

The Late-Learners of the School of Names: *Sophist*, 251a8-c6: ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος (the good man) and 白馬 (white horse)

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The focus of this contribution is on the ‘late-learners’ digression. In *Sph.* 251a8-c6, the Eleatic Stranger briefly discusses the view of some ‘young and old late-learners’ who hold that, from a logico-metaphysical point of view, unlike ‘a man is a man’ or ‘a good is good’, the statement ‘a man is good’ is neither a well-formed nor a grammatical sentence. Usually, modern commentators devote little energy to interpreting this passage since they are content to note that it suffices to discriminate *identity* and *predication* to avoid the sophism. The aim of this paper is to show that the position of the ‘late-learners’ is in fact more subtle than it seems, since it is widely open to many readings, and that the chosen reading of the digression has a direct impact on the general interpretation of the rest of the dialogue (communication of kinds, semantic distinction between names and verbs, etc.). To this end, the view of the ‘late-learners’ will be compared with a similar position discussed in a quite different philosophical ecosystem: the White-Horse Paradox forged by Gōngsūn Lóng, a dialectician of the ‘School of Names’. This paradox states that the sentence ‘a white horse is not a horse’ is true. Many readings of the White-Horse Paradox have been offered: some of these readings are the same as those suggested for the ‘late-learners’ view, but others are absent from the scholarly literature, although they provide interesting insights into the interpretation of *Sph.* 251a8-c6. sophism, dialectics, philosophy of language, late-learners, Gōngsūn Lóng

1. The ‘late-learners’ from *Sph.* 251a8-c6

In *Sph.* 251a8-c6, the Eleatic Stranger (ES) digresses on some ‘young and old late-learners’ who hold the puzzling view that, from a logico-metaphysical standpoint, ‘a man is good’ is neither a well-formed nor a grammatical sentence. For reasons of space, I shall not quote the text. I assume that any reader of this volume either is familiar with Plato’s *Sph.* or has a copy of the dialogue in hand or nearby.

The structure of the text is clear enough however, there are two steps:

251a8-b4: *a version of the aporia of the one and the many.*

Our everyday use of language implies the unity of the subject through the multiplicity of its predications or ‘appellations’, that is, the fact that

the same item can have a multiplicity of *names* (ὀνόματα), for instance Confucius can be named ‘human’ and ‘good’.

251b6-c6: *the feast for the ‘young and old late-learners’* (see also 252b8-10). The ‘late-learners’ claim that it is impossible for the one to be many, and for the many to be one. Accordingly, saying ‘a man <is> good (ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος)’ is to assert a wrong statement (from a logico-metaphysical point of view: this is an ungrammatical or a non-well-formed sentence). They believe that ‘the man <is> a man’ and ‘the good <is> good’ are the only well-formed sentences involving the names ‘man’ and ‘good’.

Who are the targeted ‘late-learners’? Scholars have suggested three hypotheses: either they are Antisthenes and his followers, or Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, or the ‘old’ late-learners are Euthydemus and Dionysodorus while the ‘young’ are some Megaric dialecticians (insofar as there is an argument very similar to *Sph.* 251a8-c6 attributed to the Megaric Stilpo in *Plut. Adv. Col.* 22.1119c-d, 23.1120a-b). I wish to remain neutral on such an issue, however it should be remarked that everything I am about to say is particularly appealing for the supporters of the Antisthenes’ hypothesis.

The implicit argument of the ‘late-learners’ is the following according to Crivelli (2012, 104):

If the same thing can be called by many names, then the many will be one and the one many.

Neither is the one many nor are the many one.

Therefore, the same thing cannot be called by many names.

Modern commentators usually devote little energy to interpreting this passage since they are content to note that it suffices to discriminate *identity* and *predication* to avoid the sophism. (Crivelli 2012, 103-109 and Brown 2019, 312-324 are notable exceptions: they discuss at length the view of the ‘late-learners’.) Nevertheless, there are three kinds of interpretations for the paradoxical view of the ‘late-learners’ (the reader can find the bibliography on this topic in Crivelli 2012):

- *Post-Fregean Interpretation*¹: the late-learners do not grasp the intuitive distinction between *predication* and *judgement of identity*.

