

Does Plato Revise His Ontology in *Sophist* 256a? Notes on the “being” of the Ideas

André Luiz Braga da Silva

University of São Paulo; Centre Léon Robin / Sorbonne Université

In the *Republic*, Socrates affirms that the Good causes the “being” of the other Ideas (R. 509b7-8). It is to some extent noteworthy, however, that the Visitor, in the *Sophist*, establishes that the “being” of each Idea is caused by participation in Being (256a1-2). Apparently, the same predicate of the Ideas is explained in two works by different causes. To assess that scenario, this paper faces three questions: i) Does “being” have the same meaning in both dialogues? ii) Is it possible to establish a rule for the causation of the predicates within the so-called Theory of the Ideas? iii) Is Plato changing or revising his ontology in *Sophist* 256a?

Plato, *Sophist*, ideas, being, *Republic*.

**To my daughter Helena Braga, the beautiful princess from “the blood and race whereof I’m proud to be”*

Introduction: my aims

According to Paul Shorey (1895) and Mario Vegetti (2003), the climax of the *Republic* is the affirmation by Platonic Socrates that the Idea of Good causes the “being” of the other Ideas (R. 509b7-8). It is to some extent noteworthy, however, that the character Visitor of Elea, in the *Sophist*, establishes that the “being” of each Idea is caused by participation in the Idea¹ of Being (254d10; 256a1-2; 256d8-9; 256e3-4; 259a6-7). Apparently, the same predicate of the Ideas is explained in two dialogues by different causes. To assess that scenario, this paper faces three questions:

- (a) Does the predicate caused by the Good in the *Republic* have the same meaning of that caused by Being in the *Sophist*?
- (b) Is it possible to establish a rule for the causation of the predicates?
- (c) Is Plato changing or correcting his ontology in *Sophist* 256a?

1 *Idéa*, *eîdos* and *génos* can be used interchangeably: *Sph.* 254a-d, *Plt.* 262b-263a, *Prm.* 129c. Cf. Cornford 1935, 276 and Ackrill 1997, 107.

1. The “being” of the Ideas in the Republic

Although the *Sophist* is the work in which the interrelation between the Forms is explored the most, it is not the first dialogue to assert that kind of relation. Some other works have evidences thereof (*Phdr.* 265e1-2, *Cra.* 438e5-10, *Phd.* 102a10-105b4), and we are expressly told, in the *Republic*, that there is *koinonía tôn eidôn allélon* (476a5-8). This dialogue even presents one example of that interrelationship. In the first part of the Simile of the Sun (508e1-509a9), we are told that, as the Sun is the cause, for the visible things, of their power of being an object of vision, similarly, *the Good is the cause, for the Ideas, of their power of being object of cognition, i.e., the power of being cognizable*. The Good causes, to the other Ideas, the “cognition” and “knowledge” (*gnosis*, *episteme*), “the truth and the being” (*alétheia te kai ón*).

The ‘cognizability’ or *power of being knowable* of the Ideas had previously been described as having, at least, two aspects:

- the *power of being “something”*, i.e., *existing (because whoever knows, doesn’t know “nothing” (oudén), but “something” (ti), something “that is” (ón): R. 476e7-477a1; see also 507b4-7);*
- the *power of existing in a very specific way*, to wit, a “changeless”, “intelligible” and “eternal” way (R. 477a2-478d9; 479a1-2; e6-8; 507b8-9).

Thus, if the Good causes the Ideas’ power of being knowable, presumably it is what causes their two aforementioned aspects. Thereby, I propose that “truth and being”, say, the “reality”² of the Ideas, must be understood as *existence and specific way of being, i.e. essence*.

