

The Referents of ‘Being’ in Plato’s *Sophist*

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I argue that part of Plato’s strategy to neutralize the paradox of falsehood is to pin down various referents of the name ‘being’, τὸ ὄν. I focus on four and track their role in the dialogue’s argument. They are: (1) any primary being; (2) the Kind Being; (3) any participant in the Kind Being; (4) a set of participants in the Kind Being. Being, reference, paradox, falsehood, Kind

1. Introduction¹

In *Sophistical Refutations* 1 Aristotle claims that one of the most prolific and widespread causes of paralogisms turns upon the nature of names. Human language is inevitably ambiguous because names are finite, and the objects they are devised to signify infinite. Inability or inexperience in disambiguating names leads for Aristotle to committing or failing to recognize paralogisms.²

Plato’s conception of homonymy is different from Aristotle’s.³ Plato does not dwell on theorizing on ambiguity. And his account of language, whereby names are designed to univocally signify an essence or nature,⁴ is *prima facie* hard to reconcile with the idea that a single name may correspond to two different λόγοι τῆς οὐσίας.⁵

1 Unless otherwise indicated, Greek texts are cited in the most recent OCT editions, and translations modify Rowe 2015. This paper is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 885273). Thanks to Lesley Brown, Paolo Crivelli, and David Sedley for feedback.

2 Cf. Arist. *SE* 1.165a3-17 (also 165b31-166a6), with Fait 2007, 102-104.

3 Cf. e.g. Pl. *Ph.* 78e2; *Prm.* 133d3; *Ti.* 52a5, where ὁμώνυμος practically means ἐπώνυμος (cp. e.g. *Phd.* 92d9, 102b2, c10, 103b7-8; *Prm.* 130e6); also Arist. *Metaph.* A 6.987b10 Primavesi: συνωνύμων, with Alex. Aphr. in *Metaph.* 51.2-25, 77.10-3 Hayduck; Syrian. in *Metaph.* 108.27-9, 112.2-6, 114.35-115.3 Kroll. See also Anton 1968. Plato also uses ὁμώνυμος simply for two things sharing a name, cf. e.g. *Prt.* 311b5-6; *Phdr.* 266a1; *R.* 330b3; *Tht.* 147d1; *Sph.* 218b3; *Plt.* 258a1.

4 Cf. esp. *Cra.* 393d4-5, 428e1-2, 436e3; with Sedley 2006, 216-221 and Crivelli 2019², 485-492.

5 Cf. e.g. Arist. *Cat.* 1.1a1-3 (but τῆς οὐσίας at 1a2 is controversial since antiquity and excised by Bodéüs); *Top.* A 15.107a20. On Plato’s limited contribution to the study of

Yet, Plato is of course aware that words are *de facto* used to signify different things⁶ and that this linguistic phenomenon can be sophistically exploited. At *Sph.* 218b8-c5 the Eleatic Stranger (ES) stresses that he and Theaetetus need to investigate the *logos* of what a sophist is, because so far they only have the name σοφιστής in common (περί τοῦνομα μόνον ἔχομεν κοινῇ), and perhaps they have privately used it to name different things (τὸ δὲ ἔργον ἐφ' ᾧ καλοῦμεν ἑκάτερος τάχ' ἂν ἰδίᾳ παρ' ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς ἔχομεν), whereas it is always about the thing itself (περί τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτό), through *logoi*, that two should agree upon, rather than merely about the name without a *logos*.⁷ At *Euthd.* 277d1-278d1 Socrates warns Clinias that he ought to learn 'the correctness of names' (277e4: ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητος) if he wants to resist the playful assaults of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who deceive him by exploiting 'the difference of names' (278b6-7: τὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων διαφοράν;⁸ see also 295d1-2). Thus, Plato was also credited in antiquity, by Eudemus of Rhodes, with resolving many sophistical problems by introducing τὸ δισσόν, i.e. the double meaning of words.⁹ Moreover, although the distinction of the senses of a term is not part and parcel of Plato's philosophical method, as it is of Aristotle's, the dialogues often stage works of linguistic clarification, aimed at identifying the primary referents of names, as opposed to secondary or just wrong ones.

My thesis here is that *part of* Plato's strategy to neutralize that particular paralogism that is the paradox of falsehood is to pin down various referents of the name 'being', τὸ ὄν.¹⁰ I want to chart some of these referents and track their role in the dialogue's argument. My project is thus different from the investigation of Plato's supposed distinction of various senses or uses of the verb εἶναι, which has been a prevalent worry of most studies on Plato's conception of being (and not-being) in the *Sophist*. The two projects may

ambiguity see Robinson 1942a; Blackson 1991; Stewart and Sprague 1977, 35-44; and Sedley 2006, 223-226.

6 'Ambiguity was a general feature of Greek literature and not the special invention of philosophers' Stewart and Sprague 1977, 61.

7 Cf. Pl. *Cra.* 439b6-8 (countering 435e-436a), and Simp. in *Cat.* 24.10-25.9 Kalbfleisch.

8 This is the closest Plato gets to a name for ambiguity. The term ἀμφιβολία and cognates (on which cf. e.g. Arist. *SE* 4.166a6-21; *Top.* Z 6.145b24-5; *Po.* 24.1461a25-6; S.E. *PH* 2.256-9 Mutschmann-Mau; D.L. 7.62 Dorandi) never occur in Plato, with the interesting exception of *Cra.* 437a7 (ἀμφίβολον).

9 Cf. Simp. in *Ph.* 98.1-2 Diels (echoed by in *Cat.* 22.9-13 Kalbfleisch), with Shorey 1930.

10 Arguably, Plato often uses τὸ ὄν and ἡ οὐσία indifferently (cf. e.g. Pl. *R.* 486a9 and 508d4, with 521d5 and 523a3; or *Sph.* 250c2 and 256a1, with 250b9, and 252a2). But this should be demonstrated rather than assumed, so here I only focus on τὸ ὄν.

partly overlap but are not the same. And I suspect Plato worried more about the former issue.

I argue that τὸ ὄν refers in the *Sophist* at least to four different things:

- 1 Any primary being;
- 2 The Kind Being;
- 3 Any participant in the Kind Being;
- 4 A set of participants in the Kind Being.

There may be further referents. But I think these are worth zooming in on.

2. The question

It first ought to be shown that Plato thinks that answering the question of the reference of τὸ ὄν matters for his project in the *Sophist*. Let us note, to begin with, that the problem of the reference of names is prominent from the very start of the dialogue, with the question of whether the three names (ὀνόματα), σοφιστής, πολιτικός and φιλόσοφος refer to three distinct kinds, or two, or one (217a4-9). Then, especially starting from the exposition of the puzzles about not-being (236d5-242b5), the emphasis on language correctness becomes increasingly conspicuous. In this stretch of text the occurrences of ὀρθός and cognates with verbs and names of saying are plentiful (e.g. 237c11; 238b4, c5, c8; 239a8, b9). More interestingly, Plato coins here the term ὀρθολογία (239b4), a *hapax* of his corpus and attested again no earlier than half a millennium later (Hdn. Gr. iii 2.513.6 Lentz).¹¹ Plato introduces it in relation to τὸ μὴ ὄν. But remember how the ES sets out to proceed: since not-being is intractable, one should start off with being, 'the most important and chief thing' (243d1); but no later than 243c2-5 the possibility arises that being is as obscure as not-being, a worry confirmed twice later (244a7-8; 245e8-246a2). An ὀρθολογία περὶ τοῦ ὄντος seems then equally, and indeed preliminarily, required.

