

All About Sophistry

by Bruce Deitrick Price This article is offered as mental exercise for gifted students....During the second half of the 20th century, the following five sophistries were often taught at major universities as final truth. The reader should try to understand each sophistry enough to argue for its correctness, and then try to understand the refutation.

Sophistry is alive and well
in contemporary thought

First of all, don't imagine sophistry to be a dull topic. This stuff's as juicy as a good bank swindle and for the same reasons! Mark Twain said lies are like cats except cats have only nine lives. Lies, it seems, just go on and on. Witness some of the major philosophical currents of the last 75 years. Looked at closely, they turn out to be all too sneaky and sophistical. I remember my shock when I first heard about the original sophists, the early Greek ones. People who don't care about truth. They just want to win arguments! Can you believe it?! All right, I was naive. Now we know that sophists are commonplace. Attorneys who defend Mafia killers; PR people with an evil client; journalists who see their true job as writing propaganda, truth no object?well, these examples are more or less trivial. Much more fascinating are the secret sophists, the ones almost never accused of being what they are. Let's take a look at five areas where naked emperors are said to be wearing particularly beautiful clothes, situation ethics, descriptive linguistics, deconstruction, moral relativism, and (too often) multiculturalism. All of them could take Zeno as patron saint. That's the Greek philosopher who proved that a fast runner can never, ever overtake a slow one?heck, neither of them can ever reach the finish line. Such is the power of sophistry. VIRTUOUS BEHAVIOR DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION

Situation ethics has been used for decades to undermine religious and moral absolutes. While pretending to be a disinterested look at life's tough choices, situation ethics usually functions destructively. Here's how it works. Situation ethics uses what might be called the rock-and-a-hard-place sophistry. You are given two choices, both bad, one carefully positioned to be less bad. When you duly pick it, the so-called ethicist says, "There, you see, you have approved evil. Doesn't that show that your moral values, your philosophy of life, are flimsy and probably false???" A common situation might go like this, imagine you're a Dutchman hiding Jews in your basement in 1942; German soldiers come to the door? do you tell the truth? No, most likely, you lie. The sophist then triumphantly pounces, "There, you think lying is okay!" It's a trap, a set-up, but it can unnerve the innocent and unwary. The student is lead to think, "Gee, I always thought lying was wrong.....but I guess it's all right...." And from there you might well start doubting all the beliefs you grew up with.

This sophistry reminds me of a discussion we sometimes had on the school bus when I was fourteen, about which of various terrible fates we would prefer to endure. Blind or deaf? Burned to death or drowned? Or, let's take a simple one, would you prefer to lose one finger or the whole arm? Everyone would say "a finger." But does this tell anything about the desirability of losing a finger? Of course not! Nobody wants to lose a finger.

Here's a few more quick takes. A plane crashed in Peru, people died, the living ate the dead; it was the only way to survive. But does this tell us anything about the value of cannibalism as a way of life?....Suppose there's a burning house?would you prefer that 6 or 20 people die? You, six people. Aha, so you approve of people dying in fires! You murderer!

The gimmick throughout is to trap you between two bad things and then make it seem that you endorse or even like one of them. But you don't. You probably hate both of them.

The technique's underlying aggression (nay, viciousness) becomes completely obvious in so-called death education when children are made to select which relatives should be allowed in a life boat?and which should be left to die! Again, at least as far back as the 1950s, psychological tests used on school children contained questions such as, "Which is worse?spitting on the American flag or the Bible?" Just imagining these things is obviously going to unsettle and numb a child, apparently the goal.

One cheerful note in all this is how resolutely people will struggle to find the morally superior choice?that is, the higher good. Lying, one could properly conclude from the first situation, is such a terrible thing that we will do it only to save human life! Situation ethics?if we but turn it right side up?proves the opposite of what it often sets out to prove. THE PRESCRIPTION IS "NO PRESCRIPTIONS"

Descriptive linguistics starts from a sensible insight, that anthropologists should be humble and unintrusive when studying foreign languages or cultures. In short, the locals are the experts about their own culture and language, especially spoken-only languages. Visiting scholars should keep their own values and opinions to themselves.

Thus, if you want to know how the Edens speak Edenese, you record and transcribe as objectively as possible. For the obvious reason that you are not an Eden, and can hardly speak the language. If you want an expert on Edenese as it is spoke, find some Edens. Makes sense, right?

This methodology is so obviously appropriate, you wonder that anthropology had to be reminded. In fact, this scientific commonplace was (re)discovered with great fanfare. And the excitement led quickly to excess, and its name was sophistry.

