

# Sophistry, Rhetoric and Politics

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The article aims to shed light on the connection between rhetoric and politics, and its dissemination in the sophistic and philosophical tradition. The argumentation is based on the conceptions of two contemporary philosophers – Barbara Cassin and Hans Blumenberg, who appear as the protagonists of positions according to which rhetoric takes up a significant place in political life. Since Plato, the sophists were treated as other pre-Socratics, as demagogues, who do not hold the truth but spread a false opinion. The philosophers share a conviction that speech immediately expresses reality, and they also prohibited following the way of non-Being (Parmenides). The sophists (Gorgias, Protagoras) shared the position that speech expresses only itself, but not reality. Two opposite (but related) ways of thinking are best seen in M. Heidegger's and H. Arendt's philosophies. Keeping in mind the main theme, Blumenberg's philosophical position includes *logos* as the mean of distancing, the art of politics is determined by the ability to delay decisions and soften conflicts by rhetorical means, while Cassin's *logology* is understood as the ontology.

**Keywords:** sophistry, rhetoric, politics, logology, ontology, distance

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## INTRODUCTION

In the current situation (especially during the pandemic of COVID-19), when freedom of speech, although postulated, is weakly guaranteed, it is worth once again recalling the principles of politics once formulated by the sophists. When I say that 'freedom of speech' is poorly guaranteed, I also mean the so-called political correctness, which is essentially linguistic, such as the use of certain words is prohibited. The so-called 'cancel culture' (a modern form of ostracism) works on a similar principle. The term 'political correctness' describes written or spoken language that is deliberately formulated to avoid offending or marginalising groups defined by certain social characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. In addition to the obvious avoidance of overt insults, political correctness also includes the avoidance of terms that reinforce preconceived negative stereotypes. The elimination of verbal discrimination is often considered one of the main goals of political correctness. 'Cancel culture' is defined as a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is customary to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they said or did something that offends. It is a method by which people can be called out and excluded from the mainstream culture; they become 'cancelled' (see more: Norris 2021). Modern ostracism emerged alongside social networks and gave birth to a strange figure 'a vigilante' – a person who acts outside the legal system to punish crime; he constantly searches

and watches various social platforms to find an offender.<sup>1</sup> Alongside linguistic ostracism, it is often said that politics is just rhetoric, which means something frivolous, insignificant, etc. Nevertheless, rhetoric is not trivial, rather it is the very essence of politics. Simply because here the principle of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher and rhetorical theorist Protagoras is realised ('man is the measure of all things'). Keeping in mind what is said, the article aims to shed light on the connection between rhetoric and politics, and its dissemination in the sophistic and philosophical tradition. The argumentation is based on the conceptions of two contemporary philosophers – Barbara Cassin and Hans Blumenberg, who appear as the protagonists of positions according to which rhetoric takes up a significant place in political life. Since Plato, the sophists were treated as other pre-Socratics, as demagogues, who do not hold the truth but spread an opinion. The philosophers share a conviction that speech immediately expresses reality, and they also prohibited following the way of non-Being (Parmenides). The sophists (Gorgias, Protagoras) shared the position according to which speech expresses only itself, but not reality. My method is the analysis of the basic ideas about the rhetoric in Cassin's and Blumenberg's thinking using some targeted works, especially taking into account the idea of the connection between language and politics. Regarding the level of involvement of philosophers and sophists in politics, it is worth deliberating about the sometimes-unclear borderline between tyranny and democracy.

