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Semantics, Predication, Truth and Falsehood in Plato's *Sophist*

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Being and Nonbeing, truth and falsehood in the *Sophist*

"The *Sophist* seems to be concerned with two things: being and nonbeing, on the one hand, and true and false speech, on the other. If speech is either true or false speech, it seems not even plausible for being to be either being or nonbeing, since we would then be compelled to say that nonbeing is as much being as false speech is speech. If nonbeing, however, is being, then nonbeing cannot be nonbeing, for otherwise the falseness of false speech would not consist in its saying 'nonbeing.' And, in turn, if nonbeing is nonbeing, the falseness of false speech again cannot consist in its saying 'nonbeing,' for it would then not be saying anything. If we then say that nonbeing is appearing, and appearing is not unqualified nonbeing, being is being and appearing, and we want to distinguish between the strict identity which belongs to being and the likeness of nonbeing to the strict identity of being. We say, then, 'Here is Socrates himself' and 'Here is a likeness of Socrates.' Everything in the likeness of Socrates that is a likeness of Socrates himself will generate a true speech of Socrates identical to another speech true of Socrates himself. Everything, however, in the likeness of Socrates that is not a likeness of Socrates himself yields a false speech of Socrates. Among the false speeches of Socrates would be, for example, the paint on Socrates' portrait but not the color of the paint that is true of Socrates himself. The paint, then, without the color (*per impossibile*), is not true of Socrates, but it certainly is not a likeness of Socrates either. The paint must be together with its color in order for it to be both a likeness of Socrates and nonbeing, but it seems to be utterly mysterious how by being together it can be that and by being apart it ceases to be anything of the sort. If every thing then is just what it is and nothing else, it is impossible for there to be any speech, either true or false, for speech is impossible unless something can be put together with something else. The conditions for speech are the same as the conditions for nonbeing, and we can have speech if there is always falsehood or being if there is never truth. Parmenides must and cannot be right. If this is the gist of the sophist's argument, it is hard to see how the Eleatic stranger shows its incoherence and thereby distinguishes between sophistry and philosophy. He leads us to believe that inasmuch as logos comes to be through the weaving together of kinds, the problem of nonbeing has been solved; but he goes on to characterize logos, insofar as it can be said to be true or false, as the weaving together of verb and noun (action and actor) without ever showing how these two kinds of logos are related to one another. The stranger himself even says that he has always failed to solve the problem of nonbeing, and in the dialogue he proves that the problem of being is no less baffling. He proposes then that his own logos, even if it fails to solve either problem, will be as far as it goes adequate for both; but since he also asserts that being and nonbeing are as different as light and dark, he implies that no single logos can be adequate for both unless it is indifferent to that difference. The argument, then, that the sophist mounts against philosophy is reinforced by the stranger's own self-contradictory account. That Theaetetus believes by the end that the problem has

been solved only goes to show the degree to which the stranger in tracking the sophist has become indistinguishable from the sophist." (pp. XII-XIII)

From: Seth Benardete, *Plato's Sophist. Part II of The Being of the Beautiful*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1986.

"The King admired Alice for being able to see even the nothing while he himself could hardly see anything. The King's intellectual ancestry goes back more than two thousand years. The problem of seeing nothing posed philosophical questions to the Greeks, and thus it became the main topic of Plato's *Sophist*. Plato did not share the King's point of view. He wished to explain truth, falsehood, and meaning without supposing that people can see the nothing. Plato's effort goes beyond the repudiation of the King's position. Underlying the problem of seeing nothing is the issue whether believing the truth is like seeing, seeing with "the eye of the mind." If believing the truth is seeing, then believing what is false must be blindness.

