

Invisible epiphanies in Plato's *Sophist* (253c-254b)

Nikos G. Charalabopoulos

University of Patras

Plato's *Sophist* 253c-254b is an interlude between two scenes of intense dialectical reasoning. There the Visitor produces two epiphanies of the philosopher and the sophist. They are constructed as each other's foil and they both share the property of invisibility for entirely opposite reasons. This competition of portraits is performed through structural mirroring, verbal replacement, reverse word order, in a manner suggestive of the best Gorgianic figures. My paper focuses precisely on the relationship between these two as presented in their respective invisible epiphanies. I argue that one of Plato's objectives for constructing this visual counterpoint is the translation in narrative terms of the five greatest kinds soon to follow: Being (τοῦ ὄντος 254a8), Rest (ἀεὶ...προσκεείμενος a8-9), Motion (ἀποδιδράσκων a4), Sameness (ἰδεῖν μὲν χαλεπὸν 253a9 = οὐδαμῶς εὐπετῆς ὀφθῆναι 254a9-10), Difference (ἕτερον μὴν τρόπον a1). The description draws on familiar Platonic tropes of manifestation of divine (or not) entities, mostly from the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, and the *Protagoras*. My second point relates to the intratextual web of this *agon eikonon* beyond the *Sophist*. A couple of pairs that immediately comes to mind as a possible parallel is that of the philosopher and the tyrant in the *Republic* and Socrates and Meletus in the *Apology*. One might be inclined to see in all these cases a Platonic replay of the Prodikos' Herakles' Choice of Life. Unlike Virtue and Vice, though, the Platonic competitors share common ground that makes it almost impossible to sever all ties between them. In the case of the *Sophist*, in particular, the sophist, as *the* arch-impostor, may easily capitalize on their epiphanic invisibility and persuade the multitude that he is the real philosopher.

Plato, invisibility, epiphany, sophist, philosopher

1. *I want it that way (Plato says)*

In terms of the *definiendum* of the *Sophist*, the digression on the philosopher (253c-254b) looks like a textually innocent interlude: a little more than a kind of respite between two scenes of intense dialectical reasoning, namely the section on the communion (κοινωνίαν 250a9) of entities and the ambitious taxonomy of the five greatest kinds (μέγιστα γένη). It isn't. For a start, throughout the dialogue only twice do we hear of what the philosopher ought to know and argue for: in a solitary remark in anticipation of the Communion of the Forms (249c-d) and in this excursus. Second, the philosopher enters the stage out of the blue. The reader could not possibly have guessed that a detailed description of the art of dialectics would *neces-*

sarily lead to the appearance of the philosopher, so that he may, for all practical purposes, be identified with the dialectician. The more so, since a few pages earlier the philosopher has been defined not in methodological but in doctrinal terms, as someone who accommodates both Being and Whole (*τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν συναμφότερα λέγειν* d4).¹

2. Double invisible epiphany

More importantly, Plato treats his audience to a couple of unusual quasi-epiphanies, namely the portraits of both the philosopher and the sophist. At first the Visitor admits that, while on the verge of tracking down the sophist, he and Theaetetus may have incidentally and accidentally come across the philosopher (*κινδυνεύομεν... ἀνηυρηκέναι τὸν φιλόσοφον* 253c8-9). His main argument is that a prerequisite for any proper definition of the sophist is the knowledge of the method of division provided by the science of dialectics (*τῆς διαλεκτικῆς... ἐπιστήμης* d2-3). The only person in possession of such a knowledge is the one who philosophises in a pure and just manner (*τῶ καθαρῶ τε καὶ δικαίως φιλοσοφοῦντι* e5-6). At this point, he reveals that they have unexpectedly discovered the habitat (*ἐν τοιοῦτῳ τινὶ τόπῳ* e8) of the philosopher. And then the Visitor makes the startling remark that, even if one happens to enter his den, the philosopher would be extremely hard to be seen (*ἰδεῖν μὲν χαλεπὸν* e9). In fact, he is as difficult to be spotted and looked at as the sophist himself.

