

**SOPHISTICAL** PRACTICE



TOWARD A  
CONSISTENT  
RELATIVISM

**BARBARA CASSIN**

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**Toward a Consistent Relativism**

*Barbara Cassin*

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## Sophistical Practice



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## Introduction: Toward a New Topology of Philosophy

*Barbara Cassin, with Penelope Deutscher*

I don't know how to approach, why not say it, the truth—no more than woman. I have said that the one and the other are the same thing, at least to man.

—JACQUES LACAN, *Encore*<sup>1</sup>

July 199

**PENELOPE DEUTSCHER:** In your work, and particularly in *L'effet sophistique* (*The Sophistic Effect*), you have put forward a sophistic history of philosophy. Can you describe this?

**BARBARA CASSIN:** The sophistic history of philosophy is a history of neglected and repressed traditions, of alternative paths. It is essential to have a plurality instead of a single path. That single dominant path of ontology goes from Parmenides to Plato via a certain reading of Aristotle up to Heidegger. I'm interested in showing how it goes even up to Habermas, who might seem to be different but belongs to the ontological tradition; he rejects the same things and people as Plato and Aristotle—in particular the sophistic and everything that might look like it. The history of philosophy, the royal road, as history of ontology and phenomenology or as history of communication, cannot be traced or even identified as a path unless one looks, from an outside perspective, at what was, even materially, left to one side.

Sophistic texts are the paradigm of what was not only left to one side but transformed and made unintelligible by their enemies. Imagine you were trying to reconstruct a dinosaur from a few small bones and that these bones had been chewed up by the dinosaur's foes. My work is thus a paleontology of perversion.

To be able to modify the perception we have of the great conceptual history of philosophy and of the royal road of ontology and phenomenology, we have to look elsewhere and even outside philosophy. Philosophy has organized things so that any critique of the royal road is rejected as not being philosophy. And you have to keep working on authors who are difficult to identify, like Anaximander, so praised by Heidegger—but my question is, can one be pre-Socratic in another way?

These “others” have in common another way of speaking, even another conception of *logos*.

I found a very simple model and countermodel, perhaps also a little caricaturish. The model is Parmenides's *Poem* and Platonico-Aristotelian ontology, and the countermodel is the sophistic Parmenidean ontology is wonderfully analyzed by Heidegger. He shows the connection, the

cobelonging between being and speaking: to speak is to speak Being. To be, to think and to say are one and the same. That leads directly to *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (*On the Way to Language*) and to the way in which a human being is entrusted with the “Being There” (*Dasein*) who will speak Being.

The countermodel, I no longer call it ontology but “logology,” to take up the term Novalis used to refer to discourse insofar as it is primarily concerned with itself. Sophistics is that second type of *logos*. But one would certainly have to think about the place of atomism, which was appropriated by ontology by Aristotle. But, as Lacan also sniffed, if Democritus is a physicist, the *physis* he treated was not nature but discourse.<sup>3</sup>

So, sophistics, for me, is a discourse that is primarily and above all performative. It is not a matter of saying what is but of making what one says *be*. One is in a completely different model from that of the physico-ontological model, say, where the concern is to account for *physis*, or being, whatever name is used. In the second model, discourse is a “great tyrant”—to use Gorgias’s phrase—and creates as it speaks. Now, the first performance is the *polis*. So one finds the opposition between physics and politics reworked.

With sophistics, one passes from physics to politics, from philosophy to literature. All that again is on the background of a basic discordance, which is the discordance between ontology and logology. I say all this to explain that in my view, one can’t work in the mainstream without at the same time working on the countermodels and without working on philosophy’s “others.”

So obviously, I need numerous traditions, a new geography. I also need the long-term perspective to see what resurgences of antiquity appear in modernity, for example, to see how the regime of discourse forbidden by Aristotle in book *Gamma* of the *Metaphysics* reappears via Freud and Lacan. And via sophistics, that is, via the possibility of homonymy and the signifier.

### *The Prostitute’s History*

**PD:** What sort of relation is there between the sophistic history of philosophy and the history of philosophy?

**BC:** Nowadays, what would a sophistic history of philosophy be? It is a history of what was forbidden by the dominant tradition in its efforts to define philosophy and define itself as philosophy. Walter Benjamin used to say: story should be written from the point of view of the prostitute instead of from the point of view of the client. In a certain way, the sophistic history of philosophy writes the history of philosophy from the point of view of the prostitute, that is, from the point of view of the *ba* “other”—the one whom one has not only the right but also the duty to shun. It’s a way of reproblematising what is inside and outside, interior and exterior.

I showed this, with reference to a precise and crucial point, in *The Decision of Meaning*, when I analyzed the impossible demonstration given by Aristotle in book *Gamma* of the *Metaphysics*, of the principle of all principles, the law of noncontradiction. Aristotle establishes this first principle, which we all believe and obey, whether we know it or not, through his refutation of sophistics. Aristotle decided that to speak means to say something, that is, to signify something, that is, to signify one and the same thing for oneself and for others. When I say “Good Day,” I am not saying “Go to hell,” or if I say at the same time “Go to hell,” then, according to Aristotle, I am not saying anything at all, I am not even speaking. Outside of the regime of meaning as univocity, there is only “what there is in the sounds of the voice and in the words.” To forbid homonymy is as structural as to prohibit incest.

