V. Being and Non-Being

What completely is, what in no way is, and what is and is not in Plato's *Sophist* and *Republic*

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Plato's treatment of what in no way is at *Sophist* 236d-239c has important connections with the arguments directed toward the lovers of sights and sounds in *Republic* V. Understanding these connections is crucial to understanding the *Sophist*'s articulation of the agenda for its main discussion that follows at 239c-242c, where Plato effectively indicates the need to reconsider the Parmenidean legacy of those arguments.
Plato, *Sophist*, *Republic*, ontology, non-being

Because the *Sophist* is one of Plato's most intertextual dialogues, understanding the development of its themes often requires recognizing how Plato is re-engaging with issues he has previously explored. For example, the treatment of what in no way is (τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν) at *Sophist* 236d-239c has connections with its treatment in the arguments directed toward the lovers of sights and sounds toward the end of *Republic* V. Recognizing these connections is important for understanding the *Sophist*'s articulation of the agenda for its main discussion that then follows at 239c-242c.[1]

The arguments at *Republic* V 476e-480a present a set of paired epistemological and ontological hierarchies, wherein knowledge has as its object what is (τὸ ὄν) or what completely or simply is (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν or τὸ εἰλικρινῶς ὄν), ignorance has as its object what is not (τὸ μὴ ὄν) or what in no way is (τὸ μηδαμῇ ὄν), and the intermediate epistemic condition *doxa* has as its object what both is and is not (ἅμα ὄν τε καὶ μὴ ὄν). The arguments manifest Parmenidean influence in their overall structure and in the set of distinctions they draw. Parmenides himself had identified what is and cannot not be as the object of understanding that does not wander; he had identified what is not and must not be as completely unknowable; and he had also identified what is and is not the same and not the same as the object of mortals' wandering understanding. Elsewhere, I have discussed at length how Plato would have found inspiration in Parmenides for the hierarchies

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1 Useful treatments of *Sph.* 236d-242c include Owen 1970, 241-4; de Rijk 1986, 84-92; Kolb 1997, 79-85; Notomi 1999, 173-201; and Crivelli 2012, chap. 2.

he articulates in these arguments (Palmer 1999, chaps. 3-4, and 2009, chaps. 2-4).

The discussion of what in no way is in the *Sophist*, which echoes and expands upon its treatment in *Republic* V, proceeds in three stages. First, the Eleatic Visitor asks Theaetetus to consider to what the words τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν, or simply τὸ μὴ ὄν, could refer.[2] The Visitor concludes, with an air of paradox, that whoever tries to give utterance to τὸ μὴ ὄν should not even be regarded as speaking. These words cannot refer to any of the things that are, he says, since each of these *is* something (τι) (*Sph.* 237b7-e7). The line of thought here expands on that Glaucon had articulated in *Republic* V in response to certain of Socrates' questions. When Socrates had asked whether one who knows knows something or nothing (τι ἢ οὐδέν), Glaucon had said one who knows knows something (τι) (*R.* V 476e7-9). When Socrates had then asked whether such a something is or is not (476e10), he had said it is, 'for how could one know what is not?' (*R.* V 477a1).[3] In the first stage of the *Sophist*'s treatment of what in no way is, the Visitor makes a very similar point when he says it should be obvious that τὸ μὴ ὄν cannot be applied or refer to any of the things that are and, if not to what is, then neither can it refer to something (*Sph.* 237c7-11).

The second stage of the *Sophist*'s discussion pursues the thought that while another of the things that are might belong to what is, none of them can ever belong to what is not (*Sph.* 238a1-c11). Here 'what is not' continues to be used equivalently to 'what is not in any way',[4] and 'belonging to' is a way of indicating predicational attribution. The thought here thus amounts to saying that what is not in any way can have no predicates, for predicating anything at all of it would involve attributing to it one of the things that are

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2 The Visitor introduces the discussion by asking whether we dare utter the words τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν (*Sph.* 237b7-10). He then asks what we should think if someone asked to what one ought to apply the designation τὸ μὴ ὄν (*Sph.* 237b10-c2). This shift without comment from τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν to τὸ μὴ ὄν indicates that these phrases are being treated as equivalent; the considerations the Visitor proceeds to develop in fact require, to make proper sense, that τὸ μὴ ὄν be understood as a shorthand equivalent for τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν. Although the subsequent discussion will emphasize that τὸ μὴ ὄν should not automatically be understood as equivalent to τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν, in problematizing the nature of appearance and falsehood the Visitor relies throughout on the equivalence (however much Theaetetus tries to resist it).

