Σκοπός and the Unity of the *Sophist*

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Although like Noburu Notomi I defend the thematic unity of the *Sophist*, I locate the unifying subject or "target," *skopos*, not in "the sophist" but in "Being and Not-Being on every level." Against Notomi's case that the *skopos* is the sophist: most of the dialogue concerns questions about Being; to define an unknown via bifurcation is a flawed method; the final definition does not fit known sophists; schools were Plato's rivals by the time of writing. My proposed unifying target comes close to Marsilio Ficino's "Being and Not-Being." Although Being is not discussed in every part of the dialogue, sections can have subsidiary *skopoi*, which all serve the whole. My interpretation helps illuminate connections between the search for the sophist in the "frame" part of the dialogue and discussions about Being in the dialogue's core.
Being, Not-Being, skopos, unity, Neoplatonic hermeneutics

Although Noburu Notomi wrote *The Unity of Plato's 'Sophist'* over twenty years ago, his observation still remains largely true, that "[t]he variety of the philosophical issues it raises ... makes us fail to see the dialogue *as a whole*." In the spirit of the Neoplatonic assumption that a Platonic dialogue aims at a unitary "target" or subject, σκοπός, I seek to carry forward Notomi's project, though in a different direction. He proposed "the sophist" as unifying subject of the dialogue.[1] I propose "Being and Not-Being on every level" (cf. παντοδαποῦ, Hermias, *in Phdr.* 1. 15.17): images, our embodied world, soul, the forms, and the One. When the Visitor talks about accounts of the thing and not only of the name (218c2-4, 221b1-2, 263), or about the divine production of "things that are" (265b-e), I take his interest to lie in what we may call ontological thickness and semantic realism (cf. 257c), not only in how to use the verb "to be."

The structure of the *Sophist*, however, calls its thematic unity into question. A logico-metaphysical core (*Sph.* 236-264) is enclosed by a frame that defines the sophist via bifurcative division. One may think the connection between frame and core merely formal. On the other hand, if we suppose that the *Sophist* is not unified thematically, what are we saying about

1 Others who recently have proposed "the sophist" include Gill 2012, 3-4 and Casadesús Bordoy 2013, 17.

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it as a work? Let us hypothesize that a dialogue is unified thematically and see how far we get.

Sometimes Neoplatonists applied the term *skopos* to what they thought Plato sought to accomplish (e.g. Procl. *in Alc.* 14.3–4; *Op.* 1). More often they spoke of *skopos* as the unitary, governing subject, which each segment of a dialogue was to illuminate (e.g. Procl. *in Ti.* 1. 19.27–28; cf. Baltzly, 2017). Is it legitimate to seek a dialogue's *skopos* understood in this second sense? One may say *no*:

First, as Heath (1989, 163–66) argued, a work's unity need not be thematic but can rest on plot, structure, or imagery. For example, we fail to pay proper attention to the work's thematic plurality (173) if we try to make both the speeches about love in the *Phaedrus* and that dialogue's later discourse on rhetoric serve a single *skopos*.

Second, the hermeneutic circle threatens to make a *skopos* otiose. We cannot identify a *skopos* except from all the parts of the dialogue, but by the time we have analyzed those, the *skopos* is the product of our analysis, not a guide to analysis.

Third, the *skopos* hermeneutic is bound up with Neoplatonic ontological assumptions. Although Middle Platonist interpreters argued for what they thought a dialogue was "about," περί (Plutarch, Anon. *in Tht.*), Iamblichus and successors called the interpreter to consider a dialogue a microcosm of reality and the author an imitator of the demiurge. These assumptions bespeak an obsession with hierarchy mediated by allegory. For example, Proclus took the characters in the *Parmenides* to "imitate" levels of being (*in Prm.* 1. 628.22–25, 699.23–26, 5. 1021–1022, 1027.13–21, 1031.12). But if we eschew allegorizing, then we should not seek a *skopos*.

Fourth, the *skopos* theory admits no disconfirming evidence. With enough ingenuity, we can claim that *any* work has thematic unity. Thus, the theory lacks heuristic value.

Against these objections, first, Socrates in the *Phaedrus* says that a *logos* should be an organic whole of parts connected by necessity, like a living body (263d–264e, 268d). Readers generally expect a unifying thematic principle, lest a *logos* be only Table Talk. Aristotle puts Socratic dialogues into the genus *mimesis*, of which the palmary species, tragedy, should exhibit organic unity as a whole composed of parts (*Poetics* 7–8).

Second, in response to the hermeneutic circle problem, I suggest that a *skopos* has the status of hypothesis; it will prove its mettle by guiding *further* insights into the dialogue. We build those on an interpretative foundation that we construct from initial readings, while we remain open to modifying our "take" as we dig more deeply. But in the end, our vision of the dialogue

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determines our vision of any part. As Burnyeat (1997, 4) said of a prologue, "far from the opening scene telling you how to read the philosophy that follows, it is the philosophy that tells you how to read the opening scene."

Third, to the objection that *skopos* is bound up with Neoplatonic allegorizing, I do not claim that the *skopos* assumption supplies the one true hermeneutic, or even that a dialogue's topic must be *rigidly* unitary. The assumption does help us dig into what a dialogue accomplishes. Aleknienė (2017) and Remes (2021) have used the *skopos* principle to illuminate the *Philebus* and the *Alcibiades*. Iamblichus' notion of unity sought to reconcile diverse elements of a work within "some more inclusive structure in terms of which the apparently multiple purposes can be seen to be subserving the same end" (Coulter 1976, 81). The principle that every piece of the text serves the whole stimulates close reading and can elicit valuable insights.

To the fourth, one may make a case that Xenophon's *Symposium*, perhaps even the opening parts of the *Timaeus*, fail the *skopos* test. Aristotle pilloried Isocrates' *Helen* as lacking thematic unity (*Rhet*. 1414b27–28).

Although I agree with Notomi that our dialogue is unified thematically, I do not think that its unifying "target" is "the sophist." Not all reviewers even understood this as Notomi's conclusion, for some thought he posited "appearance" (Rowe, van der Merren) or his refinement, "the sophist in us" (van Camp), as unifying issue. Being and Not-being receive half again as much space as do attempts to define the sophist. The final definition describes a type of which not even Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are tokens. Features that do not fit known "sophists" include: knows nothing (*Sph*. 233a–c); does not speak before crowds (268b, but cf. *Ti*. 19e); does not make speeches (268b, but cf. *Ti*. 19e); fears he knows nothing (268a). Moreover, when Plato wrote the *Sophist*, wandering disputers charging fees were of waning influence as organized schools were rising. One may think it likely, therefore, that Plato's primary target is a philosophical issue of contemporary concern rather than a type of intellectual no longer prominent.

Finally, to define an unknown via bifurcative division is a non-starter. In the division that defines the angler, the Visitor and Theaetetus already know what an angler is (218e). Theaetetus however, although he knows the name, "sophist," does not know *what* is the thing it names (218c). Division suits a philosopher's mapping of beings that are known to belong to a given kind (253c–e), but for defining an unknown, the kind needs to be identified by collection (*Phdr*. 265d). Cornford (1957, 187) and Bluck (1975, 53) suggested that the earlier divisions are in effect a collection made in preparation for the seventh division. Proper collection, though, precedes only the sixth division, where the Visitor collects crafts into a more general craft of cleansing (226b–

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e). The Visitor does use the term "collect," but at the *end* of his second division (224c9). Bluck himself noted (36) that division, if it is to yield knowledge, presumes that one already know both the object and the object's kind. As Ryle (1939, 322) pointed out, however, a division can neglect kinds that lie "on neither side of the philosopher's boundary lines," and "there is room for almost any amount of arbitrariness." In fact, the Visitor allows that his divisions operate from how these figures *appear* to *him* (221d13, 268b1). Yet in the *Statesman* he says that sophists change their forms (291b3). How, then, are appearances reliable? Such a dodgy method makes me reluctant to say that Plato's principal philosophical interest was to define the sophist.

Among moderns who have proposed some other principal topic of the *Sophist*, Benardete (1993, 761) held out for "man as the vocalic bond between beast and god." For Mouze (2020, 18-19) the topic is language. Trevaskis (1966, 99) and Molas and Villarroel (2013) opted for "the philosopher/philosophy." Neal (in Bluck 1975, 22-29) thought the *Sophist* fundamentally "a treatise on negation." Sabrier (2019, 2) says that the *Sophist* "centres on the issue of participation . . . among forms." For Wiggins (1971, 268), von Fritz (1971, 435) and Schofield (1974, 42), the dialogue focuses on problems of not-being. Cordero's view comes close to mine: Being is the "principal subject" (1993, 29) and the sophist, the "apparent subject" (32).

Neoplatonic sources already record a range of candidate *skopoi*: "the sophist" (Anon. *Proleg. in Plat. Philos.* 21.30-31); "method of division" (Anon. *Proleg. in Plat. Philos.* 23.8-9); "what is" (Olymp. *in Alc.* 110.8); "not-being" (Anon. *Proleg. in Plat. Philos.* 21.31-35); "sublunar demiurge" (Iamblichus, *Soph.* fr. 1 Dillon = *Schol. Pl. Sph.* s.v. Σοφιστής). Although too early for *skopos* to be a term of art, the anonymous Middle Platonist commentator on the *Theaetetus* already deployed the concept, reporting that "some people" held that the *Sophist* is about, περί, "things that are" (ἃ ἔστιν) (*in Tht.* 2.37-39). That view was also expressed by its second title, "on Being" (D.L. 3. 58).

Notomi (1999, 13) wrote that Proclus "takes [the sophist] as the *skopos*," but Proclus does not voice this as his own view. Proclus is summarizing an argument of people who held that the title of the *Republic* is evidence that its *skopos* is the constitution, not justice. These interpreters adduced the *Sophist* as a parallel, saying, "this was the topic for investigation (προκείμενον) in that dialogue: [namely] the sophist" (*in R.* 1. 8.20-28). Proclus expresses his own view in his commentary on the *Parmenides*. There he refers to his earlier exegesis of the *Sophist*, "where Plato engages in dialectic principally about the genera of being's participation or non-participation in each other" (*in Prm.* 2. 774.19-20).

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Marsilio Ficino identified Being and Not-Being as the topic. Although he did not use an equivalent of the word, *skopos*, Ficino wrote in the introduction to his translation and in the introduction to his commentaries that Plato "disputes about being and not-being" in the *Sophist*.

Taking inspiration from Proclus, I expand Ficino's encapsulation by blending. For Proclus, the *skopos* of the *Republic* blends justice and the state: "The person who teaches about justice, if he should see all of it and not merely some aspects, also teaches about constitutions, since he sees justice in all its aspects" (*in R.* 1. 12.3–4). I propose to blend "Being and Not-Being" with "the sophist" to yield "Being and Not-Being on every level." That is, Being as Plato presents it descends by levels from Forms to phantasms in the embodied world, of which the sophist is a constituent. The search for the sophist, statesman, and philosopher, and the contrast between sophist and philosopher (253c–254b), call attention to divine intelligibles as true goods as against reputed virtues (267c). The aims of discussing levels of being *and* the humans who do or do not cognize being on those levels are really one. The sophist deals with not-being, the statesman, with embodied being, and the philosopher, with transcendent being plus the others (cf. 254a–b). For a title, though, "Sophist" is a "better-known name" than "Being etc." would be (cf. *in R.* 1. 14.11–12).

Being, Not-Being, and related metaphysical concerns generate the dialogue's notable philosophical achievements, e.g. an account of falsehood, distinction between name and statement, and the beginning of a theory of types and their mutual relations. The definition of the sophist, on the other hand, is problematic. Other proposals for the principal topic, like Neal's "negation," do not unify all the dialogue's parts. Moreover, when the Visitor allows sensibles into Being (249b–d) and distinguishes between a whole's conditional unity and absolute unity, which has no parts (245a), the dialogue picks up problems raised in the *Parmenides*, thus developing the metaphysics of the later Plato.

