

The Overt Argument Against Conceptualism in the *Parmenides* and the Covert Argument for Conceptualism in the *Sophist* (with a Particular Focus on the Being of Not-Being)

Rafael Ferber

University of Lucerne / University of Zurich

This contribution begins by analysing the argument against conceptualism in the *Parmenides* and then extends it to “the not-being” (*to mê on*) in the *Sophist*, or that which “is what is not” (258c2-3). It concludes with the puzzle that, in this case, the being of “the not-being” also has “understanding (*nous*), life (*zôê*) and soul (*psychê*)” (249a9). The main new points are (1) if “the not-being” has understanding (*nous*), “the not-being” – according to the ontological argument of the *Parmenides* – also has thought (*noêma*), which has a second “not-being” as its object and (2) the question of whether Plato would have interpreted Fragment 3 of *Parmenides*, *to gar auto estin noein te kai einai*, not only in the sense that thinking implies being, but also in the sense that being implies thinking, concept (*noêma*), “the not-being”, Platonic realism about universals, Platonic conceptualism about universals

One of Plato’s greatest merits is the discovery of realism concerning universals, which is presented in the so-called Theory of Ideas or Theory of Forms (*eidê*). In the formulation found in the *Republic*, the argument for this realism runs as follows: “We usually assume one distinct form (*eidos*) for each group of many things to which we apply the same name” (Pl. *R.* 596a7-9, my transl.; cf. Pl. *Phd.* 75c10-d2, 78d3-4, 100b5-7).

This argument is referred to as the one-over-many argument for ideas or forms. The word “*eidos*”, rendered here as “form”, is a Platonic term for which, according to D. Ross, “the best name is probably ‘universals’”.¹ Although Ch. Kahn has argued that it is rather “misleading to interpret Plato’s [theory of] definitional essences as a theory of universals”,² these Platonic forms exist like the so-called *universalia ante rem* – that is, as

-
- 1 Ross 1951, 225: “The essence of the theory of Ideas lay in the conscious recognition of the fact that there is a class of entities, for which the best name is probably ‘universals’, that are entirely different from sensible things”.
 - 2 Kahn 1996, 337 n. 11. Cf. for a fuller treatment Kahn 2021, 145-47. Yet even Kahn 2021, 142 admits: “Hence we may reasonably connect Plato’s theory with the problem of universals, as long we avoid the Aristotelian, anti-Platonic assumption that universals correspond to predicates rather than to objective entities”.

extra-mental essences that are independent of sensible things and of which, according to Plato's 'last word' in the *Timaeus*, the following predicates are true: "unchanging" (*kata tauta eidos echon*), "uncreated and indestructible" (*agenêton kai anôlethron*), "neither receiving anything else into itself from elsewhere nor itself entering into anything else anywhere", "imperceptible to sight or the other senses" and "that which thinking has as its object" (*touto ho dê noêsis eilêchen episkopein*) (*Ti.* 52a1-5, transl. Cornford, modified).³

If forms are what "thinking (*noêsis*) has as its object", forms are not acts of thinking, but rather the objects of these acts or, more precisely, the objects of the contents of these acts (*noêmata*). Once again following the traditional rendering, I refer to these *noêmata* as "concepts". Indeed, in *Parmenides* 132b7-c8 – which postdates the *Republic* (cf. *Pl. Prm.* 126a2) and antedates the *Timaeus*⁴ – we find an argument against conceptualism, of which John Burnet writes: "Observe how clearly Conceptualism is formulated, and how deliberately it is rejected".⁵

In the following, I first (I) analyse the argument against conceptualism in the *Parmenides* and then (II) extend this argument to "the not-being" (*to mê on*) in the *Sophist*, which "is what is not" (*Sph.* 258c2-3). I conclude (III) with the puzzle that, in this case, the being of "the not-being" also has "understanding (*nous*), life (*zôê*) and soul (*psychê*)" (*Sph.* 249a9).

I.

I shall divide the argument against conceptualism into two sections, a longer one and a shorter one.

Section I

[S1] But Parmenides, said Socrates, may it not be that each of these forms (*eidê*) is a thought (*noêma*), and that it properly occurs only in souls (*psychais*)?

[S2] For in that way, each would still be one, and no longer undergo what was just now said.

[S3] Well, he said, is each of the thoughts one, but a thought of nothing?

[S4] No, that is impossible, he said.

[S5] A thought of something, then? Yes.

3 Cf. my interpretation 2020b, esp. 221-26.

4 Cf., for example, Thesleff 1982, 157-61; Sayre 1983, 256-67; Ferber 2020b, 215-21.

5 Burnet 1914, 258 n. 2.

[S6] Of something that is?

[S7] Of some one thing which that thought thinks as being over all (*henos tinos, ho epi pasin*), that is, of some one form (*mian tina ousan idean*)? Yes.

[S8] Then that which is thought (*touto to nooumenon*) to be one will be a form (*eidōs*) ever the same over all? Again, it appears it must.

(Pl. *Prm.* 132b7-c8; transl. Allen, modified)

Section 2

[S1] Really! Then what about this, said Parmenides: in virtue of the necessity by which you say that the others (*talla*) [sensibles] participate in forms (*tōn eidōn*), does it not seem to you that [a] either each is composed of thoughts and all think, or [b] that being thoughts (*noēmata*) there are unthoughts (*anoēta*)?

[S2] But that, he said, is hardly reasonable.

(Pl. *Prm.* 132c9-11; transl. Allen, modified)

B. Russell considered this argument “a kind of ontological argument to prove the objective reality of ideas”.⁶ Let us therefore call it, in analogy with the ontological argument for the reality of an immortal soul in the *Phaedo* (Pl. *Phd.* 105c9-107a1),⁷ the ontological argument for the reality of universals.⁸

This argument has already been accorded due attention by the Neoplatonist Proclus (cf. in *Prm.* 890.30-906.2), as well as by scholars, including J. Burnet, A. E. Taylor, F. M. Cornford, H. Cherniss, D. Ross, R. E. Allen, M. Migliori, L. Brisson, B. Bossi, C. Helmig, C. Kahn, S. Assaturian and A. L. Braga de Silva.⁹ Bossi has also written a clear history of the *status quaestionis*.¹⁰ In the present context, I shall limit myself to raising some relatively neglected points about the first section, and then about the second one.

6 Russell 1945, 417: “The real question is: Is there anything we can think of which, by the mere fact that we can think of it, is shown to exist outside our thought? Every philosopher would like to say yes, because a philosopher’s job is to find out things about the world by thinking rather than observing. If yes is the right answer, there is a bridge from pure thought to things, if not, not. In this generalized form, Plato uses a kind of ontological argument to prove the objective reality of ideas [and the immortality of the soul]”.

7 Cf. my interpretation in Ferber 2021, 388, with further bibliographical references.

8 Cf. Ferber 2021, 388.

9 Burnet 1914, 258; Taylor 1926, 356-57; Cornford 1939, 91; Cherniss 1944, 214-16; Ross 1951, 88; Allen 1980; Migliori 1990, 146-48, especially n. 50; Brisson 1994, 39-41; Bossi 2005; Helmig 2007; Kahn 2013, 13-14; Assaturian 2020; Braga da Silva 2022.

10 Bossi 2005, 62-69.

On Section 1

[S1] suggests *ad modum experimenti* that these forms are thoughts (*noêmata*), that is, mental entities “in souls”. As Cornford has observed, the word “thought” (*noêma*) is ambiguous.¹¹ It can refer either to the (private) “act of thinking” or to the (public) content of this act, i.e. the *nooumenon*. For Cornford, *noêma* here can only mean “act of thinking”,¹² but since Cornford does not make the Fregean distinction between the idea (*Vorstellung*), which is private, and the sense (*Sinn*), which “may be the common property of many”,¹³ and since the Platonic forms are not private ideas (*Vorstellungen*), we can nevertheless take concepts (*noêmata*) to refer to the common contents of these acts of thinking in many different souls.

