

Being and Power in Plato's *Sophist*

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At *Sophist* 247D8-E4, the Eleatic Stranger offers as a “defining characteristic” (ὅρος) of what is “really being” (ὄντως εἶναι) “power” (δύναμις), that is, the ability to affect or be affected by anything in any way, to any degree, and at any time, even once. This defining characteristic is later applied to the argument between the materialists and the idealists, but it is not subjected to further analysis. This definition takes on particular significance in the light of *Republic* VI 509B8-9, for there the Idea of the Good is “beyond *ousia*,” surpassing it both “in seniority” (πρεσβεΐα) and “in power” (δυνάμει). In this paper, I explore some of the connections between the two passages.

Sophist, *Republic*, being, power, *ousia*, Parmenides, Idea of the Good

1.

In the Eleatic Visitor's examination of various views on the nature of being, he turns to the gods and the giants, idealists or so-called friends of the forms and materialists.¹ The Visitor focuses on moderate realists who are prepared to allow that, although souls can be explained in a materialist way, properties possessed by souls cannot.² If, for example, justice or wisdom or other virtues and vices are real, then being cannot be limited to bodies. Thus, the materialist cannot claim that being or reality consists only in those things that are bodies. In the face of their presumed puzzlement regarding just what it is that bodies and psychical properties have in common that makes them both real, the Visitor offers an eirenic criterion:

I say that anything has real being that has the power to do something to something else or to have something done to it by something else in the smallest degree by the most trivial thing, even if only once. I hypothesize as a criterion for beings nothing other than power.³

1 *Sph.* 246A4ff.

2 *Sph.* 247B1-4.

3 *Sph.* 247D8-E4: Λέγω δὴ τὸ καὶ ὅποιαν οὖν [τινα] κεκτημένον δύναμιν εἶτ' εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν ἕτερον ὅτι οὖν πεφυκὸς εἶτ' εἰς τὸ παθεῖν καὶ σμικρότατον ὑπὸ τοῦ φαυλοτάτου, κἂν εἰ μόνον εἰς ἅπαξ, πᾶν τοῦτο ὄντως εἶναι· τίθεμαι γὰρ ὅρον [ὀρίζειν] τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν οὐκ ἄλλο τι πλὴν δύναμις. I have favored Burnet's text over that of the OUP revision of 1995.

The criterion of power (δύναμις) for being seems to come out of nowhere. For this reason, some scholars have suggested that the criterion is purely of dialectical significance. That is, the criterion of power is enough to defeat the strict materialist, but it is not a criterion to which Plato is himself committed.⁴

The criterion of power does not in fact come out of nowhere. In *Republic*, the Idea of the Good is said to “be beyond (ἐπέκεινα) οὐσία, exceeding it in seniority (πρεσβεία) and in power (δυνάμει).”⁵ The discordance between this attribution of power to the Good and the criterion of power used to identify anything real at all needs to be addressed. For in the latter case, we rightly assume, I think, that something’s power is indexed to its οὐσία. Thus, a particular sensible has the power to affect one or more of our senses because it is the kind of thing it is, that is, because of its οὐσία. Or, a body (σῶμα) has the power of resistance because of its nature or οὐσία as a body. But the *Republic* passage ties the summit of power to that which is explicitly said to be “beyond οὐσία.” If power is a criterion of being (τὸ ὄν) and not of οὐσία, then at least the appearance of discordance seems to recede since the Good unquestionably is or has being, even though it is “beyond οὐσία.”⁶ Yet a deeper discordance remains.

To put it simply, how can that which is beyond οὐσία have any power at all, much less be the *ne plus ultra* of power? The question is urgent for any discussion of the Idea of the Good. But this paper is not focused on that. Rather, it is focused on what the *Sophist* passage and the following arguments tell us about being. Return for a moment to the examples of power cited above, the sensible object and the body. It would seem that the attribution of power to each of these depends *entirely* on identifying the specific power that each possesses. After all, a smell does not have the power to affect our ears because of the limitation imposed on the power

4 Cornford 1935, 239, says that at 249Dff, the question regarding the nature of being is said not yet to be resolved. Therefore, δύναμις cannot be Plato’s definitive answer to this question now.