## ONTOLOGY VS LOGOLOGY

The realm of the above-mentioned problem lies in the pre-Socratic thinking in ancient Greece. In his poem *On Nature*, Parmenides formulates the main question that would later become central to modern politics. In the poem, the Goddess forbids Parmenides from going down the path of non-existence, because non-existence cannot be expressed.<sup>2</sup> Parmenides was convinced that when he talks about Being, he directly expresses it. In that way, Being, Truth, or unconcealment will become the essential foundation of philosophy (including ontology), which will later be adopted by Martin Heidegger. In his book *Parmenides* Heidegger offers to renounce the usual understanding of Parmenides' poem as a 'didactic poem' and to think of it as an invitation to focus our attention on the realm of Western thinking. According to Heidegger, Parmenides alongside Heraclitus thinks about the truth: 'To think the truth means to experience the truth in its essence and, in such experience to know the truth of what is true' (Heidegger 1992: 1). Contrary to Parmenides' position, the sophists Gorgias and Protagoras showed that Being (as well as non-being) is a consequence or effect of a language and that the measure of all things is a man (existing and non-existing). In politics, Protagoras' statement means that in Greek *polis* everyone has to think by himself about things that exist and do not exist. Such a position is opposite to the philosophical discourse, which postulates that the truth belongs exceptionally to philosophers. Since Plato, philosophical tradition is used to this opinion and still, we are faced with a similar attitude to other options of thinking.

<sup>1</sup> It is hard not to see the ironic parallel between the vigilant and *The Night Watch* – Rembrandt's painting and the documentary film *Rembrandt's J'Accuse* (2008) by Peter Greenaway.

<sup>2</sup> Come now, I will tell thee – and do thou hearken to my saying and carry it away – the only two ways of search that can be thought of. The first, namely, that *It is*, and that it is impossible for anything not to be, is the way of conviction, for truth is its companion. The other, namely, that *It is not*, and that something must needs not be, – that, I tell thee, is a wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is not – that is impossible – nor utter it (Parmenides *On Nature* [Transl. J. Burnet]).

The modern French philosopher Barbara Cassin proposes to read *Treatise on Non-being* of Gorgias as opposition to Parmenides' *On Nature* (as she puts this opposition in other words – empiricism vs rhetoric, Physics vs Politics) (Cassin 1995: 23). We should not think of sophistry as something completely different from the philosophical thinking of pre-Socratics, even if we, by following Heidegger's opinion, refuse to call Gorgias and other sophists pre-Socratics. Cassin emphasises that a philosopher is a cousin of a sophist, in the same way as a dog is a cousin of a wolf (Cassin 1995: 9).

The emergence of politics through sophistry is a crucial critical counterbalance to ontology, the 'discourse of being', which belongs to the Eleatic School, and the discourse on nature. This means that instead of *ontology*, we are faced with *logology*, the performative dimension of language. To explain the opposition to ontology, Cassin adopts the term *logology*, proposed by the philosopher and poet Novalis in 1789 (Cassin 1995: 11; Cassin 2018: 10). Novalis in his poetic-philosophical works searched for the very essence of language and he used various approaches to achieve this goal (e.g. he prefers *fragments*, because only in such a way is possible to achieve infinity). Regarding the opposition between ontology and logology, it is worth stressing that for Novalis language is a subject, active force and human lives in the linguistic sphere and appears in the middle of linguistic games. Cassin writes: 'Ontology goes from being towards the saying of being, in a good Parmenidean Heideggerian orthodoxy; logology goes from saying to being and produces being as an effect of saying, as a language-performance' (Cassin 2017: 79). The precursor of the notion that man is an object of language was the sophist Gorgias, who in his *Encomium of Helen* proved to astonished Greeks that by using language one can achieve such results as wished. When someone expresses a lie, then it immediately becomes a reality. So, ontology is simply a *chef-d'oeuvre* of sophistry but not the expression of the truth as such.

The sophists found that in a democracy everyone has the right to speak, but we hear and accept only the best opinion (the so-called consensus), while philosophers often only want to hear what they say. Such a position is a paradox because philosophy (the Socratic method – dialogue, questions and answers) seems to be designed to listen to the Other, the other's speech. K. R. Popper convincingly showed where the Platonic state leads – it becomes totalitarian (Popper 2013). Speaking about ancient Greece and politics, Cassin proposes two oppositions or an important distinction between the two thinkers representing sophistic Greece and philosophical Greece. She has in mind Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger.