But how could it be? Believing falsehoods is still believing something. It is not blindness; it is not believing nothing. Plato's dissolution of this puzzle helps us to understand better the nature of truth and falsehood. In denying that wisdom is sight and folly blindness we come to understand that truths are not objects of mental sight. What is true or false is not an object or a name. Thus Plato's explanation of truth, falsehood, and meaning has important consequences for his conception of the nature and objects of knowledge, and therefore for his theory of Forms. The results of Plato's investigation are not of mere historical interest to us. The differences between statement and name, meaning and truth, sort- and formal concepts, -- differences which Plato was pointing out -- are as lively topics of philosophical debate today as they were twenty-four hundred years ago." (pp. 22-23)

From: Julius M. E. Moravcsik, "Being and Meaning in the Sophist", *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 14, 1962.

Summary of the section on Nonbeing

"To sum up then, the discussion in the *Sophist* seems to attempt the following things: to distinguish the sense of *einai* in which it means 'exist' from various other senses which the word bears; to deal, as we have seen, with the Paradox of False Belief; and to deal with the (related) problems raised by negation on the assumption that a sentence which does contain, or could be re-phrased so as to contain, the copula 'is' asserts the existence of its subject and that its negation might be thought to assert its non-existence, or at least to attribute to it a measure of non-existence. I hope that this will become clear in the following account of the argument in which, as before, I shall prefix a number to paragraphs which purport to give the gist of the text and a letter to those which contain comment. [Sections with comments are omitted in this summary] (*To on* is that which is, an *on* is something which is; *to mê on* is that which is-not, a *mê on* is something which is-not; *einai* means 'to be').

1. The relevant section begins in 236 d, when the Stranger, having said that sophists pursue apparent rather than real wisdom, goes on to say that there has been, and still is, a serious puzzle about "appearing and yet not being, and about saying something and yet something which is not true". Arguments implying the possibility of false statement or false belief "venture to say that not-being is; for there could not otherwise be such a thing as falsity" (237 a 4).

2. The Stranger then says that Parmenides always warned his pupils not to say that not-being is, and offers as the reason for this ban the argument that 'not-being' cannot be the name of anything which is, and therefore cannot be the name of anything. But a man who says something must say some one thing; therefore the man who does not say something must say nothing, and therefore perhaps we ought to say that the man who tries to utter what is-not not only says nothing, but does not even say at all. (237 a-e).

3. It has been shown so far that not-being is a balking notion. On the one hand we often have occasion to use it; on the other hand Parmenides has good reason to forbid us to do so. The Stranger goes on to find further difficulties in the notion of not-being. That which he calls the chief of them is as follows. Something which does not exist cannot have any properties. But if one is going to speak of non-entity at all one must either use the singular or the plural ('not-being' or 'not-beings'). Not-

being, therefore, cannot be spoken of nor thought of at all. Furthermore, and worse, even to say that much about it is to treat it as if it were some one existing thing. (238 a-239 c).

4. The Stranger goes on to conclude from the difficulties he has raised about not-being that it will be embarrassing to say that sophists create semblances (*eikones*). For the sophists will ask what an *eikôn* is, will refuse to accept an ostensive definition, and will force you to admit that a semblance is something which is not the genuine thing. And since the genuine thing is really a being, and the non-genuine its opposite, a semblance will have to be something which 'is not really a being, but exists in a way, though not genuinely, except that it really is a semblance', and therefore 'not really being, it really is'. And thus we shall have to say that a not-being in a way is. (239 c-240 b).

5. The Stranger then says that he is unable to see how to define sophistry without contradicting the conclusions that they have come to in their discussion so far. He wants to say that sophists make us believe what is false, but he sees that the sophists will retort that this is impossible because a false belief must be one that asserts what is contrary to what is, either by holding that not-beings are, or by holding that beings are not. Therefore if we say that there are false propositions we shall, as Theaetetus puts it, 'be forced to tack being on to not-being, which we have agreed to be impossible'. (240 c-241 b).