Likewise, it seems to be confirmed by the Simile’s second part, in which it is said that, as the Sun is the cause for the visible things of their generation, growth and nutrition, similarly, *the Good is the cause for the Ideas of their “eînai” and “ousía”* (509b1-7). For the *horómena*, the generation is the existence’s beginning, and the growth and nutrition are related to their way of being, in the time. *Mutatis mutandis*, as the Ideas are not-generated, their *eînai* and *ousía* must mean, on the one hand, the very fact of being or existing, and, on the other hand, their specific mode of being, as eternal and changeless “essences”.

Then, the Simile’s second part confirms the first part’s message: *the Good is the cause of the “being” and “reality” of the other Ideas, i.e. their existence*

2 Cf. Dixsaut 2000, -137ff; Ferrari 2003, 304.

and *essence*. Some sense of “existence” is hence one of the meanings of what is caused by the Good in the *Republic*, as acknowledged by many scholars.³

2. Which sense of “existence”? Brief remarks on the verb “to be” in Plato

For several occurrences of the verb *eimí* in the *corpus platonicum*, its meaning was really very disputed. Nevertheless, I would like to stress that the quarrel regarding if there would be in Plato a distinction between the verb’s senses or uses is irrelevant for my argument.

Firstly, because, as noted by C. Kahn (1966), there is *an elementary, pre-modern, sense of existence*, noticeable even in Homer (*Il.* 6. 152; *Il.* 722-723), which is *presupposed* also in predicative and veridical constructions, as well in the complete and incomplete uses of the verb “to be”. L. Brown’s (1986, 1994) thesis takes, in turn, that tack, arguing that the uses and senses of the verb are indissociable, due to an “intimate” or “natural continuity” between all them. Moreover, as noted by these scholars, Plato has often denoted that elementary sense of *existence* through constructions such as “*to be something*” (*ti eînai*), “*to be something or nothing*” (*ti eînai e oudén*).

It is important to stress that *I am not arguing* that this kind of construction points *only* to the existential nuance, as Brown has well showed. My point is that *this nuance has to be recognized as present*. Accordingly, the dispute among the scholars about the differentiation of uses of the verb “to be” and if there is an univocality of its senses in Plato, it is not important to my point. It is enough for my purposes to acknowledge that *that basic sense of existence* is running throughout the passages to which I call attention. That sense, according to Brown (1994), Kahn (1981) and Aubenque (1991), is present in the notion of “*to be something (ti) rather than nothing (oudén)*”.⁴

3. The “being” of the Ideas in the *Sophist*

In the *Sophist*’s section on the “Greatest Kinds”, I understand that that elementary sense of existence is present too, due to the presence of the verb “to be” as well of the notion of “to be something”. Many times we are told

3 Shorey 1895, Adam 1963, Krämer 1969, Annas 1981. Pace Ross 1951, Santas 1980.

4 Plato has in view, with that notion, an idea of real, not merely mental, existence (see *Phd.* 65d; *R.* 480a; *Sph.* 247a).

that the *mégista géne* “are”. In some occurrences of the verb *eimi*,⁵ we have textual evidence to affirm that, if not the only sense, *the existential sense at least must be present*, to make sense of the passages.⁶ In my opinion, that point was definitively proved by Brown against G. E. L. Owen and M. Frede. Consider the following lines:

- i) “do you say that both of them [sc. Change and Rest] and each *are* in the same way?” (250a11);
- ii) “the Being surely mixes with both [sc. Change and Rest], for both presumably *are*” (254d10);
- iii) “Change *is*, because it shares in Being” (256a1).

Brown⁷ firstly shows that these passages must be read as a sequence which conveys *the same message*, but with an increasing technicality in terms of Platonic terminology: “X *is*”... “X is due to the mix with Being”... “X is due to the participation in Being”. Secondly, she shows that in all these passages the verb “to be” was put by Plato in a distinct way from the statements in which it marked the non-identity or the predication. Therefore, it must have a complete use, an existential sense. Besides the fact that we do not have textual evidence to deny it, this claim is supported by the previous discussions of the theories of being (242c-251a). I would like to add to her argument another piece of evidence, namely, the Visitor’s conclusion from ii): as Being, Change and Rest *are*, i.e. *exist*, “*they come to be three*” (*tría dè gígnetai taûta*, 254d12). If the intended sense of the verb in 254d10 were only predicative or veridical, how could he conclude that they are three things?

