

To Act and to Suffer: Allusions to Plato's Dialectical Metaphysics in the *Sophist*¹

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This paper considers the proposal made by the Stranger of Elea to materialists and idealists: reality is qualified as the power to act and to suffer. Whatever acts must act on what suffers its action, but agent and patient are in such a dynamic relationship that they can 'swap roles' with each other. The consequent complexity emerges in the entirety of the *Sophist* and has its most evident expression in the *diairesis* that manifests the complex nature of Ideas. This *diairesis* proceeds from a one and generates its multiple branches by a process that, as it were, brings the Ideas into being from what is not due to the intervention of a demiurge. If being qualifies as a power to act and to suffer that leads to a systemic vision of the complexity of reality and the intervention of a demiurge, the result is a reduction of importance of ontology, the science of 'being', which has interested readers of the *Sophist* for centuries. For Plato 'being' in all its variants is not the definitive word that connotes reality, as the subsequent ontological tradition (of Aristotelian origin) believes. In conclusion, the ontological treatment should not be overvalued: Plato here presents the dialectical and dynamic vision of his philosophy.

Act, suffer, ontology, dialectic

In Plato's second description, in the *Sophist*, of previous philosophy as a *γυγαντομαχία* between materialists² and idealists,³ the materialists, even if made better people, are kept in check. The strange thing, however, is that at

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- 1 Sadly, Maurizio Migliori passed away after submitting his paper. The editors have taken the liberty of making some stylistic changes in his English.
 - 2 A basic methodological principle should always apply. If Plato wanted to attack not a philosophical position but a school or a philosopher, he would have introduced distinctive elements that would have allowed the reader of the time to understand who it was. Since adequate textual indications are lacking, it is not possible to suggest references to specific philosophers (even if the Atomists are the only true materialists of antiquity). Since Theaetetus claims to have encountered many of them (246B4-5), it is better to think that in this case Plato refers to a theoretical position in a generic sense.
 - 3 Again, the same variety of positions that are constantly hypothesized (Megarians, Pythagoreans, Academics, Plato himself in an earlier phase) show that the problem is unsolvable. The only textual datum is that they are Eleatizing, so much so that the Stranger from Elea claims to know them well. This does not seem suffice to determine a school because, to a certain extent, the Eleatic position has conditioned the debate of a generation of thinkers.

this point the Stranger almost seems to take pity on them and to desire to help them by offering them what appears like an escape route:

Stranger: Maybe they find themselves in difficulty (ἀποροῖεν). In case they find themselves undergoing (πεπόνθασι) some such situation, then see whether they would be willing to accept our proposal and to agree (ὁμολογεῖν) that to be (τὸ ὄν) is something like the following. . . . I say that anything (ὅποιανούν) has some power (δύναμιν) either to act (ποιεῖν) by nature (πεφυκὸς) on another thing, or to suffer (παθεῖν) even a slightest thing by an entirely insignificant entity (σικμρότατον ὑπὸ τοῦ φαυλοτάτου) even if it is just for a single time, all this really is (πᾶν τοῦτο ὄντως εἶναι). In fact, I propose a definition (ὅρον): entities are nothing other than power (τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν οὐκ ἄλλο τι πλὴν δύναμις).

Theaetetus: But, since they have nothing better to say at the moment, they accept it.

Stranger: Fine. Perhaps, in fact, something different might appear both to us and to them later. For now, therefore, this remains agreed between us and them (*Sph.* 247D4-248A2).

Therefore, on the one hand we have an important fact on the theoretical level: a *definition* of being, emphatically underlined (τίθεμαι γὰρ ὅρον ὀρίζειν τὰ ὄντα), that applies to all of reality. On the other hand, this seems to be accepted only temporarily, so much that the Stranger even puts forward the hypothesis that one might change his mind.

In fact, we are faced with a first proof of how Plato uses the dramaturgic context to make the reader *think*. Accordingly, the subsequent discussion with the Friends of Ideas confirms and, at the same time, strengthens what we just read. They are presented in a better way: they defend themselves with great attention (μάλα εὐλαβῶς, 246B6-7), and they are more meek (ἡμερώτεροι, 246C10). Yet, they divide the sphere of becoming from that of being: with the body, by sensation, we commune (δι' αἰσθήσεως κοινωνεῖν) with becoming, while with the soul, by reasoning (διὰ λογισμοῦ δὲ ψυχῇ), we commune with the Ideas, the being that really is.

