

Two Ontological Functions of the Nature of Difference in Plato's *Sophist*

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To characterize the sophist as a maker of what is not, one must know what Not-Being is. *Sophist* 257c–258e elucidates Not-Being in terms of Difference. Although Not-Being was traditionally identified with Difference *itself* (Cherniss and Ross), most scholars today consider it *part* of Difference (Lee, Brown, Kahn, etc.). This paper advocates the traditional view by clarifying two ontological functions of Difference: ἀφορίζειν (marking off) and ἀντιτιθέναι (setting against). Section 1 analyzes the analogy of Difference and knowledge in 257c–d, showing that the nature of Difference functions as marking off a still indefinite Kind (being) from Being itself and other parts of Being—the “generic” function—and then specifying the content of the Kind at issue by setting it against a particular Kind—the “specific” function. Section 2 discusses the Not-Beautiful in 257d–e to explain how these two functions work. By the specific function of Difference, we learn what the Beautiful is, identifying paradigmatic exemplars of the Not-Beautiful in daily life. Section 3 interprets 258a–b as generalizing this account, concluding that the *antithesis* between a part of the nature of Difference and a part of the nature of Being is nothing but Not-Being. Thus, the context indicates that Not-Being is identical to Difference itself, which performs this *antithesis* as its function. Although the widespread view uses “τὸ πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἕκαστον μόνιον αὐτῆς ἀντιτιθέμενον” (258e2) as strong evidence, this participial phrase stands for the function of the nature of Difference, as ἀντιτιθέμενον is a dominant participle, thereby meaning “the part of it [the nature of Difference] *being set against* each being” as an example of the *ab urbe condita* construction.

Not-Being, Difference, Not-Beautiful, *antithesis*

Introduction

To characterize the sophist as a maker of what is not, one must know what Not-Being is. After careful scrutiny, the Eleatic Visitor and Theaetetus finally declare that they “have demonstrated what the form of Not-Being is” (258d6–7), recapitulating their argument as follows:

T1 258d7–e3: τὴν γὰρ θατέρου φύσιν ἀποδείξαντες οὐσάν τε καὶ κατακεκερματισμένην ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα πρὸς ἄλληλα, τὸ πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἕκαστον μόνιον αὐτῆς ἀντιτιθέμενον ἐτολήσαμεν εἰπεῖν ὡς αὐτὸ τοῦτό ἐστιν ὄντως τὸ μὴ ὄν. (OCT [1995])

By replacing the form of Not-Being with ὄντως τὸ μὴ ὄν, T1 elucidates the nature of Difference and its relationship with Not-Being. However, their connection is disputable. On one hand, as one of the greatest Kinds, Difference is treated as if it is on the same ontological level as Being. Hence, Not-Being is shown not to be the *opposite* of Being, but something *different* from it (257b3–4, 258a11–b4). As the Different is set against Being, Not-Being seems to be the same as Difference.¹ Yet, more recently, it has been assumed that “Part of Otherness, not merely Otherness by itself, defines the genuine non-Being” (Lee 1972, 267), for which T1 seemingly provides strong evidence.² In this context, a question remains regarding whether Not-Being is considered Difference (Otherness) or part of it. If Not-Being is not identified, we cannot appreciate the definition of the sophist in this dialogue.

In this paper, I discuss 257c5–258e3 and clarify the nature and functions of Difference. By doing so, I criticize the widely accepted approach in which Not-Being is identified as part of Difference, which does not consider two ontological functions of Difference: ἀφορίζειν (marking off) and ἀντιτιθέναι (setting against). In Section 1, I interpret the Visitor’s analogy of the nature of Difference and knowledge in 257c7–d6. This analogy helps us comprehend how parts of Difference come into being. In Section 2, I analyze the Visitor’s exposition of the Not-Beautiful as an example of part of Difference in 257d7–e11. This example enables us to explain how the two functions of Difference lead the Not-Beautiful into being. In Section 3, I conclude that Not-Being is defined as the *nature* of Difference, not as *part* of it, by discussing a controversial sentence (258a11–b4). Finally, I return to T1 and interpret 258e2–3 by shedding new light on the participial phrase “τὸ πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἕκαστον μῶριον αὐτῆς ἀντιτιθέμενον” in this context. My reading advocates the identification of Not-Being as the nature of Difference.

