

Like a Child Begging for Both (Pl. *Sph.* 248-249)

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Pl. *Sph.* 248-249 is a passage whose understanding impacts that of key issues in Plato's late metaphysics such as whether Forms change, whether anything remains stable, what makes something knowable, and what distinguishes Forms from particulars. The passage splits into three parts. 248a3-b1 presents the three theses accepted by the Formalists. 248e7-249b7 argues against them. 249c10-d4 draws a conclusion open to two readings. In §1 of this work, I distinguish such two readings. In §2, I sketch seven arguments in favour of the second reading. In §3, I focus on one such arguments and discuss it more in detail. The outcome, §4, is hence a battery of arguments available to support the claim that everything is both changing and unchanging, under different respects. Plato, metaphysics, forms, change, unchangeability.

1. The two readings

A central section of Plato's *Sophist* is devoted to the rejection of the position of the Friends of the Forms, a.k.a. the Formalists. The Visitor and Theaetetus attribute three theses to these thinkers, namely: (Th1) Becoming is separated from being. (Th2) Through reasoning by the soul we are in contact with being and through sensation by the body we are in contact with becoming. (Th3) Being is always by itself in the same condition and becoming is from time to time different.¹

The rejection of the Formalists' position has notably to do with the acceptance of change in the realm of being, but debate among scholars abounds on what this precisely means. Two understandings have been put forward, corresponding to two different readings of the last sentence of the following passage, which concludes the rejection of the Formalists.

1 The three theses are exposed at Pl. *Sph.* 248a3-b1. Here is my translation: 'VIS. Do you [friends of the forms] speak of becoming by distinguishing it as separated from being in some way? Otherwise, how? THT. Yes. VIS. And you say that through perception by the body we are in contact with becoming, while through reasoning by the soul with real being, which you say is always by itself in the same condition, whereas becoming is from time to time different. THT. That's what we say.'

ΞΕ. Τῷ δὲ φιλοσόφῳ καὶ ταῦτα μάλιστα [ἐπιστήμην ἢ φρόνησιν ἢ νοῦν] τιμῶντι πᾶσα, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἀνάγκη διὰ ταῦτα μήτε τῶν ἐν ἢ καὶ τὰ πολλὰ εἶδη λεγόντων τὸ πᾶν ἐστηκὸς ἀποδέχεσθαι, τῶν τε αὖ πανταχῇ τὸ ὄν κινούντων μηδὲ τὸ παράπαν ἀκούειν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν τῶν παιδῶν εὐχὴν, ὅσα ἀκίνητα καὶ κεκινημένα, τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν συναμφοτέρα λέγειν.²

VI. And by these reasonings it is necessary for the philosopher, who values all these things [ἐπιστήμην ἢ φρόνησιν ἢ νοῦν] the most, as it seems, neither to accept the static totality (τὸ πᾶν ἐστηκὸς) of those who assert the one or even the many forms, nor to listen at all to those who make what is (τὸ ὄν) change in every way, but, as in the prayer of the children, ὅσα ἀκίνητα καὶ κεκινημένα, τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν συναμφοτέρα λέγειν. (Pl. *Sph.* 249c10-d4)

First reading. Something is completely unchanging and something else is completely changing. In other words, of all entities, some are completely unchanging and some are completely changing. According to such a reading, the last phrase could be translated as follows: “To assert that what is and the totality are both together, all changing things and all changeless things”.³

Second reading. Everything is both changing and unchanging, under different respects. In other words, each entity is both unchanging, under a certain respect, and changing, under a different respect. According to such a reading, the last phrase could be translated as follows: “To assert what is and the totality both together as unchanging and changing”.⁴

Though both readings are *prima facie* plausible, they contradict each other. Indeed, if everything is both changing and unchanging (as per the second readings), then nothing can be completely changing and nothing can be completely unchanging (against the first reading).⁵ I shall now (§2) sketch seven arguments available to the supporters of the second reading. A full presentation of the arguments requires the analysis of many passages of the *Sophist*, a task which is beyond the scope of the present work. I hence present more fully (§3) only the fifth argument, since the passage on which it is based has acquired significant relevance in recent scholarship.