In the course of his demonstration, Aristotle admits that the whole of Greece (Heraclitus and Protagoras, of course, but also Homer and even Parmenides) is in danger of being left out, outside the regime of univocity. But Aristotle works at recouping them and ends up showing that they all speak like him; they all belong to the faithful, they all accept the principle. The only one left outside is the Sophist, who speaks for “the pleasure of speaking,” the unrecoupable “speaking plant.”

So I am trying to identify a series of philosophical gestures. To each gesture corresponds its “other,” which is excluded or sick or mad—and what interests me most is to see how these gestures get reproduced. I’m very interested in seeing how Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas reproduce the Aristotelian gesture. How in their work it is the consistent skeptic who becomes the Sophist. Using the same type of argument. What strikes me are the points at which philosophy is impelled to violence. It’s what I call “using the stick.” When Aristotle says of those “people who are puzzled to know whether one ought to honor the gods and love one’s parents” that they “need punishment, while those who are puzzled to know whether snow is white or not need perception,”<sup>4</sup> I want to know at what point philosophy feels it has the right to say that people need punishment ...

**PD:** And feels the need to say that people need punishment.

**BC:** ... Yes, when does it feel the need to. That comes back to a certain type of problematic that Lyotard had in mind with “the differend.” At a certain moment, Habermas excludes certain mechanisms, excludes certain types of speech that are actually employed, puts them outside the “communicative community.” That is something that interests me a lot.

### *Philosophy and Its Others*

**PD:** There are also, in your work, reflections on the relation between women and philosophy. In one issue of the *Cahiers du GRIF* published in 1992, “Women-Philosophy,” Françoise Collin asks: *From where does one think when one thinks? What are the sources of thought?* You would not refer to “masculine” or “feminine” modes of thought, but in your article in this issue of the *Cahiers*, you say that a woman “makes do with the leftovers, she knows how to make a stew.” Apparently, for you there is a relation between being either a man or a woman in contemporary philosophy and the question of how one works as a philosopher, what methodology one chooses, what one’s philosophical gestures are. How do you understand this relation?

**BC:** Perhaps I can begin with the relation between, let’s say, the great ontological or phenomenological tradition and its “others.” The great ontological or phenomenological tradition is at one and the same time a tradition of submission and a tradition of mastery. It is certainly a submission to being, to the world, to the real. But it is also an absolute mastery in several senses. First, because it defines a straight line, an orthodoxy. And everything which is not within this orthodoxy—either for or even against it but in a relation which is acceptable because it confirms the rules of the game—is expelled and in a certain way reduced to silence.

All the same, up until now, philosophy has essentially been carried out by men. It is quite natural to assimilate, or to be tempted to assimilate, this philosophical power to power of a masculine kind. So I would say (perhaps one can speak like that without being too simplistic) that the first women I came across in philosophy were the Sophists. They constitute for the Platonic-Aristotelian orthodoxy a

unassimilable heterodoxy.

~~That does not prevent them, in other respects, from returning in force, just as women can overthrow~~ the power of men. The Sophists returned in force, to the point where Hegel called them “the masters of Greece.” They returned in force with rhetoric and the Second Sophistic Movement, and they were already there in force in the linguistic constitution of the *polis*. But philosophy as such marginalized them completely.

The philosopher who was mostly responsible for marginalizing them, in this instance, was not so much Plato as Aristotle. Plato fought the Sophists every inch of the way, using, whether he liked it or not, his resemblance to them or the resemblance of Socrates to a Sophist. It was Aristotle who truly classified them as “other,” who put them in the index as “other” (in the sense, too, of putting them on the Index) when he demonstrated that their discursive regime, their way of speaking, was not human. They fell outside the principle of noncontradiction, and that made them immediately *homoiotês phutôi*—“like plants.”

Women did not speak much either, did they? Nor children, nor animals, nor slaves. All of them they were all a bit on the plant side. In short, I think that philosophy has never been able to prevent itself from being Aristotelian on that level. I’m going very quickly—but there is a persistent position of the “other” which could be thought of as being somewhat feminine. And to occupy that position is “to philosophistize”—to use Novalis’s term. To go on describing the position, showing its genealogy and its effects—that is what is somewhat new.

There is a grand tradition and there is a great orthodoxy, and then there are all the “others.” There is philosophical language, and then there is the rest—that is, precisely, rhetoric, literature, a certain type of poetry which is not the great ontological poetry or what is not considered as such, and so on. All these different registers, for me, are analogous, assimilable, adoptable, and adaptable.

That’s what I mean by making a stew.

These registers are not accepted as such, and in any case, the passage from one to another is impossible to accept today—at least, impossible to accept in the grand tradition of editorial mastery which succeeds philosophical mastery.