Stranger: But, good friends, what can we say that this 'communing' (κοινωνεῖν) is for you in relation to both cases? Isn't that what we said a little while ago? . . . A suffering or an acting on, by a certain power (πάθημα ἢ ποίημα ἐκ δυνάμεως τινος), starting from things that meet with one another (ἀπὸ τῶν πρὸς ἄλληλα συνιόντων). Perhaps, Theaetetus, you do not understand their answer to these questions, while I probably do, given my custom with them. . . . They do not grant us what a little while

ago we said about being (οὐσίᾳς) to the earth-born. . . . We have given, if I am not mistaken, as *an adequate definition* of entities (ἱκανὸν ἔθεμεν ὅρον που τῶν ὄντων), that the power (δύναμις) to suffer or to act (πάσχειν ἢ δρᾶν) is present, even with respect to the smallest reality. . . . To this they reply that to becoming (γενέσει) belongs the power to suffer and to act (τοῦ πάσχειν καὶ ποιεῖν δυνάμεως), while the power (δύναμιν) of neither is suitable for being (*Sph.* 248A10-C9).

We are therefore in the presence of a definition given here without any real reason (for the materialists it was a help; here it is an imposition), and, as in the previous case, it is emphasized that it also applies to what may seem irrelevant (σμικρότατον ὑπὸ τοῦ φαυλοτάτου, 247E2; σμικρότατον, 248C5); finally, it is defined as *adequate* (ἱκανὸν).

Plato almost seems to know the debate that has divided interpreters of this ὅρον. Of course, if we stopped at the first formulation it would be possible to accept the proposal of those (Cornford 1935, 238-39; Bluck 1975, 93) who believe that in Plato this term does not have the technical value it acquires with Aristotle and indicates only the specific mark of entities. However, the construction of the text and the fact that this description is repeatedly taken up, even in the stronger formulation in the second treatment, leads one to accept the opinion of those who believe that we are talking about *definition* in a strict sense here (Owen 1971, 109 n. 12, De Rijk 1986, 101 n. 12).

To confirm the importance of this *definition*, Plato proposes a sequence of arguments against the 'Friends of Ideas', which involve some fundamental notions of reality (248C-249B):

1. if the soul knows and being is known, this implies doing and suffering (ποίημα ἢ πάθος . . . τὸ μὲν πάθημα, τὸ δὲ θάτερον, 248D5-6; ποιεῖν τι... συμβαίνειν πάσχειν, E1-2) and therefore movement;

2. it is necessary to admit life, soul and intelligence, which are connected to each other: this makes it impossible to think of reality as animated and yet immobile (248E-249E);

3. the final consequence is that we must oppose the extreme positions, the one that affirms that everything is immobile as well as the one that claims that everything is in motion, but we must admit both terms: both being (τὸ ὄν) and the whole (τὸ πᾶν) are both immobile and in motion (249D3-4).⁴

4 Two asides, before proceeding with the analysis: 1. It is relevant that these Friends of Ideas are almost worse than the materialists both because there is absolutely no chance of convincing them and because they support a doctrine of the Ideas that Plato radically condemns, so much so that it is perhaps better to consider their sobriquet, 'friends of

Plato essentially presents us, on the basis of the pair to act – to suffer, with an extremely dynamic view of reality, which

1. cannot be organized in a fixed framework, given that movement can never be excluded, just as it must not always be required;

2. given the complexity of reality, unilateral positions cannot be accepted;

3. reality, being, is characterized by the power that both the acting and the suffering have, a pair that has an even more complex interconnection. In fact, in the *Theaetetus* Plato clarifies that the two terms of the pair should not be taken in a unilateral and rigid way because, under certain conditions, they are able to ‘exchange roles’:

In fact, a thing is not an ‘agent’ (ποιοῦν) before encountering something that suffers (τῷ πάσχοντι), nor is it a ‘patient’ (πάσχον) before encountering something that acts (τῷ ποιοῦντι); something that, when encountering something else, is an agent (ποιοῦν), while encountering still another appears to be a patient (πάσχον) (*Tht.* 157A4-7).

Plato further emphasizes the importance of these two processes also for the human being: the philosopher, who neglects things that are too close, ‘instead, . . . seeks and commits himself to the study of what the human being is and what is convenient for such human nature to act or to suffer (ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν) in a different way from other beings’ (*Tht.* 174B3-6).