2 I choose to translate τὸ ὄν as ‘what is’ and τὸ πᾶν as ‘the totality’ to remain as neutral as possible on issues regarding what a totality is, so to avoid shifting the focus of the paper.

3 Most scholars support this reading. Cf. Brisson 2008; Crivelli 2012; Sabrier 2016.

4 A conspicuous minority of scholars is sympathetic to the second reading. Cf. Irani 2022 and Gill 2012.

5 The conclusion is equivalent to ‘It is not the case that something is completely changing and it is not the case that something is completely unchanging’, which contradicts the first reading.

2. Arguments available to support the second reading

First argument. In *Tht.* 154-183, Socrates develops and then rejects a metaphysical framework based on the principle that everything changes completely. If there are independent reasons to state that in rejecting such a metaphysical framework Socrates endorses the view that everything is indeed changing, though nothing completely, then the second reading matches better with this parallel passage.⁶

Second argument. The second reading matches better with the discussion of the greatest kinds that begins at *Sph.* 250. Different interpretations of it have been proposed, but one broadly shared view is that the greatest kinds are all pervasive.⁷ If this is so, the first reading is ruled out, as it prevents the two greatest kinds Change and Stability from being all pervasive. In fact, if there is something which is completely unchanging,⁸ as the first reading claims, such an entity would fall under Stability, but not under Change. But on the assumption that the greatest kinds are all pervasive, then the second reading should be endorsed.

Third argument. The second reading matches better with *Sph.* 248b2-c10, which argues that when any two entities are in certain circumstances, some relation occurs between them. The passage also claims that when a particular soul and being (οὐσίαν) are in certain circumstances, the relation of κοινωνεῖν occurs. It is not entirely clear what κοινωνεῖν means in this passage and what it entails, but according to a plausible interpretation of it, anytime a κοινωνεῖν occurs, both the entities involved in the relation change. If this is true, being is not changeless. But if being is not changeless, then nothing is changeless, for being is what is contrasted with becoming. Therefore, nothing is changeless, against the first reading.

Fourth argument. The second reading matches better with the argument at *Sph.* 248c11-e6, which shows that the Formalists commit themselves to an inconsistent triad: what is known is unchanging, what is known is affected, what is affected is changed. From a logical point of view, this conclusion

6 I present elsewhere the advantages of this interpretation. For different ones cf. Buckles 2016; Van Eck 2009. There are textual hints that the two passages of *Tht.* and *Sph.* need to be read together. At *Tht.* 180b-d, Socrates states that the position starting from the claim that everything is completely stable needs to be discussed. At *Tht.* 183d-184a, he defers it to the *Sph.*, or so the supporters of the second reading claim.

7 Cf. Irani 2022 and Sabrier 2016 for and against this view.

8 The supporters of the first reading usually state that all and only Forms are as such, cf. Crivelli 2012.

leaves open both readings, but a plausible interpretation of the passage is that it pushes the Formalists to reject that there is something which is completely unchanging, and so that even the objects of knowledge change.⁹

Fifth argument. The second reading matches better with the argument at *Sph.* 248e7-249b8, which shows that being is not unchanging, and that what changes and Change should be accepted as beings. By itself, this conclusion leaves open both readings, and yet if the passage shows that what fully is changes, then everything changes, for ‘what fully is’ is unsurprisingly contra-posed to becoming.

Sixth argument. The second reading matches better with the argument at *Sph.* 249b8-c9, which, assuming the presence of understanding, shows that it is not the case that everything changes under all respects.¹⁰ By itself, the conclusion of the argument leaves open both readings, but on a natural reading, the premises of the argument also imply that if something changes under all respects, then there is no understanding of it. Since the Visitor himself argues that the philosopher values knowledge, reasoning and understanding the most (καὶ τὰ πάντα μάλιστα τιμῶντι *Sph.* 249c10), it is unjustified to attribute to him a claim allowing for the existence of entities that are by construction impossible to understand. Therefore, no entity changes under all respects, against the first reading.