5 R. VI 509B7-9. See Diès 1909, ch. 2, esp. 21-29, who points out that there are a number of passages in the dialogues in which δύναμις and ποιεῖν and παθεῖν figure in definitions of things. See, e.g., *Phdr.* 270C-D; *La.* 192B; *Protag.* 349B; *Phd.* 97C; *Crat.* 393D; *Tht.* 156A, 158E, 174B. But as Diès recognizes, all of these passages adduce various sorts of acting and being acted upon as indicative of a thing’s φύσις, that is, the kind of thing it is. The *Sophist* passage, however, is seeking a property or definition of being in general.

6 That the Good is not beyond reality in the sense of being nothing at all is evident from the fact that it is “the happiest of that which is” (εὐδαιμονέστατον τοῦ ὄντος) (526E4-5), that it is “more beautiful” (κάλλιον) than knowledge and truth (509A6), and that it is “the brightest of that which is” (τοῦ ὄντος τὸ φανότατον) (518C9).

that it does have. As the dialogue will go on to argue, to be this or that implies being different from other things. In other words, it seems difficult to separate power from essence. Considering the issue from another angle, if we endowed the Good with, say, the passive power to be known, this would depend entirely on it being knowable. But that would require that the Good have an οὐσία.

What, then, do that which is beyond οὐσία and that which has or is an οὐσία have in common such that we can say of both that the criterion of their being is power? Whence the commensurability of the two? Putting the question in yet another way: how does that which is beyond οὐσία “exceed” in its power anything with an οὐσία? Surely, it is not by “aggregating” all the specific powers of beings or by possessing all of them each to the highest degree. We cannot reduce that which is “beyond οὐσία” to that which is “all the οὐσίαι there are.” This is both textually false and philosophically absurd. We may begin to answer these questions by supposing that the superiority of the power of the Good in relation to the power of every other being is analogous to the paradigmatic status of the Forms in relation to their participants. Thus, the Form of Circularity does not “exceed” the circularity of participants; rather, it just is what circularity is and its participants are images of that. Along these lines, we might suppose that the paradigmatic power of the Good stands to the power of everything with an οὐσία just as the paradigmatic status of Forms stands to its participants. Taking this just one step further, we may say that “the perfect being” (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν) of Forms stands to the being of its images, as the “super perfect being of the Good” stands to the perfect being of the Forms. Let us call this “super perfect being” “infinite being” to indicate that it is not subject to the limitations imposed by having or being οὐσία. On this line of reasoning, the being of everything other than the Good is limited by its own nature. The unlimitedness of the Good is the paradigm of being.

2.

The relevance of the above to the *Sophist's* exploration of the nature of being should by now be clear. To begin, the specter of Parmenides hangs over this dialogue. Parmenides is said to hold that “the all is one.”⁷ This leads the Visitor to gloss “all is one” as the claim that being is one and to point out that

7 *Sph.* 244B6: ἔν τὸ πᾶν.

“one being” is a misnomer, so to speak. For if being is one, then its oneness is distinct from being in which case either its oneness has no being (which is contradictory) or else its oneness and being itself are two and being is no longer one and “being” no longer refers to “the all.” The internal complexity of Parmenides’ principle—being and oneness—is a useful introduction to Plato’s own exploration of being among “the greatest kinds.” I would suggest that the Visitor’s refusal to elide being and oneness but to insist that these introduce plurality into what is is only properly understood against the background of the superordinate Good. It is not the case that the postulation of the Good falls prey to the same argument that the Visitor uses against Parmenides. It is not the case that, if the Good is the paradigm of being, then “the Good is one” means that the paradigm is two, including goodness and oneness. As explained in the dialogue *Parmenides*, a paradigm of being will just be the One, whereas “one being” is irretrievably plural. That is because it is not possible for one to be without partaking of οὐσία.⁸ Complexity is thus written into the very fabric of being. Being must be one, but it also must be many.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the radical conclusion that Plato reaches by taking up and challenging Parmenidean metaphysics. Unlike Aristotle, the primary referent of “being” cannot be identical with οὐσία; rather, it must be “beyond οὐσία.” Aristotle agrees with Plato that the primary referent of being must be absolutely simple, but he rejects the necessary condition for absolute simplicity, which is the elision of being and oneness or, stated in terms of *Parmenides*, the absence of participation in οὐσία in the primary referent. Aristotle identifies the primary referent of “being” with the intellection that constitutes the unmoved mover. But just as being cannot be one without distinguishing being and oneness (and hence denying perfect simplicity in the one being), so intellection cannot exist without intentional objects or even just a single object, in which case the primary referent of “being” is not absolutely simple and so not actually primary.