This is by no means a claim one would expect to find aired in a Platonic dialogue - let alone stated almost categorically, without any further argumentation or challenge. True, nothing could be more different than what causes the invisibility in each case: the sophist cannot be seen because he is covered by the darkness (*σκοτεινότητα* 254a4-5) of Not-Being, whereas it is the brightness (*τὸ λαμπρὸν* a9) of Being that practically blocks anyone's view of the philosopher. There is also a huge discrepancy in reference to the intentionality of the invisibility on the part of its 'beneficiaries'. The sophist indulges in hiding himself from the rest of the world and this is the reason why he takes refuge in Not-Being: his disappearance into the realm of nothingness is both a choice and a treat. On the other hand, the philosopher's indiscernibility is merely a collateral product of his assimilation into the land of Being: he did not make it happen, it just did. All these factual remarks,

1 Discussions of the passage may be found in Notomi 1999, 234-40; Molas and Villarreal 2013; Priou 2013; Miller 2016; Oberhammer 2016, 172-78.

however, do little to refute the main premise of the passage, namely that both the champion of ontological light and the counter-hero of the ontological night are equally inaccessible to the common eye. The digression on the philosopher then is rounded off with two snapshots featuring him and his arch-enemy in their respective abode. For there may be little doubt that the culmination of the section is this contest of portraits, a kind of *agon eikonon* as it were, between the original and its fake.

The importance of this passage is hard to miss. To begin with, this is the last time we hear of the *φιλόσοφος* in the *Sophist*, while he is never to be mentioned in the sequel dialogue of the *Statesman*. Since the **Philosopher*, the final piece of that (supposedly) prospective trilogy (*Sph.* 217a3) was never written, this epiphany takes on the significance of a statement: the philosopher's main rival is neither the king nor any leader of a state but the sophist alone – owing to the latter's ability to assume multiple identities. Their competition is articulated in the form of condensed narratives, in which their absolute antithesis contrasts with their common denominator, namely their invisibility. Most importantly, the oppositional juxtaposition of the content finds its perfect reflection in the contrapuntal structure of the respective descriptions. Both sentences (254a4-6, 254a8-10) may be broken down into four pairs of phrasal units, interconnected through structural mirroring (all pairs), verbal replacement (pair C) and reverse word order (pair D).

| | A | B | C | D |
|-----------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Structural mirroring | ὁ μὲν ἀποδιδράσκων εἰς τὴν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος | σκοτεινότητα τριβῆ προσαπτόμενος αὐτῇ | διὰ τὸ σκοτεινὸν τοῦ τόπου | κατανοῆσαι χαλεπός |
| | ὁ δὲ φιλόσοφος τῇ τοῦ ὄντος | ἀεὶ διὰ λογισμῶν προσκεείμενος ιδέα | διὰ τὸ λαμπρὸν αὐ τῆς χώρας | οὐδαμῶς εὐπετεῖς ὀφθῆναι |
| Verbal replacement | | | διὰ τὸ σκοτεινὸν τοῦ τόπου διὰ τὸ λαμπρὸν αὐ τῆς χώρας | |
| Reverse word order | | | | κατανοῆσαι χαλεπός οὐδαμῶς εὐπετεῖς ὀφθῆναι |

3. A whiter shade of pale

This carefully projected isomorphism between the two portraits provides the digression on the philosopher an emphatic, even if enigmatic, closure. The digression itself has variously been interpreted as a proof that Plato intended to write the **Philosopher* or an implicit definition of the essence of the philosopher. In either reading this ‘contest of portraits’ is not treated separately but usually considered part of the rhetoric of the digression as a whole. Such an approach, however, does little justice to the rich textual dynamics of this authorial choice. Therefore, I would wish to suggest two further reasons for Plato’s constructing this *agon eikonon* in the *Sophist*. First, in its immediate context, it seems to offer a visual narrative that foreshadows the argumentative section soon to follow. This section features the discussion on the *megista gene*, those intellectual entities necessary for reaching a valid definition of any *definiendum*: Being, Rest, Motion, Sameness and Difference (254b-260d).²