According to Cassin, Arendt's Greece is sophistic, especially recalling a famous TV interview in 1964, when Arendt declared that she is not a philosopher, but only a teacher of political theory and political thought (Cassin 1995: 249). What is the difference between Arendt's activities and her political philosophy? Arendt argues that philosophy is not politically neutral: after Plato, it is simply impossible (Cassin 1995: 249). Later, she developed this idea, by talking about Heidegger – the philosopher who tries to implement his idea by turning into a tyrant or dictator. This is an allusion to Heidegger's flirting with the National Socialists. In other words, the lecturer of political thought has a freer attitude to politics, while philosophy claims to own absolute truth. Arendt also emphasises that 'truth carries within itself an element of coercion' (Arendt 1968: 239). She reflects Plato's distinction between truth and opinion in ancient Greece and writes: '<...> every claim in the sphere of human affairs to an absolute truth, whose validity needs no support from the side of opinion, strikes at the very roots of all politics and all governments. This antagonism between truth and opinion was further elaborated

by Plato (especially in the *Gorgias*) as the antagonism between communicating in the form of 'dialogue', which is the adequate speech for philosophical truth, and in the form of 'rhetoric', by which the demagogue, as we would say today, persuades the multitude' (Arendt 1968: 233). Heidegger's Greece is best known for his various themes about pre-Socratics, and especially about Parmenides. The quote above about Parmenides and Heraclitus as the thinkers of truth is one of the best examples of the Heideggerian notion of Greece in a general sense.

The Sophists, who took the place of poets and rhapsodists, became Greek thinkers, and thanks to them, culture as such was born. At the same time, in sophists' thinking, the goal of the state is understood as universality, to which individuality must obey and everyone must individually reflect on what universality is. With the beginning of the sophists' movement, the aforementioned statement becomes paradoxical, because its content is paradoxical. After all, the sophists are at the same time progressive, criticising traditional values and at the same time supporting the *polis*' oligarchs who deny these traditional values. How can someone be innovative and conservative at the same time? (Cassin 1995: 193). If culture is a practice of sharing common values, then how can progress be made? Is it possible to achieve consensus and progress at the same time? Sophistry suggests that there should be consensus only on the level of politics and rhetoric – there is no place for ethics here (Cassin 1995: 193). Plato and Aristotle were convinced that there is a necessary link between logic, ethics and politics. From Plato to Philostratus, it was recognised that the sophists had one advantage – *epideixis*, or public discourse. This is a *one-man show*, the opposite of the dialogue, the exchange of questions and answers, characteristic of Socratic dialectics. No doubt, anyone at the *polis* can speak and the sophists agree with such an opportunity, but only the one wins with the best language skills. Let us recall the famous *Encomium of Helen* by Gorgias: it is well known that Gorgias in the rhetoric performance proves Helen's innocence and her guilt. This is a sophistic *epideixis*. Gorgias challenges the general opinion and, using only the means of language, homonymy and praise glorifies Helen, who in Greece has been condemned since the mythical Troy era.<sup>3</sup> Rhetoric is not cumulative – it cannot be accumulated like wealth. But the *logos* ensure that one person can easily beat the majority and this is the essence of politics. There is something in society that binds citizens logically, but there is no better connection than *logos*, which is best revealed in rhetoric. So, that was the main idea of Cassin regarding the sophistic tradition and its relation to politics as such.

In the second part of the article, I would like to shed light on Hans Blumenberg's reflections on politics, language and rhetoric. No doubt, some major lines of Blumenberg's thinking coincide with Cassin's reflections on political philosophy and rhetoric (see more: Vidauskytė 2021: 616–626).