8 *Prm.* 142B5-6. We recall that Parmenides is ringing the dialectical changes on his own hypothesis regarding the One. See 137B2-4. I take it that his own hypothesis is being glossed at *Sph.* 244B6 as “the all is one.” If that is the case, then the οὐσία in which the one has to partake in order to be would be oneness. But it would equally be the case that it would have to partake of the οὐσία of being.

3.

I am going to suggest now that in *Sophist* the ensuing discussion of dialectic culminating in the introduction of the greatest kinds has as necessary background the primacy of the Good or the One as the primary referent of “being” in which case we will discover the *inevitable* complexity of τὸ παντελῶς ὄν. That among the five greatest kinds there is a γένος of Being—something that leads many scholars just to throw up their hands in despair—follows from the necessary complexity of τὸ παντελῶς ὄν. There must be a γένος of being, but this γένος cannot be the primary referent of “being.” We have already seen why this is so: the γένος of being is an οὐσία, whereas the primary referent must be “beyond οὐσία.”

The really real, τὸ παντελῶς ὄν, cannot, then, be one. But it also cannot be many (and *not* one). It cannot be one, because as we have seen, what is ἀπλῶς one cannot be one *and* also be or exist. It cannot be many and not one because, however many are the many and whatever they are, what makes them count as a many is that they all have being, excluding thereby everything that does not have being.⁹ Naturally, we might suppose that the many are one in exactly the way that any group of things that are ὅμοια are many and one. That is, they are numerically many, but one because they participate in a self-identical “one” “over and above.”¹⁰ But the self-identical one, say, the Form of Largeness, is in the crucial respect not like the putative one that is Being. For whereas the Form of Largeness is the paradigm of largeness, the putative Form of Being is not the paradigm of Being. We have seen that the true paradigm of being is “beyond οὐσία.” It is not the case, of course, that the putative Form is not one. That is exactly what the γένος of Being is; it is one γένος among the five. But this γένος also exists and so it is not merely one; rather, it is also a many. It is essentially and irreducibly many. So, it is not one in the way that the Form of Largeness is one. Being one self-identical Form is sufficient for the explanatory role it has, which is to explain how many things that are the same (ὅμοιον) can yet be different.

That τὸ παντελῶς ὄν is a one-many, but not in the way that things that are ὅμοιον are one-many only makes sense, I suggest, if we refuse to take the intelligible world as the ultimate *explanans* for the being of the sensible world. The paradigm of the being of everything that has οὐσία must be “beyond οὐσία.” Then, of course, it follows that this paradigm is unequivocally one.

9 See *Sph.* 250C1-2.

10 See *Prm.* 132A1-3.

But that still leaves us with the very difficult problem of how τὸ παντελῶς ὄν can be one-many.

In order to answer this question, we need to recur to a passage that concludes the battle of the gods and giants. There the Visitor says in response to the friends of the Forms who insist that τὸ παντελῶς ὄν is completely immobile,

What, by Zeus, are we really going to be so easily persuaded that motion, life, soul, and thought have no place in that which is completely real; that it has neither life nor thinking, but stands immovable, holy and solemn, devoid of intellect?¹¹

This is one of the most contentious passages in this dialogue full of contentious passages. Against the friends of the Forms, the Visitor urges that thinking, and all that implies—motion, life, and soul—cannot be absent from τὸ παντελῶς ὄν. The Visitor is responding to those who do not deny that thinking is real; they deny that it is really real. They suppose that the really real must be frozen in holy, solemn immobility. The Visitor is not making the utterly banal point that we should not exclude motion, life, and soul from the real. No one holds *that*. But we might well ask how thinking and all that that implies can be integrated into the really real. I want to suggest now not just that it must be integrated into the really real, but that the really real, τὸ παντελῶς ὄν, could only be a one-many if thinking is an essential part of the really real.

4.