Plato reaffirms the mutual relationality of the acting and the suffering with the explanation of sensation: this occurs as an encounter between two movements that start from the subject and the object (see also *Ti.* 45B-46C6, 67C4-68D7) and that give rise to an intermediate reality between what acts and what suffers (μετὰξὺ τοῦ ποιοῦντός τε καὶ πάσχοντος, 182A5-6); from this then two movements start which return respectively to the subject and the object. Subject and object therefore *act* inasmuch as they move but *suffer* the action of the median reality, as Plato reiterates several times. In fact, the subject that *suffers* becomes sentient (πάσχον αἰσθητικόν, 182A6-7), while *the object that acts* (ποιοῦν, 182A7) becomes, for example, hot and white. At the same time, however, the sensory organ, precisely because it perceives, is active and acts, ‘sees’ (ὁρᾷ, 156E3).

Ideas’ as well as the laudatory expressions that accompany them as ironic. 2. I have translated ποιεῖν with ‘to act’, because it is the term that ‘works best’ paired with ‘to suffer’. But its meaning is strongly ‘productive’: this verb indicates the realization of something, of some effect. Plato knows that he is moving on ambiguous terrain and in fact, at times, he also uses δρᾶν. Consequently, depending on the context, it is better to translate either with ‘to act’ or with ‘to produce’.

This game of changing roles is so relevant that Plato uses it, without stressing it, throughout the course of the discussion: at the beginning (154B1-4) it is said that we carefully look at (παραμετρούμεθα) or touch (ἐφαπτόμεθα) the object which is therefore looked at and touched (παραμετρούμενον ἢ ἐφαπτόμενον). However, also the object acts, as is clear from a series of textual remarks: for example, when it is defined as 'that which generated the colour together with <the subject>' (156E4) or when Socrates affirms the active role of 'everything that acts by its nature' (ἐκαστον δὴ τῶν πεφυκότων τι ποιεῖν, 159C4). In parallel, the subject suffers, as is recognized when speaking of 'what acts on me' (τὸ ποιοῦν ἐμὲ, 160A1; τὸ ἐμὲ ποιοῦν, 160C4). The text emphasizes that both act, for example, when it states that both the agent and the patient have generated (ἐγέννησε γὰρ... τό τε ποιοῦν καὶ τὸ πάσχον, 159C14-D1) sweetness and a sensation of sweetness; at the same time first it is said that the sensation originates from the relationship with *the patient subject* (πάσχοντος, 159D2), and then it is made clear that 'I perceive' (ἐγὼ καὶ αἰσθάνομαι, 160C5).

Therefore, the fundamental question is that of the relationship, which can also be seen from different points of view. However, the basic data remain: the seeing person is such because there is something seen; and vice versa, the subject exists because he has the ability to see, that is he emits and is able to receive, just as the object offers itself to sight, emits and is able to receive. But some subjects may not have this ability (if they are blind), some objects may not have a capacity to be seen (if they are invisible). However, the relationship remains stable in the sense that there is always an active and always a passive because there is no action without passion and vice versa. The realities at stake are always two: 'In fact, a reality in its entirety cannot simultaneously have the dual function of suffering and doing (ἅμα πείσεται καὶ ποιήσει). Otherwise, the One would no longer be one but two' (*Prm.* 138B3-5). Also, this affirmation is put forward by Plato on various occasions (see e. g. *R.* 436B8, 437A1-2).

If we now read the *Sophist* in the light of what we have said, some important points emerge. In the first place, if reality depends on a double movement, an acting and a suffering that can also turn into their opposites, the basic question becomes that of complexity, that is, of the interplay of multiple and diverse relationships that can be established between all the instances of the real (cf. *Prm.* 135E-136C). Consequently, simple outlines must be rejected *as such*: it is necessary to accept both the multiple aspects that reality has and the different points of view and/or the different theoretical models that a thinker can adopt. On the other hand, if this were not the case, how could the Stranger propose very complicated outlines of the

relationship between Ideas such as those we find in the *Sophist*, 253B8-253C3 and 253D5-E2?

Actually, the whole *Sophist* tends to highlight this relational complexity. I only recall a few points that highlight it:

1. the proposed dialectical research model, all based on relationships, which completes what has already been said in *Parmenides* and which will be made even more complex in *Politicus*⁵ and *Philebus*;

2. the double analysis of previous philosophers, which are considered both as monists and pluralists and as materialists and idealists; this shows that it is always possible to apply different paradigms to interpret our realities, which are always multiform;

3. the very complicated structure of dialogue that proposes and intertwines at least six conceptually very different themes;

3.1. the definition of the sophist;

3.2. the development of an ontological discussion;

3.3. the solution of the problem historically set up by the Eleatic school with the denial of non-being;

3.4. the introduction to the dialectic of ideas;

3.5. methodological reflections;

3.6. the definition of real entities as the power to act and suffer;