With regard to the question of who actually defended this thesis, the School of Eretria,¹⁴ Antisthenes¹⁵ and Speusippus¹⁶ have been mentioned, but suggestions like these cannot be proved or disproved, since we lack independent testimonies that would corroborate one another.¹⁷

[S2] suggests, without further explanation, that the dilemma of participation could be solved – that is, the question of whether particulars participate partially or wholly in the forms (i.e. in these mental entities).

[S3] postulates the unity of these thoughts or mental entities and their intentionality – that is, in this case, their objective reference.

[S4], [S5] and [S6] state that this reference must not be about nothing, but rather about something that is.

[S6] identifies this something with a unity over all beings, identifying it as a single form (*idea*), using the expression “*idea*” interchangeably with “*eidos*”.

[S7] draws the conclusion that this something is *one* form or *eidos*.

This conclusion seems valid to the author of the *Parmenides*, i.e. Plato, who later has Parmenides summarise the result as follows: “[...] I suppose that you and anyone else who assures that the nature and reality of each

11 Cornford 1939, 91-92.

12 Cornford 1939, 91.

13 Frege 1997, 155.

14 Taylor 1926, 357, who refers to Grote 1885, 74 n. 2.

15 Brancacci 1993, esp. 40-41; Braga da Silva 2022, 62-63.

16 Graeser 2003, 20-22.

17 Cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1919, 228: “Die verbreitete Annahme, dass die Einwände gegen die Ideenlehre, die Platon den Parmenides erheben lässt, ihm von anderen gemacht wären, läßt sich weder beweisen noch widerlegen, denn sie wird nur aus dem Dialoge selber erschlossen”.

thing exists as something alone by itself would agree, first of all, that none of them is in us" (Pl. *Prm.* 133c3-5, transl. Allen).

Thus, Ross writes: "The conceptualistic interpretation of universals is thus dismissed very summarily, and Plato never recurs to it".¹⁸ If Plato never "recurs" to the "conceptualistic interpretation of universals", then we can assume that he remained a realist about the universals until the end of his writing career, as the passage in the *Timaeus* (Pl. *Ti.* 52a1-5) confirms.

However, as Cornford remarks "Plato's *Parmenides* repudiates [with this argument] the doctrine which some critics ascribe to the *real* Parmenides, that 'to think is the same thing as to be': *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai* [...]"¹⁹ That is, by means of the argument against conceptualism, Plato's *Parmenides* also repudiates the interpretation of Fragment 3 as establishing an identity between thinking and being: Thinking is not the same as being.

Yet, if we can interpret Fragment 3 – which is unfortunately never quoted by Plato – in at least a *minimal* sense as claiming that thinking presupposes being, that is, that thinking presupposes something that exists as its object,²⁰ then we may also view this anti-conceptualistic argument as a reinterpretation of Fragment 3 on the part of Plato. H. Rochol, for example, even went so far as to write that "this theory concluding from the existence of thinking to the existence of an objectively existing object of thinking, is at the same time the gist and basic theory of Platonism".²¹

On Section 2

[S1] The first sentence of Section 2 contains two arguments: [a] an argument showing the impossibility of "panpsychism", at least if we can interpret "the others" (*talla*) as sensible things, and [b] a *reductio ad absurdum* showing that the existence of thoughts that do not think implies a contradiction. The impossibility of panpsychism derives from the impossibility that the sensible things participating in thoughts can themselves think. If this were

18 Ross 1951, 88.

19 Cornford 1939, 82, cf. 34 n. 1: "I cannot believe that Parmenides meant 'to think is the same thing as to be'. He nowhere suggests that his One Being thinks, and no Greek of his date or for long afterwards would have seen anything but nonsense in the statement that 'A exists' means the same thing as 'A thinks'".

20 Cf. Shorey 1900, esp. 210-12: "The only probable interpretation, if the text is sound, is that Thought is always of something (since it can't be of nothing) in and which it is spoken". For a maximalist interpretation, cf. Ferber 1989, 71-73.

