

Comments by Hegel on Sophistry from his *Logic: Being Part of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (translated by William Wallace; Oxford University Press, 1975).

Section 81 (p. 117).

The essence of Sophistry lies in giving authority to a partial and abstract principle, in its isolation, as may suit the interest and particular situation of the individual at the time. For example, a regard to my existence, and my having the means of existence, is a vital motive of conduct, but if I exclusively emphasize this consideration or motive of my welfare, and draw the conclusion that I may steal or betray my country, we have a case of Sophistry. Similarly, it is a vital principle in conduct that I should have an insight into what I am doing, and a conviction that it is right. But if my pleading insists on this principle alone I fall into Sophistry, such as would overthrow all the principles of morality.

Section 178 (p. 128).

To get no further than mere grounds, especially on questions of law and morality, is the position and principle of the Sophists. Sophistry, as we ordinarily conceive it, is a method of investigation, which aims at distorting what is just and true, and exhibiting things in a false light. Such however is not the proper or primary tendency of Sophistry: the standpoint of which is no other than that of *raisonnement*. The Sophists came on the scene at a time when the Greeks had begun to grow dissatisfied with mere authority and tradition and felt the need of intellectual justification for what they were to accept as obligatory. That desideratum the Sophists supplied by teaching their countrymen to seek for the various points of view under which things may be considered: which point of view are the same as grounds. But the ground, as we have seen, has no essential and objective principles of its own, and it is as easy to discover grounds for what is wrong and immoral as for what is moral and right. Upon the observer therefore it depends to decide what points are to have most weight. The decision in such circumstances is prompted by his individual views and sentiments. Thus the objective foundation of what ought to have been of absolute and essential obligation, accepted by all, was undermined: and Sophistry by this destructive action deservedly brought upon itself the bad name previously mentioned. Socrates, as we all know, met the Sophists at every point, not by a bare reassertion of authority and tradition against their argumentations, but by showing dialectically how untenable the mere grounds were, and by vindicating the obligations of justice and goodness—by reinstating the universal or notion of the will. In the present day such a method of argumentation is not quite out of fashion. Nor is that the case only in the discussion of secular matters. It occurs even in sermons, such as those where every possible ground of gratitude to God is propounded. To such pleading Socrates and Plato would not have scrupled to apply the name of Sophistry. For Sophistry has nothing to do with what is taught: that may very possibly be true. Sophistry lies in the formal circumstance of teaching it by grounds which are as available for attack as for defence. In a time so rich in reflection and so devoted to *raisonnement* as our own, he must be a poor creature who cannot advance a good ground for everything, even for what is worst and most depraved. Everything in the world that has become corrupt has had good ground for its corruption. An appeal to grounds at first makes the hearer think of beating a retreat: but when experience has taught him the real state of these matters, he closes his ears against them, and refuses to be imposed upon anymore.