5 The dialectical dialogues in sequence show that the diaretic procedure is presupposed: in fact, we proceed towards the *Philosopher* (unwritten) distinguishing him first from the sophist, a figure at the same time similar and yet radically different, then from the politician, who is extremely close, not to say connected, to the philosopher. This also justifies the absence of a real hiatus between *Sophist* and *Politicus*. This need to distinguish is characteristic of the *Philosopher*, which however remains unwritten. The important thing here is to find a sign that seems to anticipate the decision not to write it. In fact, at the beginning the problem of the figure of the philosopher is posed (216C-E), then the question arises of distinguishing three obviously connected figures, sophist, politician and philosopher (217A4), and the Stranger faces the difficult operation of 'clearly determining for each (καθ' ἑκάστων) what it is' (217B2-3). Then, however, in 253E, after having characterized dialectic, he affirms that 'in a context of this type we will find it now and later, if we would look for it (ἐὰν ζητῶμεν)' (253E8). The use of the subjunctive signifies a reference to a possible eventuality and, thus, leads us to think that nothing forces the Stranger to define the philosopher. Although this is apparently incongruous with respect to the commitment made, it is really a small sign that we can expect the unwritten dialogue. That is to say, it would be possible to write it. In fact, at the beginning of the *Politicus*, it is recalled that the project is threefold (τριπλάσιον, 257A4) and discussed whether to treat the philosopher or the politician first (257B-C). The puzzle about the appropriate sequence shows that the problem must be elsewhere, namely, in the limits that Plato imposes on himself in writing about things of great importance.

4. the same initial presentation of the figure of the philosopher (216 C-D) that

4.1. in some cases is endowed with value,

4.2. while in other cases appears worthless,

4.3. and in still others looks to describe a madman;

4.4. and needs to be distinguished from politicians and sophists, with which some confuse him;

5. the same five *diaireseis* of the sophist:

5.1. the first three are connected but very different from each other;

5.2. the next, which features a purifying sophist (226B-231B), is completely out of the box, so much so that

5.2.1. it is impossible to say, *on a textual basis*, whether such purification is an acquisitive or a productive *technē*,

5.2.2. in fact, it is not mentioned in the final list which speaks of hunting, fighting, mercantile techniques as acquisitive arts (265A7-8);

5.3. the last *diairesis* is not theoretically harmonizable with the other three (which are acquisitive arts, while the last is productive).

In summary, the game of (potentially) infinite relationships that characterizes complexity is made apparent in the *Sophist*. But the most important moment to highlight the complexity of reality is the denial that all the Ideas either mix with each other or that none mixes with any other. Instead, it is necessary to investigate each combination individually and the instrument of this investigation is dialectic.

To verify whether and how the Ideas are connected to each other, Plato examines only 'some' (ἄττα) of those considered greater' (254C3-4), that is, same and different, rest and change, being. We will return to this strange list, made up of two pairs and being taken alone, but for now it suffices to say that we do not need Plato to tell us they are not all the most important, since two absolutely central pairs are missing, namely, one-many and whole-part.

The one-many pair is missing because it would create an almost unsolvable theoretical problem with respect to the central theme of the *Sophist*, given that, only here, we have an identity:

We say that the *identity* (ταὐτόν) between one and the many, manifested by reasoning (ὑπὸ λόγων γιγνόμενα), occurs every time in each statement, always, in the past as well as now. This will never end and it does not begin now; but, in my opinion, there in us is some immortal and stable feature (ἀθάνατόν τι καὶ ἀγήρων πάθος ἐν ἡμῖν) of the same reasonings (*Phlb.* 15D4-8).

As for the whole-parts pair, it is missing because in this case, unlike the other pairs, the relationship is vertical: the whole contains the parts and the relationship cannot be further articulated or overturned, whatever the importance of the part.

This absence of the two pairs is actually mere appearance, because the *diairetic* procedure is justified only on the basis of that complexity of reality, made up of one and many, of the whole and of parts. The procedure finds its maximum expression in the fact that Ideas are composed of Ideas, as Plato explicitly says many times. To give just a few examples among the many possible: in the *Phaedrus*, the first moment of the dialectical procedure consists in bringing the scattered things back into a single Idea, the second in 'being able to divide in reverse *by Ideas* (κατ' εἶδη) according to the articulations they have by nature and trying not to splinter any part' (265E1-2; see also 277B5-8). Similarly, in the *Politicus*: 'we must not separate a small part (μόριον) from the large and numerous ones *nor act independently of the Ideas* (εἶδους), but the part (μέρος) *must be at the same time an Idea* (εἶδος)' (262A8-B2; cf. also 285A3-B6); then, after a long discussion (262E3-263B10) the Stranger states: 'when there is an Idea (εἶδος), it is *necessary* (ἀναγκαῖον) *that it is also a part* (μέρος) of this thing of which precisely we say Idea (εἶδος), while there is no need that a part (μέρος) is an Idea (εἶδος). In this way, rather than the other way around, you have to say, Socrates, that I always (ἀεὶ) mean to speak'.