Thirdly, Brown shows that the point above on 256a1 is valid for the other two key passages containing the formula “*ésti dià tò metéchein tōù óntos*”, 256d9-e3 and 259a6-7. By reading these three passages in the inverse order, Owen’s (1971, 253-255) only argument to deny the existential sense, or complete use, is the fact that in 256d9-e3 and 259a6-7 the verb admits a completion. So, according to him, it would have to be assumed as an elliptical, incomplete use, and we could apply that reading to 256a1. Conversely, Brown shows that Owen’s position is implausible in the three passages alluded to, and that it is better to accept that the complete uses are *not incompatible* with the addition of a completion to the verb, due to a “natural

5 E.g. *Sph.* 250a11; b3-10; 252a2; 254d10; 256a1-2.

6 Cf. Cornford 1935; Ackrill 1957; Vlastos 1981b; Heinaman 1983a; Cordero 1993; Crivelli 2012. Pace Frede 1967; Owen 1971; Kostman 1989.

7 Brown 1986, 65-68. See also Crivelli 2012, 150.

continuity” between its uses in Plato’s eyes.⁸ Besides reading the passages in their natural order, Brown’s reading has the advantage of making sense of them in their specific occurrences and in the whole of the dialogue⁹.

Furthermore, in the *Sophist*, the existential sense is also connected with the notion of “*to be something*”, in a parallel way to *R.* 476e7-477a1. Then, we are told that Change and Rest “*are*”, i.e. each one *is* “*something*” (*ti*), *exists*,¹⁰ and, “*with respect to them*”, Being is a “*third thing*” (*trítón ti parà taúta*, *Sph.* 250b7). Therefore, Change and Rest have a power of connection (*dýnamin koinonías*) by which *they share in reality, exist* (*methéxeton ousías*, 251e9-10; 250b10-11; 252a2-3).

Notwithstanding the fact that the predicate “*being*” of the Ideas has in two dialogues the same meaning – at least with respect to a basic sense of *existence* –, we can see nonetheless a divergence about *what causes*¹¹ it: in the *Republic*, it is explained by the Good; in the *Sophist*, by Being.¹²

Thus, is Plato revising a central aspect of his metaphysics? However interesting this question can be, we must first answer another one: *how does the causation of the predicates by the Platonic Forms work?*

8 The same argument is, in my view, correctly used by Brown 1986, 66 n. 29 to show that Frede’s (1967) position, according to which *Sph.* 256a1 is *contained* in 255e11, is also not the best reading.

9 And, as we saw with pleasure in our 2022 Symposium, L. Brown still holds her 1986 position.

10 Cf. Kahn 1966; Aubenque 1991. In Dixsaut’s (2022, 563) view, “l’être ne peut avoir que son sens “existentiel”: en participer c’est avoir la puissance d’exister”.

11 The terminology for the *causality* of the Good on the other Ideas (“*F* is *available* or *belongs to X* (*paréinai*; *proseínaí*) *due to* (*hypó* + genitive) the Idea of *F*”, *R.* 509b5-8) is *compatible* with the typically undefined formulas of *formal causality* (“*X* is *F* *due to* (*diótí*; *diá* + accusative; causal dative) the Idea of *F*”, *Phd.* 100d7; *R.* 505a3-4; etc.). Sometimes this relation is expressly called “*participation*” (*Phd.* 100c5; *R.* 476c7-d3). And this exact phrasal structure is what we find in the *Sophist*: *X ésti dià tò metéchein toú óntos* (255b3; 256a1-2; 256d8-9; e3-7; 259a6-b1). See Vlastos 1981c, Guthrie 1975, 349-350, Frede & Brunschwig 1989, Sedley 1998.