6. The Stranger then says that they must come to terms with Parmenides, and show that not-being in a way is, and being in a way is-not. This leads him to the criticisms of various philosophical and cosmological schools which we have examined in an earlier chapter, the professed aim of these criticisms being to show that being is just as difficult a notion as not-being. He criticizes (a) those who say that to on is two or three things, such as the warm and the cold; (b) Parmenides who says that it is to hen (which could mean either 'unity' or 'the one substance'); (c) the materialists who say that to on is what we can see and touch; and (d) the Partisans of the Forms who say that to on is utterly changeless. Showing, from this last criticism, that activity and inactivity both are (i.e. exist), and yet are not being, he concludes that it is as difficult to say what 'being' is the name of as it is to say what 'not-being' is the name of. (241 d-251 a).

7. The Stranger continues his argument by way of drawing attention to the fact that in every predication something other than the subject is predicated of it, and that this shows that kinds can share. Then follows the passage about dialectic and the discussion of the very great kinds-being, activity, inactivity, sameness and difference-in which it is demonstrated that all of these are, but that none is identical with any of the others. From this it is concluded (256-7) that activity (for instance) is not being, and that therefore 'not-being must exist with respect to activity and in accordance with all the kinds'. Since none of them is identical with being they can all be called not-beings while at the same time they are beings. 'Every kind has much being and infinite not-being' (256 a 1). Even being itself is-not everything else. (251 a-257 a).

8. The Stranger now concludes that when we speak of not-being we do not speak of the opposite of being, but only of something different from it. Negation does not 'signify the opposite'. To prefix 'not' to a word is to indicate something different from the thing that the word stands for. There are many parts of difference, or in other words many contrasts, such as that between the beautiful and that which is different from it; and the contrasted term (such as the not-beautiful) is just as much a being as the other term, since the former does not signify the opposite of the latter, but only something different from it. This, he says, deals with the problem of the sophists' teaching. Not-being is difference. It is not the opposite of being. We are not 'venturing to say' that the opposite of being exists. The question whether there is such a thing as not-being conceived of as the opposite of being, and if so whether any account can be given of it, is not one which arises in this connection. It is sufficient for the present purpose to show that the kinds can share, and that though difference (or "not-being" in the ordinary sense of that phrase) is not being, it is a being, in which all other beings, including being itself, partake. (257 b-259 b).

9. The Stranger continues his argument by warning his hearers against the frivolous production of antinomies. The fact that *logos* or the making of statements involves the interweaving of different kinds means that it will always be possible to produce apparent antinomies out of innocent statements if one fails to attend to the sense of what is said. But to exploit such antinomies is to render discourse impossible. He then alarms his hearers by telling them that though the existence of not-being has been established, the sophists will still be able to contend that statements and beliefs cannot partake in it, and meets this with the analysis of a proposition into an *onoma* and a *rhema* with which we are familiar. (259 b-264 b)." (pp. 502-514)

From: Ian MacHattie Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, Vol. II: *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1963.

A survey of recent interpretations (in progress)

"Coming back to false statement, a fantasm exists qua fantasm, and so possesses being. But qua fantasm -- qua perceived look and not qua verbal or material embodiment of that look -- it exists as not that which it shows itself to be. Therefore it cannot refer directly to what it shows itself to be or derive its existence solely from that and hence indirectly from /the pure form) being. So it looks as if the fantasm refers to, and derives its existence from, (a pure form) non-being. If, however, non-being is a pure form, then it too derives its being from combination with the pure form being. If non-being is indeed a pure form, then 'non-being is' in the sense just explicated. This statement contains a self-contradiction because it can be unpacked into the two statements: "non-being" means "complete absence of being" and "non-being" means "presence of being" or something of the sort. Actually, the problem is even worse than this, because to deny that non-being possesses being is by the Stranger's analysis meaningful if and only if the expression 'non-being' refers to something. We can make this point sharply, if not in the Stranger's own terms, by saying that, for him, 'non' or 'not' cannot be explained entirely as a syntactical particle or function.

This leads to another preliminary remark that I think worth making here. We should not assume that it is self-evident what the Stranger means by a 'contradiction'. I want to bring this out by making use of an unpublished paper by Richard Routley.

