

The *Eidos* of Non-existence in Plato's *Sophist*: 257a11-b4

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Some contemporary scholars (rightly) accept Ackrill's claim that in the *Sophist* the Eleatic Visitor recognizes three ways in which being can be predicated of a thing: it can be said to be identical to something, or to have some property, or to exist. But scholars generally maintain that the Visitor only recognizes *two* corresponding ways of predicating not-being: we can say that something is not identical to something, or that it does not have some property, but we cannot intelligibly say that it does not exist. I argue that at 257a11-b4 the Visitor does recognize this third way of predicating not-being, construing it as a special case of negative property predication. To predicate not-being of something is to say that it shares in the Form of Non-existence, viz. that part of Otherness that is set opposite the Form of Being (Existence). The scholarly resistance to this view is largely based not on the text of 257a11-b4, but rather on the *aporiai* raised for the intelligibility of the expression τὸ μὴ ὄν at 237b7-238c3. I argue that those *aporiai* are not meant to be decisive, and, in particular, that a claim that figures in the first, that the term "something" can only be intelligibly applied to something that exists, should not be thought to be endorsed as obviously true by Plato. In support I adduce *Parmenides* 160e, where the denial of that claim is persuasively argued for. Being, not-being, non-existence, negative predication

At the start of the *Theaetetus*, Euclides tells Terpsion that Theaetetus is near death from wounds and dysentery. As the two of them listen to a slave read aloud the account of Theaetetus' long-ago conversation with Socrates, they know that at any moment they may hear the news that Theaetetus is no more. We who read that dialogue, and its sequel, the *Sophist* – in which an Eleatic Visitor and Theaetetus discuss, among other things, not-being – we, too, are reminded that Theaetetus (along with all the rest of them) is no more. Does the Visitor's discussion of not-being take into account this particular kind of not-being: the not-being of something that has ceased to exist? Strangely enough, the scholarly consensus is that it does not. According to this consensus, the Eleatic Visitor, and presumably Plato himself, remain under the spell of Eleaticism when it comes to non-existence: non-existence statements are unintelligible, and, indeed, unspeakable. This is, in my view, remarkable. *We all* think that non-existence statements are intelligible, and, often enough, true. There are well-known problems in accounting for their meaningfulness, to which Russell, Frege, and others have offered solutions. Neither does Plato shirk the task of explaining the meaningfulness

of non-existence statements. In order to account for their meaningfulness, Plato's Visitor takes pains to argue that there is a Form that gives sense to the predicate in such statements: the Form of Non-existence.

Before defending this claim let me point to a difference between Plato's main concern and that of Russell et al. The latter are typically concerned with the problem of the meaningfulness of statements that include non-referring singular terms, such as "Santa Claus." If the meaning of a singular term just is its reference, then non-referring singular terms, and the statements in which they occur, are meaningless.¹ Though Plato's discussion does bear on this issue, it primarily concerns a different problem: the meaningfulness of *predicating* not-being of something.² The expression with which he is concerned, τὸ μὴ ὄν, is not a name, nor does Plato treat it as one.³ It is, rather, a definite description: "that which is not," in which not-being occurs as a predicate. Plato's problem is the meaningfulness of *predicating* not-being of something – not of *referring to* what does not exist.

That this is Plato's concern helps explain why the Visitor treats non-existence statements as a special case of negative predication. The discussion of negative predication culminates, at 257a11-b4, in the Stanger's establishing the existence of a Form of Non-existence, which he analyzes as that part of Otherness that is directed toward (or set opposite) Being. This is what we invoke when we say that something does not exist, and this is what is involved, metaphysically, in making such statements true, when they are true. That this is a natural reading of 257a11-b4 has, I think, never been denied. Rather, the doctrine it would express has been thought to be so clearly at odds with assertions, elsewhere in the dialogue, of the unintelligibility of not-being that interpreters have felt the need to adopt other readings of the passage. Now the most important of these assertions of unintelligibility occur in the paradoxes concerning "that which in no way is" that are discussed at the beginning of the ontological section of the dialogue (237b7-238c3). Therefore, after a brief synopsis of what I take to be the dialogue's theory of being (or of what is), I shall start with a discussion of these paradoxes, and then go

1 Russell's solution to the problem is to deny that terms such as "Santa Claus" are in fact names or singular terms at all; they are disguised definite descriptions.