When I wanted to publish at the same time *The Sophistic Effect* and a collection of short stories (*Avec le plus petit et le plus inapparent des corps*, that’s the phrase used by Gorgias to describe the power of *logos* as a small “body” which performs the most divine of acts), it proved impossible. I was told that if I wanted to keep my scholarly reputation, I should not publish the collection of short stories. As far as I was concerned, I thought my reputation would benefit from it. In any event, I published the stories in literary journals. I consider that the stories came out of the same type of work on language and the same type of work on the dominant, orthodox, or again ontological phenomenological tradition. It is exactly the same type of philosophical work—and I would have been really excited if they could have been accepted at the same time. But as it turned out, they were unable to be.

It makes me absolutely speechless, and I don’t feel I can swim against the current, it is too much for me. It is too difficult to swallow. And besides—one final point to explain my relation to, let us say, “masculine” philosophy—of course I have always encountered a lot of goodwill toward my stories or my poems from male philosophers who thought that what I wrote in philosophy was worthless. They have always said to me: “Well, of course, yes, it’s brilliant, your writing, when you write stories or poems, it’s fantastic.” But, you see, for me, there is a kind of social resistance there. It is much easier for a woman to be a novelist than a philosopher. And as soon as she is recognized as a philosopher, she must not be a novelist.

**PD:** What were the steps, in terms of your training and intellectual development, which led you to the Sophists?

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**BC:** I think the decisive encounter was with Heidegger, whom I met at the *Le Thor* seminar with the poet René Char, and my encounter with French Heideggerianism. That made me want to focus on Greek, and I realized that Greek philosophy was very entangled and twisted. And not only Greek philosophy but Greece, the Greek language, everything that was Hellenic was twisted in a certain way, a grandiose way, but appropriate for only a part of Greece. That really made me want to study the texts again, to understand how the traditions were articulated.

I studied philology, and I realized that viable alternatives existed. They were not always so convincing enough for my taste, from a philosophical point of view—in other words, I find that Heidegger is, in a certain way, irrefutable. In France, anyway, he has been irrefutable, much more than in Germany, obviously, for a large number of philosophers of the generation preceding mine, but also for my generation and for the one after, even now.

It was Pierre Aubenque who gave me the *Treatise on Non-Being* by Gorgias for my research subject. And from then on, many things crystallized, including the relation between philology and philosophy, between Gorgias and Parmenides. Gorgias put himself forward as a challenger of Parmenides, using other means, and a genuine violence, and above all, a terrifying intelligence, which saw right through ontology. That's how I perceived him, understood him, and that is what set in motion a reflection on the articulation between ontology and its critique. Once again my question is: Can one be pre-Socratic differently? How is there a Greece other than ultra-Heideggerian?

And with those questions, entire sections of Greek culture, not only of philosophy but also of rhetoric and literature, were opened up to being potentially reworked and perceived otherwise. The relation between philosophy and literature itself needs to be worked on—for example, when one begins to juxtapose and understand together the First and Second Sophistic Movements.

My intellectual career was really determined by that encounter with Heidegger. But under the auspices of René Char and of what his presence opened up simultaneously. Char was sufficiently grand and even grandiose, sufficiently celestial and terrestrial at the same time, to allow me to question and to put into perspective, let us say, the extraordinary Heideggerian intelligibility. Poetry counts a lot for me—I write poems—but I would say not in a Heideggerian way. I don't sacralize poetry, and I don't think it offers a short path to ontological intuitions. I will always remember the dialogue between Heidegger and Char. Heidegger spoke of the poet and the philosopher as communicating from one mountain peak to another, and Char answered that they were much more like prisoners in a *oubliette* (a dungeon), almost underground prisoners, communicating through very small holes in the walls.

**PD:** Do you think that philosophers need to rethink the relation to Heidegger ...?

**BC:** Nowadays?

**PD:** Yes. Is it still a problem for contemporary French philosophy?

**BC:** I think it is, yes, to a great extent. The only antidote—well, there have been several antidotes. First, there has been more work done on Heidegger, by Derrida, for example, extensive work. But in my view, the real antidote is Deleuze, along with Jean-François Lyotard, who occupied a very

complicated position. And Foucault, who certainly died a bit too soon, at least as far as his relation to Greek philosophy is concerned. (His last books, which look directly at Greece, are absolute conventional; I don't think they come off right.)

**PD:** Many of your projects provide an occasion for encounters between different domains of philosophy, and the introduction to *Nos Grecs et leurs modernes* (*Our Greeks and Their Moderns*) (1991) explains your interest in getting Anglo-American philosophy and European hermeneutic philosophy to engage in dialogue.

**BC:** For me, the analytic-hermeneutic difference is very important for Greek philosophy because we are looking at two perceptions of the same texts, which are often difficult to reconcile. But it is not fundamental in philosophy. It gets things out of proportion and leads to conflicts that are sometimes more irritating than really beneficial. I mean that I could get on as well or as badly with someone from the hermeneutic tradition as with someone from the analytic tradition when it comes to Gorgias' *Treatise on Non-Being*. As it happens, I've been involved in scraps with one side as much as the other.

