

VI. Kinds

Sixty-five years of the communion of kinds: a reappraisal of Ackrill's 'Plato and the Copula'

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I offer a reappraisal of Ackrill's classic 1957 article 'Plato and the Copula' in the light of subsequent scholarship, and celebrate its lasting achievement. In a coda I defend the semantic continuity thesis of *einai* from some recent objections.
Ackrill, Frede, Crivelli, identity, predication

J.L. Ackrill published 'Plato and the Copula: *Sophist* 251-9' in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 1957. It immediately achieved the status of a classic, and was reprinted in many collections. I am taking the opportunity of the invitation to give the Cornelia de Vogel lecture to reappraise this six-page gem.¹

1. Framework claims

Ackrill began his 'brief and unargued outline of the passage' thus: 'Plato seeks to prove that concepts are related in certain definite ways, that there is a *symplokē eidōn* (an interweaving of Forms) 251d-252e'. In a footnote to 'concepts' he wrote

"The use of this term may seem provocative. But whether or not the *eidē* (Forms) and *genē* (kinds) of the *Sophist* are something more than mere concepts, a good deal of interpretation of 251-9 can satisfactorily proceed on the assumption that they are *at least* concepts." (fn 2)

It would take me too far afield to evaluate the now highly contested understanding of Forms and kinds as concepts, something Ackrill held to be true of the middle dialogues, as well as for the *Sophist*.² Given the *Sophist*'s unusual focus on 'what we say' (for instance at 236e, 239a8, 243b-e and a

1 All references to the 1957 article are to its reprinting in Ackrill 1997.

2 Ackrill 1997, 14 (originally published 1973) argued that *anamnēsis* in the *Phaedo* is invoked to explain our acquisition of concepts; a rival understanding (Scott 1995, 53-73) takes *anamnēsis* to be the province of the philosophers (not ordinary speakers) in their search for knowledge of true reality.

host of other *loci*), and the Eleatic Stranger's interest in *orthologia peri to mē on* (239b4), we can agree with Ackrill that a good deal of interpretation of the middle part can satisfactorily proceed on the assumption that—among their other more substantive roles—the *Sophist's* kinds are *at least* concepts.

On one point, however, Ackrill's interpretation is surprising and surely mistaken. I refer to his remarks about the *dia* locution, found in remarks such as 'Kinēsis is because it shares in Being' or 'Kinēsis is different because it shares in the Different'. He writes that this *dia* does not introduce a proof that *Kinēsis* is.

Nor obviously does it introduce the cause why *kinēsis estin*: it does not refer to some event or state which resulted in the further state described by *kinēsis estin*. The words introduced by *dia* give an expansion or analysis of *estin* as this word is used in *kinēsis estin*—that is, as used existentially'.(81-2).

(I return in Sec 7 to 'as used existentially' – which in my view is perfectly correct.) This account of the phrase *dia to metechēin tou ontos*—denying that it gives a cause—is in line with Ackrill's conviction that the role of the *megista genē* passage is to explicate the *meaning* of certain sentences in order to clear up confusions and put an end to puzzles. And there is some truth in that, of course. But if we take the phrase *dia to metechēin tou ontos* at face value it does indeed offer a cause. The notion of cause which Ackrill invokes, whereby a cause must be an event or a state, is different from that favoured by Plato, as Sedley argued in 'Platonic Causes'.³ He showed that, as well as *aitia*, Plato's favoured locutions for causal statements include use of the preposition *dia*—as we have here—, the dative case, and the verb *poiein*. For Plato, Sedley claims, a cause is typically a thing, not an event or a state; causal statements are conceptually self-evident, and the basic causal relationship is a matter of logic, on a par with the self-evidence of tautologies. Though he doesn't discuss the *Sophist*, what Sedley writes fits well with Plato's language in our dialogue, where we find not just the *dia* locution but also the verb *poiein* used of the form of the Different, at 256e2: the nature of the different makes each form *ouk on*. The causal reading, denied by Ackrill, is now widely accepted.⁴

3 Sedley 1998.

4 See for example Cordero 1993, 260 n. 301 'la valeur causale de la formule [sc. *dia to metechēin tou ontos*] est indéniabile'.

If, *contra* Ackrill, locutions such as ‘because of sharing in ...’ do offer a cause, then it would seem that they give the ontological basis for the *truth* of the proposition in question, not merely *an analysis of its meaning*. Here we touch on another well-known controversy. In his article ‘Communion of Forms’ Robert Heinaman argued (against Ackrill’s 1955 *Symplokē Eidōn*) that for Plato the selective communion of forms grounds the *truth* of claims such as ‘*Kinēsis* is’ or ‘*kinēsis* is different from *stasis*’,⁵

2. Plato and the Copula: against Cornford

Here is how Ackrill states his aim:

The question I wish to discuss is this. Is it true to say that one of Plato’s achievements in this passage [sc. 251-9] is ‘the discovery of the copula’, or ‘the recognition of the ambiguity of *estin* as used on the one hand in statements of identity and on the other hand in attributive statements? The question is whether Plato made a philosophical advance which we might describe in such phrases as those just quoted, but no great stress is to be laid on these particular phrases. Thus it is no doubt odd to say to say that Plato (or anyone else) discovered the copula. But did he draw attention to it? Did he expound or expose the various roles of the verb *estin*? Many of his predecessors and contemporaries reached bizarre conclusions by confusing different uses of the word: did Plato respond by elucidating these different uses? These are real questions. (81)

In answering in the affirmative, Ackrill takes issue with two contributions, both by eminent Platonists, Robinson and Cornford. Robinson had denied that Plato in his Doctrine of Communion detected the confusion between identity and attribution: I return to that issue shortly, though it occupies the first part of Ackrill’s short article.

In the second half of the piece, Ackrill disputes Cornford’s claim that it is wrong to invoke the copula in elucidating Plato’s remarks in the Communion of Kinds stretch. Cornford denied that the relation between Forms designated as participation is the same that subsists between an individual thing (e.g. a man) and the Form Man that he partakes of. He added: ‘*Participation as between Forms* is a symmetric relation’.⁶ Cornford’s sole evidence for this astonishing claim is the famous and difficult passage

5 Heinaman 1983b

6 Cornford 1935, 256.

at 255e where *to on* is said to participate in (or ‘partake of’) both the *auto kath’hauto* and the *pros allo*. Ackrill’s demolition of this misguided claim by Cornford—that participation between Forms is a symmetrical relation—is so brilliantly done that it has stood the test of time, and is accepted on all hands. In a nutshell, Ackrill shows how there is difference among the various terms Plato uses for relations among *eidē*. There are the generic terms such as *koinōnia* and *koinōnein*, mixture and *summeignusthai*, which “stand for the rather indeterminate symmetrical relation ‘being connected with’. Then there are others, like *metechein*, which we expect to be standing for some more determinate non-symmetrical relation.”(89) Ackrill showed convincingly, *contra* Cornford, that this is indeed the case, by a detailed examination of the passage. He also demonstrated, against Ross, that there is a significant difference between locutions where terms like *koinōnein* are used with the dative case and when they are used with the genitive. The dative construction “occurs in highly general remarks about the connection of *eidē*, while *koinōnein* plus genitive represents much the same as *metechein*.” In Ackrill’s terms, this is “that some *eidōs* is (copula) such-and-such (e.g. different from ...) ; that is, it is used to express the fact that one concept falls under another”. Below (Sec 4) I comment on the Fregean terminology in which he puts the point. For now I just want to celebrate the definitive achievement of this stretch of the 1957 article.

3. Ackrill against Robinson on identity and attribution; the role of the Four Quartets (255e-257a)

Robinson agreed with Ackrill that the Late-learners’ error was to understand every ‘is’ as the identity sign.⁷ But he held that nowhere in the *Sophist* does Plato properly diagnose their error: the confusion between the identity and attributive uses of ‘is’, a confusion he also found at points in the arguments of Part II of the *Parmenides*. In Robinson’s view Plato *thought* he had refuted the Late-learners in the immediately following stretch, where the Stranger gives some arguments against the ‘no mixing’ thesis. But, he argued, the refutation was not successful; the identity/attribution confusion is not exposed and diagnosed in that stretch. On this point Ackrill agreed. But Robinson had not paid proper attention to a later passage, the exploration of the *megista genē* and how they combine with one another. For convenience

7 Robinson 1942b.

I shall use a label I gave the passage 255e-257a in my 2008 paper: the discussion of the Four Quartets.⁸ It is here, in this very carefully constructed stretch in which the Stranger explores the combination of *Kinēsis* with the other four kinds, that Ackrill found Plato's solution to the Late-learners' problem. (This much is agreed by the rival interpretation I shall turn to shortly, which I dub the self-predication interpretation.)

In this very well-known stretch, after some initial remarks about *Kinēsis* and *Stasis*, the Stranger turns to the other three kinds and offers the three pairs of apparently inconsistent sentences: *kinēsis* is and is not *tauton*, *kinēsis* is and is not *heteron*, and finally *kinēsis* is and is not *on*. With the help of a variety of explanations in terms of *metechein*, the ES shows that the pairs are not contradictory, spelling it out in detail for the pair: *kinēsis* is and is not *tauton*. "Change then is the same and not the same; we must agree this and not dispute it. For when we say [it is] the same and not the same, we are not speaking in a similar way".

That phrase: *ou homoiōs eirēkamen* gets interpreters excited, of course. And with justification, for here Plato offers an unusually explicit signpost. What different ways of speaking is the Stranger pointing out? Recall that his aim is to find *orthologia* about what is not: something that is in part achieved in this passage. Ackrill's line (which many before him had also maintained) is that Plato here points out two different uses of *estin*, the copula and (the denial of) the 'is' of identity.

He shows that (1) where *estin* is being used as the copula, it gets replaced in the philosopher's version by *metechei*; (2) the philosopher's version of 'ouk *estin*', where the *estin* is not the copula but the identity sign is (not *ou metechei* but) *metechei thaterou pros* (shares in difference from). (83)

This distinction (between the copula and the identity sign) is just what is required to immunize us against the paradoxes of the *opsimatheis* (251b) and Plato does suppose that his discussion puts these gentlemen in their place. (84)

4. Two approaches: Ackrill's and the Platonist/self-predication approach

I highlight and contrast two dominant lines of interpretation, which I label the Ackrill approach and the Platonist/self-predication approach.⁹ As we

8 Brown 2008, Sec 2.2.1; lightly revised version in Brown 2019.

9 What follows in part reprises Brown 2019, Sec 2.4, but from a more reflective standpoint.

know, Ackrill takes the issue Plato identifies and resolves to be the confusion of identity with attribution or predication or, in his terms, the copula. The influence of the work of Gottlob Frege on Ackrill's presentation of his case is palpable. He includes a long quotation from Frege's essay 'On Concept and Object' (Über Begriff und Gegenstand) in the translation by Geach and Black. Just as Frege had distinguished different meanings of 'is'/'ist' (the equals sign and the copula), so did Ackrill, and so, he argued, did Plato in his 'not speaking in a similar way' remark. Within this broad approach I include any view which accepts that it is the identity/predication distinction that Plato is drawing attention to, even if he doesn't do so by pinpointing uses of the verb to be. For now, I put that issue on one side, in order to distinguish the broad Ackrill approach from the Platonist/self-predication approach. I refer to two versions argued with great subtlety: first that of Michael Frede in the 1967 monograph, and repeated in Frede 1992; and second the very carefully argued position of Crivelli in his outstanding monograph, a view which, though somewhat different, in his words 'preserves the distinctive intuition' of Frede's approach.¹⁰

What I want to highlight is this. The Ackrill approach, which finds Plato indicating an identity/predication distinction, took inspiration from a classic of philosophical logic (Frege's 'On Concept and Object') and a host of twentieth century writings and logic textbooks. Frede and Crivelli, on the other hand, draw their inspiration from well-known issues in Plato's metaphysics: Plato's tendency to make claims such as that holiness is holy or (by implication in the *Phaedo*) that the beautiful is beautiful. Indeed in the *Sophist* itself we find 'the large is large' and 'the beautiful is beautiful' (258c1-2), as well as a handful of remarks about *the nature of* kinds. Hence the label: the Platonic/self-predication approach. In principle I am in sympathy with an interpretation which locates the issue Plato is offering to resolve (in the 'not speaking in a similar way' passage) in problems arising specifically from Platonic metaphysics. I say 'in principle' because below I argue that their approach does not fit our texts. Here's how its proponents argue their case.

Frede's diagnosis of the Late-learners' problem links their issue with those of the dualists, and hence with the metaphysics of the pre-Socratics.¹¹ On Frede's reading, the Late-learners held that 'x is only what x is *qua* x'; and this reminded Frede of the pre-Socratic world picture whereby the hot is hot, the wet is wet and so on.

10 Crivelli 2012, 107 n. 13.

11 Frede 1967, 67.

The Platonist/ self-predication approach takes the Late-learners to allow some sentences and disallow others; it has this in common with Ackrill. But Frede reads them not as denying all predications, but as denying only ‘other-predications’. What the Late-learners allow are not, as in the Ackrill approach, identity sentences, but self-predications, ones in which you say of something what it is in itself, or of itself, or *qua* the thing it is, or in relation to itself.¹² This is Frede’s famous ‘first use of ...is...’, as distinguished from an ordinary or ‘other-predicative’ use of ‘is’. Frede finds Plato drawing this very distinction in the Four Quartets passage, so that when the Stranger says that *Kinēsis* is not *tauton*, this is to be understood as the denial that *Kinēsis* is, in or of itself or *qua* itself, the same. For Frede, neither in the Late-learners’ stretch, nor in the Four Quartets passage is Plato interested in highlighting the ‘is’ of identity, but only the ‘is’ of self-predication: the only ‘...is...’ recognised by the Late-learners, on his reading.

It was central to Frede’s view that Plato showcased this distinction between the two uses of ‘is’ (self-predication and other-predication) when he introduced the *auta kath’hauta-pros alla* distinction at 255c13-14.¹³

Crivelli’s version is argued with great subtlety, and there are many differences from the account we find in Frede, but I don’t think it is a travesty to regard them as importantly similar, especially given Crivelli’s statement that his line ‘preserves the distinctive intuition’ of Frede’s approach’. For Crivelli the Late-learners’ position concerns what he calls essentialist predication – that being the only kind of sentence they allow. On his reading ‘the Late-learners believe that a name can be truly applied to a thing only if it fully expresses the thing’s essence.’¹⁴ ‘The Late-learners only allow us to apply the name good to the kind goodness, and the name man to the kind man (in sentences such as ‘Goodness is good’ and ‘Man is a man’), for, on their view, ‘only kinds have natures that can be fully described by means of predicative sentences’ (108). In contrast to both Ackrill and Frede, Crivelli does not hold that Plato distinguishes different uses of ‘*estin*’ in 255e-257a, or that he attributes a thesis about the use of ‘*estin*’ to the Late-learners. Rather, Plato distinguishes two readings of predicative sentences, definitional and ordinary (161). Only sentences about kinds have definitional readings. This

12 Frede 1992, 401 for the formulations ‘in itself’ and ‘of itself’; Frede 1967, 28 for ‘what x is *qua* itself’ and ‘in relation to itself’

13 Frede 1967, 12-35, reprised in Frede 1992, 399-402. For discussion of this distinction, cf. Crivelli 2012, 4.5, who translates ‘*auta kath’hauta*’ as ‘on their own’. This rendering is to be preferred to Frede’s ‘in themselves’ and certainly to ‘in relation to themselves’ (mit Bezug auf sich selbst), 1967, 28, 36.

14 Crivelli 2012, 107.

is the distinction Plato is drawing at 256a10-b4 when he explains how ‘we aren’t speaking in the same way’ when calling *kinēsis tauton kai ou tauton*.

For Crivelli (161), Plato’s point is that ‘*Kinēsis* is *tauton*’ is true on its ordinary reading, while ‘*kinēsis* is not *tauton*’ denies the *definitional* reading, i.e. denies that to be *tauton* is the definition of *kinēsis*. He argues that this difference in readings of sentences is also to be found at other important points of the dialogue, notably in the difficult argument (255ab) to prove that each of *tauton* and *heteron* is different from each of *Kinēsis* and *Stasis* (122ff.). But what concerns us now is his claim about the Four Quartets stretch (255e-257a): that here Plato makes the Eleatic Stranger ‘explicitly help himself to the distinction between ‘ordinary’ and ‘definitional’ readings of sentences’ (163, argued at 161).

These brief sketches of two versions of what I have called the self-predication interpretation, are, I hope, enough to show how this reading of the Late-learners’ difficulty and of the Four Quartets passage, draws its inspiration from issues in Plato’s metaphysics (as well as that of his predecessors, at least in Frede’s version). As such they are much to be welcomed and given a sympathetic hearing.