21 Rochol 1971, 506-507, quoted in Dorter 1994, 35 n. 21.

true, not only would animals and plants participate in thinking, but also even stones, which would therefore be said to think in some way. The *reductio ad absurdum* formulated in [b] consists of the logical contradiction that these thinking sensible things do not think.

[S2] gives young Socrates' consent.

Thus, conceptualism about universals is refuted and realism seems to be true. In this case, however, we may not only fall into the "pit of nonsense" (*bython phlyarias*) (Pl. *Prm.* 130d7), accepting the real existence of forms of things "like hair and mud and dirt" (Pl. *Prm.* 129c6-7), but we also have to accept negative forms, such as forms of the unjust (*adikou*) and of the bad (*kakou* (cf. Pl. *R.* 476a3)), as well as forms of negations. Thus, Aristotle writes in his critique of Plato's Theory of Ideas, "According to the 'one over many' argument there will be Forms even of negations" (Arist. *Metaph.* A9 990b12-13).²²

II.

Indeed, if we apply this ontological argument for the existence of ideas to "the not-being" (*to mê on*), then "the not-being" (*Sph.* 258e2) is also "a thought (*noêma*) of some one thing over all the [negative] things (*henos tinos, ho epi pasin*), that is, of some one form (*mian tina ousan idean*" (*Prm.* 132c3-4). Therefore, "the not-being" (*to mê on*) also *is*.

In fact, the *Politicus*, which concludes the trilogy *Theatetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, summarises the *Sophist* with the phrase "the not-being is" (*einai to mê on*) (Pl. *Plt.* 284b8).²³ Indeed, after having introduced the term "the other" (*to heteron*) for "the not-being (*to mê on*)" (*Sph.* 257b3-4), Plato has the Visitor from Elea state that "the not-being" is a "single form (*eidōs hen*) numbered among the many things that are" (*Sph.* 258c2-3, transl. Rowe).

However, if "the not-being" (*to mê on*) is "one single form" (*eidōs hen*), then it also belongs to what "perfectly is" (*pantelōs on*) (*Sph.* 248d7-248a1).²⁴ But in this case (cf. *Sph.* 248c4-249a4) "the not-being" (*to mê on*), too, qua

22 For a good discussion, cf. Ross 1951, 166-67.

23 Cf. my interpretation 2020b, 219-20.

24 For a bibliography referring to *pantelōs on* in Pl. *Sph.* 248d7-248a1, see Krämer 1964, 193-94. Particularly valuable discussions are to be found in de Vogel 1970, 176-81, and Lafrance 2015, 319-39, especially 321: "Ainsi mis dans son contexte immédiat, le *pantelōs on* désigne l'être dans toute son extension, c'est-à-dire tout ce qui est immobile et tout ce qui est en mouvement. La connaissance entant que mouvement constitue une partie de ce *pantelōs on*. L'adverbe désigne moins ici l'absoluté et la perfection de l'être que la totalité de l'être envisagé sous l'angle du mouvement et du repos".

“the other” (*to heteron*), possesses “change (*kinêsis*)” (*Sph.* 248e6), “understanding (*nous*), life (*zôê*) and soul (*psychê*)” (*Sph.* 249a9).²⁵

But if “the not-being” has understanding (*nous*), then according to the ontological argument of the *Parmenides*, “the not-being” is also a thought (*noêma*) or concept which has “the not-being” as its object. Since “the [first] not-being” is already real, “the [second] not-being” cannot be a further mental object *outside* of the first, but must rather be a *noêma* or concept of itself, that is, a *noêma* of a higher order, meaning that “the not-being” would be a “thought” (*noêma*) of a “thought” (*noêmatos*).

