

A Tattered Net, a Tangled Web: Contested *sophia* in Alciphron *Letters* 1.17–19

Andrew Scholtz

What do fishing nets do? They catch fish, but what about nets abandoned long ago, tattered and torn? One such net in Alciphron plays a frayed and fraught role in mediating the fictitious correspondence of two fishermen (1.17–19). In so doing, it sheds light on a perplexing but little-noticed puzzle: how so worthless a thing as this net becomes an object of envy and lust. (Zanetto 2018: 126; Rosenmeyer 2001: 294n48, 315.)

Writing to the net's owner (1.17, 19), a fellow fisherman describes finding it disintegrating on a beach. His case for taking possession is unsurprising: forgotten and unclaimed, the net is fair game. Curious is the fact that he would want it at all, not to mention the sophistic flavor of his argumentation. Thus the finder denies that the owner is being penalized or fined (*hēkista zēmoumenos*) — why? One gathers, because the owner, through a kind of automatic forfeiture for neglect, has in effect already “fined” himself. He must therefore be ready to “gift” (*pros tēn dosin*) that which neither he nor anyone owns, a logically challenging notion recalling passages from Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and Plato's *Euthydemus*.

Viewing the net through the lens of actor-network-theory, we detect an added twist. Note the “utter annihilation” (*pantelōs apōleian*) to which the owner has consigned his erstwhile property. Compare “depunctualization,” where a broken-down implement ceases to be itself and becomes its parts (Gehl 2016: 38; Latour 1999: 183). Just so, this disintegrating net is no longer a functional thing, indeed, has all but ceased to be. Consider as well the resonance with Gorgias' *On Nonbeing* (fr. 3 D-K). If nothing is, how can we know it, much less communicate it? In similar fashion, how can the net's owner defend his claim to a virtual non-thing?

Strikingly, this net, by dint of its non-functionality, its quasi-nonexistence, still does things. It functions as a mediator; it “translates” the finder's request into a sophistic performance seeking to ensnare the owner in its tangled web. (Mediation, Latour 2005: 37–42. Translation, Callon 1984.) Does the owner notice? Though his reply (1.18) declines to acknowledge outright the finder's ploy, it manages to hoist him on the petard of his cleverness. Thus the owner, conceding his own neglect of the net, imputes to the finder insatiable lust (*aplēstous epithumias*) and envy's evil eye (*baskanos . . . ophthalmos*), thereby reinstating the net's entity and value, this time, as a vehicle for *sophia*. That quashes the sophistic basis of the finder's claim (one cannot knowingly envy or desire a non-thing), but it also attacks the finder for the kind of cleverness that, according to Philostratus, earned the mistrust of classical Athenians (*V S* 1.483.18–21). One detects a note of realism in this fantasy. What if the finder exaggerates? What if this net is just barely worth salvaging? The finder's failed attempt at sophistry would then evoke sympathy for someone reduced by straightened circumstances (cf. Alciphron 1.3, 9, 20) to procuring needed gear by making the weaker argument stronger (Protagoras fr. 6b D-K).

Works Cited

- Callon, M. 1984. “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay.” *The Sociological Review* 32: 196–233.
- Gehl, R. W. 2016. “The Politics of Punctualization and Depunctualization in the Digital Advertising Alliance.” *The Communication Review* 19: 35–54.

- Latour, B. 1999. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rosenmeyer, P. A. 2001. *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zanetto, G. 2018. "The Sea of Alciphron." In Biraud, M. and Zucker, A., eds. *The Letters of Alciphron: A Unified Literary Work?* 126–37. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV.