

Power of Connection as the Mark of Beings

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This chapter argues that in the battle of gods and giants (*Soph*, 246a4-249d5) the Visitor proposes to both corporealists and formalists that the mark of being is the power of connection. It has two kinds: (i) the power to be added to or separated from something else causing difference according to its nature and (ii) the power to bear such a difference. In neither case does the power of connection entail motion, but it can cause stable states. One substantive outcome of this argument is that ontology must begin with an inclusive concept of being as existence. Another conclusion is that to exist is to have a nature that determines a peculiar set of rules regarding connection to other things. Statements express such connection by the copulative use of the verb “to be”, either saying that “X is Y” or that “X is not Y.” This point paves the way to argue that, as a mode of connection, non-being is also a mark of things that exist. Therefore, in the *Sophist*, the Visitor is doing more than displaying the distinction between the existential and copulative meanings of being; he is building an ontology in which to exist is to connect. The proposal of such an ontology begins with the battle of gods and giants.
Plato, *Sophist*, being, power, connection

After detailing the first batch of difficulties regarding beings—those about their number—the Visitor of Elea in Plato’s *Sophist* addresses the second set concerning what kind of things are beings (246a4-6; *ποῖά ἐστιν*, 242c6). The scope is to determine what is the mark they all have in common so that they are identified as such.¹ According to the Visitor, thinkers who have previously dealt with this problem fall into two groups that hold opposing theses. Their contentious confrontation is compared to a battle of gods and giants. In the right corner, the corporealists assume that beings are bodies (246b1-3) that we can touch with our hands (246a9, b1), so that tangibility is the mark of beings (247c5-7). In the left corner, the formalists think that only forms are real beings, essences (*τὴν ἀληθινὴν οὐσίαν*, 246b7-8), thence their mark is self-identity and stability (248a12). In addressing the contenders,

1 I do not think this is a definition of beings (as in Owen 1970, 230, n. 14; Miller 2004, 350-351; Fronterotta 2008, 189-190; Leigh 2010, 81-82; Gonzalez 2011, 66-68) for two reasons: (i) it has a disjunctive formula (either...or) and (ii) it does not determine a difference within a kind. This latter reason is welcome for avoiding the vexed question of the criterion for exclusion from being (see other arguments in Cornford 1935, 232; Brown 1986, 189; Vázquez 2018, 267).

the Visitor's approach consists of proving that both hold too narrow a conception, and he asks them to expand their horizons and agree on a more inclusive ontology. In this chapter, I aim to reconstruct the Visitor's two arguments in order to show that he is not simply refuting his interlocutors with *ad hoc* objections. He is rather introducing his own mark for beings, which later will take the lead of the dialogue, and inviting his counterparts to build a common ground. This mark is, I submit, the power of connection (δύναμις κοινωνίας), and it is a sufficient condition for something to exist (*qua* being).

Corporealists

We begin with the corporealists' thesis that tangibility is the mark of beings. Against their view, the Visitor points out evidence for the existence of ensouled bodies (246e5-7), souls (246e9), virtues of souls (247a2-3), and, finally, virtues such as wisdom (247a5-8). Because soul and wisdom are hardly tangible entities, the Visitor suggests that they would be better described as things that have the power to be added or separated from others (247a9-10). For instance, when virtue is added to or separated from the soul, it causes it to have the property of being virtuous (or not). If the corporealists accept this evidence, they must reject their previous thesis: some things that cannot be touched [by hands] exist (247b1-4). In these terms, a better mark of beings would be to have the power to be added or separated from others. This is how the Visitor formulates his proposal:

Λέγω δὴ τὸ καὶ ὅποιανοῦν τινα κεκτημένον δύναμιν εἴτ' εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν ἕτερον ὅτιοῦν πεφυκὸς εἴτ' εἰς τὸ παθεῖν καὶ σμικρότατον ὑπὸ τοῦ φαυλοτάτου, κἂν εἰ μόνον εἰς ἅπαξ, πᾶν τοῦτο ὄντως εἶναι· τίθεμαι γὰρ ὄρον ὀρίζειν [δεῖν], τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν οὐκ ἄλλο τι πλὴν δύναμις

I say that whatever has any power whatsoever really is, whether to naturally make something different, or to bear [something different] including the most trivial caused by the weakest, even if only one or once and for all, for I stipulate the mark delimiting them must be that beings are nothing but power (247d8-e4).