Do we not fall here once again again, in thinking the not-being as having soul, into a new “pit of nonsense” (*bython phlyarias*) (*Prm.* 130d7) and, to avoid doing so, are we not forced to conclude with Ross and others that those who believe that Plato is abandoning here “his belief in the unchangeability of Ideas and assigning soul to them” are “mistaken”?²⁶ Or must we rather accept, with Plotinus, that if the forms have “change, life, soul and understanding (*nous*)” (*Sph.* 248e6-7), then Plato admits intellection (*noêsis*) on the part of essential being (*ousia*) (*Enn.* VI, 7, 39, 29-30), and the Platonic world of forms is, in the words of Szlezák, “a self-thinking, transcendent intellect”?²⁷

In this case, “the not-being” – which “is what is not” – can “act or be acted on” (*Sph.* 248b5) in the following sense: It can act on itself in the sense of “spiritual motion”,²⁸ or more exactly spiritual self-motion (cf. *Pl. Lg.* 896a3-4), when reflecting on itself, and it can be acted on, in the sense of being moved spiritually, when being reflected on by itself.

However, this is not explicitly stated, at least not in the passage quoted from the *Timaeus*: If what is “unchangeable” and “admitting no modification” (*Ti.* 52a1-5) belongs to the “perfectly real” (*pantelôs on*) (*Sph.* 248d7-249a1), then it “stands immutable in solemn aloofness, devoid of understanding” (*Sph.* 249a3, transl. Ross).

I do not see how to harmonise these contradictory statements, between, on the one hand, Plato’s realism about universals in the *Parmenides* and *Timaeus* and, on the other hand, his implicit conceptualism with regard to universals in the *Sophist*, where he equips them with “change (*kinêsis*),

25 For this difficult passage, see Ross 1951, 110-111.

26 Ross 1951, 110.

27 Szlezák 2021, 474-75, who refers to Schwabe 2001. For an overview of scholars who think that the position in the *Sophist* is not “incompatible with the metaphysics of other dialogues”, see Crivelli 2012, 95 n. 75.

28 Cornford 1939, 237. Quoted in de Vogel 1970, 179.

understanding (*nous*), life (*zôê*) and soul (*psychê*)” (*Sph.* 248e5-7). How, for example, could mathematical universals such as “the equal” (*to ison*) (cf. *Phd.* 74a5-75a3) or “the other” (*to heteron*) as “the not-being” (*to mê on*) (*Sph.* 257b3-4) have a subject that thinks? Perhaps it is a higher-order conceptualism in the sense that *universalia ante rem* are also concepts in the mind of the world, as “the complete living thing” (*to pantelês zôon*) (*Ti.* 30c1).²⁹ However, this would involve an extrapolation, if not a kind of “misinterpretation by inference” (Robinson 1953, 2-3). If that was what Plato actually meant, he could have said so. But he did not.

III.

I conclude with a puzzle: When the young Socrates interprets the Platonic forms as thoughts (*nêmata*) or concepts, he is led by the Platonic Parmenides back to the real being of forms. Conversely, when the young Theaetetus assumes the real being even of “the not-being” (*to mê on*), he is led by the Eleatic Stranger back to understanding (*nous*). In other words, conceptualism about “the not-being” implies Platonic realism about “the not-being”. But does Platonic realism about “the not-being” not imply conceptualism? Does Plato reinterpret, *pace* Cornford (cf. here p. 377), Fragment 3 of Parmenides (*to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*) not simply in the “minimal” sense that thinking presupposes being, but also in the sense of an identity between thinking and being? Moreover, since the relationship of identity is symmetrical, did he interpret this relationship not only “forwards”, in the sense that thinking implies being, but also “backwards”, in the sense that being implies thinking?³⁰ This is what Plotinus subsequently did when quoting Fragment 3: “[...] thinking is not outside but in being” (*Enn.* V.1.8-20-22).

Was this mutual implication or “circle” between thinking (*noein*) and being (*einai*) not perhaps predicted by the historical Parmenides: “It is indifferent to me where I make a beginning; for there I come back again” (*DK.* B5, transl. Gallop/Taràn)?³¹

29 Cf. Krämer 1964, 200-201.

30 Such an interpretation has indeed been defended, *pace* Cornford 1939, 34 and 92, by Long 2004, esp. 234-40, cf. 229: “Parmenides’ first call on us is not to think about being, but to think about thinking being”. Quoted without footnote.

31 Thanks are due to B. Bossi, L. Brown, A. L. Braga da Silva and S. Meister for some helpful remarks.