Seventh argument. Only the second reading allows for a real attack against the Formalists, one that forces them to a serious modification of their metaphysics. The first reading, on the other hand, allows the Formalists to block the Visitors’ attack by a slight terminological change, namely the use of ‘Forms’ for what they previously called ‘Being’, and of ‘Being’ for the conjunction of ‘Forms’ and ‘Becoming’.

3. Focus on the fifth argument

Each of the arguments presented in §2 stands on a particular interpretation of thorny passages from *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. I shall now remove the

9 Cf. again Gill 2012 and Irani 2022.

10 The argument is as follows. (1) If everything changes under all respects, then nothing is by itself in the same condition. (2) If nothing is by itself in the same condition, there is no understanding. (3) There is understanding. (C) It is not the case that everything changes under all respects. To be precise, in the text one reads that everything is φερόμενα καὶ κινούμενα. From *Th.* 181-183 this means that everything is completely changing. Moreover, that everything is completely changing is equivalent to the absence of stasis, explicitly stated in the text.

hypothetical flavour from one such arguments by providing justification for the interpretation used. For its relevance in the current debates on the matter, I focus on the fifth argument, previously presented as resting on the assumption that *Sph.* 248e7-249b8 states that what fully is changes. This section hence aims at justifying such an assumption.

At *Sph.* 248e7-249b8, the Visitor sets an argument to reject the Formalists' position by listing the following premises:

What fully is (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν) has faculty of understanding (νοῦς).

If it has faculty of understanding, it has life.

If it has life, it has it in a soul.

If it has a soul, it changes.

Together, the four premises imply that what fully is changes.¹¹

Based on this reconstruction, the passage indeed claims that what fully is changes and hence the fifth argument goes through. However, there is an ongoing debate among scholars on whether 'what fully is' is a good translation of τὸ παντελῶς ὄν and whether 'faculty of understanding' is a good translation of νοῦς. Though these translations are very natural for the Greek text, they seem to impose on the Visitor the striking view according to which Forms have souls. As a consequence, scholars divide into two streams. On one side, those who bite the bullet and weakened the meaning of having

11 Instead of agreeing on such a simple conclusion, the Visitor and Theaetetus draw two, slightly more complicated, conclusions (*Sph.* 249b2-3). One conclusion is: 'If what is were unchanging, there would be no faculty of understanding, for anyone of anything under any respect'. If one is ready to assume that the 'what is' of this conclusion refers to the previous 'what fully is', the conclusion follows by contraposition. For suppose that what fully is is unchanging. If it is unchanging, namely it is not changing, it has no soul. If it has no soul, it has no life. If it has no life, it has no faculty of understanding. Hence, it has no faculty of understanding. And if even what fully is has no faculty of understanding, then nothing has it (if one rejects that 'what is' in this conclusion refers to the previous 'what fully is' by claiming that 'what is' means 'anything that is', the conclusion will still hold, for understanding implies change). The other conclusion is: 'What changes and Change should be accepted as things that are'. Such a conclusion splits into two parts: (i) What changes should be accepted as something that is. (ii) Change should be accepted as something that is. (i) causes no troubles, since even what fully is changes, and it indeed is. On the other hand, there is no explicit indication on why Change should be accepted as something that is, but given that it is the Formalists' position which is under discussion, it is reasonable to assume that what changes changes because of its participation in Change, and that it is not possible for what participates in F to exist without the existence of F. Therefore, if what changes is, then Change is as well.

a soul.¹² On the other, those who have stretched the meaning of νοῦς or of τὸ παντελῶς ὄν.

Dealing with Plato's conception of the soul would lead me too far from the present aim, and I hence limit myself to a short comment to justify my translation of νοῦς and τὸ παντελῶς ὄν. As to νοῦς, the proposed alternatives are: 'having a guiding rational principle' and 'participate in a certain kind of rationality/order'. However, two reasons tell in favour of my translation. First, if νοῦς takes any such weaker senses, premise (2) would lack justification, since neither the guidance of a rational principle nor the participation in a certain order seem to imply the possession of life. For example, an apple falling from an apple-tree is guided by a rational principle and participates in a certain order, that of Newton's law, but it arguably has no life. Contrarily, my understanding of νοῦς makes sense of (2), since it is acceptable that if something has the faculty of understanding then it has life. Second, at *Sph.* 249c7, the Visitor lists νοῦς together with other two faculties of the philosopher, namely ἐπιστήμη (knowledge), and φρόνησις (faculty of reasoning), and so it is natural to read νοῦς as a third faculty, that of understanding.