3 Πῶς γὰρ ἂν μὴ ὄν γέ τι γνωσθείη; Glaucon's response here echoes Parmenides B2.7 DK: οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐόν, as recognized, e.g., by Owen 1970, 226; Kahn 1988, 255; Palmer 1999, 32-3; Bossi 2013, 158-60.

4 This point is essential to understanding the line of thought developed here and through the second and third stages of the discussion. Cf. de Rijk 1986, 84 n. 3.

and thus some measure of being. That is, what is not in any way is not *F* for any and all values of *F*. The Visitor proceeds to infer on this basis that what is not (in any way) cannot have any number, since number is one of the things that are, and that, as such, it cannot be either one or plural and should neither be spoken or thought of as such. He concludes this stage of the discussion by declaring that what is not itself in itself (τὸ μὴ ὂν αὐτὸ καθ᾽ αὑτό) is 'unthinkable, unspeakable, unutterable, and indescribable' (*Sph.* 238c8-10). In the third stage of the discussion, the Visitor notes how he has himself lapsed into self-contradiction by illicitly, albeit unavoidably, referring to it as singular in speaking of it as τὸ μὴ ὄν and how he has attributed some measure of being to it in saying that it *is* unutterable, unspeakable, and indescribable (*Sph.* 238d1-239c3). These latter stages of the *Sophist*'s discussion of what is not in any way can be seen as exploring at greater length the point already articulated in the first of the *Republic* V arguments that what is in no way is altogether inapprehensible (*R.* V 477a3-4).

These three stages of the *Sophist*'s discussion of what in no way is follow upon the Visitor's characterization of appearing and seeming but not being and of saying things that are not true as all intensely problematic, after their quarry the Sophist himself has been identified as a practitioner of the art of appearance-making (*Sph.* 236b-d). The discussion of what in no way is aims to make it clear that the not-being involved in seeming and appearing but not being and in false speaking *cannot* be the not being of what in no way is. When the Visitor says that talk of these things hazards the supposition that 'what is not is' (*Sph.* 237a3-4), the supposition cannot be that what in no way is somehow is. Thus, the conclusions established in the treatment of what in no way is at *Sophist* 237b7-e7 remain unchallenged throughout the remainder of the dialogue. Although the *Sophist*'s treatment of what in no way is echoes that in *Republic* V, the *Sophist*'s focus has shifted from its inapprehensibility (an epistemic concern) to its unutterability (a logical-metaphysical concern). This shift is due not only to the *Sophist*'s concern with the problem of falsehood but also to the fact that Plato is in this dialogue endeavoring to provide an analysis of the possibility of false speech and thought and of appearance. The programmatic discussion that follows at *Sophist* 239c-242c thus begins to focus on how not being is actually involved in the sophistic art of appearance-making.[5] Plato is here in effect returning to what completely or simply is and to what both is and is not in a

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5 Robinson 2001, 438-45, usefully discusses this portion of the dialogue in service of his defense of the text οὐκ ὄντως ὂν at *Sph.* 240b7 and οὐκ ὂν ἄρα ὄντως at 240b12, printed in his 1995 OCT edition of the dialogue and accepted here (as already in Burnet's 1900

manner that reconsiders their relation and problematizes the *Republic*'s strict division between the two.