2 Wittgenstein, for one, did share Plato's interest in the meaningfulness of negative predications. Cf. Wittgenstein 1922, 4.0641 and idem 1961, 30. The Wittgenstein-Plato parallels are discussed by Lee 1972, 293-297 and Pippin 1979, 179-196.

3 In introducing the topic the Visitor does employ the words τοῦνομα[α] ... τοῦτο, τὸ μὴ ὄν (237c2), but I take it that ὄνομα does not here have the sense the Visitor assigns it at 262a6-7, and that the entire phrase is best translated simply as "this expression, 'that which is not.'"

on to argue that, once they are dismissed, the existentialist interpretation of 257a11-b4 emerges as the obvious and unobjectionable one. There are, to be sure, other passages that have also been offered as evidence that the *Sophist* does not countenance negative existential statements;⁴ these I shall have to leave for another occasion.

As far as the *Sophist's* account of what is goes, I largely endorse the view of Ackrill,⁵ who argued that Plato here distinguishes (and gives an analysis of) three senses of "is": the existential sense, where "*a* is (exists)" is made true by *a's* participating in the Form of Being; its use as a copula, where "*a* is *f*" is made true by *a's* participating in the Form of *F*-ness; and its use in identity statements, where "*a* is (identical to) *b*" is made true by *a's* participating in the Form of the Same with respect to *b*. Shorn of its focus on the meanings of the word "is," Ackrill's three-part analysis is correct: the *Sophist* does indeed analyze existence, property-possession, and identity in the ways indicated. Ackrill's analysis has been influentially contested by scholars who have raised doubts as to whether Plato (or the Greek language itself) clearly makes these distinctions.⁶ But more recently some scholars have argued that the Visitor does indeed make the relevant distinctions, and that he analyzes them in much the way Ackrill maintained.⁷ Furthermore, as regards non-being, these scholars (rightly) maintain that the Visitor provides, for two of these three positive kinds of being, analogous analyses of not-being: "*a* is not (identical) to *b*" is made true by *a's* participating in the Form of the Other with respect to *b* (255e8-257a11), while "*a* is not *f*" is made true by *a's* participating in that part of the Other that is directed toward *F*-ness (257b1-258a10). However, scholars have refused to allow that the Visitor supplies a comparable analysis for the third case, non-existence. I maintain that he does: "*a* is not (=does not exist)" is made true by *a's* participating in that part of the Other that is directed toward Being (258a11-b7). (It will be objected: how can *a* participate in this alleged Form, if *a* does not exist, and so is not there to participate in anything? I cannot here fully address this issue. I simply note that in Plato's *Parmenides* Parmenides argues that we cannot infer from something's

4 Most important are 258d5-e1 and 260b7-8. Relevant to my response to these is the proper interpretation of 259a3-b7.

5 See Ackrill 1957. Ackrill summarizes his three-fold analysis in the last paragraph. Note that the Form of Being figures only in the analysis of the existential "is."

6 A pioneering work raising these concerns is Brown 1986, 49-70.

7 For defense of the claim that the *Sophist* gives (among other things) an account of existence, see O'Brien 2005; idem 2013b, idem 1995 and Crivelli 2012. The latter's distinction between the 'is' of definition, the 'is' of existence, and the 'is' of 'ordinary predication' is roughly equivalent to Ackrill's three-fold distinction.

participating in a Form *F* that it exists: 160e7-161a5. Unlike many, I take this to be a proposal that Plato himself should, and does, endorse.)

I now turn to what is thought to be a decisive objection to this interpretation: the Visitor's apparent dismissal from the very start of the intelligibility of non-existence (237b7-238c3). In this passage the Visitor lays out the initial *aporiai* concerning talk of what is not. He follows this up (after a digression, 239c4-242b9) with an extended presentation of *aporiai* concerning what is (at 242b10). He is only done with laying out difficulties at 250e, whereupon he begins to make the distinctions required to deal with these difficulties. Though the Visitor does not return to these *aporiai*, I submit that it is a mistake to assume that Plato thought them unsolvable. In the discussion following 250e we are provided the tools needed to resolve them.