Cassin in *The Decision of Meaning* analysed the impossible demonstration, given by Aristotle in the book *Gamma* of the *Metaphysics*, of the principle of all principles, the law of non-contradictions. When Aristotle forbids homonymy at the same, he 'forbids' sophists – philosophy marginalising them completely. Similarly to Cassin's philosophical position, Blumenberg demonstrated that *myth* (which uses metaphors and various aesthetic figures) was always an integral part of *logos*. Since metaphors were declared only as ornaments of public speech, philosophers preferred to let stay such unclear and clumsy expressions in the handbooks of

<sup>3</sup> Let us return for a while to a vigilante's figure, which was deliberated above. Gorgias using his verbal performance demonstrated to the citizens gathered at the agora how to 'de-cancel canceled person'.

rhetoric. At the beginning of *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Blumenberg criticised the methodological program set out by Descartes: the clarity and distinctness that the first rule requires of all matters apprehended in judgments. Philosophical language should be purely and strictly ‘conceptual’ (Blumenberg 2010: 5). Both authors, Cassin and Blumenberg, work on the banned or neglected way of philosophers – the way of rhetoric, public speech, myth and metaphors. The force of philosophers tended to forbid different ways of persuading and simply does not want to see rhetorical aspects of their activity. And summing up, in the first part it is worth emphasising that actually on the rhetorical level, there are no criteria to distinguish truth from untruth. Cassin puts such statement in these words: there are no criteria for how to distinguish the words of the teacher and Führer (Cassin 1995: 226). Perhaps here is the essence of politics as such – each person should make a judgment, as was proposed by Pythagoras.

### RHETORIC AND POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

At first sight, Blumenberg’s relation to politics is not so clear, because the majority of researchers agree that his philosophy is intriguing but very difficult to understand. Today, however ‘as the research on Blumenberg continues and our picture of his thinking is more and more nuanced, it becomes clear, that he approaches political issues in a very indirect, sometimes almost hidden way’ (Heidenreich 2015: 526). According to Heidenreich, it is, however, often forgotten that Blumenberg’s work has been considered, in the late 1960s, to be of high political ambition (Heidenreich 2015: 526). Before continuing the analysis, it is worth emphasising some remarks about Blumenberg’s notion of the human to understand the specific place of rhetoric in his thinking.

Blumenberg’s philosophical project often is labelled as ‘philosophical anthropology’. As a research paradigm, philosophical anthropology was an attempt at providing a theory of ‘the human’ that avoided speculative idealism and mere accumulative scientism. Blumenberg states that ‘philosophical anthropology can be reduced to one pair of alternatives: man can be viewed either as a poor or as a rich creature. The fact that man is not fixed, biologically, to a specific environment can be understood either as a fundamental lack of proper equipment for self-preservation or openness to the fullness of a world that is no longer accentuated only in terms of vital necessities. Man is defined by what he lacks or by the creative symbolism with which he makes himself at home in worlds of his own’ (Blumenberg 1987: 429).

For Blumenberg, ‘anthropology’ means the attempt to understand human existence from itself, not having its reason in ‘Being’, ‘God’ or whatsoever, such as has supposedly been the case throughout the history of thinking. Blumenberg criticises Heidegger’s Being, Freudian *libido*; such final philosophical myths have one meaning – everything arouses from the One, *viz.* metaphysics. According to Blumenberg, rhetoric’s anthropological importance stands out best against the background of metaphysics that has been dominated since antiquity (Blumenberg 1987: 432). In that way, the Blumenbergian approach to philosophy and rhetoric has similarities to Cassin’s position and her interest in Sophistic history, and here lies the direct connection with the critical attitude to ontology. It is interesting to note that despite similarities regarding the importance of rhetoric, Blumenberg heavily criticised Hannah Arendt, who was an example of a sophistical attitude to politics for Cassin. Only a few years ago, Blumenberg’s work *Rigorism der Wahrheit* (*The Rigorism of Truth*) was published from *Nachlass*. The philosopher makes the comparison between Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* and Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, seeing both as attempts by authors to

refute founding myths of Jewish identity. He accused both thinkers of being moral rigorists who fetishised truth despite the practical consequences this would have. According to Blumenberg, both books robbed Jews of the ammunition to confront anti-Semitism and defend the creation of the state of Izrael (Blumenberg: 2018). Someone would be astonished by the strange proposal to consider a very controversial person (Eichmann) directly related to the emergence of the state of Israel. Nevertheless, this controversy led us to look more attentively at rhetoric (as myth is a part of Blumenberg's philosophy).