Routley distinguishes three kinds or senses of 'contradiction.' (1) One statement may cancel another. In this case, the result of 'A and not-A' is silence or nothing. (2) The collision of the statements 'A' and 'not-A' results in what Routley calls the 'explosion' of 'A' into every statement whatsoever. In other words, from a contradiction everything follows. (3) The statement 'not-A' constrains but does not totally control 'A.' Routley is thinking here of relevance logic, in which the choice between 'A' and 'not-A' can be sensibly raised if and only if 'A' and 'not-A' are each the opposite of the other. The semantical rule for evaluating relevant negation is then: 'not-A' holds in a world a if and only if 'A' holds in world a', the reverse of a. Following this third case, 'not-A' is the reverse of 'A,' and reversal is the relevance-restricted version of 'other thanness,' or what looks like the Stranger's eventual explanation of nonbeing. In sum: within relevance logic, there must be a substantive connection between 'A' and 'not-A' for any meaningful (and hence truth-functional/ connection to hold between them. To the extent that this applies to the Stranger's doctrines, we may take the connection to be semantic; since the Stranger has no doctrine of possible worlds, the connection between 'A' and 'not-A' must hold in this world. However, this world has two different aspects. Some statements refer directly to pure forms. Other statements, like 'Theaetetus flies,' do not. So 'Theaetetus flies' and 'Theaetetus sits' are contradictory, if and only if there is someone we know named Theaetetus who is either flying or sitting.

To this extent, then, the Stranger may be called a relevance logician. The Stranger is not reduced to silence by the assertions 'nonbeing is' and 'non-being is not.' At least, this is not his intention, as his subsequent analysis makes plain. Similarly, the Stranger cannot accept the 'explosion' interpretation of contradiction. For within this interpretation, the statement 'non-being is' would continue to hold, side-by-side with 'non-being is not.' Differently stated, the Stranger's fundamental interest is ontological, not 'formal,' in the sense used in contemporary logical calculi. If the Stranger's interests were merely formal, he could easily avoid a contradiction by stipulation. This is of course an anachronistic way of looking at the actual situation, but that is precisely my point. One comes closer to the truth by saying that the Stranger is investigating the semantical basis of logical rules, and that for him 'semantics' is in the last analysis a doctrine of ontological or pure forms." (pp. 178-179)

From: Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Sophist. The Drama of Original and Image*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1983.

"In order to understand the Stranger's position with respect to otherness, we must remember that he is on the way to a resolution of the problem of non-being. It will be part of his resolution not to hypostatize 'not'; that is, he will deny that 'being' (or being) has a contrary (or 'opposite'). In one sense, then, 'not' must be explained as a syntactical particle to which no form corresponds. But in

another sense, this is impossible, since the Stranger requires forms to provide meaning. The semantic force of 'not' will thus be derived by him from otherness. Despite the assurances of some scholars to the contrary, the Stranger does have a 'complete' use of 'is,' as I have now explained at length. This use cannot be negated; at least, the Stranger never deals with this problem. He never deals with nonexistent 'things' because (to put the point somewhat awkwardly) for him, there are no such things. I am not contending that he would not understand statements like 'Socrates does not exist.' The absence of such statements follows from his primary concern with 'exists' in the sense of 'possesses being' or 'combines with being.' But the analysis of statements like 'Socrates does not exist' would present grave problems for the Stranger. This is because he wants to explain 'not' by way of a form. The form he chooses is otherness. So 'not to be' means for him 'not to be F,' where ultimately F is a form or combination of forms (in the case of instances). But 'not to be F' must in turn mean 'to be G,' where G is ultimately a form, or formal combination, entirely distinct from F. If Socrates does not exist, then he does not participate in the form being. In this case, however, he participates in no forms at all. He is not 'other than' an instance of being. The doctrine of forms provides no basis for explaining the meaning of the statement 'Socrates does not exist.' Nor, for that matter, does the meaning of 'Socrates is dead' spring readily to the eye, given the Stranger's doctrine. In sum: since we wish to avoid speaking of nonexistent things, or to put it positively, since anything at all combines with or participates in being, 'not' must be explained by means of the available network of pure forms. The obvious choice is otherness. 'Not to be this' is instead 'to be that.' Hence otherness must be a double look, or what would today be called a two-place relation. This conclusion gives rise in turn to a second question: What about sameness? Contrary to the contemporary procedure, the Stranger takes 'sameness' as a complete look. This is misunderstood by those who replace 'sameness' by 'identity' and explain that, in turn, as one sense of 'is'. As I have shown in detail, this destroys the distinction between the two forms being and sameness. When the Stranger says that each form is the same as itself, he is in fact denying that form F is 'related' to any other form, qua same; hence his insistence that sameness and otherness are two distinct forms. If sameness were a two-place relation, it would contain otherness in its intrinsic nature; and this would violate the separateness of the two forms. The Stranger sees no need to consider 'sameness' as a reflexive relation (for example, as 'F = F'); we may infer that this would introduce duality from his standpoint. However we might analyze it, the expression 'each of them is other' (254d13) is for the Stranger a way of saying that the form sameness is a distinct form, which provides a distinct look, and which is complete in itself. That is, 'a is the same' is a complete expression, whereas 'a is other' is not." (pp. 271-272)

