

# The Stranger of the *Sophist*: A Citizen of Elea “Different” from the Eleatic Philosophers

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In 1561, the protagonist of the *Sophist*, a citizen of Elea, became a member of the ‘Eleatic school’. This intrusion had an author: the German philologist J. Cornarius. Indeed, in 1561 J. Cornarius proposed his own version of some passages of Plato’s *Sophist*. In this version Theodorus presents the Eleatic Stranger as ‘a companion (*hetairoi*) of Parmenideans and Zenonians’ (216a). Since then, this *cliché* is accepted by all translations. However, when the possibility of justifying the existence of images and appearances is considered, the Stranger himself proposes ‘testing’ Parmenides’ thesis. His remarks are rather those of an adversary than of a friend or companion of Parmenides. In fact, in spite of Theodorus’ presentation, the Stranger, albeit citizen of Elea, does not seem to share the theses of the ‘Eleatics’. These anomalies invited us to question the character of ‘companion’ of the ‘Parmenideans’ credited to the Stranger. The questioning is possible if we exploit some valuable greek manuscripts of Plato’s *Sophist*, neglected by J. Burnet, like *Vindobonensis* 21 (Y). This manuscript, among others, has the lecture ‘*heteros*’, ‘different’, instead of ‘*hetairon*’, “companion”. This manuscript permits to maintain the formula ‘*tôn hetairôn*’, transmitted by *all* the manuscripts after the first ‘*hetairon*’, and removed in modern editions. The translation we propose is: the Eleatic Stranger is ‘different (*heteros*) from the companions (*tôn hetairôn*) of Parmenides and Zenon’. Cornarius, manuscript Y, *heteros*, Eleatic School, companion

If we had to specify which is the main novelty that Plato, in the *Sophist*, introduces in his own philosophy, there is no doubt what we would choose the notion of ‘difference’ (τὸ ἕτερον). Thanks to this notion Plato justifies in 257b the possibility of the existence of a certain non-being which is not the opposite (ἐναντίον), but only ‘the *other* (ἕτερον) of being’. This discovery mitigates the scope of the alleged ‘parricide’, since it does not refute the non-existence of an absolute non-being (to which, Plato says, we said ‘goodbye’ long ago, 258b), and justifies, at the same time, the possibility of the existence of a λόγος ψευδής (which expresses, in its turn, something ‘different’ from what it)<sup>1</sup>.

\* I am very grateful to Christopher Kurfess for his meticulous reading and comments on this work.

1 This discovery refutes the thesis of the main target of the dialogue, which is Antisthenes, not Parmenides, that ‘*all* λόγος is true (ἀληθύνει = veridise)’ (Proclus, *In Crat.* 37).

Plato, not only a great philosopher but also a very subtle writer, has taken care to give his novel discovery a fitting dramatic setting and he has decided to exhibit it in a dialogue *different* from the others. It's obvious that each of Plato's dialogues has its own specificity, but two main *differences* between the *Sophist* and his previous works make this dialogue a work apart: (a) its protagonist is 'other' than Socrates (we could say 'Socrates' other'), and (b) the method he uses is 'different' from the previous dialogues.

Our reading will be devoted almost exclusively to the exposition of point (a), concerning the personality of the protagonist of the dialogue, the Stranger from Elea. Concerning (b), about the method used, we should briefly note the following. Usually, Plato's philosophical mouthpiece for exposing his philosophy is Socrates, sometimes in a rather dogmatic way, who tests his interlocutors, who, in turn, are almost always convinced in advance or perhaps directly stubborn and foolish, like Thrasymachus. In some dialogues Plato arrives at solutions, while others remain *aporetic*. Everything is *different* in the *Sophist*. After a long introduction which prepares the final solution, a series of definitions obtained through the division of kinds into X and the *other* of X, the protagonist reviews, in two occasions, the history of previous philosophy, and presents his personal position about the achievements of past philosophers. Thanks to this method, his 'defining definition' of being, which he proposes on page 247d, can be considered valid not only for this passage, but also throughout the dialogue.