5. Difficulties for the self-predication readings of 255e-257a

But, sympathetic though I am, I find it impossible to square them with the key texts. The major objection derives from the Stranger’s counterfactual remark at 256b6-8. Each view reads Plato as obscuring, indeed in effect contradicting, the very point he just made—as they interpret him—when he had the Stranger draw attention to two ways of speaking. For Frede, ‘we are not speaking in the same way’ (*ou homoiōs eirēkamen*) points out two ways in which a kind can be F, either as an ordinary predication (as in ‘*Kinēsis* is the same’) or as in ‘in-itself predication’ (as in the denial that *Kinēsis* is *tauton*). This *should* allow the Stranger to say (as an ordinary predication) that *kinēsis* is *stasimos*, that the kind *kinēsis* is—like all kinds—stable. But a few lines later, at 256b6-8, we find the Stranger remarking that if *kinēsis* were to share in *stasis* (counterfactual) it would not be strange to call it *stasimon*. Instead of deploying his distinction (as Frede reads it) to show how *Kinēsis* is *stasimos* is true (as an ordinary predication), Plato makes the Stranger by implication deny it.

The very same objection applies to Crivelli's reading, and he devotes several pages to trying to meet it.¹⁵ As we saw, Crivelli holds that, with the remark about how we must grant that both *kinēsis* is *tauton* and *kinēsis* is not *tauton* because 'we are not speaking in the same way' (256a11-12), the Stranger points out two possible readings of predicative sentences, the ordinary and the definitional. But, if so, the Stranger should insist that there is a way in which it is possible to call *Kinēsis* stable—viz. as an ordinary predication—whereas in fact he by implication denies it. I find it impossible to accept an interpretation on which Plato obscures in such a blatant way the very distinction he has blazoned as the solution to the contradiction.¹⁶ For both versions of the Platonist/self-predication interpretation, it is a grave drawback that, on their reading, Plato makes such a mess of setting out his own distinction.

By contrast, on the Ackrill interpretation, an appropriate distinction is drawn between '*kinēsis* is not *tauton*' as a denial of identity, and '*kinēsis* is *tauton*' as a predication—or, in Ackrill's terms, as containing the copula. And the subsequent remark, implying that it would be absurd to call *kinēsis* stable, since it does not in any way share in *stasis*, does nothing to disturb that point. Another advantage of Ackrill's interpretation is that it can give a consistent reading of the four negative statements: *Kinēsis* is not *stasis*, *kinēsis* is not *tauton*, *kinēsis* is not *heteron*, and *kinēsis* is not *on*. Each of them is derived from the claim that *kinēsis* is different from the kind in question, and, on the simplest reading, all four are denials of identity between *Kinēsis* and the kind in question. But for Frede and Crivelli, the last three of these are to be read not as denials of identity, but as denials of a special kind of predication. However, since the last three follow the pattern established with '*kinēsis* is not *stasis*', Plato is surely preparing the reader to understand them too as denials of identity: *kinēsis* is not the kind *tauton* (even though it is predicatively the same [sc.as itself]), and so forth.

6. *Identity vindicated, but not an 'is' of identity*

Back, then, to the Ackrill interpretation. He is surely right that the negative conjuncts—*kinēsis* is not *tauton*, *kinēsis* is not *heteron* etc—are denials of identity, and not denials of some special kind of predication. Can it be saved

15 Crivelli 2012, 162-66.

16 By contrast, for Crivelli 'it beggars belief that Plato would have failed to realize [sc. that change is stable, even though not by its own nature] 163.

from charges of anachronism, of importing ideas from the philosophical logic of Gottlob Frege and much of the twentieth century?

Yes, it can. First, Ackrill's reading also has Plato responding to familiar problems. We know from the *Euthydemus* about a bunch of fallacies often left unsolved there but posing very pretty philosophical problems. And the one known as Dionysodorus' ox (300e-301a) surely fits the bill as a close relative at least of the Late-learners' problem.¹⁷ Are there beautiful things, Dionysodorus asks Socrates? Yes. The same as or different from the beautiful? Different, but beauty is present to them. So, if an ox is present to you, you are an ox! Here we get in effect a distinction between being the beautiful, (being the same as the beautiful), and being beautiful merely because beauty is present to you; in effect—to cut quite a few corners—between identity and predication. We even find the language of 'same as' and 'different from' in the *Euthydemus* passage. So, to find Plato distinguishing statements of identity from predications, in answer to the Late-learners who allowed only identity statements, does answer to earlier issues of interest.