This is even better clarified in *Philebus* 16C-E where Plato proposes a second model of *diairesis*, divided into five passages:

I. we have to assume a single Idea for each individual reality (ἀεὶ μίαν ιδέαν περὶ παντὸς ἐκάστωτε θεμένου, 16D1-2);

II. afterwards, it is necessary to examine whether it contains two or three others or a greater number;

III. we have to proceed in the same way for each of these;

IV. in the end it is necessarily discovered not only that the reality in question is *one, many and infinite* (ἓν καὶ πολλὰ καὶ ἄπειρά, 16D6), but how many there are;

V. in the same way we have to proceed with the Idea of the unlimited (τὴν δὲ τοῦ ἀπείρου ιδέαν, 16D7).

This complexity, manifested in *diairesis* and at the same time concealed by the technical formalization of the model, which almost seems to be an elementary game, explains the fundamental features that Plato exhibits right from the choice of the fisherman. *Diairesis* has no heuristic value because one must already know what one is trying to define. However, it is useful in that it can reveal unsuspected difficulties, due sometimes to the limits of

language; it can also allow us to discover otherwise hidden links, such as that between the sophist and the fisherman, and it can allow us to formulate relevant concepts such as the nature of productive art.

The explanation of this latter art starts by an initial step that is logically connected to the agent-patient pair: 'Speaking of everything that was not previously and that then someone leads to being (εἰς οὐσίαν ἄγῃ), we say that whoever brings it to being produces (τὸν μὲν ἄγοντα ποιεῖν) in some way, while what is brought to being is produced (ποιεῖσθαι)' (219B4-6). This passage is so important that towards the dialogue's end it is explicitly recalled as clarifying the 'power' of a productive art: 'we said, *if we remember what was stated at the beginning*, that productive art (ποιητικήν) includes every power (πᾶσαν ... δύναμιν) which is the cause of the subsequent generation of things that were not there before' (265B8-10).

The reference to power leads to a parallel between the human and the divine demiurges (θεοῦ δημιουργοῦντος, 265C4): the Stranger opposes a spontaneous causality devoid of thought (τινος αἰτίας αὐτομάτης καὶ ἄνευ διανοίας, C8-9) to 'a divine reason and science, which derive from a divinity' (ἢ μετὰ λόγου τε καὶ ἐπιστήμης θείας ἀπὸ θεοῦ γιγνομένης, C9-10). Thus Theaetetus, with many doubts, accepts the opinion that reality is produced κατὰ γε θεὸν (D3). This allows for a quick conclusion:

I will assume that the realities that are called natural are produced by a divine art (θεῖα τέχνη), while what is made by men starting from these (τὰ δ' ἐκ τούτων ἀνθρώπων συνιστάμενα) is the effect of a human art and that, according to this reasoning, there are two kinds in productive art (ποιητικῆς γένῃ), the one human, the other divine (θεῖον) (265E3-6).

Thus, it is possible to conclude that natural realities 'are all (πάντα) the result of the generation made by a divinity (θεοῦ), who produced each of them (ἕκαστα)' (266B3-4). Of course, this discourse should be further developed by examining the human demiurge and the divine one in the other dialogues (especially in the pair *Timaeus-Philebus*), but we must return to the theme of being with a basic question. To face it, I recall the points made in the discussion so far: 1) reality is characterized as the power to act and suffer; 2) things with these powers have such a dynamic relationship that they can even 'swap roles' with each other; 3) the consequent complexity emerges in the entirety of the *Sophist* and has 4) its most evident expression in the *diairesis* that manifests the complex nature of Ideas. 5) This *diairesis* proceeds from a one and 6) generates its multiple branches 7) by a process that, as it were, brings the Ideas into being from what is not 8) due to the intervention of a demiurge.

If being qualifies as a power to act and to suffer and if this insight leads to a systematic vision of the complexity of reality and to the intervention of a demiurge, what remains of that ontology that has interested readers of the *Sophist* for centuries? This result reduces the importance of 'being' in Platonic philosophy: for Plato 'being' in all its variants is not the definitive word that connotes reality, as the subsequent ontological tradition (of Aristotelian origin) believes. Plato's philosophy is a dialectic, not an ontology, so the ontological readings of his thought must be considered an evident case of what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of the effects).