The Analogy of the Nature of Difference and Knowledge (257c7–d6)

At 257c7, the Visitor begins to explore the nature of Difference by investigating how it “has been cut up into pieces” (κατακεκερματισθαι). What does he mean by “being cut up into pieces”? He first explains this in the case of knowledge:

1 Cherniss 1944, 93 n.61: “τὸ μὴ ὄν is the ‘idea of difference’”; 262: “[Plato] identifies [τὸ μὴ ὄν] rather with the idea of difference”; Ross 1951, 115: “[not-being] is not a sixth ‘greatest kind’, because it is simply difference under another name.”

2 Brown 2012, 249: “not being is not identified with the different, but with either one special part of it ... or with any part of the different”; Kahn 2013, 121.

T2 257c10–d1: Knowledge too, I suppose, is one, but each part of it, marked off (ἀφορισθὲν), is relating to a particular thing (ἐπὶ τῷ γιγνόμενον) and carries a particular name (ἑπωνυμίαν ἴσχει) that is peculiar to itself. (Rowe 2015, trans., slightly modified)

By analyzing the naming practice into two steps, T2 shows how knowledge is cut up into pieces. The second step is easier to understand than the first. For example, in relation to health and disease, a particular kind of knowledge is named “medicine.” Another kind concerning numbers is named “arithmetic.” In general, each branch of knowledge has a proper name in relation to its specific subject matter. Before this step, however, a particular kind of knowledge must *already* have been grasped as “part” of knowledge, since we are not interested in knowledge in general. This first step is expressed as “being marked off” (ἀφορίζεσθαι). But from what? The answer is that the relevant part must be marked off from both the whole of knowledge and its other parts. The reason is that calling something a part implies that it is not the whole of which it is a part, and that it is a part that is different from other parts.

Hence, the naming of a particular branch of knowledge consists of two steps. (1) We are concerned with knowledge, not as a whole but as a part of it, marked off from the whole as well as other parts. Logically, in this step, we still have no idea of the part of knowledge with which we are dealing. (2) By relating it to a particular subject matter, we find a specific type of knowledge by which we deal with this branch's proper object.

Using the analogy of knowledge, the Visitor tries to explain how the nature of Difference is cut up into pieces, assuming it “is one, and its parts have suffered the same” process as parts of knowledge have (257d4–5). Each part of Difference is named according to two steps: (1) being marked off from Difference and its other parts; and (2) according to its specific nature. Immediately, the Visitor replaces (2) with “being set against (ἀντιτίθεσθαι) some specific being” (cf. 257e2–4), thus discussing the Not-Beautiful as a part of Difference. How, then, are these two steps in naming related to the nature of Difference?³

At the end of the “five greatest Kinds” passage (254b–256e), which argues that each of the five Kinds is no other Kind and is different from all other Kinds by partaking of the nature of Difference (255b3, e5–6; cf. 256b2–3), the Visitor draws a general conclusion from the case of Motion: “with all Kinds (πάντα τὰ γένη), the nature of Difference, by making (ἀπεργαζομένη) each

3 Cf. Lee 1972, 269–76; Brown 2012, 243–48.

of them different from Being [itself], renders (ποιεῖ) it not Being (οὐκ ὄν)” (256d12–e2). Just as a sensible object’s participation in a transcendent Form represents a *causal* relationship in the middle works, so does the nature of Difference function (ἀπεργάζεσθαι, ποιεῖν) in a similar causal way to *make* each Kind different from Being and to *render* it not Being. Ontologically, without this function of Difference, no Kind could exist *distinctly* from Being. As each Kind comes to *be* (or exists) only by partaking of Being (256e3), Difference, with Being, serves to make each Kind one among beings (τὰ ὄντα), that is, a part of Being. Thus, the nature of Difference, as being one (μῖα οὐσης 257d4–5), is “cut up into pieces over *all* beings (ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα)” (258e1), and with Being, “pervades” (διεληλυθότε 259a4–6, cf. 255e4) *all* Kinds. Since this function of Difference can be applied generically to all Kinds, I call it the “generic function” of Difference. By this function, the nature of Difference generically marks off part of Being, which is also part of Difference, not only from Being itself, but also from other parts of Being.

Hence, the generic function of Difference is the first step in naming of a part of Difference, by which X is marked off from Difference itself and its other parts. It is not contradictory to say that X *is* and *is not*, as X *is* by partaking of Being, while X *is not* by partaking of Difference: X is different from Being and *is not* Being. Thus, Being and Difference cooperate to mark off X as being something (τὶ), but X remains as something *indefinite* at the stage, where the generic function of marking off is not enough to determine what X is (cf. 255e3–6). As in the case of knowledge, to specify what content X has by virtue of the nature of Difference, we must consider the second step in naming: the Not-Beautiful.