For them, $A \in B$ iff $A = B$ (for instance a man *is* good iff man *is identical to* good). The rationale for such a view seems to be as follows: *man* and *good* are neither *co-extensional* (for $\{x: x \text{ is a man}\} \not\subseteq \{x: x \text{ is good}\}$) nor synonyms, i.e., *co-intensional* (*being a man* does not mean the same as *being good*); nor do they belong to the same *sort* (since ‘man’ is the *name* of a natural kind, ‘good’ that of an axiological quality, and what names a natural kind is not what names an axiological quality). Hence, someone who says ‘a man is good’ in reference to a subject (Confucius for instance) would make this *one* (subject) be *many*, namely, both a *man* and a *good*.

- *Bradleyan Interpretation*²: they do not grasp the distinction between *denoting* and *describing*, and they allow only one function for words, namely *naming* (they reject their *adjectival* and *verbal* functions).

According to this interpretation, their argument would be the following:

An object can only be referred by exactly *one* proper name.

The words ‘man’ and ‘good’ are different names.

No object can be named both by ‘good’ and ‘man’.

(if it were, *one* object would be *many*)

Unlike ‘a man is good’, both ‘a man is a man’ and ‘good is good’ are mere iterations of the same speech act of *naming* (when I say ‘ x is x ’, I refer to the object named by ‘ x ’ twice), and so are unpuzzling.

- *Essentialist Interpretation*: they do not grasp the distinction between *essential* predication and *nonessential* (or *ordinary*) predi-

1 I label this exegesis ‘Post-Fregean’ because Frege 1892a, 193–194 (followed by Russell 1903, §64; 1919: 172) forcefully distinguishes (unlike Leśniewski for instance) the ‘is’ of identity from the ‘is’ of predication: the first occurs in ‘Clark Kent is Superman’, the second in ‘Clark Kent is a man’.

2 I label this exegesis ‘Bradleyan’ for, in Bradley 1893, 19–24 (second chapter entitled ‘substantive and adjective’), Bradley asks how a quality can be both an adjective (‘the sugar is sweet’) and a name (‘sweetness is a property of the sugar’).

cation, and they allow only predication that fully expresses the essence of the thing.

For them, $A \in B$ iff B *fully expresses the essence of* A (for instance, a man is good iff goodness *fully expresses the essence of* this man). ‘A man is a man’ is an essential predication, while ‘a man is good’ is an ordinary predication. If ‘a man is good’ were an essential predication, then the object which is *one* would have *many* essences (humanity and goodness), and therefore the *one* would be *many*.

Of course, the preceding descriptions are crude and clumsy. There are many fine-grained subtleties within each of these three kinds of interpretation. For instance, among the Post-Fregean interpreters, Ackrill 1957 has claimed that Plato makes the distinction between identity and predication by discriminating two meanings for the copula ‘is’, whereas Brown 2019 believes that Plato distinguishes two kinds of *sentences*, namely, identity sentences and predications. But a rough and coarse overview is all I need here.

Choosing between these three readings involves selecting the relevant area of inquiry to which the late-learners’ discussion belongs: in the Post-Fregean Interpretation, the issue belongs only to logic; while in the Bradleyan Interpretation the issue belongs both to logic and philosophy of language; and in the Essentialist Interpretation, it belongs to logic and metaphysics. The choice is not trivial because it determines where in the text the ES answers the ‘late-learners’: either the answer would take place in the discussion of the ‘communication of kinds’ (Essentialist Interpretation) or at the very end of the dialogue in which Plato makes the distinction between nouns and verbs (Bradleyan Interpretation) or nowhere (Post-Fregean Interpretation). I will not offer any insight about what is the right reading of Plato’s text. Rather, I will propose a comparison with another puzzle to develop a bit the rationale in favour of the Bradleyan Interpretation (one reason to favour it is that Plato states many times that the target of the ‘late-learners’ is the fact that many *names* (ὀνόματα) are – wrongly from their point of view – attributed to the same thing, see *Sph.* 251a5-6, a8, b4).

2. The White-Horse Paradox: Gōngsūn Lóng and the Mohists

Curiously, a conundrum very close to that of the ‘late-learners’ was current in another philosophical ecosystem. Around 300BC, the dialectician of the ‘School of Names’ Gōngsūn Lóng has proposed a reasoning of that kind

against the non-identical predication (or ‘nomination’): the White-Horse Paradox³.

The White-Horse Paradox, unlike the ‘late-learners’ from *Sph.* 251a8-c6, was hotly debated in Chinese philosophical circles; for instance, it is mentioned in various Classics (*Liezi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Mengzi*), in the *Han Feizi* and in the *Mozi*, etc.

The chapter *Báimǎ Lùn* (白馬論) of the *Gōngsūn lóng zi* (公孫龍子)⁴ is a dialectical dialogue between a proponent of the truth and a supporter of the falsity of the following sentence:

白馬非馬 (*báimǎ fēi mǎ*)

“A white horse (白馬, *báimǎ*) is not (非, *fēi*) a horse (馬, *mǎ*)”

In Chinese, since there is no inflection, such a sentence can be read in many ways: ‘white horse is not horse’, ‘a white horse is not a horse’, ‘white horses are not horses’, ‘whitehorsesness is not horsesness’, ‘the kind *white-horse* is not the kind *horse*’, etc. I will ignore the subtleties involved by the fact that a preferred reading might be chosen and that some readings might be dismissed for contextual motives.

The dialogue gives five arguments for the truth of ‘a white horse is not a horse’, and five arguments in favour of its falsity.

The first argument for ‘a white horse is not a horse’ is true is as follows: ‘White’ is the *name* (名, *míng*) of a colour, ‘horse’ that of a shape, but naming a colour is not naming a shape, therefore white horse is not horse (since while ‘white horse’ names a coloured shape, ‘horse’ names only a shape).

The four other arguments are less exciting, they require that the sentence be understood only as ‘white horse is identical to horse’, and consist in showing that ‘white horse’ and ‘horse’ are neither co-extensional nor co-intensional. I shall ignore them.

The same kinds of interpretation have been suggested for the White-Horse Paradox as for the view of the ‘late-learners’, *minus* the Essentialist

3 The example taken by Gōngsūn Lóng reminds us of the example of horsesness favoured in some anti-Platonic anecdotes: the famous words of Antisthenes ‘Plato, I can see the horse, but not horsesness’ in *Simpl. in Cat.* 208.28-3, and a similar anecdote attributed to Stilpo in *DL* 2.119.

4 For an edition of this dialogue, see Suter, Indraccolo & Behr 2020.

Interpretation (because there is no known discussion of essences in Ancient Chinese Philosophy)⁵.

- *Post-Fregean Interpretation*: there is a confusion between *predication* (or *class membership*) and *judgement of identity*.

Gōngsūn Lóng refuses to discriminate the true statement ‘*white horse* is not identical to *horse*’ from the false statement ‘*horse* is not predicated of *white horse*’. In his first argument, he points out that *horse* and *white-horse* do not belong to the same *sort* of things (‘white (白)’ is the *name* of a colour, ‘horse (馬)’ that of a shape, and what names a colour is not what names a shape. ‘White-horse’ is neither the name of a colour, nor of a shape, but the name of a colour-and-shape). In his four other arguments, he indicates that *horse* and *white-horse* are neither *co-extensional* (since $\{x: x \text{ is a white horse}\} \subset \{x: x \text{ is a horse}\}$), nor synonyms, i.e., *co-intensional* (*being a horse* does not mean the same as *being a white horse*). His interlocutor who defends the commonsense view retorts that ‘*horse* is predicated of *white horse*’ is true: although *white horse* is not identical to *horse*, *white horse* is a member of the class *horse*.

- *Bradleyan Interpretation*: Chinese dialecticians do not grasp the distinction between *denoting* and *describing*, and they allow only one function for words, namely *naming* (they reject their *adjectival* function).