Certain scholars, especially linguistic anthropologists and linguists influenced by them, suddenly acted as though they had found an iron rule of life, applicable in ALL situations--thou shalt not prescribe (i.e. make rules), thou shalt only describe.

Well, that's obviously a contradiction, so already we're suspicious. But the bad part is still ahead. These linguists, in a marvelous sleight of hand, took a perfectly good methodology and insisted on applying it in places where the reasons for the methodology are no longer valid! The sophistry here is something like saying, well, a razor is good for cutting whiskers, so I'll use it to cut cloth, or to cut glass, or to cut out an appendix. Just because something is appropriate in one place doesn't mean it works in even a quite similar place. What the linguists did was take a methodology designed for novice anthropologists doing field research among exotic, preliterate cultures, and apply the exact same methodology to us!

The United States is not a preliterate culture, which might be a clue right there that a different methodology is appropriate. Our language is a written one and it's already massively transcribed—in a billion books in ten thousand libraries. And you want experts?—there's a few million handy. They're called writers, editors, teachers, etc. But the linguists said, no, no, we don't care what those people think, absolutely not. The methodology demands that we stop people at random, guys on the street?just as though we were still among the Edens. Although even there, one supposes, they don't interview the children and mentally defective. Strangely, when they get to us, they insist on an inclusiveness almost that broad. Anybody but the real experts, actually. The prescription seems to be this, in attempting to pin down English grammar, rely only on those who don't know much about it.

And if you ask, regarding any of this, why?!, the linguists will respond, as though you are a complete idiot, because you can't prescribe, you can only describe, that's the RULE. And if you say, give me that again, why can't we prescribe? The linguists will say, because we don't do that when we study the Edens.

True story.

The prescription also takes this form, "Languages change, that's the way it is, there's nothing you can do about it, and all changes are equally valid." Compare this to an equally weird non-sequitur, "Rivers naturally change their courses all the time. Any course is equally valid. So don't waste time trying to save your land or your cities."

A preliterate language exists in the present and probably in a very limited geographical area. But English exists vertically through time (one (night say), going back 400 years to Shakespeare. And it exists horizontally, being the first language around the planet. There is vast advantage in keeping the language coherent, so we can draw on the wisdom of the past, and so we can communicate effectively with people everywhere today. With the spread of phones, fax machines and computers, this is more crucial than ever before.

In fact, linguists are often not as simple-minded as the narration so far might suggest. My guess is that they are putting us on to some degree. There's usually an ideological component operating here. Descriptive linguistics, with its solemn scientific pretensions, provides a convenient way to undermine the dominant culture, to attack what some might call "privileged" language forms. Such an attack, naked and forthright, would not gain much support, even from the people it purports to help.

Descriptive linguistics is also a tremendously handy tool for educators engaged in dumbing down the schools. These people actually say, it's not scientific to make kids learn to write good English. Whatever the children do, that's fine—they're the experts regarding how they use the language.

Welcome to Eden. DECONSTRUCTIVELY YOURS

Deconstruction is perhaps the most ingeniously packaged cluster of sophistries one can imagine. Basically, deconstruction seems to be Marxist Literary Studies, but someone must have realized the name wouldn't help sales. However, let's not pin labels on it. Let's look at deconstruction on its own terms and, well, deconstruct it. Indeed, that is deconstruction's first sophistry—that it doesn't apply its own methodology to itself.

The second sophistry is that deconstruction comes out four-square against all hierarchies. Except the one—surprise!--where deconstruction is on top. Ah, hubris.

The third sophistry is a thorough-going if sly inclusiveness. Every text turns out to have an infinite number of meanings (shades of Zeno's Paradox, which uses the same device, known as infinite regress). All those thousands of meanings means a student could spend a year on a novel and never find out what the book is universally thought to be about! An infinite number of meanings, if you want to be rigorous about it or even mildly practical, means no meaning.... In fact, this apparent indulgence is merely a gambit, often used to push aside or obscure those meanings which most readers detect or that the authors themselves are on record as acknowledging.

Which leads to the fourth sophistry, a thorough-going if not so sly reductionism. When all the apparent meanings have been picked through and most of them dismissed as so much air, it turns out that the real, deep-down, true meaning is usually the same one. No matter what text is examined, it turns out that the author is signaling us that bourgeois society is bad, Marx is right, etc.

In practice, the professor of deconstruction can bend most texts in this manner, while just leaving others out. So that, at the end, all literature is politicized and the students are to some degree indoctrinated. And, thank heavens, they can no longer spend their time in bourgeois contemplation of beauty or just enjoying a good book....