Further, the whole enquiry into being pursued by the ES and Theaetetus is driven by questions on the exact reference of τὸ ὄν, which those thinkers who have so far made pronouncements about how many beings there are and what they are like (242c5-6: τὰ ὄντα διορίσασθαι πόσα τε καὶ ποιὰ) have uncritically failed to clarify, thereby making their views underdetermined and ultimately incomprehensible (242c4-243b10). Thus, the two interlocutors agree at 243d3-6 that they 'need first to talk about being (τὸ ὄν), and

11 There is another Platonic *hapax* at 236e5, ἐναντιολογία (see below).

track down exactly what those who use the expression think they're indicating (δηλοῦν) by it'. Then at 244a5-6 the ES asks those who have spoken about being what they intend to signify when they utter the word 'ὄν' (τί ποτε βούλεσθε σημαίνειν ὅποταν 'ὄν' φθέγγησθε). Yet again, at 244b6-7 he proposes to inquire from the monists 'what exactly they say being is' (τί ποτε λέγουσι τὸ ὄν). Once light has been shed on the referent(s) of ὄν, one can do the same with τὸ μὴ ὄν and hopefully solve the paradox.

Answering the question of the referent(s) of τὸ ὄν is therefore key to Plato's project in the *Sophist*. Let us now inspect how Plato answers that question.

3. Four Referents of τὸ ὄν

As anticipated, I argue that at least four referents of τὸ ὄν emerge from the *Sophist*'s inquiry into being:

1) First in the order of exposition is the one implicit in the πόσα τε καὶ ποιά inquiry (242c5-6), pursued by the other thinkers who have spoken about being. Arguably, by claiming that τὰ ὄντα are, say, two, e.g. the hot and the cold, those thinkers did not contend that any other object except hot and cold is a blank nothing, i.e. that the furniture of the world counts only two items. Instead, they probably meant that hot and cold (or similar pairs) are basic constituents of all things,¹² perhaps on the assumption that, unlike everything else, they alone are immune from generation and corruption (things may be more complicated, but not necessarily different, with the monists). The notion of a *being* assumed by these thinkers compares therefore to that of a *principle*, like e.g. in Aristotle's *Ph.* A 2 or *Metaph.* Z 1 (see Mansfeld 1986, 5-11).

Likely, this is also the meaning relevant to the notorious τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι at 248e8-249a1. I will not open the can of worms of the interpretation of this phrase. But if we take it to refer to *perfect* being, then τὸ ὄν may stand not only for any primary being, but also for the *domain* of those beings. And this chimes with Plato's familiar use of τὸ ὄν (or οὐσία) to signify the whole intelligible realm, in contrast with γένεσις.

Now, cross-examining the thinkers who have spoken about being, the ES pushes them to clarify their notion of being: when they say that certain

12 Either as basic material stuffs (e.g., Frede 1996, 186-187) or as fundamental properties (e.g., Cornford 1935, 218; Rosen 1983, 207; and Crivelli 2012, 74-75). Perhaps these thinkers were insensitive to this distinction.

(primary or fundamental) beings *are*, they attribute *being* to them; but what exactly does this *being* in turn refer to? The question rests on the implicit assumption that 'being' must refer to some real thing, something that counts itself as a being (see e.g. Rosen 1983, 208; and Crivelli 2012, 76), an assumption in turn based on a robust realist theory of meaning. Thus, throughout the assessment of the rival views on being, a conception of being as a distinct entity finds its way through the dialogue.

2) This leads us to the second referent of τὸ ὄν, the Kind Being,¹³ one of the 'greatest' or 'most important' Kinds. This Kind is introduced with the assessment of the so-called 'children's prayer' (at 249d3-4), and has a pivotal role thenceforth. It should be conceived of, I submit, neither as a mere generalization over whatever is,¹⁴ nor as a most comprehensive genus of all genera, located atop of a universal Porphyrian tree.¹⁵ It is instead, like any other Form, the entity metaphysically responsible for its participants' possession of the property its name names, i.e. being (*simpliciter*). A distinctive feature of this Kind is that it is all-pervasive (256d12-e3, 259a5-6), i.e. cannot fail to be participated in. Further, it is well-known that Forms play for Plato a special role in setting the norm for the correct use of language.¹⁶ Notably, they are the primary bearers of names and their participants inherit their name from them.¹⁷ This suggests that the Kind Being has a referential primacy in the *Sophist's* 'orthological' inquiry into being; and that any participant in the Kind Being is also thereby derivatively called ὄν.