Gōngsūn Lóng, as other early Chinese dialecticians, believes that *one* name exactly corresponds to *one* thing⁶, and that the denotation of a name cannot vary depending on the linguistic context. His argument would be as follows:

An object can only be referred by exactly *one* proper name.

The words ‘white horse’ and ‘horse’ are different names.

No object can be named both by ‘white horse’ and ‘horse’.

(if it were, *one* object would be *many*)

‘a white horse is a white horse’ and ‘a horse is a horse’ are mere iterations of the same speech act of *naming* (when I say ‘*x* is *x*’, I pick out the object ‘*x*’ twice), and so they are unpuzzling.

5 For various readings of the White-Horse Paradox, see Hansen 1983, 140-171; Mou 2009, 22-26; Fung 2009, 172, 175-181; Van Norden 2011, 108-111, 113-114; Lucas 2012; Fraser 2020, 300-304 and Garfield & Priest 2021, 23-25.

6 On this point, see Hansen 1983, 72-81, 150-151

So far, the comparison between the White-Horse Paradox and the view held by the 'late-learners' is neither particularly instructive, nor particularly stimulating. The interest of Gōngsūn Lóng's paradox lies in its reception in later Chinese philosophy: the Mohists, who represent the acme of ancient Chinese logical philosophy, seized the paradox to distinguish two types of 'communication' of names.

Indeed, the Mohists (*Xún Zǐ*, part. 3) take the White-Horse Paradox as an opportunity to wonder about the way in which the reference of generic compound names is fixed. They make the distinction between two kinds of compound names (see Hansen 1983, 148-155):

- some compound names denote the *intersection* of several classes.

For instance, 'white horse (白馬, *báimǎ*)' denotes the class corresponding to the *intersection* of the *horse* and *white* classes, i.e., $\{x: x \text{ is a white horse}\} = \{x: x \text{ is a horse}\} \cap \{x: x \text{ is white}\}$.

- some compound names denote the *union* of several classes.

For instance, 'ox-and-horse (牛馬, *niúmǎ*)' denotes the class corresponding to the *union* of the *ox* and *horse* classes, i.e., $\{x: x \text{ is an ox-and-horse}\} = \{x: x \text{ is an ox}\} \cup \{x: x \text{ is a horse}\}$.

In doing so, the Mohists support the view that the scope of the denotation of the name 'horse' varies when it appears in a compound expression: the name 'horse (馬)' used singly denotes all the members of the class of horses. When joined with the name 'white (白)', 'horse' denotes a subclass of horses; and when joined with the name 'ox (牛)', 'horse' denotes the class of horses.

But, such a heterogeneity in the way that compound names refer is a massive threat to a substantial thesis shared by almost all Chinese thinkers at that time, namely the principle: *one name, one thing*. Stated more fully, the thesis is that each thing has exactly *one* correct name, and each correct name has exactly *one* denotation. This would mean that all names select exactly the same denotation in all contexts, whether used singly or compounded into phrases.

The Mohists abandon or moderate the one-name-one-thing dogma, and consequently, the traditional and Confucian idea that the linguistic structure

does always *directly* reflect the structure of things in the world⁷. They allow that the denotation of a name can vary depending on the linguistic context. Unlike them, Gōngsūn Lóng takes a conservative stance and understands the one-name-one-thing dogma at face value: the objects denoted by the compound names are distinct from the objects denoted by either of their constituent names. So, ‘white horse’ is neither white nor horse, but, according to Gōngsūn Lóng’s first argument, a distinct *sort* of thing. As Lucas 2012 shows, the White-Horse Paradox involves a semantic taxonomy of predicates and classes according to the *sorts* to which they belong, *white horse* would be neither *horse* nor *white* because these names would all denotate classes belonging to *sorts* whose domains are disjoint: respectively: <colour + shape>, <shape> and <colour>).

Finally we can see the point of interest for comparison with the ‘late-learners’. The claim ‘one name, one thing’ is also shared by the ‘late-learners’ from *Sph.* 251a8-c6 according to the Bradleyan Interpretation. And so, it is possible to offer a *revised* Bradleyan Interpretation which can be labelled the ‘Gōngsūnian Interpretation’. While the Bradleyan Interpretation sees in the view of the ‘late-learners’ an issue about the distinction between *substantive* and *adjective*, the Gōngsūnian Interpretation is the reading according to which the issue lies rather in the distinction between *compound* name and *simple* name.