Let us now look at our central subject, case (a), that of the protagonist of the dialogue. He is presented by Socrates' interlocutor, Theodorus, as someone 'from' Elea, literally, 'τὸ γένος, ἐξ Ἐλέας' (216a3). The choice of Elea is obvious. Since the aim of the dialogue is the definition of the sophist, and, in the dialogue, the most precise and rigorous definition makes him someone who produces *appearances* of knowledge, we must first justify the existence of *appearances*. But since another great original thinker of Elea, Parmenides, had denied the existence of appearances, one must first put to the test the arguments posited by Parmenides. And nothing is more appropriate than to ask the point of view of an Eleatic who had listened to Parmenides himself in his youth. That's why Plato decides to give the floor to this privileged witness of Parmenides' words, another Eleatic like Parmenides.

Before continuing, let's make a parenthesis. I digress, but I would like to notice that it has never been seen that, unintentionally, almost by accident, the passage of the *Sophist* which presents Parmenides' point of view, is a very important document about Parmenides' philosophy. Why is that? Because the Stranger says that in order to justify the existence of φαίνεσθαι and δοκεῖν, that is, of *appearances*, it is necessary to *refute* Parmenides,

because appearances, which do not have the guarantee of being, belong to non-being, and Parmenides had said that non-being does not exist. For Parmenides, says Plato, who is the first doxographer of Parmenides, the appearances do not exist. The information is precious because 99% of the works devoted to Parmenides say that the so-called ‘second’ part of the *Poem* deals with appearances, (we speak in English of the Way of Seeming), which is totally false. Heidegger, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* says, along these lines, that, ‘in the appearance, it is the being that reveals itself. He makes Parmenides a phenomenologist *avant la lettre*. Δόξα, in Parmenides (and all the Presocratics) means ‘opinion’, ‘viewpoint’, never ‘appearance’. End of parenthesis.

Now, as we know, Elea, according to the *Sophist*, was the seat of a school of philosophy, the Eleatic school (in Greek, ἔθνος, literally ‘tribe’, but we can also say ‘group’, or ‘family’, according to Vladimiro Arangio-Ruiz and Livio Rossetti). It is the Stranger himself who mentions the existence of this group, but -and I am beginning to get closer to my main point- the Stranger does not say that *he* belongs to this school. Is it enough to be born in Elea to belong to the Eleatic philosophical school? Ameinias, the first ‘master’ of Parménides (D.L. IX.21) was born in Elea and was Pythagorean.

For our present concern, the question is important, because we are clarifying the philosophical position of the Stranger. If this philosophy is a ‘local’ philosophy, as is implied in from the majority of the translations, it concerns all the philosophers of the region. In fact, August Diès translates ‘chez nous’, Giuseppe Cambiano, ‘nostra stirpe’, Vladimiro Arangio-Ruiz ‘la nostra eleatica famiglia’, Léon Robin, ‘notre gens’, Francis M. Cornford, ‘in our part of the world’. But the text is problematic, because these translations rely, concerning the group, on the words παρ’ ἡμῖν, dative, with locative value. But in reality this text is found only in Theodoret and in an *emendatio* of the codex *Parisinus graecus* 1808, *emendatio* inherited by some descendants. On the other hand, the whole manuscript tradition, especially the best codices, B, T, W and Y, presents παρ’ ἡμῶν, genitive, with the meaning of ‘starting point’<sup>2</sup>. It would be a school that issued ‘from home’, which is more logical, since it spread from Elea, πόλις of the only two true Eleatics of the group, Parmenides and Zeno, since Xenophanes is from Colophon and Melissos from Samos. Precisely the choice of παρ’ ἡμῶν helps to explain why someone who lived very far from Elea, like Melissos will become the Eleatic par excellence, because he is the only one who will write -we will see- the true core of Eleatism, ‘there is only one being’. We will return to this question.

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2 Casadesús Bordoy 2013 is an exception, as he translates ‘procedente de nosotros’.

But, even if we adopt the original text, did the Stranger belong to a school that issued from his home? The only way to answer the question is to look at whether the philosophy that Plato attributes to the Stranger coincides with that of the Eleatic group. This is not the occasion to deal with the much discussed sentence according to which, even if this group comes from Elea, it had started (ἀρξάμενον) with Xenophanes, and even before (!). It is curious, however, to place a Colophonian as the initiator of a movement originating from Elea...But, what did the 'Eleatic' philosophers maintain? They argued in their stories (or, directly, in their myths: μύθοι) that 'what is called (καλουμένων) all things (τῶν πάντων) is one thing (ένος ὄντος)' (242d6). The usual translation of the sentence as 'they say that everything is one' is therefore not valid (by the way, the only philosopher who wrote 'πάντα - έν' is...Heraclitus). In the characterization of the Stranger unity would be more a matter of language, and it will become an ontological thesis when Plato later speaks of the 'monists,' as we shall see.