The Visitor raises three difficulties: two are relevant to our concerns.⁸ The first considers what it is that we could apply the expression "what is not" to – that is, what subject it could be predicated of.⁹ The Visitor asserts that it cannot be applied to anything that is; nor even to anything to which we might apply the phrase "something," since the use of the latter phrase is always itself necessarily applied to something that *is*. Since there is nothing to serve as the subject for the predicate "what is not," and every predication needs a subject, we cannot so much as get a predication of not-being off the ground. The second difficulty concerns a paradox within the predicate itself. Insofar as our predicate expression must be either singular, dual, or plural,¹⁰ it turns out in fact to be a compound predicate: it predicates not only not-being, but also *number* of whatever it is asserted of. But only things that *are* can be of a certain number. Our predicate expression therefore predicates both not-being and a kind of being – being of a certain number. The predicate is, therefore, self-contradictory (see 238a1-c11).

Are these considerations sufficient grounds for dismissing the possibility of predicating not-being (understood as non-existence)? More specifically: does the Visitor – does Plato – think so? Presumably no modern commentator on the dialogue *in propria persona* thinks so; indeed, that they do not shows itself in the occasional awkwardness of their language when assuring us that Plato did.¹¹ It is true that, after establishing (as I maintain) that there

8 The third difficulty, which the Visitor calls greater than the other two (238d2), consists in the fact that the unintelligibility of not-being also infects any attempt to *declare* it unintelligible.

9 See 237c2: "to what (ποῖ) ought we apply this expression, 'what is not.'"

10 The Visitor refers to the singular and plural (238b10-c6); for the dual, cf. 237c7-e7.

11 Cf. "This may plausibly be taken to indicate that..." Crivelli 2012, 38.

really is a Form of Non-existence, the Visitor does not return to show how these paradoxes are to be solved. But neither does he indicate that we must abide by them and banish non-existence from our speech and thought.¹² And I will venture to put my finger on what I think is the weak claim in at least the first of the two paradoxes: the claim that when we utter “something” we necessarily apply it to something that is. Though never retracted in this dialogue, this claim is denied in the passage in the *Parmenides* to which I earlier referred.¹³ As for the second paradox, a simple counterexample may help resolve it. Our being quite certain that Snow White and the Seven Dwarves do not exist does not prevent us from tallying them up and determining that they are eight. Predicating number does *not* predicate being (i.e., existence), any more than predicating any other normal predicate does.

Let me now turn to the crucial passage in which the Visitor arrives at the Form of Non-existence. He begins with a rough statement of what will be his analysis of not-being (non-existence): “Whenever we talk about that which is not,¹⁴ as it appears, we are not talking about something contrary to what is, but only about something *other* than it” (257b3-4). When Theaetetus expresses his puzzlement, the Visitor begins a general analysis of negative predication. He points out that “not large” is not the contrary of “large” (viz., small), but only *other* than it. Thereupon he introduces the notion of the parts of otherness, one of which is assigned (e.g.) to beauty, to give a *bona fide* Form (*eidos*) of the Not-beautiful (257c7-e11). After applying this analysis to the Not-large¹⁵ and the Not-just (258a1-5), he generalizes the principle as follows:

And we will accordingly speak in the same way about the rest, since the nature of the Other has appeared to be among the things that are, and,

12 At 258e7-259a1 the Visitor says: “We’ve said good-bye long ago to any contrary of that which is, and to whether it is or not, and also to whether or not an account can be given of it” (trans. White 1993). What does he mean by “the contrary of that which is,” if not non-existence? I suggest that the term is meant to be equivalent to “what in no way is” (τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν 237b7-8), and refers, not to non-existence, but to something that participates in no Form at all. So the Visitor is not here endorsing a previous rejection of a Form of Non-existence.