We must consider the problem more deeply. Surely, the question of being cannot be undervalued because, on the negative side, Parmenides seems to have led philosophical investigation to a standstill due to the impossibility of saying 'it is not'. It is no coincidence that the Stranger speaks of an extraordinarily difficult question. In fact, an object that appears but seems without being as well as a statement that is not true pose many difficulties. Theaetetus finds it extremely difficult to grasp in what way one could say or think that the false really exists without falling into the contradiction (236D9-237A1).

So, the problem to be faced concerns the impossibility of pronouncing 'not being' in some way. This situation places the sophist in a position of such strength (240B) that he might undermine Eleatic thought itself; for this latter finds itself blocked in its attempt to deny non-being, which it has claimed to be unspeakable: 'So what can you say about me? In fact, *for some time* and still now I may be defeated in the refutation of non-being' (239B1-3). The first proposition of Gorgias' *Peri tou me ontos*, the one that the Anonymous of *De Melisso, Xenophane et Gorgia* attributes as proper and exclusive to the sophist, states that, if non-being is not, it *is* no less than being: as not being is not being, so being *is* being. Consequently, the fact that things are is no more significant than the fact that they are not.

To get out of this problem the Stranger affirms that it is necessary to proceed with much patience (241C) and, above all, not to consider him a parricide:

But this above all I beg you (μᾶλλον παραίτοιμαι). . . . Do not believe (μὴ ὑπολάβῃς) that I have become a kind of parricide. . . . To defend ourselves <from the sophists>, we will necessarily have to test the speech of our father Parmenides and to force not-being in a certain way to be, and being in turn in a certain way not to be (241D1-7).

Confirming the complexity of the task, Plato explicitly says that he will offer an *inadequate* performance: he will deal with the relationship between these

supreme genera only 'to grasp being (τό τε ὄν) and not-being (μὴ ὄν), if not with absolute clarity, in order at least not to remain without any reasoning about them (λόγου γε ἐνδεεῖς μηδὲν) to the extent that is allowed by the procedure of the present inquiry' (254C5-8).

However, from this *limited* treatment some extremely relevant conclusions emerge, conclusions that confirm that Plato's dialectical philosophy is not and cannot be an ontology: being has no primacy over other supreme genera:

It must be said, therefore, that even 'being in itself' is different from other <genera> (τὸ ὄν αὐτὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἕτερον). . . . Even being (τὸ ὄν), then, for us (ἡμῖν) is not for as many times as there are other <genera>. In fact, not being each of those, it is in itself one (ἐκεῖνα γὰρ οὐκ ὄν ἐν μὲν αὐτὸ ἐστίν), but it is not even the others which are numerically infinite (ἀπέραντα δὲ τὸν ἀριθμὸν). (257A1-6).

The same thing is said even more explicitly in further conclusions, which I present in segments:

<1> So, do not tell us that, by showing not-being as contrary to being (τοῦναντίον τοῦ ὄντος), we have dared to affirm that it is. In fact, for some time now we have said goodbye to the opposite (περὶ μὲν ἐναντίου τινὸς) of being, whether it is or is not, whether we can or cannot talk about it.

Therefore, in the first place, absolute not-being remains excluded and denied (with an evident allusion to Gorgias: 'that it is or not, that one can or cannot talk about it').

<2> Instead, as for the not-being that we have now said to be (ὃ δὲ νῦν εἰρήκαμεν εἶναι τὸ μὴ ὄν), someone must either try to convince us that we are not speaking well by refuting us or, if he is not capable of it, he too must say like us that the genera mix with each other and that both being and different cross all genera and each other (τό τε ὄν καὶ θάτερον διὰ πάντων καὶ δι' ἀλλήλων διεληλυθότε) and that different, through participating in being, is; however, because it is not that which it participates in, but is different, and being different from being, it is quite evidently necessary (σαφέστατα ἐξ ἀνάγκης) that it be not-being (259A2-B1).

Therefore, not-being as different, not-being relative to the negation of some specific reality, must be affirmed. Consequently, both being and different (the relative not-being) are pervasive. In short, not-being remains a very important issue here also because it constitutes the link between the ontological problem and that of the figure of the 'sophist'.

Plato declares that he has not given space to the absolute not-being, but only to the relative one.