### *The Spirit of Languages*

**PD:** Could you say something about the question of the spirit of languages? It is connected to your work on untranslatables.

**BC:** The big project is a dictionary of untranslatable terms in philosophy. It's a bit deceptive to call it that because it's not a dictionary: it won't cover all the terms, and because obviously the untranslatables are translated, and it is their translation that the debates are all about. This is also a way of finally resolving, but certainly not once and for all, my differences with Heidegger. It's a way of giving another version of the great conceptual tradition which takes us from ancient Greece to modern Germany as though there were only one philosophical language worthy of the name, that of the Greeks and of those who are more Greek than the Greeks, namely the Germans, via, occasionally a momentary and semiaccidental incursion into a language that one may consider, in a certain period, as interesting; for example, Italian during the Renaissance or Spanish at the time of the Mystics. It's a weapon against "ontological nationalism," which hierarchizes languages and peoples from the point of view of their proximity to being.

What I'm trying to do, by contrast, is understand how each language constitutes an autonomous geography, a net for understanding the world in its own way, a net to catch a world, create its world (something like logology again). A model other than the universality of the *logos* has to be found. Wilhelm von Humboldt offers a conception of language which takes into consideration the plurality of languages.

The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* tries, for example, to reflect on the difference between the words *mind*, *Geist*, and *esprit*. Or between *logos*, *ratio*, and *oratio*. *Mind*, *Geist*, and *esprit* belong to different semantic networks and give us access to different universes. None of these universes is superior. Then one has to go into enormous detail. One has to see at what point the terms were translated, at what point the bifurcations took place, at what point the superimpositions began to exist. And each time, not only what sort of genealogical arborescence but also what sort of rhizomatic spreading out are at stake.

At the same time as one is interested in discordances between the networks, one is also interested in the singularities. For example, the term *leggiadria*, at a certain point during the Italian Renaissance was invented for the Mona Lisa's smile, a woman's doelike beauty, that beauty of a wild thing tamed. The term is not well translated by "grace" because "grace" also has a religious meaning that is not a truly part of the meaning of *leggiadria*. So each dimension of language has to be perceived in its singularity. So that examples can only be symptoms ... for example, what's going on when *Istina* and *Pravda* both claim to be translated by "truth" since you absolutely have to refer *Pravda* at least for the domain of justice as well.

My claim is that that we philosophize in languages with words and not with universal concepts—is also a kind of weapon against a certain type of analytic philosophy. Not that of the linguistic turn of that of Stanley Cavell but the tradition which would see Aristotle as one's best Oxford colleague. That's why the English translation of this dictionary of untranslatable terms is particularly crucial for me.<sup>5</sup> The philosophical point is that languages perform different worlds. The political point is not to see language as a simple means of communication—as when one language (English?) is seen as the universal language of communication. At that point it is no longer a language at all; it's no longer English.<sup>6</sup> We philosophize in words and not in concepts: we have to complicate the universal with languages.

**PD:** Philosophy tends to deny the spirit of languages?

**BC:** I think that philosophy tends to turn the spirit of languages into something horrible. I think that the spirit of languages is an absolutely terrifying concept that leads in a straight line to the worst kind of Heideggerianism, that is, Hellenico-Nazism, quite easily identified; although I don't want to caricature too quickly, the caricatures are there.

We have to rethink, set about reconsidering, the possibility that the spirit of languages need not be horrifying. To reflect on, how, at a certain point in Russian history, diglossia, which is the difference between "low" language and "high" language, opens onto two types of perception of the world and could be connected with spiritualism. That sort of phenomenon is on the frontier between linguistics and philosophy.

One gets horrified very quickly when one thinks about a language (*langue*) *qua* language (*langue*) just as when one thinks about a nation *qua* nation. Is there a way of doing it without arousing anxiety (*angoisse*)? The problem has to be rethought, but we have very few instruments at our disposal because, as it happens, the most powerful instruments were or are Graeco-German. So, finding a way of thinking about the problem differently and finding countermodels, real countermodels, gets very difficult. And those are the difficulties I try to confront.

**PD:** Why did you use the word "anxiety"?

**BC:** It makes me anxious (it should make everybody anxious!) to suppose the superiority of one language *qua* language in its relation to philosophy, as if Greek, then German, were the languages of being.

To resolve that anxiety requires, on the one hand, rethinking the relation between philosophy and ontology, and that's the reason for the sophistic lever, if you like.

That also means having to rethink the relation—but all in one go—the relation between literature and philosophy and poetry a little differently in order to desacralize all that.

**PD:** How would you describe your relation to academia, to institutionalized philosophy? You've already touched on the issue when you mentioned the reception of your philological, philosophical work, and literary work.