As the *Sophist*'s discussion of what in no way is reprises and expands upon its treatment in *Republic* V, Theaetetus's efforts to articulate what an εἴδωλον is operate against the background of the *Republic*'s development of the distinction between what completely or simply is and what both is and is not. Theaetetus's initial proposal, that by εἴδωλα we mean images in water and mirrors, ones that are drawn or stamped, and others like that (*Sph.* 239d6-8), recalls the lowest division of the *Republic*'s Divided Line, which had contained εἰκόνες comprising shadows, appearances in water and other reflective surfaces, and the like (*R.* VI 509e9-510a3).[6] When the Visitor tells Theaetetus that the Sophist will want a general and properly conceptual account of what an εἴδωλον is, rather than just examples, Theaetetus bravely suggests that an εἴδωλον is 'some other such thing made to resemble the genuine thing' (*Sph.* 240a7-8). In considering this account, the Visitor gets Theaetetus to agree that, as such, an εἴδωλον is not another true or genuine thing, where by 'true' or 'genuine' he means ὄντως ὄν – 'really being' or, perhaps, 'actually being' (*Sph.* 240a9-b4). Likewise, the Visitor gets Theaetetus to agree that if an image is not genuine, it is the opposite of genuine, and that, insofar as what is like something else is itself not genuine, it is not ὄντως ὄν or 'really being' (*Sph.* 240b5-8). This exchange echoes Socrates' description in *Republic* X of how the bedmaker does not produce the Bed itself but only a particular bed: 'if he does not produce what [the bed] is, he would not then produce what is, but something such as what is but that is not' (*R.* X 597a4-5). This passage, of course, comes in the context of a discussion of how 'a remarkable sophist' can produce appearances of all things, though not things that really are (*R.* X 596c-597a; cf. *Sph.* 234b-c).

Although Plato in the *Republic* will eventually identify Forms, as here in Book X, as the things that genuinely are and sensible particulars as things that both are and are not, the arguments at the end of *Republic* V operate at a level of generality that does not yet make these identifications. The discussion at this point in the *Sophist* is similarly abstract. At the same time as it reprises the distinction between what completely is, what in no way is, and what is and is not, this stretch of the *Sophist* is going beyond the *Republic* by explicitly problematizing the distinction. As the Visitor presses

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OCT), against the readings οὐκ ὄντως οὐκ ὄν and οὐκ ὄν ἄρα οὐκ ὄντως transmitted in W (for defenses of which see, e.g., Kohnke 1957, Frede 1962, Cordero 2007).

6 The Divided Line of *Republic* VI further divides the categories of what completely or simply is and what both is and is not initially distinguished in *Republic* V.

him for clarification, Theaetetus bravely suggests that although what is like a genuine thing, which really or actually is, is not itself ὄντως ὄν or 'really being', it still *is somehow* (ἔστι γε μήν πως, *Sph*. 240b10), just not genuinely, and that it really *is* a likeness. The Visitor, adopting the standpoint of the Sophist, makes this characterization of something that is not what really or genuinely is but nevertheless *is somehow* appear intensely problematic; and it starts to seem that way to Theaetetus himself, even though he can see that what is required is some manner of interweaving what is not and what is. The attempt to specify what an εἴδωλον is here concludes with the Visitor remarking that the Sophist has effectively forced them to agree, despite their reservations, that what is not is somehow (*Sph*. 240c5).

This point is already implicit in *Republic* V's characterization of the object of *doxa* as what both is and is not. In the earlier dialogue, however, it was apparently not regarded as problematic to posit that there are things that both are and are not, or at least not problematic in the way it is thought to be here in the *Sophist*. The *Republic* V arguments were designed to persuade the lovers of sights and sounds (and the sophists associated with them) that, in focusing their attention solely on beautiful things without recognizing the nature of the Beautiful itself, they fall short of knowledge and instead operate solely at the level of *doxa* (*R*. V 476b-d). What was at issue was whether there is any such entity as the Beautiful itself, not whether there are particular beautiful things, which are understood to be beautiful in some contexts or relations but not in others. The principal problem with the first argument Socrates had constructed for the sight-lovers was that although the sight-lover might well agree with its first premise that one who knows knows something that is rather than something that is not, he can hardly be expected to concede the subsequent premise that what completely is (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν) is completely knowable (*R*. V 477a3). For that there is anything that could properly be designated as τὸ παντελῶς ὄν is just what the sight-lover does not recognize, and there is nothing in this argument that could be reasonably seen as helping him do so. Here in the *Sophist*, by contrast, even as it recurs to the same ontological hierarchy of what really or genuinely is, what is in no way, and what is and is not, it is the last of these that is now found most problematic. The Sophist's refuge from the Philosopher's effort to define him as a trafficker in appearances rather than reality is in effect a suggestion that those appearances are as true, real, or genuine as anything else.