A close reading of the ‘duel’ between the sophist and the philosopher may reveal that all five of them have a role to play in that narrative. The philosopher seems to hold fast to the Form of Being (τῆ τοῦ ὄντος...ιδέα 254a8-9), while experiencing a state of permanent Rest (ἀεὶ...προσκειμένος a8-9). The sophist, in turn, finds himself in constant Motion (ἀποδιδράσκων a4), while partaking in the existence, whatever this may be, of the Not-Being (τοῦ μὴ ὄντος a4). The pejorative connotations of his movement are hard to miss, since he is depicted in terms of a fugitive, even a runaway slave (cf. *Prot.* 310c3), who takes refuge in the safe haven of darkness. Earlier in the dialogue the ‘multi-headed sophist’ (ὁ πολυκέφαλος σοφιστής 240c4) had been compared to well-known mythic monsters, such as the Hydra, the Scylla or the Chimaira. Himself a shape-shifter he could easily play the part of the champion of Difference fighting against his great opponent, the champion of Sameness. Yet they are both equally invisible to the eye of

2 It is a familiar authorial trope on Plato’s part that his characters, either in their actions or narratives or both, exemplify the arguments discussed in the course of the dialogue – whether pro- or analeptically. For an example of *prolepsis* one may point to the condensed reference to the war between Athenians and Atlantians at the beginning of the *Timaeus* (21a-26e), a story to be narrated in elaborate detail in its sequel dialogue, the *Critias*. An instance of *analepsis* may be found in the mirror scenes of riotous entrance in Agathon’s house (*Smp.* 212c-e ≈ 223b) or Socrates’ description *post eventum* of how his divine voice prevented him from crossing Ilissos (*Phdr.* 242b-d).

the beholder— regardless of the radically different reasons that generate this feature (ἔτερον μὴν τρόπον 254a1).³

4. Intratextuality

My second point relates to the intratextual web of this *agon eikonon* beyond the *Sophist*. It is true that Plato here hints at the manifestation of divine (or not) entities in dialogues such as the *Republic*, the *Symposium*, and the *Phaedrus*. One pair that immediately comes to mind as a possible parallel is that of the philosopher and the tyrant in the *Republic*. Despite the vast difference in scale and the connection with the main argument of their respective dialogues, in both cases the contestants exemplify modes of life almost ontologically incompatible.

Yet the *Republic* connection may go deeper than one might at first think. The phrase *ιδεῖν χαλεπὸν / χαλεπὸν ιδεῖν* is attested quite a few times in Plato but, as a rule, in its negative version ('it is not difficult to see'). The only occurrences of the affirmative form are the extract from the *Sophist* (253e9) and the section featuring the most famous Platonic dictum of the *Republic*; namely, the aphorism that the cities will always suffer from all kinds of evils unless the rulers become philosophers and/or the philosophers rulers. This is how Socrates' last words on the relevant section (473e4):

χαλεπὸν γὰρ ιδεῖν ὅτι οὐκ ἂν ἄλλη τις εὐδαιμονήσειεν οὔτε ἰδίᾳ οὔτε δημοσίᾳ.

For it is difficult to see that there is no other way a man could find happiness either in his private or public life

The analogy is more than telling: for the vast majority of people it is equally difficult both to see the philosopher in his full glory and accept that the philosophical administration is the only way to happiness for all the inhabitants of a city. In a sense the philosopher of the *Sophist* experiences in a pure,

3 The common ground between the philosopher and the sophist is well brought out by Dominick 2019 and Esses 2019. According to Bossi 2013, 167 the opposition between the bright abode of the philosopher and the dark one of the sophist is 'evidence of the effect of a certain Parmenidean legacy' upon Plato. On the multilayered significance of brightness in Plato see Sassi 2020. For the epiphanies in the ancient Greek world see Petridou 2015 and Petraki 2022. On mythical monsters and shapeshifters see Murgatroyd 2007; Konstantakos 2017; Syropoulos 2018; Mawford 2020.

undiluted manner the happiness Plato's ideal city in the *Republic* was meant to guarantee for its citizens in their private and public affairs.⁴

5. A darker shade of blue

There also appears to be a sinister, darker side lurking behind the description of what does the sophist do as soon as he reaches the land of Not-Being: he seems to perform a perverted version of the intercourse the philosopher has with the Form of Beauty in the *Symposium*. There the Form impregnates the philosopher with beautiful thoughts, ideas, speeches, and so on, to which the philosopher will give birth as soon as he finds his beautiful philosophical *eromenos*. Here the sophist attaches himself to and touches the (grammatically female) darkness of the Not-Being through physically rubbing (τριβῆ) himself on her.