The very brief characterization of the Eleatic school we have just summarized is found in the very famous passage in which the Stranger considers the research of the previous philosophers, 242c-243a. A few pages later the Stranger begins a more precise study by reviewing those who have pronounced on the quantity, πόσα, of principles. We might say, as we have announced, that when he alludes to the 'monists' he is taking up the Eleatic thesis, but now from the ontological point of view. Indeed, the Stranger imagines that he questions the monists and asks them, 'You affirm, perhaps, that it (sc. τὸ ἓόν) is only one (έν πού φατε μόνον εἶναι, 244b9)?' 'We affirm it,' they say. The statement is not hesitant or ambiguous. In direct speech, the text would be, 'We monists say: έν μόνον ἔστιν'. Now, it has never been noticed that these three words are a literal quotation from fr. B 8.1 of Melissos: 'μέγιστον μὲν οὖν σημεῖον ὁ λόγος, ὅτι έν μόνον ἔστιν' (Simplicius, *De Caelo* 558).

Even if he is never mentioned in the *Sophist*, Plato obviously thinks of Melissos when he invented from scratch an 'Eleatic school' because the only monist of the quartet which would compose this school, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno and Melissos, is, precisely, Melissos. In Xenophanes unity was a characteristic of the divinity (fr. 23), that would have made of him a monotheist, not a monist; Parmenides, for his part, as L. Tarán has noticed, meant that 'Being is the only thing there is'<sup>3</sup> (which does not mean that

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3 L. Tarán 1965, 190.

it is One<sup>4</sup>); and Zeno, Parmenides' ‘defender’<sup>5</sup> at the beginning of Plato's *Parmenides*, offered arguments for ‘eliminating’ (ἀνίρει) the one, according to Eudemos' account reproduced by Simplicius (*In Phys.*, 99 = 29A21 DK). Only Melissos is left. As J. Barnes says, ‘Melissos may go down in history books as the real inventor of monism’<sup>6</sup>.

Let us see now if the conceptions of the Stranger coincide with those which would make of him, not only an Eleatic, but also a representative of the school of Elea. After a long course which brought him to an encounter with the previous philosophers, the moment finally comes for the Stranger to express his own ideas. Aware of the solemnity of the moment, Plato doesn't hesitate to dramatize what the Stranger will say, and insists on using the first person, in order to underline the speaker's commitment. Here is what the Stranger says: ‘I affirm that what possesses a power, whatever it may be, either to act on any other similar thing, or to suffer -I summarize-, all this really exists. And therefore I posit as a definition that defines beings (τὰ ὄντα) that these are nothing but power (or ‘possibility’) (247e)’.

It would be illusory to try to find even a hint of monism in these words, which are a definition of τὰ ὄντα. Beings, τὰ ὄντα, are defined by the possession (...‘that which possesses...’) of something, but that something is not unity, but the possibility of acting or suffering. The title of our lecture, ‘The Stranger of the *Sophist*: a Citizen of Elea ‘Different’ from the Eleatic Philosophers’, seems to be confirmed. But let us see other examples.

We can suppose that, if the Stranger is a supporter of monism, he must respect the ideas of Parmenides and Zeno, as Plato interprets them. But in several passages of the dialogue the Stranger is very critical of Parmenides (to the point of fearing to be thought by a parricide, 241d3). At 241e says, for example, that even to a blind man (τυφλός) it would seem obvious that in some way being is not and that, under certain conditions, non-being is, which is the opposite of what Parmenides said (so a blind man would ‘see’ better than Parmenides!). And when examining the thesis of the monists, the Stranger remarks that those who hold that there is only one being, cannot even call this one thing ‘being,’ for the contrary would be . . . irrational (λόγον οὐκ ἂν ἔχον, 244d). But, if Parmenides was a monist — as Plato says — he should have done so. And finally, as a conclusion to his examination

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4 K. Reinhardt had written that the predicate of unity was almost marginal (Nebensächlicher) in Parmenides (Reinhardt 1916, 108).

5 However, we should not forget that Plato makes Zeno say that ‘it was indeed out of a taste for controversy (φιλονικία) or something of the kind that I wrote this work when I was young’ (*Parm.* 128d).

6 J. Barnes 1979, 21.

of monists and pluralists, the Stranger draws this conclusion: ‘Thus, then, he who asserts that being is either a couple or only a unity, is led to thousands of other impasses (ἄποροίαι) that cannot be crossed’ (245e).