12 Ackrill 1957, 1 claims that “*dià*” in *Sph.* 256a1 does *not* mark that (ii) “*metéchein toú óntos*” is the *cause* of (i) “*kínesis éstin*”, because (ii) is *not prior* to (i). However, the inter-eidetic relation in view is a *formal causality* (see the previous note), with respect to which any temporal precedence could not have any sense (*Met.* 1070a21-24; *APo.* 95a19-24). So, I disagree with him because his only argument simply ignores the possibility of a timeless relation. The Idea of Being *causes* the existence of the other Ideas, but *not in the same way* as a father *causes* his son’s. In my view, the *diá* precisely indicates *the explanation* why “*kínesis is*” (256a1), as the Aristotelian “*why*” of something (*tò dià ti*) is its *aitía* (*Ph.* 194b16-23; *Simp. in Ph.*, 316, 29-33). For *diá* + *accusative case*, see the *LSJ* s.v.

4. A rule for the causation of predicates

At *Phd.* 100b5-c8, we are told that *something has the property F only due to participating in the Idea of F (or F-ness)*. Nevertheless, F-ness, as all Forms, has many properties. Which ones are relevant? Maybe this causality rule could be more detailed if we had, in Scolnicov's (2003, 64) words, a "distinction, within the Form, of the properties that are shared in from those that are not". Well, we have it elsewhere.

At *Top.* 137b3-13, Aristotle establishes *a distinction among the kinds of properties that Forms possess*. It would unfortunately require a more in-depth discussion to expose that distinction and to explain why it is hardly acceptable.¹³ Nonetheless, the notion that grounds that distinction, namely, the *relativization of the possession of properties*, can prove to be useful. Although Plato himself has done that in other contexts (*R.* 454a-455d; *Phd.* 102b-d; *Men.* 71d-72d), Aristotle's novelty was to use the relativization to think the eidetic field. So I suggest the following distinction, inspired by that *Topics*' passage as well as by some great studies on it:¹⁴

- i) "Ideal Properties", which belong to all Forms *qua* Forms, differentiating them from the sensible beings;
- ii) "Defining Properties", which *define the specific Form that each Form is*; the Form has this kind of property in the *Pauline Predication mode*;¹⁵
- iii) "Existential Properties", which all Forms and sensible beings have in common.¹⁶

Now this distinction can usefully restrict the *scope of participation: the only predicates of the Form that are shared by its instances are the "defining properties"*. Thus, by sharing in the Idea of Beautiful, the painting is *beautiful* but not *imperishable* (*Phd.* 100b5-c8; *Prm.* 130e4-131a3). And by sharing in the Idea of Bed that object is a *bed* but not *immaterial* (*R.* 596alff.). It is important to mark that this rule also regulates the relations between Ideas: by participating in the Idea of the Same, each Idea is the same (as itself) (*Sph.* 256a7-8).

Any different result for the causation of predicates that was not the possession of the "defining properties" of the Form shared in by the sharing thing would be an *absurdity*. In the examples above, if some of the "ideal

13 See Cherniss 1944, 1-5; Vlastos 1981a, 334.

14 Owen 1986; Keyt 1969; Vlastos 1981a. For the new distinction, see Braga da Silva, 2017 & 2022.

15 Vlastos 1981b.

16 E.g. existence, identity and alterity.

properties” were shared in, e.g. imperishability and immateriality, our world would be composed of paintings and beds which would be sensible and, at the same time, imperishable and immaterial. Moreover, that absurdity is expressly prohibited in the *Sophist*: each Idea is different from the others not due to its own nature, nor by participating in whatever Idea, but only due to participating in the Idea of the Other (255e3-7). Then, a *causal exclusivity* is presupposed: *only the Idea which has the predicate as its “defining property” can cause it in other Ideas*.