If σκοτεινότης (a Platonic coinage?) here – and this is a big if – replays the dark Night from Hesiod's *Theogony* (Νύξ ἐρεβεννή 214), then a gloomy question looms over the readers of Plato: what about the sophist's offspring? The Hesiodic text provides two possible scenarios, both deeply disturbing for different reasons. According to the first one, Night conceives asexually, in the manner of parthenogenesis, and gives birth to a number of fearful and loathsome deities, such as Death, Distress, Old Age (211-225). If the sophist's τριβή is a mock penetration, then any offspring of his will have only a 'biological' mother without a father. The sophist's lack of a permanent identity and the fact that two of Night's kids are called Ἀπάτη and Ἔρις might be suggestive of what is going on in the Platonic text. On the other hand, option (b) is even more devastating. Night has sex with Pitch-Black (Ἐρεβος) and gives birth to Aether and Day (οὐς τέκε κυσαμένη Ἐρέβει φιλότητι μυγείσα 125), the producers of light for mortals and immortals alike. But very few propositions would be quintessentially anti-Platonic than claiming that the brightness of the Being has somehow originated in the darkness of Not-Being – yet the hypothetical possibility is there.

4 I follow Slings' latest OCT edition who prints ἄλλη (in the dative) following the reading of a 15th century manuscript. In the earlier OCT Burnet had printed the adjective in the nominative ἄλλη, following all major earlier manuscripts. On this reading the meaning of the sentence would be that the only city capable of attaining happiness for its citizenry is the Kallipolis. My argument applies equally to both available textual variations.

6. The Well of Fortune

Another possible intratext is the *Theaetetus*. The way the Visitor introduces the philosopher in this digression has a striking similarity with a couple of elements from the (in)famous Thales story, narrated by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, the prequel of the *Sophist* in dramatic terms. A comparison between the passages may speak for itself:

Sph. 253c7-9

(ΞΕ.) ἢ πρὸς Διὸς ἐλάθομεν εἰς τὴν τῶν ἐλευθέρων ἐμπεσόντες ἐπιστήμην, καὶ κινδυνεύομεν ζητοῦντες τὸν σοφιστὴν πρότερον ἀνηυρηκέναι τὸν φιλόσοφον;

(VISITOR) Or, for heaven's sake, **without noticing** have we **fallen into the knowledge** that **free people** have? Maybe we've found the philosopher even though we were looking for the sophist?

fallen into: Charalabopoulos stumbled on N. P. White

Tht. 174a4-8

ΣΩ. Ὡσπερ καὶ Θαλῆν ἀστρονομοῦντα, ὦ Θεόδωρε, καὶ ἄνω βλέποντα, πεσόντα εἰς φρέαρ, Θράττα τις ἐμμελής καὶ χαρίεσσα θεραπαινὶς ἀποσκῶψαι λέγεται ὡς τὰ μὲν ἐν οὐρανῷ προθυμοῖτο εἰδέναί, τὰ δ' ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρὰ πόδας λανθάνοι αὐτόν.

SO. They say Thales was studying the stars, Theodorus, and gazing aloft, **when he fell into a well**; and a **well-proportioned and gorgeous** Thracian servant-girl made fun of him because, she said, he was wild to know about what was up in the sky but **failed to see** what was in front of him and under his feet.

well-proportioned and gorgeous: Charalabopoulos witty and amusing: Levett rev. by Burnyeat

While the Milesian philosopher falls into a well, finds nothing and fails to see what is going on next to his own feet, the Visitor and Theaetetus have fallen into the knowledge of free men, find the abode of the philosopher and take a glimpse of the bright realm of Being. In both Platonic dialogues the motif of *katabasis* is parodied since falling is not a matter of free choice but necessity. And, to make matters (slightly) worse, the territory of Being seems to be 'located' somewhere down under (not Australia!), the traditional area that belonged to the gods and inhabitants of the Netherworld.

One might also be inclined to see in all these cases a Platonic replay of the Prodicos' Herakles' Choice of Life. Unlike Virtue and Vice, though, the Platonic competitors share common ground that makes it almost impossible to sever all ties between them. In the case of the *Sophist*, in particular, the sophist, as *the* arch-impostor, may easily capitalize on their epiphanic invisibility and persuade the multitude that he is the real philosopher.