To be is to have power either to naturally make or bear something different.² With this claim I take a stand against the mainstream interpretation that understands that the proposed mark of being is motion in the sense of acting and being acted upon.³ I do not claim that such a motion is excluded from it; instead I think the proposal has a broader target. Here are my reasons.

I construct the phrase ποιεῖν ἕτερον ὅτιοῦν so that ὅτιοῦν is the direct object of ποιεῖν, and ἕτερον an adverbial complement of ποιεῖν, which would mean “to make different.”⁴ This option explains why the term used is ἕτερον (the other of a pair) instead of ἄλλος (an unqualified other). Although “to make different” could be understood as causing change, this is not the best reading when it comes to linking the proposal to the previous argument against the corporealists. They were pressed to include the power to be added to or subtracted from things, following their premise regarding the tangibility of bodies. Such an addition/subtraction does not need to cause an alteration in a bearer, and nothing in the corporealists’ account suggests so. They seem instead to understand that additions and subtractions simply build a new set.⁵ For instance, if soul is corporeal, then a living being could be described as a soul connected to a body, instead of a body changed by the presence of a soul.

The same reason applies to the translation of δύναμις εἰς τὸ παθεῖν as “the power to bear [properties].” The fact that πάθος was used in the argument against the monists to designate properties (245b4-5), in particular essential properties, only strengthens the case.⁶ If the power of παθεῖν includes allow-

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- 2 Crivelli 2012, 87-89 calls it a modal characterization of being, which disappears from the dialogue after the argument to the formalists. Although powers may entail modality when motion is implied, motion is not necessarily implied. In stable things, the power to produce difference amounts to explaining difference in something which, in its turn, is different because it has the power to bear this difference. This also departs from interpretations that claim that the text introduces a peculiar kind of motion (see Cherniss 1944, 439; Macé 2006, 143; Fronterotta 2008, 200; Gonzalez 2011, 80; Wiitala 2018, 186).
- 3 Cornford 1935, 238 drops the “either...or” and talks about “the power of acting and being acted upon, which belongs to ‘the just’ equally with ‘the hot’ and ‘the cold’” (on this point, see Künné 2004, 310-311).
- 4 Compare to ὅτιοῦν βέλτιον ποιούμεν in Pl. *Alc. I*, 128e2. I thank Mauro Regali for the objection that, according to the LSJ, the syntax of the two cases imposes different meanings. I could not see any reason why the order of the terms would determine such a variation in Classic Greek.
- 5 See Macé 2006, 137.
- 6 See Moravcsik 1962, 37; Owen 1966, 337; Bluck 1975, 97; Bondeson 1976, 5; Künné 2004, 87, who sustain this interpretation in a formal approach. For a defence of a metaphysical approach instead, see Brown 1986, 190-192; Leigh 2010, 73; Crivelli 2012, 87; and Halper, forthcoming.

ing for something to be added or subtracted from compositions and for this to happen once and for all, as in the case of essential properties, it should not entail change.⁷

A final relevant point is that difference makers and bearers are *naturally related* to whatever they are added to or subtracted from. These powers are natural rules for difference. If this is the right reading of the proposal, the mark of beings is to have the power to be added to or separated from others in the sense that beings either cause difference in something else or bear this difference due to what they are by nature. The Visitor does not aim to prove that bodies cannot be a prime component of the world; he wants to expand the corporalists' horizons so they can accept the existence of things that are not bodies: the soul and, as shall soon be clear, essences.

Formalists

An important feature of the formalists' view is that they are committed to the dual connection thesis: "in our case, the body⁸ connects to generation through perception, and the soul to real being through reasoning" (248a10-13).⁹ Given this premise, the Visitor aims to reduce the two instances to a single explanation "Regarding this 'connecting,' my excellent fellows, what would we say you mean by it in both cases?" (248b2-3). He does this by rephrasing the same proposal (248b3-4). Connection is thus "bearing a property or obtaining a state that emerged after a certain power from things becoming together with one another" (Πάθημα ἢ ποιήμα ἐκ δυνάμεώς τινος ἀπὸ τῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλα συνιόντων γιγνόμενον, 248b5-6).

I would like to point out a slight difference between the two versions of the proposal. The suggestion made to the formalists speaks of outcomes of power, very clearly marked by the suffix "-μα", in πάθημα and ποιήμα,

7 Those who thought that power entails change had their eyes on the following argument to the formalists, but see below.

8 Reading a dative of association, instead of instrumental or locative, matters to the argument, see below.

9 Cornford 1935, 242 and Wiitala 2018, 177 sustain that, in parallel to the corporalists, formalists deny the existence of generation and motion, but this contention does not require symmetry of ontologies. Quite the opposite, the Visitor's purpose is to include essence in the corporalists' account, and to make the formalists realize that being is existence. Therefore, I do not find Politis' (2016b, 157) claim that the outcome of the battle must be either a tiered or a tierless ontology compelling. In my view, the outcome is an inclusive concept of existence that allows for the distinctions such as the one between essences and things in generation.

as well as by the expression “after a certain power” (ἐκ δυνάμεως τινος), indicating causality. If δύναμις εἰς τὸ παθεῖν means the power to bear a property, a πάθημα ἐκ δυνάμεως must then stand for the actual bearing of a property. Ποίημα, on its turn, must be understood as obtaining a state of affairs that marks the end of a process. In both cases, we are referring to states in which two items were brought together. But, as in the case of addition and subtraction, this does not necessarily mean that the items changed in the process. This is precisely the point the Visitor aims to make to the formalists.

Let me put the latter point more clearly. The formalists refuse the proposal by claiming that such a power occurs only in things in generation and not in essences (248c6-8).¹⁰ But, as we saw, the proposal does not entail change; moreover, it does not collapse the distinction between being and generation. Quite the opposite, it departs from the distinction of being and generation sustained by the formalists themselves and proceeds by building a common ground. In making such a proposal, the Visitor anticipates that the formalists suppose that power implies change. His goal is to show them that this is not the case; power entails connection, and this may refer to stable states.

As a consequence, the kernel of the argument to the formalists is not to refute them by claiming that, since connection implies change, forms must either cause change or be changed when they become objects of knowledge.¹¹ The Visitor is not committed to such a premise. Furthermore, this is not the most charitable reading of the formalists’ position. They suppose that reasoning and forms are always connected (248a11). The dual connection thesis suggests that the generation of a person causes this reasoning-forms connection to be placed in a soul and in a body, causing the need of this embodied soul to move in order to learn. There is no motion of reasoning towards forms because forms do not *become* known, they are known.¹² The motion of knowledge is the self-motion of the soul (or the intellect) of a living being towards understanding of this stable connection, perhaps in a process of reminiscence.¹³

10 I follow Cornford 1935, 240 n. 3 in reading τὸδε γέ at 248d10. On ascribing to the formalist the premise that power entails motion, see Vlastos 1973, 314 and Leigh 2010, 68.

11 For this interpretation, see Cornford 1935, 245; Keyt 1969, 6; Brown 1998, 201; Miller 2004, 355; Fronterotta 2008, 200; and Gonzalez 2011, 83.

12 See Keyt 1969, 8.

13 I therefore reject the idea that this is about a Cambridge change (as in Moravcsik 1962, 39-40; Owen 1966, 338-39; Keyt 1969, 13; Bluck 1975, 97; Künné 2004, 318), without

The proof to the formalists is that the motion of embodied souls towards knowledge exists, and that essences connect with generation by means of the soul's motion. The Visitor therefore builds on their assumption that the soul moves the body (246e5-7; cf. 249a9-b1) and also moves the intellect (249a4-7; cf. 248a11). From this, he shows that there is motion, life, soul, and wisdom (248e7-249a2), which connect generation to essences. Intelligence is motion in the embodied soul towards forms (249b2-3), a soul that also causes motion in the body. This brings us to the rejection of the initial claim that essences are indeed connected to things in generation (249b12-c2). The dual connection thesis is thereby reduced to one single concept of the power of connection.

In this reconstruction of the argument, it becomes clear that the Visitor does not aim to prove that Forms change, as this would actually go against his conclusion. If Forms would change, nothing would count as a stable item in the world¹⁴, and he would have no grounds to claim that reality is the sum of everything that is both stable and in motion (249d3-4).¹⁵ As with the corporealists, his goal is to expand the formalists' horizon and to make them accept that both motion and stability exist (250c3-4). If this is correct, a substantive outcome of the battle of giants and gods is that both parties should get rid of their narrow conception of being in order to build an ontology that begins with the most inclusive concept of being: existence. They were also advised to see existence as entailing the power of connection. This latter point still needs further clarifications, which I can only briefly indicate in an overview of the sequence of the dialogue.

Existence and connection

The first clarification comes in the argument to the late learners, who are described as “not allowing one to say that the person is good, but only that the good is good and that a person is a person” (251b9-c2). Their justification is that beings do not mix and have no power to take part in each other (251d6-7; μηδενὶ μηδὲν μηδεμίαν δύναμιν ἔχειν κοινωνίας εἰς μηδέν, 251e9). Because they conceive of reality as a series of discrete units, they

denying, as Leigh 2012, 248) does, that forms are the stable items in the world (see below).

14 See Bluck 1975, 100; Crivelli 2012, 93.

15 I take τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι μὴ παρῆναι (248e8-249a1) to mean “not present in being altogether” (see Fronterotta 2008, 208; Wiitala 2018, 188), hence expressing the same idea as τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν συναμφότερα at 249d4.

see statements displaying connection as meaningless. There is much dispute concerning the argument directed toward the late learners, which I cannot address here, but an implicit (and, to my view, uncontroversial) premise in it is that the copulative use of the verb “to be” in a statement means connection.

This allows for the Visitor to further specify his position: in claiming that beings have the power to connect, he is not saying that everything is merged into a single, self-identical monistic unit (πάντα εἰς ταὐτὸν συναγάγωμεν ὡς δυνατὰ ἐπικοινωνεῖν ἀλλήλοις, 251d8-9). He seems to agree that beings are discrete units; nonetheless, he sustains that they are inserted in interrelations. Within these, things connect to one another in two modes: one *is* the other and one *is not* the other (τὰ μὲν, τὰ δὲ μή, 251e1).¹⁶ For every two things that exist, they connect through either being or non-being. As a result, “is not” stands for a kind of connection, as opposed to the absence of connection.

Another clarification is found in the simile of the letters. The Visitor claims that, like vowels, being and non-being connect everything (252e9-253a7; 259a3-7), functioning as bonds (οἷον δεσμὸς διὰ πάντων κεχώρηκεν, 253a4-5). Being is pervasive because, as a kind, it provides existence to everything.¹⁷ Non-being, in its turn, is pervasive because it provides specific difference, making everything discrete (256d12-e4). As a result, everything that exists has its peculiar rules of connection (ὅποια ὀποίοις δυνατὰ κοιωνεῖν, 253a8), its own nature.¹⁸ If the mark of being is the power of connection, the mark of non-being is the way each thing is differentiated from every other. Existence entails connection and difference.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to account for non-being as difference. This overview aims simply to suggest that the Visitor is doing more than displaying the distinction between the existential and predicative meanings

16 I read the negation as applying to ἀλλήλοις, and not to δυνατὰ ἐπικοινωνεῖν, for there is nothing that does not have power of connection.

17 Edward Halper, whose forthcoming work has coincidentally much in common with the ideas in this chapter, asked me why two kinds would need being as a third kind to hold them together. I thank him for pressing me regarding this point. As I understand it, the copulative “is” express the existence of something *qua* a specific standard of connections (having the power to connect to somethings and not to connect to others). Being, therefore, is not a kind that *holds* two kinds together, but is a kind that accounts for their existence as having this kind of connection.

18 For power as a nature, see Fronterotta 2008, 190; Gonzalez 2011, 67; and Vázquez 2018, 266.

of being.¹⁹ He is explaining that existence entails a position within a state of affairs that marks beings according to their connection to others and their peculiar difference, and this argument begins in the battle of gods and giants.

19 Cornford 1935, 296; Ackrill 1957, 2.