Whether this causation dynamics makes sense, the predicate “being”, in its elementary sense of “existing”,¹⁷ only could be caused exactly as it is described in the *Sophist*: *by participation in the Idea which is its intelligible correspondent, the Idea of Being* (256a1). According to the same dynamics, the Idea of Good could never cause the existing itself, but only the predicate “to be good”.¹⁸ As a corollary, the affirmation in the *Republic* of the causation of existence by the Good constitutes a *total violation of this rule*.

Final Considerations

In conclusion, some remarks about my initial aims can be made. (a) A common sense of existence is signified as one of the meanings of the predicate which is caused in the *Republic* by the Good and in the *Sophist* by the Being. (b) We can derive a rule within the Platonic metaphysics, according to which there is a *causal exclusivity* regarding the explanation of the predicates: *only the Idea which has the predicate as its “defining property” can cause it in the other things*. (c) So, concerning the “being” of the Ideas, Socrates cannot be right; only the Visitor’s claim is concordant with that rule.

Does this mean that Plato is correcting that point in the *Sophist*? The honest answer seems to be recognizing that the explanation of the divergence is not readily available in these dialogues to the reader. It seems rather to have to be sought in other aspects of Platonic *opera*, as the dialogical, maybe even the extradialogical aims of the author. However, any attempt to furnish a proper explanation of the divergence requires a more in-depth discussion than what is possible to develop in a short article like this. In spite of that,

17 Even if one can argue, on the basis of Frege’s (1884, § 53) and Russell’s (1903) works, that *existence is not a predicate* of things, we have many Platonic passages in which, as we saw, *existing* is a *predicate* expressly caused by an Idea, exactly as all other predicates. Plato is not Frege. See Dixsaut, 2022, 620.

18 Further, “to exist” and “to be good” cannot be equivalent, because *bad things exist* and *the Good is not their cause*: R. 379b1-c7.

without any pretensions of solving the issue but by way of a conclusion, I would like to present *two suggestions*.

From a *dialogical perspective*, it is a fact that *Republic*'s Socrates is present in the *Sophist*, so he listens the Visitor's point regarding the "being" of the Ideas. But what is really noteworthy is his *silence* on this point. Why does he not erupt in protest? I would like to suggest that *he does not disagree with the guest's position*. It is possible to reach this conclusion if one has in view two pieces of evidence:

- a) the Athenian admitted, one day ago (*Thet.* 169a6-c3), that he has a personality trait which he calls his "sickness": a "terrible love" for "fighting in the *lógoi*", which does not allow him to continue the discussion without debating any issue with which he disagrees;
- b) after listening to the Visitor, Socrates says thanks to Theodorus for having introduced the Eleatic to him (*Plt.* 257a), and that points to the fact that he really appreciated the exposition.

Finally, from an *extradialogical perspective*, regarding the very dissonance between both positions, I would like to suggest something close to Proclus' interpretation on other "gaps" in the dialogues (*in Prm.*, IV): more than a "revision" or "correction", Plato could be providing, *to his reader*, an *invitation*, to "fill", by himself, that silence on Socrates' part, and to engage and strive for identifying the divergences and difficult "fits" between the several positions presented in the dialogues.¹⁹

Then, this would be an invitation, *to us*, to identify the subtle aporias which, *even if not put in the texts* – being *kept in silence* (like Socrates) – could insist on resonating *within us*. Surely this invitation would urge the reader to move himself towards not only the questions, but also the answers, the openings of the roads, the solutions – solutions that are not readily given: *euporíai*.²⁰

19 In Blondell's (2002, 39) view, Plato's goal was also "to draw in the reader as a participant in the discussion". Cf. Nails 1995, 218-219.

20 I wish to thank to Debra Balido and Jeremy Henry for the English revision. I also wish to thank to my colleagues of the Centre Léon Robin and the UFRJ Pragma, especially to Anca Vasiliu and Carolina Araújo, for enriching discussions on these subjects. A special thanks is due to Néstor Cordero too, for our enthusiastic conversations on the *Sophist*, our "Bermuda Triangle".