Here is the basic idea. Plato was perhaps the first to realize that thinking is essentially a unificatory process. By this I mean that to think, basically to engage in διάνοια, is to aim to see the unity within a phenomenal complexity. To take a simple example, to see that the Morning Star and the Evening Star (a “many”) are in fact one, namely, the planet Venus, is to achieve cognitive unification. Without cognizing the unity “behind” the many, there would just be the planet Venus. Without the ability to “see,” that is, to mentally see, that what appears to us as many is in fact one, there would remain the phenomenal many without unity. More generally, in any truth-functional

11 *Sph.* 248E7-249A2: Τί δὲ πρὸς Διός; ὡς ἀληθῶς κίνησιν καὶ ζωὴν καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ φρόνησιν ἣ ῥαδίως πεισθισόμεθα τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι μὴ παρεῖναι, μηδὲ ζῆν αὐτὸ μηδὲ φρονεῖν, ἀλλὰ σεμνὸν καὶ ἅγιον, νοῦν οὐκ ἔχον, ἀκίνητον ἐστὸς εἶναι;

λόγος, we express our judgment that a “many,” the subject and the predicate are, nevertheless, one or *relatively* identical. But of course their identity is not perfect identity, something that resides only in that which is unequivocally one, namely, the first principle of all. In fact, the very idea of a predicative judgment depends on thinking of the many as one. Without the thinking, the “is” of predication is gratuitous. We might as well say that “Theaetetus” and “sitting” are two phenomena whose connection is entirely adventitious or arbitrary. Without thinking, we might as well say that for any “A” and for any “B,” there is no more reason to say that “A is B” than to say that “A is not B,” for example, that Venus is and is not the Morning Star or the Evening Star. Predication, for Plato, is not made according to some arbitrary criterion, say, physical proximity, but according to a criterion that thinking alone has access to, namely, being. In the above examples, we must add that the being attained in predicative judgments generally is the diminished being of sensibles. The one-many of the subject-predicate judgment is of course real. Its being is an image of the really real being where we find a really real one-many.

Returning to τὸ παντελῶς ὄν and the explanation of why it must be a one-many, we can, I think, see this most easily in the following manner. If each Form is a one or μόνας, then the predicative judgment we make, for example, in mathematics, will not be able to provide the requisite unity. So, a λόγος that expresses the relation between a circle and a straight line or between odd and even numbers or, in fact, any terms on both sides of an equation would *not* be rooted in reality. If, in other words, “five is odd” is true, then the mere fact that there is a Form of Fiveness and a Form of Oddness would not in itself explain why this is true any more than would the fact that the Morning Star is the Evening Star be explained by the existence of the planet Venus. But what “unifies” the Form of Fiveness and the Form of Oddness?” By now it should be evident that the only thing that can do this is in the requisite manner is an intellect eternally thinking all that is thinkable in its internal complexity. To leave intellect out of picture or to say that it is extraneous to the correct account of intelligible reality is to leave unexplained, and I would say, inexplicable the necessity of the truth that “five is odd.” I emphasize that we can no more efface the oneness of each Form as “part” of a many than we can make the manyness merely a “sum.” So, an intellect—revealed by Plato in *Timaeus* as the Demiurge—eternally contemplates the array of intelligibles in all their internal complexity. We might gloss the really real being of the intelligible world as the internal relatedness of all οὐσίαι. I suppose that is the clearest way of expressing the otherwise dark saying that being is one-many.

I have been arguing that in order to understand why δύναμις is a ὅρος of being, we have to recur to *Republic* in order to make use of Plato's claim that the paradigm of being and the paradigm of δύναμις must be "beyond οὐσία." Once we do that, we can see why τὸ παντελῶς ὄν is not simply one. We can see why the battle of gods and giants is in itself inconclusive owing to its assumption that "being" will be the one thing that all beings have in common. This is of course true in a sense, but as soon as we see that if this is so, we shall be unable to explain why there is a γένος of Being that itself is a being no more and no less than any other γένος. To state the *Aufhebung* of Parmenides, it is indeed the case that being is one, but only if we recognize that being is "beyond οὐσία." From this it follows that the being of everything else is internally complex but that this complexity is only possible with the introduction of an intellect into τὸ παντελῶς ὄν.¹²

I would like to close by reiterating my claim that *Sophist* is rendered philosophically incoherent if we refuse to situate it within the systematic framework explicitly introduced in the *Republic*. Without the first principle of all, and without its having or being δύναμις paradigmatically, we do not have the basis for the claims that Plato makes about the intelligible world in *Sophist*. The many puzzles thrown up by *Sophist* provide as good an example as any I know of the necessity for a systematic and comprehensive approach to Plato.

12 See Abbate 2016, 227–242, esp. 228–230.