From: Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Sophist. The Drama of Original and Image*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

"Before Plato is ready to attempt an integration of his accounts of becoming and of being into a coherent theory of participation, however, another important problem from the *Theaetetus* must be resolved. Although *lógos* is made possible by the weaving together of Forms (*Sophist* 259E5-6), not every case of *lógos* is a case of knowledge. It is just the difference between true and false discourse, in fact, that ultimately marks the difference between philosophy and sophistry. To complete the 'official' mission of the Sophist, which is to make the nature of the latter clear, the distinction between truth and falsity in judgment must be firmly established. To complete its account of being, in turn, which is the more substantial purpose of the dialogue, is to show how the objects of knowledge (the Forms) must be related to make the distinction between true and false judgment possible. To this end Plato develops an account of not-being (of what is not) that remains among his more impressive accomplishments of the intermediate period.

The sophist is a producer of semblance in discourse, which means that he influences our minds 'to think things that are not' (240D9). What we thus understand him as doing, however, is precisely what Parmenides had proclaimed not to be understandable at all. That it is not,' he said, 'is not to be said or thought' (Kirk and Raven, 1995, fr. 347.8-9) rather, 'all that can be thought is the thought that it is' (Ibid, fr. 352.1). Thus to complete his definition of the sophist's art, the Stranger must engage in a form of parricide (241D3), and show that 'what is not' can be thought after all." (pp. 228-229)

From: Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology. A Riddle Resolved*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983. (Second edition with a new introduction and the essay, *Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C*, Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2005).

"Plato's Sophist has held special significance in recent decades. Of all of his works it has seemed to speak most directly to philosophical interests of modern American and British philosophers. Much of the most sophisticated Platonic scholarship has been aimed at interpreting it. (...) In 1905 Russell published his article 'On Denoting'. In it he claimed to show how the notion of nonexistence could be expressed without the paradox that had often appeared to afflict it. His answer to the problem seemed to provide a lesson in how explaining a bit of language could unravel a metaphysical tangle. The problem arose because, for example, when one says 'Pegasus does not exist,' one seems to indicate that one is talking about a certain thing, Pegasus, and yet at the same time to say that it is not there to be talked about. Russell tried to show how this appearance of paradoxical conflict could be eliminated.

The Sophist mainly deals with a problem that looks much the same as Russell's. At 236ff., Plato expounds a difficulty concerning 'that which is not' (to me on). He attributes the discovery of it to the earlier philosopher Parmenides (who died probably not long after 450 B.C.). His contention was that we cannot speak or think of that which is not. Nonetheless, Plato emphasizes, certain things that we say and think do indeed seem to require us to use the phrase 'that which is not' -- including even our own effort to say that we cannot speak or think of that which is not (238d-239b). Parmenides' difficulty seems related to Russell's problem about nonexistence. For example the statement, 'That which is not cannot be spoken of,' seems paradoxical in a way that is reminiscent of 'Pegasus does not exist.' The resemblance appears especially strong if 'nonbeing' and 'nonexistence' amount to the same thing. In that case we have the two statements, 'Pegasus does not exist' and 'That which is not cannot be spoken of,' both of which look as though they single something out to talk about, but at the same time say that it is not there to be talked about. The two statements are not exactly parallel (the latter, unlike the former, tries to say explicitly that its alleged subject matter cannot be spoken of). Still, both appear to be caught up in much the same difficulty, which is roughly that of trying to speak about something that is, by hypothesis, not there at all.