If we take all this into account, our lecture could end here, for we have shown that the Stranger, while being an inhabitant of Elea, is really ‘different’ from the Eleatic philosophers. But I must continue my talk because, when Theodorus presents the Stranger, he appears to say the opposite of what I am demonstrating. An Eleatic ‘different’ from the entourage of Parmenides and Zeno? Impossible. Theodorus says that this unknown person, on the contrary, is a ‘companion’ (ἑταῖρον) of the Parmenideans and Zenonians, and that, consequently, he shares their ideas. We are at an impasse, and we can ask ourselves the question: was Plato capable of using a companion of the Parmenideans to contradict Parmenides and even to try to kill him? Certainly not. As we know, the person who put the word ‘companion’ (ἑταῖρον) in Theodorus’s mouth (which would have made a ‘companion’ a real traitor, criticizing his masters) is a sixteenth-century German philologist, Janus Cornarius, or Kornar, from his real name Johan Haynpol, and the date of the crime, of the slander, is the year 1561. You probably know the story, but I must say two words to justify my position.

If Plato decided to choose as his spokesman a philosopher from Elea, it’s because he is supposed to be a good connoisseur of the local philosophy, who even had the privilege to listen personally to the lectures of the most important Eleatic, Parmenides. And, as a connoisseur of Parmenideanism, this anonymous person is aware of Parmenides’ findings, for example, the refutation of the existence of an absolute non-being, but also of the weak points of this position, for example, the difficulty of justifying the existence of a false speech

We do not hesitate to assert that, for Plato, the Stranger is *the other* (ἕτερος) of Parmenides. He belongs to the same philosophical current, therefore, he is not the opposite of Parmenides, but with respect to the non-being he supports a ‘different’ position, not contrary, which prevents him from consummating the parricide. It must be taken into account that the Stranger never speaks of the thesis of ‘his’ father Parmenides, but of ‘the’ father Parmenides (τὸν τοῦ πατρὸς Παρμενίδου λόγον, 241d5), for Parmenides is a kind of ‘father’ of the Eleatics’ homeland, author even of the πολιτεία of the city. The Stranger, then, is neither a companion nor a disciple of Parmenides. He is someone who has a relationship of *otherness* concerning Parmenides, because he is *different* from the Eleatic philosophers

What I have just said is not the result of an excess of imagination. It is *Plato himself who says it*, and the dialogue was interpreted in this way until

the tragic date we have mentioned, the year 1561, when the Stranger became, in spite of himself, a ‘companion’ of the Parmenideans. The author who established this bond of friendship is the philologist Janus Cornarius, as we have already said.

Let us look closely at the continuation of the events. There is not very precise information about the manuscript sources used in the first editions of the *Sophist*, that of Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1513, that of Johann Valder in Basel in 1534 and, finally, that of Henri Estienne in Geneva in 1578. But, in the passage that interests us, which concerns the presentation of the Stranger, there is no doubt that they used the same text that we find today in the *Vindobonensis* 21 (Y), or others of the same family. That text was as follows: ‘He comes from Elea (τὸ μὲν γένος ἐξ Ἐλέας), but he is different (ἕτερον δὲ) from the companions (ἐταίρων) of Parmenides and Zeno (τῶν ἀμφὶ Παρμενίδην καὶ Ζήνωνα); however, he is a true philosopher (μάλ᾽ ἀνδρα φιλόσοφον)’ (216a3);

It is also certain that Marsilio Ficino’s Latin translation relied on a similar text: ‘Eleatem quidem natione, longe vero alterum ac dissimilem a Parmenides et Zenone suis aequalibus’ it is the same in the case of the source used in 1552 in Louvain by Petreio Tiara: ‘itemque alterum quendam Parmenidis Zenonisque familia’, and, especially in Estienne’s version.

We found the same text in manuscripts not directly derived from *Vindobonensis* 21, for example, *Parisinus* 1814 and *Vaticanus* 1030, and A. Diès adds that ἕτερος was also found in an *emendatio* to the *Venetus Append Class.* 4.1, dated to the tenth century. We know that the *Vindobonensis* 21 (Y), is one of the four most important manuscripts on which the Oxford’s Burnet edition was developed (that however retains ἐταῖρον), but strangely it was not used by the new edition of D. B. Robinson, of 1995. A. Diès is a very enthusiastic defender of the *Vindobonensis* 21. He says: ‘Y often has the privilege of the correct reading, either with B or T, or with W or Stobée: sometimes it has it alone, and one does not see why we would be obliged, in such cases, to substitute, for the guarantee offered by Y, the precarious guarantee provided *ab aliis librariis*’ (1923, 298).