Rhetoric has to do with the consequences of possessing the truth or with the difficulties that result from the impossibility of obtaining the truth. Man as a rich creature exercises his disposition over the truth that he possesses with the aid of rhetoric. But rhetoric is not manipulated as it was in the Platonic tradition. Rather it is the activity of introducing order in reality at the anthropological level that is at the same time an ontological process of creation of reality, both external and internal. Using rhetorical tools, a man constructs his reality. But even the word a 'tool' is not appropriate for this purpose, because rhetoric does not 'lend' itself to the truth, it is not an instrument but pure expression; the brilliance of the diction is the brilliance of truth itself, the direct self-translation of the 'matter' into language and its persuasive force (Blumenberg 2010: 38). Rhetoric plays its role in the face of political authorities because '[r]hetoric teaches us to recognize rhetoric, but it does not teach us to legitimate it' (Blumenberg 1987: 448).

Human beings need the art of persuasion only to the extent that they lack access to reality that can convey truth. As the art of persuasion, rhetoric is also distinguished by the fact that it distances itself from the mere power of command (Blumenberg 1987a: 204). Blumenberg's theory of rhetoric is the art of postponing final decisions and civilising discourse. Just as *logos* plays an essential role in sophistic thinking, so in Blumenberg's political thought we see rhetoric and the idea of man: man is weak and therefore doomed to compensate for his weakness by 'technical' means (such as rhetoric). Blumenberg explains that rhetoric can be understood not as the art of deceit, but as a mediator in achieving consensus even in conflict (Blumenberg 1968: 144). Blumenberg's theory of human reason or rationality can be described as a metaphor for the theory of remixing using analogies; in other words, rhetoric that helps to negotiate in life.

Blumenberg insists on the importance of replacing action with words. From his point of view, the major task can be described as follows: How to do nothing with words? (Heidenreich 2015: 534).

In contemporary liberal society, there is no necessity to reach a consensus, and Blumenberg emphasises the fact that each person pursues different goals throughout his life. The openness and 'uncertainty' of a person show why the idea of a good life is so fundamentally different. All this seems like a trivial thesis, but Blumenberg gives a political sound to this idea: he argued that only the diversity of goals allows people to live together in peace. If we pursued the same goal in life, a civil war would break out. If only our desires, dreams and aspirations are broken down into many objects, professions and concepts of success, humanity can avoid the exhalation of competition. Such an idea of Blumenberg is essentially anti-Aristotelian: if there is no general idea of a polis (as it was in antiquity), then a person is not a *zōōn politicón*. Politics is not a joint work, but the maintenance of a mechanism for maintaining a distance. Having formulated doubts about the 'essence of man', Blumenberg nevertheless tries to determine what is the difference between man and animal: man is 'man at a distance' (Heidenreich 2011). Unlike animals, man can use stones, sticks and all tools that allow him to