Second, the objection that Ackrill was unduly influenced by the work of Gottlob Frege and his twentieth century adherents in finding Plato signal different meanings of 'is'. I reply that we can read the passage as drawing the crucial distinction between statements of identity and predications without finding a claim about different uses or meanings of 'is'. As I and others have argued, Ackrill may overstate his case when he finds Plato explicitly differentiating uses of the verb to be. The difficulty is well-known; the verb to be is conspicuously absent at the point at which the Stranger explains that 'we are not speaking likewise when we call it *tauton* and not *tauton*'.¹⁸ Plato may be drawing the requisite distinctions by adverting to different ways to understand sentences, (specifically, sentences of the form *kinēsis is tauton*) without thereby pointing out that they involve different uses of the verb to be, the identity sign and the copula.¹⁹ He has made the Stranger show satisfactorily that a thing can be what it also is not, as *kinēsis* can be *tauton* (i.e. can be predicatively the same, can share in sameness) without being (identical to) the kind *tauton*.²⁰ The same applies, of course, to the two subsequent apparently contradictory pairs of sentences: *kinēsis is heteron*

17 Cf. Brancacci 1999.

18 Eck, J. van 2000, 71-2 counters this difficulty by pointing to *gegonen* at 256b3.

19 Brown 2008, 2nd ed. 2019, 2.3.3

20 An alternative account, suggested by Owen 1999, 446 n. 62 is that Plato is offering different analyses of *tauton*, in effect as adjective and as abstract noun (Kinesis is not the Kind Sameness).

and not *heteron*; and finally the crucial one: *kinēsis* is *on* and not *on* (is a being and not Being (sc. not the kind Being)). I have argued that it is not a failure on Plato's part if he does not spotlight different uses of the verb to be in drawing the requisite distinctions.²¹

Indeed, Sedley has suggested that Plato is 'ideologically opposed to equivocation', that is, to a single word having more than one meaning.²² He claims that Plato is untroubled by different words having the same meaning, but is unwilling to countenance a single word having more than one meaning. The only clear exception, Socrates' discussion of *manthanein* in *Euthydemus* (277e3), is dismissed on the grounds that Plato discredits it by attributing the equivocation account to Prodicus! I'm not fully persuaded, but this view indicates how far scholarly opinion on the matter has travelled in recent years.

Here, then are my conclusions about Ackrill's claims. I argued in Section 1 that some of Ackrill's framework remarks are contestable: the emphasis on concepts and meaning, and his denial that that the *dia* locutions offer a cause. The refutation of Cornford's view—that communion is a symmetrical relation—is a masterpiece. On Ackrill's claims about the 'is' of identity and the copula I have given my negative verdict, but I still regard myself as a disciple of the approach more broadly considered: the distinction of identity from predication, and thus the solution to some eristic but at the same time serious problems. The Stranger is the philosopher in action, capable not just of dealing in *aporiai*, as the sophist does, but of providing the solution to them. To have achieved all this in an article a mere six pages in length—true, JHS pages are bigger than most—is remarkable.

7. Coda: An existential 'is' at 256a1? The semantic continuity thesis defended

After getting agreement from Theaetetus that *kinēsis* is different from stasis, and therefore is not stasis, the Stranger adds: "Ἔστι δέ γε διὰ τὸ μετέχειν τοῦ ὄντος. ΘΕΑΙ. Ἔστιν. Above (in 1) I endorsed Ackrill's understanding whereby Plato indicates that the *estin* in '*Kinēsis estin*' is used existentially.

I here rehearse, and defend from some recent criticism, my original discussion of the complete, existential *estin* here and elsewhere in the *Sophist*.²³

21 Brown 2008, 449. Brown 1994, 215 n. 3 notes scholars who have expressed skepticism about whether there is a discrete 'is' of identity.