**BC:** I have been extremely lucky in that I had the chance to work at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research). So I am not answerable to anyone so long as I produce reports explaining, in an acceptable way, how I am working, and so long as I *am* actually working. It was rather unlikely that I would get this position. But it is a generous institution, and as it happened, at a certain point, the people who were involved in the decision were generous, too. I hope we continue to be generous now that I am among the people who decide.

But in the normal course of events, I think that anyone in my position would have given up on philosophy. Because after my first doctorate, on *Si Parménide (If Parmenides)* (already something very heavy), I simply couldn't find a job at all, ever. It was understandable because I didn't have the *agrégation* (the highest-level competitive examination). Now, the *agrégation* is something which I couldn't prepare for, I wasn't capable of it, I didn't want to, all of those things, but certainly I wasn't capable of it. It was an obstacle—an *agrégation*, to be "aggregated," and to what?—which I couldn't get past, especially after 1968 and after I'd encountered Heidegger and Char. But there were no other options if I wanted to pursue philosophy. So I had to stick it out for a very long time, financially as well.

I had parents who supported me, I had a research stipend, I worked as a hand model, I painted some portraits, which I was able to sell. I was also asked to write for the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, and in all these ways I had enough to live on. I led quite a strange life; for a certain time I taught psychotic adolescents in day hospitals, sometimes I taught at the post office, sometimes even at the ENA (the elite university that trains future public administrators). I was able to get by without having to become a philosophy teacher in a provincial *lycée*<sup>7</sup> at a time when I already had a child with someone who worked in Paris. A truly impossible life when one doesn't have parents or a husband or friends to help you or when one doesn't have real enthusiasm for what one is doing.

All this meant that I worked in my own way, according to my own rhythm. I think that teaching psychotic adolescents was the experience from which I learned the most. I did philosophy with them but obviously not the sort of philosophy that I would teach today to university students. I did ancient philosophy with them; I worked on language in its early stages. I read the *Cratylus* with the adolescents, and seeing Greek words written on the blackboard made them realize that they did have a maternal language, which was far from evident for them. One could even say they realized that the French language was "more of a *mother* tongue," more maternal than any other for them, with an alphabet more familiar than Greek, and that they could play with their language as Plato did with his. They would invent etymologies; we did astonishing, brilliant things.<sup>8</sup> That taught me a lot.

So I was fortunate that I didn't have to deal with institutions until I could do so effectively. That is until I'd completed enough work for it to be legitimated. But it was enormous luck that I didn't remain on the margins—as a nonagrégée, as a sophist, as a woman. Once I was at the CNRS, things started sorting themselves out without trouble, I really worked hard, and now I feel—and this surprises me a lot—I have a sort of power.

I've just finished retranslating Parmenides's *Poem*; it's not at all intended as a definitive translation but as the exploration of a real question: Greek, *qua* Greek, is it or is it not the language of being? That's the subtitle, by the way: "The Language of Being?" with a question mark.

I perceived in or perhaps projected into Parmenides's *Poem* two main lines of interpretation. The



first, suggested to me by Gorgias, is about how being is created by language. Parmenides's *Poem* first and foremost the story of Greek, which, following the path of the "is," makes language itself in the plot. It deploys syntax and semantics, the whole grammar: starting from the first "esti," from the verb conjugated as "is," it produces the subject, "to on," the being, *l'étant*, substantive, substantified participle as noun. One can see how, through what linguistic changes, one gets from verb to subject from being to substance: that's what I call the ontology of grammar.

The second thread is how the poem is in itself the narrative of all the grand narratives. The ontology, which is so new, is in fact a palimpsest which rearticulates all the previous discourses, from myth to physics via epic. A sign of that: when being, *to on*, appears in the poem (in fragment seven) Parmenides uses the words that Homer used to describe Ulysses when he sails past the Sirens—it (the Being)/he (Ulysses) remains "solidly rooted there." All Greek texts possess an extraordinary palimpsestic depth, so we can understand how philosophy and literature are linked together.

**PD:** In *The Sophistic Effect*, you say specifically that yours is not an interest "in the margins"; you are not "making a plea for *penseurs maudits* (accursed thinkers)<sup>9</sup> against vetoes and exclusion." You say also that you are not concerned with "rehabilitating" sophistic thought.

**BC:** What I'm trying to say is: "Don't get things mixed up." I'm not interested in those who are "rehabilitating sophistics" because rehabilitating sophistics consists in making Sophists into philosophers after all. They are welcomed back into the flock ("*agrégés*"!). For example, thinking about the Anglo-Saxon tradition, G. B. Kerferd thinks that the Sophists are hyperrationalists and congratulates them: they want even the formless, even sensation, to be subject to reason. That type of rehabilitation, which merely reverses the Platonic judgment about the Sophists while maintaining the same scale of values, doesn't interest me at all.

We are told that they are serious thinkers because they fit perfectly into the traditional schema of Greek philosophy. One could say the same thing about the Sceptics. There is a big rehabilitation of the Sceptics, according to which they are rigorous philosophers, and there is also a rehabilitation of the Sceptics, according to which they are disturbing philosophers who disrupt philosophy. Obviously, it is the second kind that I'm interested in. But they can't be separated so easily, and the second kind is continually overlapped by the first. The inside always absorbs the outside—that's how it is.