work at a distance, such as language, writing, etc., when at the same time the animals cannot do it. A person can create a spatial and temporal distance. Only within the framework of liberalism (which maintains a distance between citizens and between citizens and the state) will it ensure that escalation is prevented. Each citizen can cultivate individual ideas of happiness and help his fellow citizens not to interfere with their plans. Blumenberg lets us know that there is no such thing as *res publica* because there is no general idea of happiness. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *volonté generale* (in political philosophy, the general will is the will of the people as a whole) may seem here to be an absolute misunderstanding (Heidenreich 2011). The best we can achieve within the political framework is to allow everyone to pursue their own goals and distance themselves as peacefully as possible. Therefore, as Heidenreich insists, Blumenberg's political thought can be characterised as a 'liberalism of distance' (Heidenreich 2011). Someone can ask the right question about how far 'liberalism of distance' works? Does it work under the conditions of the war, when extraordinary collaboration among all citizens is required? It seems that Blumenberg's preference for a 'common being in distance' follows from his negative experience of the National Socialist regime in Germany. Heidenreich insists that the lack of intimacy in Blumenberg's theory shows its narrowness (Heidenreich 2015: 537–538). But probably this question is still open because the studies of political aspects in Blumenberg's thinking just started and we need to wait for wider deliberations on this issue. Moreover, Blumenberg himself removed many of his ideas about political myths from his published works, and these unpublished 'pieces' are left in the archive. The researchers now face the dilemma – do they need to take into account ideas that were rejected by the author? The question is not so easy to answer.

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern political correctness and 'cancel culture' have revealed unexpected parallels with the history of the rivalry between sophistical and philosophical discourses. Cassin revisits the denied and highly marginalised history of sophistry. Her deliberation shows that sophistry, and the path of logology it has chosen, are much more liberal than traditional philosophy. The problem of coercive truth is not so easily solved either in a democracy or in a tyranny. Today we often see again the same ancient dilemmas that the Ancient Greece polis faced when philosophers and sophists started to spread their thinking among citizens. Heidegger's notion of Ancient Greece and unconcealment appears on the same logical basis as modern ostracism, viz. 'cancel culture.'

Blumenberg, who is not traditionally considered a political thinker, follows the same path as Cassin. Until now, there is a growing number of studies that allow us to consider his position in relation to philosophical anthropology as political. Emphasising the importance of rhetoric (rhetorical and literary figures) in politics, cognition, law, philosophy, etc. Blumenberg appears next to Cassin (she also works in the area of abandoned, parallel roads). The methodological program of philosophy, based on strict terms and established by Descartes, does not remain within its own framework. Philosophers often just do not notice that they use metaphors and fetish truth despite the consequences of such a position. Blumenberg's philosophical position includes *logos* as the mean of distancing, and the art of politics is determined by the ability to delay decisions and soften conflicts by rhetorical means.

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## Sofistika, retorika ir politika

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnio tikslas – nustatyti sąryšį tarp retorikos ir politikos bei to sąryšio sklaidą sofistinėje ir filosofinėje tradicijoje. Argumentacija pagrįsta dviejų šiuolaikinių filosofų – Barbaros Cassin ir Hanso Blumenbergo – mąstymu. Pastarieji pristatomi kaip protagonistai pozicijos, postuluojančios, kad retorika yra reikšmingiausias elementas valstybės ir politiniame gyvenime. Nuo Platono laikų sofistai buvo įvardijami kaip kitokie ikisokratikai, kaip demagogai, kurie nežino tiesos, o tik platina nuomones. Filosofai laikėsi įsitikinimo, kad kalbėdami apie tikrovę, Būtį, jie išsyk (tiesiogiai) ją ir išreiškia. Jie taip pat uždraudė eiti nebūties keliu, panašiai kaip draudimus taiko šiuolaikinė *atsaikimo* kultūra. Sofistai (Gorgijas, Protagoras) laikėsi pozicijos, kad kalba išreiškia tik save pačią, bet ne tikrovę. Du priešingi, bet vis dėlto giminingi, mąstymo keliai atskleidžia Martino Heideggerio ir Hannos Arendt filosofijose. Atsižvelgiant į pagrindinę šio straipsnio temą, H. Blumenbergo filosofinė pozicija apima *logos* kaip atstumų, distancijos kūrimo priemonę (liberalizmas), o B. Cassin mąstyme dominuoja logologija kaip ontologija.

**Raktažodžiai:** sofistika, retorika, politika, logologija, ontologija, atstumas