Given all these elements the adoption of ἕτερος instead of ἐταῖρον is necessary<sup>7</sup>. The discrepancies found in the manuscript tradition most likely obey the technique of self-dictation often used by copyists, as the two words,

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7 The version we presented in our translation of the *Sophist* (1993) has recently been adopted by E. Mouze, who has also made the Stranger a philosopher ‘different’ from the Parmenideans (Mouze 2019, 59).



ἕτερον and ἑταῖρον, are pronounced the same way, even before the Byzantine period. There are other examples in the *Symposium* (221b7) and in the *Lysis* (206d4). And we understand why Theodorus must make it clear that, even though the Stranger is ‘different’ from the entourage (τῶν ἀμφί) of Parmenides and Zeno, he is, by birth, from Elea, but (δέ), (a remark that would be superfluous if he were really a ‘companion’ of the Parmenideans) —philosophically, he is other. . . . L. Gili proposes replacing δέ by γε<sup>8</sup>, but, in that case, the adversative character of the sentence would be weakened. Instead of trying to explain the anomaly that makes the Stranger (an Eleatic) someone ‘different’ (ἕτερον) from the Eleatic philosophers, Cornarius has chosen the lectio faciliior, ἑταῖρον, and made the character a ‘companion’ of the Eleatics.

Apart from the coherence that the adoption of ἕτερος introduces into the dialogue, there are at least two additional reasons to support this reading:

(a) All manuscripts (out exception) that preserve the first lines of the *Sophist* present the following text, after the choice ‘ἕτερος/ἑταῖρος’: τῶν/τὸν ἀμφί Παρμενίδην καὶ Ζήνωνα ἑταίρων, ‘the entourage of the companions of Parmenides and Zeno’. If we keep ἑταῖρος (this is the case of all editions after 1561, notably the now orthodox one of Burnet-Robinson), the translation of the passage would be: ‘companion of the entourage of the companions of Parmenides and Zeno’. The redundancy is obvious, and for this reason all editions have deleted the second ἑταίρων, which has become ‘[ἑταίρων]’, when it is present in the entire manuscript translation. This anomaly disappears if we accept ἕτερον: ‘different from the entourage of the companions of Parmenides and Zeno’.

(b) Plato sometimes has the habit of advancing at the beginning of his dialogues the main subject of the work. Numbers, for example, will play a decisive role in the *Timaeus*, and the first words of the dialogue are: ‘One, two, three, but our fourth [...] where is it?’ (17a). The *Hippias Major*, whose subject is beauty, begins in this way: ‘Here is the beautiful (καλὸς) and learned Hippias’ (281a). This is, finally, the case of the *Sophist*, whose main discovery will be that of the ἕτερον, and the protagonist is presented as the ἕτερον of Parmenides, someone who, while being Eleatic, will be ‘different’ from Parmenides.

We are left with the justification of the date. The philologist Janus Cornarius had died in 1558, but his son published posthumously in 1561 his translation into Latin of Plato's dialogues, accompanied by *eclogae*, and, in the *eclogae secunda* he says, without going into the question, that, at

8 Gili 2017, 173.



the beginning of the *Sophist*, the reading ἕτερον ‘*mox supposita est*’, ‘has been placed later’ (he does not say how) instead of ἑταῖρον. He proposes to restore ἑταῖρον and he translates it as ‘sodalis.’ More than two centuries later, in 1771, Johann Friedrich Fischer, professor at Leipzig, published a second edition of Cornarius's *Eclogae*, in which he confirmed the choice of ἑταῖρον, and three years later Fischer added commentaries to Estienne's edition of 1578 (which had retained ἕτερον). In his comments Fischer again said he preferred the ‘*elegans Cornarii coniectura*’ (4), and proposed to eliminate the second ἑταίρων, which would have been added by the copyists. Since then, all editions of the *Sophist* have favored an *emendatio* that is only four centuries old and have dropped a version that had been respected from the writing of the dialogue until the sixteenth century, that is, for almost two thousand years, a version according to which the Stranger of Elea is a real philosopher, but *different* from the members of the Eleatic school.