Don't think that I am going to rehabilitate the Sophists by claiming that they are good philosophers. On the contrary, in a pinch I would say that it is the philosophers, insofar as they have excluded the Sophists, who interest me. At the same time, what interests me is the light that sophistic thought can shed on philosophy. Anyway, it's not because the Sophists are outside that I'm interested in them.

**PD:** It's because they are excluded?

**BC:** You've got it. It's the gestures and the strategies. And it might also be said, after all, that I am largely rehabilitating the Sophists as philosophers to the extent to which I make of them, roughly speaking, models for the critique of ontology. As Jean Beaufret used to say—and it's a comment with frightening implications—"A destroyer of torpedo boats [*contre-torpilleur*] is first and foremost a torpedo boat [*torpilleur*]." How can you manage not to get recaptured by the inside? What interests me are the gestures of recapture and the gestures forbidding that recapture.

I am one of the few, in France at any rate, who has really tried to think together the First and the Second Sophistic Movements. There is one Anglo-Saxon tradition, more on the side of analytical

philosophers, concerned with the First Sophistic Movement, another Anglo-Saxon tradition, more on the side of the literary classicists, which is concerned with the Second Sophistic Movement. But both together—not really. What interests me is what emerges from all that history. Which connections do Philostratus make? What are the new relations between sophistic, rhetoric, literature, philosophy, politics, and so on?

*Paris, 2011*

**PD:** Barbara, here we are some fourteen years later, on the occasion of the English publication of your collection of articles from a great many projects that you have pursued since we first spoke in 1997. There have been a number of political events with which you've engaged since that time. How have they engendered in you new ways of thinking about performance and performativity?

**BC:** One commitment was to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). I had a visiting position teaching rhetoric at the University of Cape Town—I was there when Mandela came to power and at the beginning of the TRC. A student of mine who had wanted to do a doctorate on Plato and sophistic became the head of the NGO *Khululekani* (Freedom). That's how it happened that ANC leaders asked me to help think about bringing parliament closer to the people.

I became aware that what was happening with the TRC process was a kind of political sophistry, or sophistical politics. The parallel was the attention given to speech and to the way speech can build things in the world. In this case what was to be built was the “Rainbow People,” so suddenly I was on a real political stage.

Another thing that struck me at the time was the number of national languages that were part of the constitution. The constitution itself has to be written in all eleven national languages. Some words were impossible to translate from English (for example, there's no word for “freedom” in every language, and the distinction between *freedom* and *liberty* is certainly not in use everywhere), and conversely a Zulu word such as *ubuntu*—said to mean something like *fellowship* or *reconciliation* (“we are, therefore I am”)—cannot be translated into English.

So I spoke with the new government's leaders. We tried to see to what extent speech could help, so that one would not fear the tongue of the other—such as the specific, juridical tongue (for example that of the parliament, that whole context—which is a tongue in itself). And a few years later I was asked to begin to think about a dictionary of the “untranslatable” terms in the different laws and constitutions in order to try to make the different languages communicate—not only the tongues but also the types of speech, locutions, interlocutions.

And ... that was a great experience. There was no real solution beyond being more aware that language does things and that there are different languages which are different ways of seizing the world. It was on the basis of those two perceptions that I undertook the research that followed.

**PD:** Before that you had long been working on a project on untranslatability, but I think in a largely European context? And the founding of the European Union was an important factor there?

**BC:** As a result, we were talking much more about Europe, and I believed that the only way I could help build a “livable” Europe (if at all) was to focus on the problem of tongues. It was the only political means that I could find, within my own abilities, to hold on to difference. It was the only

political path that didn't disgust me.

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**PD:** Why was there a risk of disgust?

**BC:** The socioeconomic direction of Europe can appear disgusting. I agree that Europe is also desirable if it really does manage to take diversity into account rather than just paying lip service to it—and in many ways, not just socioeconomically.

One of the main dangers concerns languages and a too easy leveling of them. Two possible solutions confronted us, a choice between two possible directions. Either the ideal of one tongue for everybody, the ideal of a “language of mere communication” or a “universal language of communication,” a “ULC,” but there the ideal was just “communication.” And what does that mean exactly: to “just communicate”? Or else, the departure point had to be the problems of communication, and one would start exploring from there on in.

**PD:** It seemed to you very likely that the problems of communication would be minimized?

**BC:** No, I think it was that either we were only going to focus on “communication,” and then the best way to communicate was going to be a kind of basic global English—Globish—or else we had to focus on the difficulties. Not only word difficulties, of course, but those, too. For me, words and grammars play the role of symptoms—symptoms of differences, of different “worldviews,” as the German Romantics used to say. The question was how to explore and dig deeper into these difficulties: with the idea that it is only in making them deeper that we could work through them rather than try to escape them. And that's how I began to conceive the dictionary of untranslatable terms as a European vocabulary of philosophies.