<3> And since being, in turn, participates in the different, it will be different from other genera; but since it is different from each of these (ἕτερον δ' ἐκείνων πάντων), it is neither each of them nor all the others taken together but only itself (πλὴν αὐτό). Consequently, being indisputably (ἀναμφισβητήτως) is not for innumerable reasons and in innumerable cases. The same also applies to the other genera which, taken one by one as well as all together, are in many respects and, on the other hand, in many respects are not (πολλαχῇ μὲν ἔστι, πολλαχῇ δ' οὐκ ἔστιν) (259A1-259B6).

Therefore, being is determined in turn by the different and, consequently, it is not the other genera, neither considered individually nor taken all together. Being, like all other genera, is and is not.

If, though, being were the theoretical category that adequately defined all of reality, how could it be articulated on the same level as the other supreme genera as happens in the *Sophist*, and how could Plato say: 'This, then, is the discourse that summarizes my reasoning, as far as I think. There were three distinct realities (τρία τριχῇ) even before the sky was generated (πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι), Being, Space and Generation (ὄν τε καὶ χώραν καὶ γένεσιν)' (*Ti.* 52D2-4). So, before the generative process began there were three preconditions, and being is only one of them. Moreover, since the text underlines the 'three', we must assume that the structure of the numbers precedes this list of preconditions.

All this leads us to a conclusion: since each term corresponds to an opposite, Plato is proposing (without explicitly saying so; i.e., he leaves it to the reader to work it out) two pairs of genera: absolute being - absolute not-being (obviously omitted from the discussion); relative being - relative not-being (the latter marked by the different).

In conclusion, I have tried, in a completely inadequate way,⁶ to argue that Plato here presents a dialectical and dynamic vision of his philosophy and that the ontological treatment should not be overvalued because in this discussion the main theme is that of the need to place relative not-being (and therefore also relative being) in the picture.⁷

6 For further details cf. Migliori 2007.

7 All this brings us to another conclusion: since each term corresponds to an opposite, we see that the five genera are actually eight when counting the pairs (1) "absolute being - absolute non-being" (removed from further consideration); (2) relative

My proposal immediately raises a basic objection: Does Migliori really believe he can affirm this dialectical vision of Platonic metaphysics on the basis of two little phrases about acting and suffering? Is it not right to think, on the other hand, that 'for such an important definition one would expect much more emphasis'? (Centrone 2008, 147 n. 107). To answer this type of objection, for reasons of space I give up on analyzing what Plato says in the *Phaedrus* on philosophical writing as a game (παιδιά), yet so serious that one can dedicate one's entire life to it (276C-E; 277E; cf. also 278C-D), but I recall two passages:

The first reference is to the *Philebus*, in which Plato presents reality as a mixed result of the *action* of *Peras* upon the *Apeiron*. Here, there would be a lot to say, especially by intertwining it with the two treatises of the *Timaeus*, the one focused on the actions of the Demiurge (29E-47E) and the one that adds (παράθεσθαι) the action of Necessity with material causes, but there is not space to do this.⁸

The second is to recall the many passages in which Plato, without attracting attention and without any emphasis, mentions the pair to act - to suffer. Of these, I mention only three. In the well-known passage *Phaedo*, 97B-99C he speaks of Anaxagoras ordering all things through Intelligence. Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that the problem concerns the identification of the causes: 'I thought that if someone wanted to find the cause (αἰτίαν) for which each thing is generated or perishes or *is* (γίγνεται ἢ ἀπόλλυται ἢ ἔστι), he should find, for each thing, what is the best way to be or to suffer or

being - relative non-being (as marked by the different); (3) motion - rest; (4) same - different. This may seem very strange since Plato only ever talks about five genera. The fact is, however, that Plato plays a game with the meta-ideas by insisting obsessively and uselessly on the number of these meta-ideas. Let us limit ourselves to mentioning the lines in which the numerical reference (i.e., two, three, four and five) is explicit: we have in a few lines, from 254D7 to E5, seven numbers plus another eight up to 256D1. There are 15 numbers, some of which are truly impressive for their obvious uselessness: for example, 1) it is stated that since two new genera have been added to the previous three, the discussion concerns five genera (254E5); 2) the Stranger asks first if same is a fourth form in addition to the three previous ones and then if we have to consider the different as the fifth (255C); 3) it is stated that movement is different from the other three and not from the fourth 'after we have agreed that there are five genera, concerning which and among which (περὶ ὧν καὶ ἐν οἷς), we set out to investigate' (256D1-2). The diversity of relationships must rightly be emphasized, but this insistence on the numerical data requires an explanation. A possible explanation (mine) is that Plato invites us to reflect on the numerical data in order to make Theaetetus say that it is impossible for their number to be less than five (256D3-4), a statement that can be read as either completely meaningless or really 'allusive'.