As to τὸ παντελῶς ὄν, the alternative defended in the literature is that the adverb παντελῶς refers to a certain totality comprising both what is and what becomes.¹³ However, at least two reasons tell in favour my understanding of παντελῶς. First, there is textual evidence that τὸ παντελῶς ὄν means 'what fully is', for it is contrasted with τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν, which clearly means 'what in no way is'.¹⁴ Second, the supporters of the alternative view are forced to a very unnatural understanding of how the non-sentential adverb 'completely' works. Non-sentential adverbs, just like adjectives,¹⁵ qualify the term they refer to by modifying its intension or extension.¹⁶ When they modify the intension of the term they qualify, the resulting phrase refers to a concept different from the one expressed by the term without qualification, though related to the previous one. For example, the predicate 'being *almost*

12 Cf. De Vogel 1953 and Irani 2022. The view in Fronterotta 2008, 33 is interesting, though he does not justify why 'having a soul' should be understood by analogy and 'non implica la presenza dell'anima'.

13 Such scholars can be made coincide with the supporters of the first reading, for their usual move is to state that, in everything there is, something changes and something else does not. Cf. Sabrier 2016.

14 I owe this point to Fronterotta 2008, 29. Cf. *Sph.* 237b.

15 It is often possible to substitute adverbs for the corresponding adjectives, but not always: someone who teaches well is not necessarily a good teacher.

16 It is possible that they modify neither, as in 'really true' and 'true'.

friends' has a different intension from 'being friends', though both have to do with friendship. When non-sentential adverbs modify the extension of the term they qualify, they usually shrink it. An example with adjectives is that the extension of 'the full glasses' shrinks that of 'the glasses'. Sometimes, non-sentential adverbs expand the extension of the term they qualify. An example is the suffix '-ish', since the extension of 'the greenish apples' expands that of 'the green apples'. The supporters of the alternative view are forced to claim that *παντελῶς*, namely 'completely', expands the extension of the term it qualifies (in our case τὸ ὄν). However, this is simply not how the non-sentential adverb *παντελῶς* and its English counterpart 'completely' work.

As a final remark, let me note that both the scholars who bite the bullet and those who stretch the meaning of the Greek text understand 'what fully is' as a synonym of 'Forms'. And yet, there are reasons to avoid this move. First, Forms are never mentioned in the argument and arguably play no role here. Indeed, in the whole passage *Sph.* 248-249, the Greek word for 'Forms' appears just twice: right at the beginning, at 248a4, in giving the name to the group of philosophers that the discussion wants to reject, and at the very end, at 249d1, to say that those who posit (the unchanging) Forms have been rejected. Second, by breaking the synonymity, it is possible both to read the Greek text naturally and not to concur with the claim that Forms have souls. Third, it helps acknowledging that the argument at *Sph.* 248e7-249b8 undermines the Formalists' ground to posit Forms. Recall that the Formalists assumed (Th1) that being is separated from becoming. Positing Forms is a consequence of such a separation. And yet, if such a separation is rejected, their ground for positing Forms is undermined and their view rejected. Of course, Forms can still exist, but their existence would need to be posited on other grounds, and Forms would be different from how they were previously thought to be. For example, if being and becoming are not separated, since everything is shown to change (become) under certain respect, then Forms (as well as anything else) would change under some respect.

4. Conclusion

I presented seven arguments available for the supporters of a reading of *Sph.* 249d3-4 according to which everything is both changing and unchanging, under different respects. (1) It gives a nice parallel with a passage in the *Theaetetus*. (2) If kinds are all pervasive, then it should be preferred. (3) If whatever is involved in a *κοινωνεῖν* gets changed, then it should be preferred.

(4) If whatever is involved in a process of knowledge gets changed, then it should be preferred. (5) If what fully is changes, then it should be preferred. (6) If there is nothing which cannot be understood, then it should be preferred. (7) If the attack against the Formalists is meant to be a serious one, then it should be preferred.