3) This brings me to the third referent of τὸ ὄν. Just as Plato calls καλόν both the Form of Beauty and what partakes in it, so too he calls ὄν not only the Kind Being, but also any of its participants. Thus, Motion is a being, because it partakes in (the Kind) Being (256d8-9: κίνησις...ἐστι ὄν ἐπειπερ τοῦ ὄντος μετέχει); and so are all other Kinds (e2-4: σύμπαντα [γένη]...ὅτι μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος, εἶναί τε καὶ ὄντα).

4) But Plato can also refer to a given *set* of participants in the Kind Being, with the collective singular τὸ ὄν (see O'Brien 2005, 146-147). We come here to the fourth referent. The notorious phrase πολὺν τὸ ὄν at 256e6 should, I think, be interpreted in this way. In saying that 'in relation to each of the Forms being is *manifold*' (e6: περὶ ἕκαστον ἄρα τῶν εἰδῶν πολὺν μὲν ἐστι τὸ ὄν), the ES means that the beings signified by the predicates that hold true

13 Cf. e.g. Pl. *Sph.* 250c2, 254d4; 259a4-5, b1-2.

14 Pace e.g. Bostock 1984, 101.

15 Pace e.g. Stenzel 1931, 94-97; Diès 1925, 286; Frede 1996, 197-198.

16 Cf. e.g. Pl. *Cra.* 435e6-440e1, with Cambiano 1991, 181-185 and Barney 2001, 138-155.

17 Cf. e.g. Pl. *Phd.* 102b1-3; *R.* 596a7-9; *Prm.* 130e5-131a2.

of a given Form are manifold, i.e. that each Form partakes in several other Forms.¹⁸ Notice in this regard the backreference at 263b11-2 to the point made at 256e6-7, now restated in a slightly different phraseology: ‘for we said, I think, that there are many things that are about each thing, and many that are not’ (πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ ἔφαμεν ὄντα περὶ ἕκαστον εἶναι πού, πολλὰ δὲ οὐκ ὄντα). The πολὺ ὄν at 256e6-7 is now πολλὰ ὄντα, which confirms the collective meaning of τὸ ὄν in the former passage.

4. Contribution to the Solution to the Paradox

How does this work of semantic clarification about τὸ ὄν contribute to the solution of the paradox of falsehood? A few words on the paradox itself first. In outline, it contends that (i) false speech says that the things that are, are not and that the things that are not, are;¹⁹ thus (ii) false speech implies a reference to not-being; but (iii) Parmenides established that the not-being is neither thinkable nor sayable; (iv) therefore false speech is impossible. The critical notion is obviously that of not-being (τὸ μὴ ὄν): false speech entails it; Parmenides banishes it. I will not, of course, reconstruct Plato’s entire solution to the paradox. I want to focus on the role that the distinction of referents of τὸ ὄν plays in this solution. Here is my proposal:

After setting aside the notion of being implicit in previous accounts of being (referent 1) as unhelpful in solving the paradox, Plato suggests that in the notions of τὸ μὴ ὄν involved respectively in the Parmenidean ban and in falsehood, not only is the negative particle μὴ to be understood differently (as indicating contrariety in the former and mere difference in the latter), but also, I submit, the name ὄν, i.e. as respectively referring to the Kind Being (referent 2) and a set of beings (referent 4), viz. those signified by the predicates true of something; and since referent 3 (any participant in the Kind Being) is foundational for referent 4, the importance of the whole fourfold distinction becomes apparent.

18 See O’Brien 2005, 147-148. The conclusion at 256e6-7 need not be inferred from 256e3-4 alone. It is instead more naturally read as resulting from the entire argument initiated at 255e8 (*pace* e.g. Owen 1971, 255-259; cf. Heinaman 1983a, 6-10).

19 My formulation reflects what Crivelli calls ‘bipolar’ description of falsehoods, which replaces the initial ‘unipolar’ description (cf. Pl. *Sph.* 240d9-10; also, 237a3-4, 260c3-4 and d2-3), with a view to Plato’s solution to the paradox (cf. Crivelli 2012, 60-63). My account concerns Plato’s solution and does not cover the referent of being in a ‘unipolar’ description, which seems to be *what is the case*.