22 Sedley 2006, 224–26.

23 Brown 1986.

My proposal has been dubbed ‘the semantic continuity thesis’.²⁴ Here are some points I argued for then, and would still defend. Ackrill and others were correct to claim that here Plato is using ‘is’ existentially: the Stranger is making the claim that *Kinēsis* exists. Similar existence claims had been made earlier.²⁵ Whether Plato is here marking off an ‘is’ of existence is a more delicate question. Since I doubt that in the next lines he is highlighting two other meanings or uses of ‘is’, I am not persuaded that he here marks off the existential ‘is’, though he certainly uses it existentially, and explains it by ‘shares in being’. I contested the key claim by Owen, Frede and Malcolm that this and other such apparently complete and existential uses should in fact be read as incomplete, elliptical uses, and I insisted that the above sentence manifests a complete use of ‘is’, one where no complement, no completion, is elided or expected or implied.

The thrust of my ‘semantic continuity thesis’ for the Greek verb to be is this: while there undoubtedly are uses of ‘is’ which are complete, and which mean ‘exist’, our texts suggest that for Greek writers and thinkers these are not seen as sharply distinct, either syntactically or semantically, from incomplete—that is, predicative—uses. I examine below some supporting texts. While the semantic continuity thesis did not deny that there are (in Plato as in other authors) uses of *esti* which are syntactically complete and existential in meaning, it offered a different understanding of the relation between the complete and incomplete uses of *esti*, proposing that the uses are semantically close, in a way that distinguishes them from the relation between English ‘exists’ and ‘is ...’.²⁶

Here are some criticisms of that proposal. Malcolm objects that if it is correct, then Plato is committed to the view that ‘X is F’ entails ‘X is’, and that this contravenes what he calls the ‘Uncommitted Copula’ condition: ‘something can have properties attributed to it without existing’.²⁷ Malcolm claims that ‘the difference between ‘what it is’ and ‘that it is’ is integral to rationality as such and, in all likelihood, was implicit in the thought-processes

24 By Leigh 2008, who disagrees with it. I consider one of her objections below.

25 250a11, 254d10.

26 In Brown 1986 I offered, for Greek *estin*, the analogy with the relation between (i) ‘Jane is teaching’ and (ii) ‘Jane is teaching French’, where (i) is a complete use, but closely related to sentences like (ii). Crivelli 2012, 202, who accepts a version of the semantic continuity thesis, prefers to compare the relation of ‘Jim is running’ to ‘Jim is running slowly’, on the grounds that ‘is teaching’ in (i) is dependent or parasitic on ‘is teaching’ in (ii). Crivelli’s suggestion avoids proposing a priority for the incomplete over the complete uses.

27 Malcolm 2006, 283.

of the Cro-Magnon', and hence Plato must be credited with recognising it. The issue is a weighty one. I can only repeat that I have found no evidence, in *Sophist* or elsewhere, that Plato rejected the inference from 'X is F' to 'X is', and plenty of evidence that he accepted it.²⁸

A different criticism of the semantic continuity thesis comes from those such as Leigh and O'Brien who find in ancient Greek, no less than in English, an existential use of '*estin*' that is entirely discrete from, and not semantically or syntactically continuous with, any incomplete uses. I consider their arguments after setting out some key texts on which (in part) the semantic continuity thesis depends.

Key Text 1. *Sophist* 259a6-8:

τὸ μὲν ἕτερον μετασχὼν τοῦ ὄντος ἔστι μὲν διὰ ταύτην τὴν μέθεξιν, οὐ μὴν ἐκεῖνό γε οὐ
μετέσχεν ἀλλ' ἕτερον, ἕτερον δὲ τοῦ ὄντος ὃν ἔστι σαφέστατα ἐξ ἀνάγκης εἶναι μὴ ὄν·

.....the different, by partaking in being, is because of this partaking, but [it is] not that in which it partakes but something different

Key text 2 *Laws* 10, 901c8-d2

ΑΘ. Νῦν δὴ δὺ' ὄντες τρισὶν ἡμῖν οὓσιν ἀποκρινάσθωσαν οἱ θεοὺς μὲν ἀμφότεροι

ὁμολογοῦντες εἶναι, παραιτητοὺς δὲ ἄτερος, ὁ δὲ ἀμελεῖς τῶν σμικρῶν.

.....both of you maintaining that the gods are (i.e. exist), the one [saying that they are] venal, the other that they are careless of small matters.

