

Finding Certainty in the Being of Non-Being: A Final Rejoinder to Protagoras

Jenny K. Strandberg
Philosophy, Sacred Heart University, USA

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates demonstrates the existence of false judgments in a dilemma that leads up to the (in)famous *peritrope* argument (*cf. Thet.* 170c). Put simply, the dilemma is based on the proposition ‘there are false judgments.’ If judged true, then false judgments exist; if judged false, then false judgments still exist since the proposition itself is deemed false. This paper aims to show in two parts that the same logic is used to demonstrate the Being of Non-Being in the *Sophist*. In this dialogue, the visitor confronts the sophist’s claim that “*that which is not* never in any way has a share in being.” (*Sph.* 260d). By construing Non-Being in accordance with Parmenides’ illegitimate concept of Nothingness, as contrary to *what is*, the sophist argues that any association in thought or speech with Non-Being is impossible and, by extension, that false judgements cannot exist. Should the visitor and Theaetetus prove unable to challenge this claim, the sophist will have escaped into the dark region of deceit and illusion. Although they do fail to refute unintelligible Nothingness, I argue that their failure is in fact progress, as it prepares the ground for a different account of Non-Being. I will show that the transition from a failed *elenchus* to the victorious assertion that Non-Being has a share in Being is facilitated by the logic used against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*.

False judgements, *peritrope*, Non-Being, Protagoras, Parmenides

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates asks an imaginary Protagoras what they are to do with his thesis ‘Man is the measure of all things’. Things are not for every man what they seem to him to be, that is, men do not always judge what is true. Sometimes they judge truly and sometimes falsely, which undermines the idea of human beings as standards for truth. Socrates demonstrates the existence of false judgments in a dilemma that leads up to the (in)famous *peritrope* argument. Put simply, it is based on the proposition ‘there are false judgments.’ If this proposition is judged true, then there are false judgments; if it is judged false, then there are false judgments nonetheless, since the proposition itself was judged false (*cf. Thet.* 170c).¹ This paper aims to show in two parts that the same logic is used to demonstrate the Being of Non-Being in the *Sophist*.

In this dialogue, the Eleatic visitor confronts the sophist’s claim that “*that which is not* never in any way has a share in being.” (*Sph.* 260d). By constru-

1 All citations from the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* are from *Plato: Complete Works* (1997).

ing Non-Being in accordance with Parmenides' illegitimate concept of Nothingness, as contrary to *what is*, the sophist argues that any association in thought or speech with Non-Being is impossible and, by extension, that false judgements do not exist. If the visitor and Theaetetus fail to refute this claim, the sophist will have successfully escaped into the dark region of deception and false appearance. And they do fail at refuting unintelligible Nothingness. However, as I argue in the first part of this paper, their initial failure provides a platform for formulating an alternative account of Non-Being, ultimately leading to the downfall of the sophist. How they move cleverly from failing to refute Non-Being as Nothingness to victoriously asserting that Non-Being has a share in Being by relying on the same logic that was used against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* will be shown in the second part.

Partners in Confusion

In their attempt at hemming in the sophist, the visitor suggests that they disect the art of copy-making. Is the sophist a likeness- or an appearance-maker? Bewildered, he fears the sophist has “escaped neatly into an impossibly confusing type [ἀπορού εἰδος] to search through.” (*Sph.* 236d). Theaetetus agrees, but has he truly understood the conundrum they are facing, “this seeming but not being, and this saying things but not true things (....).” (*Sph.* 236e)? The questions that are emerging from their discussion are exceedingly difficult to answer: How is it possible for things to *appear* in a way that they *are not*? How can one talk about things that are false if things that are false *are not*? To successfully capture an illusionist, Theaetetus must not be bedazzled by the argument and simply share in the visitor’s state of confusion over the type of copy-maker the sophist is. He must realize that an account of confusion itself is necessary. For confusion, falsity, and deceptive sophistry would not be possible unless *that which is not* somehow *is*. The sophist would slip out of their hands were they not able to refute the claim that Non-Being is contrary to Being and radical Nothingness. And, so, they must enter the treacherous path of inquiry that Parmenides had warned against and examine the notion that Non-Being is.

Their engagement with Non-Being as Nothingness at 237b—239b can be divided into three parts. First, the visitor shows that if Non-Being does not have a share in Being, then it cannot be expressed in language, since one can only speak of things that are. To speak about Non-Being would be to speak and say nothing. With this, Theaetetus thinks that their *logos* has reached “the height of confusion”, but the visitor contends that the “greatest

and most fundamental confusion” remains (*Sph.* 237e-238a). In the second part, the visitor proceeds to demonstrate that the root of the problem is the unintelligibility of Non-Being. If none of *those that are*, i.e., Forms, and especially Unity and Plurality, can belong to *that which is not*, then Non-Being cannot be grasped in thought. For it is only by applying Unity or Plurality to some particular ‘thing’ that it becomes an intelligible ‘something.’ But it turns out that there is an even greater *aporia* concerning Non-Being than its unintelligibility. In the third part, the visitor explains that Non-Being confuses even those who attempt to show how confusing it is, forcing them “to say mutually contradictory things about it.” (*Sph.* 238d). This is because the very act of demonstrating that Non-Being cannot be conceived as a ‘thing’ treats it as a ‘thing’. The demonstration itself violates the unintelligibility of Non-Being. The visitor now admits that “the refutation [Ξλεγχον] of *that which is not* has been defeating me for a long time.” (*Sph.* 239b).

This defeat, however, is not the letdown it first appears to be. Pausing to reflect on it, we realize that it would not be possible for the visitor to be defeated by their *elenchus* unless Non-Being has a share in Being. By failing to adequately approach Non-Being in words and thought, the visitor demonstrates performatively that it is possible to be wrong and speak falsely about something. Their failed *elenchus* is evidence that Non-Being has a share in Being. Thus, I argue that in declaring himself defeated by their argument, the visitor nevertheless emerges victorious from it. Careful readers of the *Theaetetus* will recognize the logic of this maneuver. Let us remind ourselves of the dilemma confronting Protagoras there: Socrates claims that if most people judge falsely that there are false judgments, then there are false judgements, since they judged *falsely* that there are such judgements. In the *Sophist*, we see this logic reproduced. If the visitor’s engagement with Non-Being as Nothingness is contradictory and false, then Non-Being must somehow *be* since it confused him, and he spoke falsely about it. The visitor cannot be confused and speak falsely about Non-Being, unless Non-Being somehow is.

Having caught on to this underlying logic, we find it expressed in yet another remark by the visitor in the same passage: “So was I deceived just now when I said that I would formulate the biggest confusion [μεγίστην ἀπορίαν] about it, when we have this other one to state which is even bigger?” (*Sph.* 238d). In the second part of my division above, the visitor claims that the greatest confusion about Non-Being is its unintelligibility. Then, in the third, he confronts the fact that Non-Being *qua* Nothingness is irrefutable as such. Perplexed, the visitor wonders if he was wrong earlier when he deemed the unintelligibility of Non-Being the greatest *aporia*. Although the question is

merely rhetorical, let us spell out the alternative ways that he and Theaetetus could answer it. They could either say, yes, he was deceived earlier, but if he was, and said things that were false, then Non-Being must have a share in Being. Alternatively, they could say, no, he was not deceived earlier—the unintelligibility of Non-Being is the most confusing thing about it. But, alas, for there to be confusion about anything, Non-Being must have a share in Being. No matter how they respond, it must be admitted that Non-Being is.

The visitor's question is reminiscent of Socrates' rhetorical question to an imaginary Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*: "What then, Protagoras, are we to make of your argument [τῷ λόγῳ]?" (*Tht.* 170c). The *homo mensura* doctrine becomes problematic given that most people believe in the existence of both wisdom and ignorance amongst them (cf. *Tht.* 170b). If people are the measure of all things, and they judge that there are false judgements, then there are false judgements, according to Protagoras' own doctrine. On the other hand, if they are judging falsely that there are false judgments, then there are false judgements, nonetheless. As Socrates concludes there, "Whichever we say, it comes to the same thing, namely, that men do not always judge what is true; that human judgements are both true and false." (*Tht.* 170c). The visitor could have made a similar remark concerning the greatest confusion surrounding Non-Being: Whichever we say it comes to the same thing, namely, that Non-Being is.

From Retreat to Counterattack: A Clever Move

Having accepted defeat—and, at the same time, not accepted it—in their battle with Nothingness, the visitor asks Theaetetus: "What then? Are we going to withdraw and give up?" (*Sph.* 241c).² Should they make themselves as absent as Non-Being itself in their attempt at confronting it? The other option is to take on Father Parmenides' saying and insist "with brute force both that *that which is not* somehow is, and then again that *that which is* somehow is not." (*Sph.* 241d). They must modify Parmenides' ontological framework to extricate themselves from the grip that the sophist still has on the argument. But the visitor expresses concern, admitting to Theaetetus that, "I'm afraid I'll seem insane to you if I'm always shifting my position back and forth, given what I've said." (*Sph.* 242a-b). Only moments ago, he showed that it is impossible to refute Nothingness. Now he is willing

2 Minor modification of Nicholas P. White's translation in *Plato: Complete Works* (1997).

to assert once again that Non-Being is—is the visitor a sophist himself, changing his position for the sake of winning the argument?

Not exactly. He is not reversing his position on the illegitimate ‘concept’ of Non-Being. It remains unapproachable in thought and speech and irrefutable as such. What he will boldly attempt, pending Theaetetus’ support, is a negotiation of this framework to accommodate for an account of Non-Being that is *other than* Parmenides’, but not contrary to it.³ Theaetetus’ response is reassuring: “I certainly shall not think you are going wrong if you proceed to your refutation and proof.” (*Sph.* 242b).⁴ Indeed, if the visitor were going wrong by continuing his argument, then he would still be right, given that it would not be possible to go wrong on the sophist’s understanding of Non-Being.

The project that lies ahead is to conceptualize Non-Being so that it allows for the existence of falsehood. This is a clever move on behalf of the visitor (or Plato), I argue, as it shifts the burden of proof from the visitor and Theaetetus to the sophist. Instead of having to disprove the sophist’s understanding of Non-Being as contrary to Being, which remains an impossible task, *the sophist* will have to disprove an account of Non-Being that grants the existence of falsity—and how could the sophist coherently hold that an intelligible account of Non-Being is false within an ontological framework that denies the existence of false speech and thought? She cannot claim that such an account is false without affirming what is being denied—the Being of Non-Being. The radical position of the sophist is untenable precisely because it eliminates the condition for refutation. If false judgements do not exist, then the sophist cannot be wrong, but neither can she dispute the opinions of others. Clearly, the sophist is in deeper trouble than the visitor lets on at this point in the dialogue.

Although the apparent challenge in the dialogue is to explain how it is possible for *that which is not* to have a share in *that which is* and vice versa, it is more challenging, indeed impossible, to explain how an existing account of Non-Being is not, based on an understanding of Non-Being as Nothingness. Once an account of Non-Being that allows for the existence of falsehood is formulated, it becomes indisputable that Non-Being somehow is. It is therefore not a problem for the visitor and Theaetetus that they cannot refute the sophist’s understanding of Non-Being *qua* Nothingness.

3 I agree with Francesco Ferro’s reading of Plato’s relation to Parmenides’ philosophy in ‘Parmenides: a superficial and stubborn father: The Eleatic Legacy in the *Sophist*’ presented at the Symposium Platonicum XIII, 2022. See also O’Brien, 2013c.

4 Minor modification of Nicholas P. White’s translation in *Plato: Complete Works* (1997).

They do not need to. They can simply let it go, or more deviously declare themselves defeated by their own *elenchus*. All they need to do to capture the sophist is to come up with a *different* account of Non-Being. We see this insight reflected in the following comment by the visitor: “Even if our grasp of *that which is* and *that which is not* isn’t completely clear, our aim will be to avoid being totally without an account of them—so far as that’s allowed by our present line of inquiry—and see whether we can get away with saying that *that which is not* really is *that which is not*.” (*Sph.* 254c-d). It is not necessary to formulate a correct account of Non-Being. *Any* intelligible account of Non-Being that grants the existence of falsehood will guarantee the Being of Non-Being.

The account they develop is premised on the fact that Forms are not self-contained and discrete entities. For *that which is not* to have a share in *that which is*, and vice versa, the Forms must be allowed to blend. Some Forms will associate with other Forms to a small extent and others to a large degree, says the visitor (*cf. Sph.* 254b). For example, the Different has great blending powers, since each Form is different from all the others. The Different also associates with Being, since the Different *is* without being Being itself. In the same way all Forms *are* by participating in Being, and they *are not* since they are not Being itself but different from it. By participating in the Different, every Form, including Being, *is not* in the sense that it is one Form and not all the others. “So even *that which is* is not, in as many applications as there are of the others,” says the visitor, “since, not being them, it is one thing, namely itself, and on the other hand it is not those others, which are an indefinite number.” (*Sph.* 257a).

This conclusion follows from their hypothesis that the Forms blend. If the Forms do not blend, then they could not formulate an account of Non-Being as Difference. So, why would a sophist not try to unravel their account by countering that the Forms do not associate with one another? The visitor seems open to such a challenge: “And if somebody doesn’t admit that [it is in the nature of Forms to blend], then he needs to win us over from our earlier line of argument for it, to win us over from its consequences.” (*Sph.* 257a). But this is not a viable option for the sophist, given the logic expounded in this paper. If an opponent demonstrates that their theory of the blending of Forms is false, then Non-Being must have a share in Being, or else their theory could not be proven false. From this perspective, the invitation to refute their account is yet another point in support of it. Anyone is welcome to show that they are wrong because doing so will only prove that it is possible to be wrong, which implies that they are right—Non-Being must have a share in Being and, hence, the Forms do blend.

The strength of their position is not made explicit in the dialogue, but there are signs that the visitor is aware of it. The first sign is the mentioned invitation to disprove their theory of the blending of Forms. If this were a real threat to their position, it is unlikely that the visitor would have left it unaddressed, as he does in the dialogue. Rather than confronting a possible weakness in their account, he goes on to bracingly affirm their position: “Nobody can say that this *that which is not*, which we’ve made to appear and now dare say is, is the contrary of *that which is*.” (Sph. 258e). Non-Being is not contrary to *what is* and radical Nothingness, but the nature of the Different “chopped up among all beings in relation to each other” so that Non-Being is “each part of the nature of the Different that’s set over against *that which is*.” (Sph. 258e). The confidence with which this conclusion is delivered, without addressing potential challenges to their theory of the blending of Forms, is another indication that the visitor is fully aware of their advantage in the argument.

Although their account of Non-Being could be improved through dialectical discussion, nobody can deny that *that which is not* in some way *is*, while submitting instead that Non-Being is absolutely Nothing, since such a counterargument would only affirm the Being of Non-Being. In what might be a final rejoinder to the great sophist, Protagoras, the visitor urges: “With regard to *that which is not*, which we’ve said is, let someone refute us and persuade us that we’ve made a mistake—or else, so long as he can’t do that, he should say just what we say. He has to say that the Forms blend with each other, that *that which is* and *the different* pervade all of them and each other, that *the different* shares in *that which is* and so, because of that sharing, *is*.” (Sph. 258e–259a).

The visitor seems to say (with unmistakable triumph in his voice), ‘Now that we have made the Form of *that which is not* appear, Protagoras, or any other sophist, go ahead and refute us! Prove us wrong if you can.’ To borrow the turn of phrase once more from the *Theaetetus*: ‘Whichever you say, it comes to the same thing, namely, that Non-Being is.’ The dilemma facing the sophist is this: If she agrees with their account of the blending of Forms, then Non-Being is. If she disagrees with it, contending it is false, then Non-Being is nonetheless, or else their account could not be false. It turns out that to capture a sophist all they need is a different account of Non-Being than Nothingness, since any such account cannot be denied without affirming the Being of Non-Being.