In the parallel discussion articulating the apparently problematic character of false belief and speech, Theaetetus suggests false belief involves supposing things that are not are *in a way* (*Sph*. 240e3-4). This suggestion

is hardly surprising since it obviously parallels his previous suggestion that things that are not true or genuine still *are* in some way. It is more surprising and interesting to find the Visitor himself proceeding to introduce yet another viable possibility, namely, that one could also believe falsely by supposing that 'things that completely are in no way are' (*Sph*. 240e5-6). This possibility is striking in the way it combines the extremes of the ontological hierarchy in *Republic* V. But why should false belief involve a supposition that things that completely are in no way are? The Visitor might have simply added to Theaetetus's suggestion the complementary possibility that false belief involves supposing that things that are are not. And what are 'things that completely are' supposed to be? Some sense can perhaps be made of the Visitor's striking suggestion by understanding it as representing the stance of those who, like the lovers of sights and sounds, resolutely refuse to recognize the existence of anything beyond the ordinary objects of experience that could be designated as what completely or simply is.

The Visitor sums up this stage of the initial discussion by saying false speaking will need to be understood along the lines just suggested for false belief, namely, 'as stating that things which are *are not* and that things that are not *are*' (*Sph*. 240e10-241a1). It seems clear enough that 'stating…that things that are not are' corresponds to Theaetetus's suggestion that false belief involves supposing that things that are not *are in a way*. It is not so clear, however, that 'stating…that things which are *are not*' simply corresponds to the Visitor's suggestion that false belief may also arise when one supposes things that completely are in no way are since the phrase in fact appears to be characterizing a more general possibility. In any case, the Sophist is represented as rejecting the possibility of either option – apparently, as the somewhat vague representation of his reasons for doing so at 241a-b indicates, because he equates not being with not being in any way or at all. Until not being is clearly distinguished from not being in any way, such refuge may continue to appear available to him.

At the beginning of his preliminary discussion of the problems of appearance and falsehood, the Visitor had quoted Parmenides' declaration: '…for this may never be made manageable, that things that are not *are*. | But you from this way of inquiry restrain your understanding' (Parm. B7.1-2 D-K). At the end of this discussion the Visitor says that he and Theaetetus will have to defend themselves against the Sophist's objections by subjecting Parmenides' words to closer examination and by forcefully insisting that 'what is not *is* in some respect and, then again, that what is somehow *is not*' (*Sph*. 241d5-7). The intervening discussion has made it clear that the not being involved

in these still rudimentary analyses cannot be that of not being in any way. For the possibility that what is not in any way could *be* in any respect has been decisively ruled out. Parmenides himself, at the end of B2 D-K, had identified what is not and must not be as completely unknowable, and the discussion of what is not in any way here in the *Sophist* can be seen as developing that thought as well as Plato's own earlier use of it in the first of the arguments at the end of *Republic* V. Whatever thought Parmenides is warned against in B7.1-2, that thought is not that things that are not in any way are. Elsewhere, I have suggested that what Parmenides is being warned against is supposing that things that are not *are* in the way required to serve as objects of genuine understanding (Palmer 2009, 122-5). This thought involves insisting on a separation between the immutable object of true understanding and the mutable objects of the wandering understanding mortals typically achieve. If the Eleatic Visitor is suggesting that he may have to contradict Parmenides, it would appear to be on this firm separation, for in the course of demonstrating how there is a way of not being distinct from not being in any way, he will make it possible to understand, not only how things that are (though not genuinely or truly) are not, but also how what completely or really is in certain respects is not. And this, of course, amounts to a reconsideration by Plato of an important feature of the *Republic*'s ontological division.[7]