Key text 3 *Laws* 10, 887b7-8, Kleinias speaking

διαφέρει δ' οὐ σμικρὸν ἀμῶς γέ πως πιθανότητά τινα τοὺς λόγους ἡμῶν ἔχειν, ὡς θεοὶ τ' εἰσὶν καὶ ἀγαθοί, δίκην τιμῶντες διαφερόντως ἀνθρώπων

..... our arguments that the gods exist and [are] good, respecting justice more than men do.

My original claim, about Key Text 1, was this.²⁹ Yes, we have to supply the verb *estin* from the first clause in the subsequent ones. Contra Owen (1971, 253), that does not prevent the verb in the first clause being a complete and existential use of *estin*. Rather, it shows that such a use can also do duty for

28 Crivelli 2012, 202 concurs, writing 'statements of predication have an existential component'. O'Brien, though rejecting the semantic continuity thesis, also accepts this point 2013b, 226-27.

29 Brown 1986, 55-56, 67.

the incomplete *estin* which has to be understood in the following clauses. We find exactly the same phenomenon in the next two passages.³⁰

Leigh objects that the verb *estin* need not be supplied from the first clause, but rather, in Key Text 2, ‘the copulas required for the second and third clauses [may] have been elided, as is standard practice in Greek.’³¹ I find this alternative construal unlikely, though it cannot be ruled out.

A different response to the phenomenon exemplified in these texts may be found in O’Brien, a fervent defender of an existential ‘is’ in Greek philosophy, especially (*contra* Owen, Frede and others) in the *Sophist*.³² Though he does not explicitly address the semantic continuity thesis, some of his remarks seem designed to negate the probative value of the key texts. He notes ‘the phenomenon whereby an author starts off with an existential *einai*, only to tack on a complement’: a description which fits the above texts well, comparing Empedocles B17.13. He suggests that ‘this doubling up of the verb is a deliberate stylistic device’.³³ Elsewhere (with reference to *Sophist* 258e3) he calls it ‘a deliberate play on the existential and copulative use of the verb’ and ‘an equivocation’.³⁴

Here is my reply. Those who are convinced that there must be, in ancient Greek, a sharp distinction between the self-standing *estin* and the incomplete uses will naturally try to explain away the occurrences such as the three texts I have cited, either as Leigh does or, with O’Brien, as a stylistic device: an ‘equivocation’, a ‘deliberate play on the two uses of the verb’. But to my ear, the passages quoted (and *Sophist* 258e3 instanced by O’Brien) are prosaic bits of writing. Consider Key Text 3: I doubt that Plato is putting into the mouth of Kleinias a deliberate play on words.³⁵ I conclude that in these

30 Crivelli 2012, 202 offers this helpful description of the phenomenon: ‘Plato sometimes places *einai* near the beginning of a sentence to make an existential claim, but then adds general terms without repeating the verb, so that the original occurrence of *einai* becomes predicative.’

31 Leigh 2008, 114 n. 15.

32 O’Brien raises a difficulty about the label ‘complete’ (O’Brien 2013b, 225). Referencing Burnyeat’s reformulation of Brown 1986, 53 (in Burnyeat 2003, 10), O’Brien objects that it involves ‘questionable logic’ and protests ‘How can something complete be completable?’ The label ‘self-standing’ will serve my purpose equally well to describe the uses of *estin* in 256a1, 250a11 etc, which, with Ackrill and O’Brien, and against Owen and Frede, I classed as existential uses, insisting that they are not elliptical (Brown 1986, 65-68).

33 O’Brien 2013a, 198-9 n. 10

34 O’Brien 2013b, 237 with n. 23

35 For an example of an equivocation/play on words compare ‘she left in a fit of rage and a taxi’. The key texts above present no similar equivocation, I submit.

passages we do not have a stylistic device or play on words. We must accept that it came quite naturally to Plato to use a single occurrence of the verb to be where it is a self-standing (or complete) use in the first clause, and has to be understood as the copula in what follows. It may not be possible in English, but it clearly was in the Greek Plato wrote. This is a major plank in my defence of the so-called semantic continuity thesis.³⁶

36 I would like to thank the President, Edward Halper, and the committee of the IPS for the very great honour of inviting me to give the Cornelia de Vogel lecture. Thanks go also to the audience for their lively responses to my presentation.