Objections to my proposed *skopos*. First, the Neoplatonists held that the *skopos* explains every part of a dialogue, but Being and Not-Being are not targets of the divisions that seek the angler or the sophist. The steps between those divisions are not ordered by necessity. Therefore, either there is no unifying target, or "the sophist" is the target.

Reply: a work need not make its unifying target explicit in every part. As Noël Carroll argues, we derive the theme by abduction from the parts (2009,

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110). Neoplatonists allowed segments to have their own *skopoi*.[2] Socrates' picture of holistic medicine in the *Charmides* (156b–157c) provides a model, for although bodily parts do different work, each serves the whole.

A second objection would channel those interpreters we met in Proclus. They argued, "if one thing is thought worthy of investigation for the sake of something else," then the second topic "should be considered the *skopos*" (*in R.* 1. 7.20–23, 8.25). I reply by invoking Holger Thesleff's pedimental metaphor: a dialogue's philosophical apex lies at a turning point in its central section (1967, 34, 167). At the *Sophist*'s center we find the parricide theme as the Visitor casts not-F as what is different from F, and sensibles are admitted among "beings." On those takeaways depend the definition of the sophist and also details in the frame like the philosopher's being called "divine" (216a–c). That characterization is explained by the core, where the philosopher alone knows the one form of Being (253c–254b). Assimilation to what is one in form makes something divine.[3]

A third objection: do we need *so many* definitions of the sophist? As Cordero complains, to illustrate division, one or two would have been enough (1993, 27 n. 19). Not all, then, serve a *skopos*. Reply: the definitions point to ways in which sophists were seen, and with them Plato pushes us to seek for the "one form" in investigation. That sort of search presupposes the notion of One Being, treated in the core. In the *Statesman*, Plato tries to parry such an objection, for the Visitor contends that his digressions were not "superfluous" or too long (286c1–2).

The *skopos* approach helps spotlight connections between the frame and the core. As Blondell has shown (2003), the Visitor's anonymity problematizes the dialogue's particularity and aligns its discourse with the universal. Not only his Eleatic origin but also memories about Parmenides make us think about Being and Not-Being. In a similar vein, Socrates' concern about genuine vs. fake philosophers (216c) calls for clarity about falsehood and Being, sought in the core. The search to define "sophist" employs the concepts of "kind," "same" and "different" (e.g. 223c), all awaiting clarification in the core. Cordero (1993, 218 n. 33) observes that during the divisions, the contents of each discarded, left-hand branch amount to instances of the kind, The Different, established in the core. The final definition of sophist as maker of semblances depends on the core's clarifying "not-being" as differ-

2 Cf. e.g. Procl. in R. 2. 7.8, 96.5, in Ti. 1. 92.15, in Prm. 6. 1061.12–13, 1064.17, 1071.4, 7. 1212.26, and on skopoi of segments, in Alc. 9.

3 The philosopher is divine (Sph. 254a8–b1, R. 500d1, 613b1, Tht. 176b1–2). Something is divine because it is "one in form," μονοειδές (Smp. 211e3–4, Phd. 80b1–3).

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ence, and in the frame, the Visitor's treatment of perceptibles as "things that are" (219b–c, 234d4) needs the core's admission of changeable things into being (249b–d). By that move, Plato makes room for *epistēmē* to apply to our world and for non-philosophers to have some *epistēmē* in the *Statesman* and *Philebus*.[4]

The *skopos* assumption helps us appreciate a dialogue as a work, spot connections among its parts, and interpret features. The corollary, that segments have their own *skopoi*, helps us avoid forcing every detail to implicate the principal *skopos*. The search to define the sophist ties the core's metaphysics and logic to our world, giving us being and not-being on every level. If the unity of a philosophical dialogue lies in what is philosophically significant, I propose that *that* is Being and Not-being, not the problematic definition of the sophist.

4 On this step cf. Murphy 2023; Cordero 2013; Fronterotta 2013.

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