**PD:** Europe and South Africa provided very different contexts for work on the politics of communication and translation. How did those differences impact the projects?

**BC:** In South Africa there wasn't a choice between one or many tongues. There were many tongues and that was the point. There were the “rainbow people.” In Europe, we could aspire to be one, or a certain type of “One.”

Of course, you encounter the problem of multiculturalism: how to articulate the one and the plural. But it's complicated ... in South Africa, there was a result. The slogan was “one man, one vote,” the end of apartheid took place without bloodshed, there *were* rainbow people, they'd made it happen. But Europe can implode at any moment. It has not yet been accomplished, and we don't know how it could be. It's not a historical necessity. Maybe it is a political or an economic necessity, but nothing ensures that.

I should also say about the European context that we want to hold on to the richness of the plurality of languages as a plurality of cultures and ways of life and so on. Translation imposes itself. We need to communicate through translation and to grasp this new paradigm of translation as our paradigm. What always struck me as very shortsighted in Habermasian consensus is that there is no place for something like translation (we agree, we want to agree, and insofar as we do—we're done). But through translation it really is endless. We build ourselves through translation, not through consensus, and we build a “we” much more through translation than through consensus.

**PD:** And what projects have followed on from the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* (*European Vocabulary of Philosophies*)?

**BC:** The first has been to “intranslate” (*intraduire*) (the term *intradução* is used by the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos, and in French it also draws on “introduction,” “to introduce”) the *Vocabulaire* into other languages—as Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood have done for the Anglo-American audience (*Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*)—that is, to say, to rebuild something new inside another language.

Intranslation is a completely philosophical act because it is at once theoretical, poetical, and political. It gives birth to new things as a total performance inside languages and cultures. I am very happy that the first Arabic volume and a Ukrainian version of the project have also been published—I think this conjunction is very important.

And the second new project—again to be pursued with colleagues and friends—concerns the untranslatables of the three monotheisms. At one point I was invited by the Prince of Jordan Amman to explore the possibility of working on a “concordance of values” (*valeurs*), that’s to say of ethical values, between the three monotheisms. And I suggested not that we try to find equivalents—as if we ever could—but that we dig for differences. I proposed beginning to work with about twenty words through which the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran each unfolds and around which they intertwine. This is a very precarious project—we need to pursue it very carefully. And it may be worth noting that the woman who would try to undertake it is Jewish, a baptized Catholic—and as pagan as she gets.

**PD:** And the *Appel des appels* (*Call of Calls*)?

**BC:** During the Sarkozy years, many of us (without my knowing exactly who “us” is, perhaps it is a new type of “us” who responded to the *Call of Calls*) were scared—and scandalized—by what we saw as the dismantling of the possibility of professional work (*la casse des métiers*). Professionals such as judges, doctors in hospitals, social workers, teachers and researchers could no longer do their work well. They could no longer take the time they needed. They no longer had the possibility to do what they knew they had to do and what they were able, trained, and professionally committed to do. Of course, it was partly a question of money and the economic crisis. But it wasn’t only that. There were also questions of “performance,” of evaluation, and of competition that “Europe” had also provoked—that was one of the bad sides of Europeanization. And globalization—and in fact ... there are many things that come from Canada! For example, the term *impact factor* is used in a specific Canadian context for a bibliometric medical index. Then, suddenly having an “impact factor” became the first or the only, doorway to obtaining European funds. If we look further, we see that this mode of accounting and accountability of performance is also not far from the rankings that prevail in search engines like Google.

**PD:** So you’ve both published on the “schizophrenic state” in *L’appel des appels* (2009) and also a very trenchant work on Google (*Google moi: La deuxième mission de l’Amérique*, 2007), and, to go on thinking about the different directions your work has taken since 1998, you’ve also developed a number of projects with Alain Badiou in recent years.

**BC:** In fact, this story dates back to when I had just published *La décision du sens* (2000). François

Wahl and Paul Ricoeur were stepping down from editing the series *L'ordre philosophique* for the publisher Seuil. Badiou was to take over, but he was looking for a partner. He thought it ought to be a woman and that such a team could be more interesting and open minded. And *La décision du sexe* intrigued Badiou the most.

**PD:** Since then, you also coauthored two works, published in 2010 and forthcoming in English with Columbia University Press: *Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel: Deux leçons sur "L'étourdit" de Lacan* (*There's No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship: Two Lessons on Lacan*) and *Heidegger: Les femmes, le nazisme, et la philosophie* (*Heidegger: His Life and His Philosophy*). Your collaborative work has prompted a considerable engagement from each of you with the question of sexual difference. And you often pit the position of "sophist" against Badiou's "Plato." How do you see this connection?

**BC:** I don't believe in truth. He does—and he wants to. We don't see language as playing the same role. So the point is to know whether this traverses our positions as man and woman. Is it a gendered position to be a sophist-philosopher? We are currently working on a new joint project that involves (very roughly) thinking about man, woman, philosophy. We began to deal with this when we were working together on Heidegger's correspondence with his wife—and in another way when we were working together on Lacan. What was so refreshing with our book on Heidegger was that we could play, as with a piano, with four hands. We found ourselves absolutely agreeing even though we don't at all think the same things. That's a good kind of consensus by the way—in that it's not at all a consensus but a continuous dissent traversing particular points.