8 Cf. Migliori 2013, 472-82.

to produce anything (ἢ εἶναι ἢ ἄλλο ὅτιοῦν πάσχειν ἢ ποιεῖν)' (97C6-D1). Here the text passes easily from the classical ontological determinations (to be, to be born and to perish) to this 'strange' association between being and acting and suffering; the latter two are proposed as the ontological cause of anything, that is, of any reality, as if it were an obvious and banal fact. Soon after this, the relevance of this pair is proposed again when Socrates states that it would have been enough for him to understand 'how for each one (ἕκαστον) it is better to both produce and suffer what he suffers (καὶ ποιεῖν καὶ πάσχειν ἅ πάσχει)' (98A5-6).

So, too, the *Phaedrus*, 269D-270D, underlines the power of acting and suffering as a determining element for grasping the nature of both simple and compound realities.

First, we need to see if the object, of which we would like to become experts ourselves and capable of making others expert, is simple or composite. Secondly, if it is simple, it is necessary to examine *its power* (τὴν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ), *what does it act upon by nature?* (πρὸς τί πέφυκεν εἰς τὸ δρᾶν), *by what does it have power to be acted upon?* (εἰς τὸ παθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ). If, on the other hand, it contains multiple Ideas (πλείω εἶδη), after having enumerated them, one must see for each one, as if it were one (ὅπερ ἐφ' ἑνός), *by virtue of what it itself acts by nature? or by virtue of what it suffers and from what?* (τῷ τί ποιεῖν αὐτὸ πέφυκεν ἢ τῷ τί παθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ) (*Phaedrus*, 270D1-7).

Finally, acting and suffering appear decisive elements in the *Laws* against those who support the disengagement of the divinity:

Let us try to persuade this young man with the reasoning that the one who takes care of the whole (τοῦ παντός) has prepared everything for the salvation and the realization of the whole (τὴν σωτηρίαν καὶ ἀρετὴν τοῦ ὅλου), in which also each part (τὸρος), as far as it can (εἰς δύναμιν), suffers and acts (πάσχει καὶ ποιεῖ) what is proper to it. Each of these parts is under the control of rulers who always preside over the smallest action or passion (ἐπὶ τὸ μικρότατον αἰεὶ πάθης καὶ πράξεως) and realize the ultimate goal in the smallest details (*Lg.* 903B4-9).⁹

9 Did Plato really entangle things so much? To this question I answer yes, on a textual basis. Plato has a precise conception of writing: the important things 'then he will not write them seriously (σπουδῇ) in black water, sowing them through a pen with speeches (μετὰ λόγων) which cannot discursively defend themselves (αὐτοῖς λόγῳ βοηθεῖν) and which cannot adequately teach the true (ικανῶς τάληθῃ διδάξαι). . . . But he, as far as he is concerned, will sow them in the gardens of scriptures and write them, *if he writes*,

(γράφει, ὅταν [δὲ] γράφῃ) as a game (παιδιᾶς)' (*Phdr.* 276C7-D2). In fact, the written game becomes the characteristic of the philosopher, which is the one 'who believes that in a written speech (γεγραμμένῳ λόγῳ) on any subject there is necessarily a lot of play (παιδιάν πολλήν) and that a work in verse or prose worthy of much seriousness has never been written (μεγάλης ἄξιον σπουδῆς)' (*Phdr.* 277E5-8). The statement is then reiterated and connected to the definition of philosopher: 'if one has composed these works knowing the truth (τὸ ἀληθές) and being able to help them (βοηθεῖν) when he is tested on the things he has written, and if speaking (λέγων) he is able to demonstrate the weakness of the writings (τὰ γεγραμμένα φαῦλα), he must not be called with some name taken from them, but from what he is devoted to Calling him wise (σοφόν), Phaedrus, seems excessive and suitable only for a divinity, but a lover of wisdom (philosopher, φιλόσοφον) or something similar would be more suitable for him and more moderate' (278C4-D6). Of course, these are not futile games, indeed they are very beautiful (276E); Plato not only does not despise them, but he goes so far as to say that they are so important and demanding that one can dedicate his life to them (276D), *as he did*. In this way he was able to remain faithful to the teaching of Socrates: philosophy is not taught, but practiced and the true teacher is the one who provides the student, in this case the reader, not so much with the solutions, but rather with indications, tools, suggestions, provocations that lead him to reflect, to identify problems and to grasp the signals for possible solutions, in a word: to do philosophy.