- *Gōngsūnian Interpretation*: the puzzle involved in the view of the ‘late-learners’ is reducible to the question: how *compound names* as ‘good-man’ (ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος) or ‘white-horse’ work without the one being many and the many being one?

The Gōngsūnian Interpretation involves a complication that is very interesting once we adopt a Platonistic viewpoint. Indeed, for Gōngsūn Lóng, the problem raised by compound names like ‘white horse’ and ‘good man’ is not only that of determining their proper extensions, but also that of combining different or not different *sorts* of items: ‘white horse’ implies the combination of a colour and a shape, ‘good man’ the combination of a natural kind and an axiological quality. Gōngsūn Lóng argues for the weird thesis that *white*, *horse* and *white horse* are three sorts that do not intersect with each other (in sortal logics, we say that the two sortals X and Y intersect iff X and Y are true of at least one object). As for the Mohists, they grant that

7 On the ‘rectification of names’, see Hansen 1983, 72-81, a view that obviously reminds us of some ideas from the *Cratylus*.

white horse is the sortal intersection of the sorts *white* and *horse* (see Lucas 2005 on Mohist 'sortal' logic).

Let us now put the discussion in the *Sophist's* framework. The ES begins by presenting a digression about the 'late-learners' who support a paradoxical view close to Gōngsūn Lóng's, but the ES immediately changes the subject to the issue of the 'communication of kinds' (*Sph.* 251d-259b). The connection between these two steps of the dialogue is better understood if the chosen reading of the 'late-learners' is Gōngsūnian rather than Bradleyan or Post-Fregean: since the 'late-learners' have some worries about whether the sorts intersect or not (they do not allow that 'good man' is a genuine *unity* resulting from the sortal intersection of *man* and *good*), it is appropriate to come straightaway to the topic whether there is some combination of kinds or not. In short, the Gōngsūnian Interpretation offers a way to grasp the connection between *Sph.* 251a8-c6 and what immediately follows.

True, in *Sph.* 251d-268c Plato nowhere examines the reference or denotation of forms resulting from the combination of other kinds, and so there is no 'Mohistic' text in the dialogue. In fact, the true answer to the 'late-learners' is not the idea that kinds can combine with each other (that would be question-begging), but rather appears in *Sph.* 261d1-262e1 in which Plato distinguishes between *noun* (ὄνομα) and *verb/predicate* (ῥῆμα, see Aristotle, *de Int.* 2-3). In doing so, he dissolves the simplistic semantics of the 'late-learners' (whether they are Bradleyan or Gōngsūnian): words can have different functions when they occur in different speech acts. If so, 'good man', far from being a compound name, is a syntactic complex construed as a pair <noun, predicate>.

3. Conclusion

Reading *Sph.* 251a8-c6 in the light of the *White Horse Dialogue* provides an exegesis of the *Sph.* sensitive to the fact that the rejection of non-identical predication (or nomination) constitutes a foil to which several types of answers can be provided: Plato and the Mediterranean tradition found in such a seemingly sophistic riddle an opportunity to distinguish identical or reflexive predication from non-identical and non-reflexive predication, while for the Mohists it was the opportunity to wonder about the way in which the reference of compound names is fixed. Furthermore, the Gōngsūnian reading of *Sph.* 251a8-c6 is attractive for better understanding the structure of *Sph.* 251d-268c given that such an interpretation connects the digression

about the late-learners with both the discussion of the communication of kinds and the logical-linguistic enquiry at the end of the dialogue.⁸

8 For another interesting comparison between Plato and Chinese philosophy: Wáng Bì from the ‘School of the Dark (玄學, *xuánxué*)’ offers exactly the same argument than Plato’s *Ti.* 49b-51b, 52d-53b, 57d-58c (in which Plato argues that the *χώρα* is unqualified or formless) for the thesis that the *dào* has no characteristics at all, see Garfield & Priest 2021, 18.