13 “Furthermore, the one that is not partakes of that and of something (τοῦ τινός) ...” (160e2-3, trans. Gill and Ryan 1996.) For discussion of the passage in which this occurs, see Tuozzo 2021.

14 Unless noted, translations are my own. In this passage I remove the quotation marks inserted by Duke, Hicken, Nicoll, Robinson, and Strachan 1995.

15 His application of the analysis to the not-large speaks against the contention in Lee 1972, 269 that 257b1-c4 is not part of the discussion of negative predication.

given that it *is*, it is accordingly necessary to posit that the parts of it, too, are no less things that are. (258a7-9)

In this passage, “the rest” (τᾶλλα) refers to all other Forms: just as there are parts of the Other assigned to the Beautiful and the Just, there is a part of the Other assigned to every other Form, and each such part is a being no less than the positive nature to which it is directed. The Visitor then goes on to apply this principle to the case he has been aiming at from the start: the case of not-being:

So it seems that the setting against each other (πρὸς ἄλληλα... ἀντιθεσις) of [i] a part of the nature of the other and [ii] the nature of that which is, is in no way less a being (οὐσία), if it is lawful to say so, than that which is itself. And it does not signify something contrary to that which is, but only something *other* than it. (258a11-b4, my reference numbers)

Although the translation of this terse passage has been the subject of dispute, the foregoing is, I think, the most natural way of reading it.¹⁶ An alternative translation assumes that the passage is elliptical, and that its first sentence is concerned with “the setting against each other of a part of the nature of the other and [of a part] of the nature of that which is,” where “a part of the nature of that which is” is taken to be a designation appropriate to any given Form. On such a reading, the passage simply restates the general principle just stated in 258a7-8. There are decisive reasons against such a reading, not least the fact that the *Sophist* nowhere else makes use of the notion of a part of Being.¹⁷ Oddly, however, even those who recognize the unsuitability of assuming an ellipsis here nonetheless endorse the sense that that reading would give: namely, that the reference to the nature of what is is meant distributively: it refers to each of the things that are, i.e., all the Forms. The plain sense of the text, I submit, is, rather, that there is a distinct part of Otherness directed towards Being, just as there is one directed towards Beauty, another towards Largeness, and so on – and that this is precisely the not-being that the inquiry into the sophist required us to find. Indeed, the rather solemn phrase, “if it is lawful to say so (εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν),” appropriately marks the momentous occasion of the transgression

16 See the brief but judicious remarks of Lee 1972, 283-284, and also Notomi 1999, 244. Pace Crivelli 2011, 121, τῆς θατέρου μορίου φύσεως is an unobjectionable, even characteristically Platonic, hyperbaton for μορίου τῆς θατέρου φύσεως. Compare Denniston 1952, 53 on hyberta and the “splitting up of unified phrases.”

17 So, again, Lee 1972, 283-284.

of Parmenides' interdiction. The continuation of the passage confirms the impression that something momentous has occurred:

Visitor: What, then, should we call it?

Theaetetus: It is clear that this is what is not, itself (τὸ μὴ ὄν ... αὐτό), which we were looking for on account of the sophist.

Visitor: Therefore doesn't it, as you said, fall short of none of the rest in being? And don't you have to gather courage at this point and say that what is not is firmly in possession of its own nature, just as the large was large and the beautiful was beautiful and the not large and the not beautiful,¹⁸ so too that which is not (τὸ μὴ ὄν) in the same way was and is not-being, one form numbering among the many beings? Or do we still have some ground for disbelieving this, Theaetetus?

Theaetetus: None. (258b6-c6)

The language here suggests *not* that what is not is simply the sum of the Not-large, the Not-beautiful, and all the other Not-*fs*, but is rather one single Form, on a par with them, but especially important because the positive nature towards which it is directed is Being itself. And if that is the case, I suggest that what we have here is an analysis of non-existence to put beside the earlier analyses of non-identity and negative predication. The Form they have discovered is the Form of Non-existence.

18 I omit the supplements printed in Duke, Hicken, Nicoll, Robinson, and Strachan 1995.