We also became aware that we agreed on the following diagnosis: that we have absolutely opposite critiques of pure reason. But we share the same disgust for the critique of practical reason. And we have exactly the same critique of judgment. This is why we really can work together—and judge together—with generosity.

**PD:** Why do you consider it urgent—today—to develop a "consequential" relativism (*relativism consequent*)?

**BC:** The "One" frightens me. I think that we need strategy and tactics to deal correctly with the "One." That's also why I am so happy to work with Badiou: because we have to be extremely aware of one another. The scenario between Plato and the Sophists is a microcosm of what can happen today and so much in the context of philosophy as in the context of politics, love, science, and life. It's a question of how to take into account the one, the multiple, and diversity.

I call this "consequential relativism" because we have to choose at every moment what it is best to propose or to answer and for whom. I frame everything with the Protagorean affirmation: the point is not to make one change from falsity to truthhood but to produce change from a lesser good to a better state. Better for someone or for a city-state. Of course, many other dangers open immediately from that position. But they are less dangerous "for me." You see that I speak in a dedicated, comparative way. The comparative seems less dangerous, and less dangerous for me, than the "One" and the "Other Truth" with a capital *T*.

This is also why John L. Austin is so important to me—and why relativism, performance (*epideixis*), and performativity are linked. Austin concluded *How To Do Things with Words*<sup>10</sup> with an expression of his inclination "to play Old Harry" with two fetishes: the true/false and the value/fact fetish. This is precisely the link between logology, performance, relativism, and politics.

**PD:** In recent projects you have used two phrases: “enough of the truth for” and a “better for” notion of relativism. Can I ask you more about these “fors”? How can we keep maximally open “for whom,” “for which,” and “for what” (individuals, peoples, events, moments, and futures) the truth and the relative are to be enough or better? You seemed to acknowledge that “This is better for us!” or “This is enough truth for us!” (or for the future or the circumstances) can also be adopted as intransigent stances and worse.

**BC:** Yes, there is a “for” in “enough truth” and “better relativism.” But that “for” isn’t absolute. No, it is an ethical *metron*, a “just measure” regarding virtue. It’s linked to time, to *kairos*, and to who is speaking to whom. Who is judging for whom. Who is proposing something to whom. This is certainly the link. Of course, you can always close yourself in whatever you want. No sentence can prevent that. But what I like in “Enough of the truth for ...” is that it’s not a complete sentence and that you have to go on ...

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## Part I Unusual Presocratics

## Who's Afraid of the Sophists?: Against Ethical Correctness

SOPHISTICS, substantive noun. A. The set of doctrines, or more precisely, the shared intellectual attitude of the main Greek sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, etc.). B. (Common noun) Used to refer to a philosophy of verbal reasoning, lacking solidity and seriousness.

—A. LALANDE, ed., *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*

### *The Occasion*

The set of doctrines or teachings associated with the individuals known as the sophists is termed *sophistikê*, in French, *sophistique*. The expression is lacking in English, which puts one in the position of either using the adjectives “sophistic,” “sophistical,” or of using the dismissive expression “sophistry.” As I argue for a systematic role for these doctrines, I will ask your indulgence and introduce the neologism “sophistics” for now. The question is, why should one be interested in sophistics today?

As occasional causes are by far the most significant and the most efficient, I would like to explain first of all where my own interest in sophistics stems from. It arose from the encounter of two trajectories that were rivals in all senses of the word. The first phase of study, both triumphant and confused, took place under the sign of Heidegger. Because everything possessed a renewed intelligibility, everything also fit neatly into the palm of one's hand. The history of philosophy was philosophy itself, which the question of Being enabled one to scan and rework into epochs and turnings, with a hitherto unequalled skill that knew when to be self-effacing. It is very difficult to rid oneself of the idea that philosophers today do anything else besides rework Heidegger's gesture, even the anti-Heideggerians who sought their training in Kant, with a point of entry different from that of *Kantbuch*. In order to move out from this circumscribed territory, no less is required, doubtless, than (a) a redefinition of philosophy throughout its history, in such a way that this widening of the scope does not produce a mere analytic restriction or moral rigidity that can immediately be traced back destinally to the technical and technological nature of our epoch, and (b) probably some new conceptual characters, to use Deleuze's expression. But the most frequent approach, which Deleuze himself initiated or at least made use of contemporaneously (using the Stoics, Spinoza, and Bergson) is to draw attention to the readings Heidegger failed to perform, or did not perform, inasmuch as they are held to be strategically impossible.

My own growing rigid, in this context, has to do with the determination of the origin and the dawn. The Greek morning which Heidegger arranged for us is monomaniacal and kleptomaniacal. It robs an entire array of texts and possibilities so that they may fit under the aegis of Parmenides's poem, such



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