Let me explain. When at 258e6-259a1 the ES denies having in any way rehabilitated a contrary of being (τοῦναντίον τοῦ ὄντος), by adding that he and Theaetetus have long since said farewell to that contrary (ἡμεῖς γὰρ περὶ μὲν ἐναντίου τινὸς αὐτῷ χαίρειν πάλαι λέγομεν; see O'Brien 2011), he must have in mind the impossible Parmenidean not-being, the μηδαμῶς ὄν (237b7-8) which, in the context of the falsehood paradox, entailed an ἐναντιολογία (236e5; another Platonic *hapax*²⁰). But at this stage of his analysis this is reconceived of, I submit, as the contrary of the *Kind Being*. For (a) when earlier at 257b3-4 the ES concludes that τὸ μὴ ὄν is not something contrary, but only different from ὄν (οὐκ ἐναντίον τι λέγομεν τοῦ ὄντος ἀλλ' ἕτερον μόνον), he should have in mind what was said about Motion at 256d5-9, that since it is different from ὄν, it is an οὐκ ὄν; and also what was said about Difference at 256d12-e4, that by rendering each a different thing from being (ἕτερον ἀπεργαζομένη τοῦ ὄντος ἕκαστον), it makes it a not-being (οὐκ ὄν ποιεῖ). In both cases ὄν stands for the *Kind Being*. For the ES is quick to point out that Motion and all other Kinds, while being not-beings, nevertheless *are* because they also *partake in* τὸ ὄν (d8-9: καὶ ὄν, ἐπεὶ περ τοῦ ὄντος μετέχει; e3-4: καὶ πάλιν, ὅτι μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος, εἶναι τε καὶ ὄντα). (b) Second, this *Kind* is universally participated in; but since contrariety implies absence of participation,²¹ there can be no contrary of Being. Hence, τὸ μὴ ὄν involved in the Parmenidean ban, as reformulated in the *Sophist's* analysis, is the (impossible) contrary of the *Kind Being*.

But this is not the referent of ὄν denied by the μὴ ὄν involved in the ES' account of falsehood. At 263b7-12, he concludes that false speech says things that are not, as if they are (τὰ μὴ ὄντ' ἄρα ὡς ὄντα λέγει); and yet what it says are things that are, just different things that are from those that are about Theaetetus (ὄντων δέ γε ὄντα ἕτερα περὶ σοῦ). Here we find the back-reference to 256e6-7: 'for we said, I think, that there are many things that are about each and every thing, and many that are not'. Just as the manifold being (πολὺ ὄν) at 256e6 is here rephrased as 'many things that are' (πολλὰ ὄντα), so too the not-being unlimited in multiplicity (ἄπειρον πλήθει τὸ μὴ ὄν) at 256e7 is here rephrased as 'many [things] that are not' (πολλὰ οὐκ ὄντα). I should leave aside the issue of the substitution of 'unlimited in multiplicity' for 'many'.²² The point is that the μὴ ὄν involved in falsehood is not the negation of the *Kind Being* (neither as a contrary of it, nor as differ-

20 Cf. 268b4: ἐναντιολογεῖν, itself a Platonic *hapax* (cf. Arist. GC A 7.323b17 Rashed). My hunch is that the two *hapax*, ὀρθολογία (239b4) and ἐναντιολογία (236e5), are related.

21 See Pl. *Phd.* 102d6-7 (also 104b6-c1); *Sph.* 252d2-10; with O'Brien 2005, 129-133.

22 See O'Brien 1995, 79-81. For a different reading see Crivelli 2019², 459-500 n. 47.

ent from it), but of a given set of beings, i.e. those signified by predicates that hold true of a subject – our referent 4. Thus, the $\mu\eta\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ involved in falsehood is the set of beings that are *different from* (and therefore *are not*) all those signified by the predicates that hold true of a subject.

This is how the work of referential clarification about $\tau\omicron\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ contributes to solving the paradox. The solution requires, among other things, elucidating the meaning(s) of $\tau\omicron\ \mu\eta\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$; but to do so, we need to distinguish both different meanings of the negative particle $\mu\eta$, but also, I have argued, different referents of the name $\tau\omicron\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$.