It has been disputed whether the two problems are the same (cf. *infra*, pp. XX, XXVIII), and whether 'nonbeing' really is tantamount to 'nonexistence.' Nevertheless the resemblance between them makes clear why many nonexistence twentieth-century interpreters of Plato have found the Sophist especially congenial food for philosophical and historical thought. Its problem of nonbeing, taken along with its possibly antimetaphysical and obvious linguistically oriented thinking, fits well with modern preoccupations." (pp. VII-IX)

From: Plato, *Sophist*, Translated, with introduction and notes by Nicholas P. White, Indianapolis: Hackett 1993.

"The sophist as a kind can be grasped only if falsity is possible. But the False in things and in words, that which makes them pseudo-things and pseudo-accounts (pseudos being the Greek word for "falsehood"), is shot through with Non-being: Just as imitations are not what they seem to be, so false sentences say what is not the case. Now if Non-being is unthinkable and unutterable, as Father Parmenides asserted, then we may conclude that all speech must be granted to be true for those who utter it. Perfect relativity reigns.

Parmenides' dangerous single-mindedness cannot be overthrown by the mere counter-assertion of the paradox that Non-being after all somehow is. Non-being has to be given a meaning; it has to be rendered specific and placed among the articulable kinds. The stranger helps Theaetetus to discover the great and comprehensive kind that does indeed make Non-being sayable: the Other. When Non-being is specified as otherness, it becomes a powerful principle for regulating the slippery relativity that is the sophist's refuge. The Other controls relativity in two ways. First it is itself the principle of relativity which turns the swampy relativity of "everything is true for someone" into a firm source of relationality. The Other does this work by being chopped up and distributed through all beings or, in the dialogue's other metaphor, by being thoroughly interwoven with Being. Every being, every thing, is not only the same with itself but also other than all the other beings. Each being is related to all the others by the reciprocating principle of otherness: It is the others' other without being the less itself, the less self-same.

So the Other acts as a sort of divisive bond that enables speech to mark off each kind or thing from all the others without consigning any of them to mere non-being or consigning itself to saying nothing. As the Other, Nonbeing does indeed become speakable. In fact the stranger's way of division relies continually on this power of the Other when it selects certain kinds and sets aside the other or non-selected kinds.

Non-being interpreted as the Other thus ceases to be mere nothingness and becomes instead the source of articulated diversity in things and in thought. Parmenides has been superseded. But the sophist's relativity has not yet been completely controlled. The stranger has shown that Non-being, far from being unutterable, is in fact a necessary ingredient in thought and speech. To catch the sophist, however, another step is needed. The stranger does not just speak; he speaks falsehood, makes pseudo-arguments, offers imitation-wisdom. Though the Other is Nonbeing positively understood, it is still negative enough to help account not only for the diversity of kinds but also for differences in their dignity. An image or an imitation, because it has a share in Non-being, is not merely other than its original but also less. It is less in genuineness and may even fall further into falsity. The sophist can no longer claim that there is no intelligible discrimination between true and false.

The Other as positive Non-being thus has a double function: First it establishes a world of diversity through which the multifarious sophist ranges, with the stranger in hot pursuit. And second, the Other plays a role in establishing the hierarchy of genuineness in which the sophist is caught and marked by the stranger as one who truly deals in falsity." (pp. 11-12)

From: *Plato's Sophist. The Professor of Wisdom*, With translation, introduction and glossary by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem, Newburyport: Focus Publishing 1996.