I admit to taking deconstruction personally. I write novels and poems, and I know what meanings I put in. The idea of somebody telling me none of that is relevant is scary (as lunacy usually is). No, you start with the author's meanings and then go to the additional meanings that the smartest critics and shrewdest readers have found. Then, if you want to know what various psychoanalysts, historians, and ideologues see in the work, be my guest. That's the

only possible hierarchy. Anything else says no runner ever crosses the finish line. RELATIVELY SPEAKING

Moral relativism has been widely accepted as a final philosophical word. People routinely say, "Well, everything's relative," usually meaning that you can't make moral judgments about anything. Put simply, some argue that if God is dead, everything must therefore be relative. Speaking for myself, I heard this line of reasoning so many times, I passively accepted it. If we can't prove the existence of God, well, it does seem we're stuck with relativism.

Then I realized that relativism was used a lot in political debates, particularly Cold War debates. And the idea seemed to be that since everything is relative, there was no possible way to criticize Communism. Everything's relative....you're wrong....end of discussion.

However, I suspect that as we shift from debating metaphysics to talking about how to structure human societies, relativism is by no means so obvious or pertinent. Here's why. Relativism is valid only if there's no God. But in that case, mankind becomes the measure of all things. (Unless you're saying might makes right.) So, while relativists no longer have to listen to God, don't they now have to listen to people?

The sophistry of the relativists is that they get rid of God, and then they keep right on going and get rid of everything else in their way. How convenient if they happen to be trying to defend something monstrous. Or to pull down something you value.

The more you think about it, it's relativism that is dead. If there's no God, then there's people! And for people, in everyday life, almost nothing is relative. On every basic of human existence, 99.99% of us would vote the same. Here's a few basics and I submit that everyone is going to pick the second option,

Sickness / Health
Hunger / Adequate diet
Slavery / Freedom
No religious freedom / Religious freedom
Work 18 hours per day / Work 8 hours a day
No free speech / Free speech
Raise a family in one room / In two rooms
Breathe dirty air / Breathe clean air
Can't travel / Free to move
Illiterate / Educated
Destitute / Prosperous
Live in crime-ridden city / In safe city

Well, you get the point. What actually is relative? Sure, a good sophist can jump on any of these and assert that people don't really want it or would be better off without it. That's how you know they're sophists. Then they'll prove that the fast runner will never catch the slow one.

The point is, relativism pretends to be higher truth. In practice, it's usually a low debating technique in the service of nihilism. A hundred million voices may cry out for something dear to their hearts but the relativist will say, nope, we don't have to listen to that nonsense, it has no basis in logic! Thus spake the sophist. MULTIWHAT?

First of all, multiculturalism is not automatically sophistical. The idea that we should study other cultures has always been at the heart of a good liberal arts education. Ideally, we'd want to learn the high points of all the major civilizations (if only there were world enough and time). Indeed, one might argue that knowing these high points is the mark of an educated person. Multiculturalists usually claim to be arguing from this premise. Hey, they declare, students should know all the great things produced by other cultures, not just this country.

In practice, however, many advocates of multiculturalism often don't get around to the best and brightest of the other great cultures. Often the syllabus lists minor works by minor thinkers from minor eras (things that might be appropriate in graduate school). Multiculturalists sometimes sell a route and then switch the promised destination. In retail, they call this bait and switch. Here, I'm calling it sophistry.

The real object of many multiculturalist programs, given an undergraduate's very limited time, is simply to diminish the study of the student's own culture. Then, as a second part of the combination, these programs peddle works that will further attack that culture. In fact, multiculturalism is often just another name for America-bashing. Of course, that may itself be a worthwhile object of study, if sold as such. It's when the multiculturalist has a secret agenda that sophistry intrudes very dramatically. I'm not here to argue that America can't stand some bashing. I simply want truth in advertising. IN CONCLUSION

Overall, it seems to me that serious philosophers should have been playing watchdog, far more than they have. Unfortunately, serious philosophy in this century has usually been academic philosophy, people mostly busy counting the contemporary counterpart of angels dancing on the head of a pin. In early Greece, there was a steady conflict between teachers of clever debating techniques and people seeking truth or the right way to live. The two sides were always battling, and that was good for everybody. In our time, the field has been left wide open to sophists and, in one man's opinion, they've had it much too easy.

About the Author

----- Bruce Deitrick Price is the author of four books. He has two sites concerned with education, <http://www.Improve-Education.org> and <http://www.leducate.info>, a homepage for teachers, writers, etc. (Note, same article appears as "Philosophy Weeps" on Improve-Education.org, which now has 24 essays.) News: recently added, #22: On Bullsh-t & Sophistry continues the investigation begun in the above article.

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