Not-Beautiful as a Part of Difference (257d7–e11)

The Visitor goes on to explain how parts of Difference come to possess their own names, focusing on the second step in the naming process. To his question of whether what is set against the Beautiful has a name, Theaetetus confidently replies:

T3 257d11–13: Yes, it has (“Εχον)! For that which we utter on each occasion (ἐκάστοτε φθεγγόμεθα) as “not-beautiful” is different from nothing else than the nature of the Beautiful (τῆς τοῦ καλοῦ φύσεως).

Contrary to the usual interpretation, T3 does not treat negative predications, as already shown by van Eck and Brown.⁴ The participle ἔχον stands for τῷ καλῷ τι θατέρου μῶριον ἀντιτιθέμενον (257d7), which is named “μὴ καλόν”; γάρ explains why this part of Difference is named “Not-Beautiful” by appealing to our daily experience of uttering “not-beautiful,” in which we call or name *this part* “Not-Beautiful.” So, the relative pronoun ὃ and its “postcedent” τοῦτο must refer to this part. Because the nature of Difference is regarded as a Kind, this part of it must be a Kind, and ἡ τοῦ καλοῦ φύσις, which is set against the Not-Beautiful, must also be a Kind, but not whatever is beautiful.⁵

Why, then, does Theatetus mention our daily experience of naming the relevant Kind “Not-Beautiful”? Consider the occasion on which we utter “not beautiful.” As noted above, this utterance is not a predication that says something about something else, nor is it plausible to imagine a theoretical discussion of the Not-Beautiful by using its name. The context of this passage requires us to reflect on the structure of how we name a part of Difference, so we may well expect Theatetus to vividly recall how he has so far demarcated the Beautiful and the Not-Beautiful in his life. If so, the use of φθέγγεσθαι seems to highlight our ostensive learning of the Beautiful in contrast to the Not-Beautiful. In trying to learn what the Beautiful is, we encounter something that is not beautiful at all, and suddenly exclaim in surprise, “No! Not beautiful!” This utterance never *describes* X before our very eyes as “X is not beautiful,” but it is a sign of *identifying* the Not-Beautiful in X, regardless of what X may be.

To illustrate this type of identification by analogy, consider how a child learns a color, say, “red.”⁶ A child is shown various color samples by a teacher—not only paradigmatic samples of red, such as apples and tomatoes, but also foils, which are paradigmatic samples of different colors, such as peaches and eggplants. The child is aware of learning a particular color. When the teacher shows another sample of red and asks whether it is called “red,” the child may correctly answer, “Red!” If the teacher shows a yellow ball, the child may shout, “Not red!” The child who is learning what red is tries to demarcate between red and not-red, focusing on the realm of color and ignoring where red or not-red exists. Through trial and error, the child learns what to call “red,” often by identifying what is not-red.

4 Van Eck 1995, 25–32; Brown 2012, 243–48.

5 Pace Bostock 1984, 115–16.

6 Cf. Quine 1969, 119ff.

This analogy can be used to illustrate the second step in naming. If, as Bluck suggests,⁷ “Theatetus’ reply at 257d ... in terms of concrete instances” is concerned with “paradigmatic standards,” we can easily interpret our utterance of “not-beautiful” based on recognizing foils—in contrast to paradigms—in the process of learning the Beautiful. We sometimes ostensibly identify the Not-Beautiful based on paradigmatic cases here and now, demarcating it from the Beautiful. This identification constitutes the second step in our naming of a part of Difference, which specifies its *indefinite* content by setting it against the Beautiful. I call this the “specific function” of Difference.

Accordingly, the Visitor explains the Not-Beautiful in terms of these two functions of Difference:

T4 257e2–4: Ἄλλο τι τῶν ὄντων τινὸς ἐνὸς γένους μέρος ἀφορισθέν, καὶ πρὸς τι τῶν ὄντων αὖ πάλιν ἀντιτεθέν, οὕτω συμβέβηκεν εἶναι τὸ μὴ καλόν;

Is it not this: a part of some one Kind, marked off from beings, and in turn, again, set against from some one of beings, this is how the Not-Beautiful turns out to be?

T4 is problematic both philosophically and philologically. Using my interpretation of the two functions of Difference, I submit my reading of T4 based on the new Oxford Classical Text.⁸ The first participial phrase explains the generic function of Difference [ἀφορίζειν], so τινὸς ἐνὸς γένους μέρος stands for a part of Difference, the content of which is still indefinite at this step, marked off from other parts of Being (τῶν ὄντων). The second participial phrase stands for the specific function of Difference [ἀντιτιθέναι], which shows that the content of the part of Difference in question is specified by being set against some part of Being (τι τῶν ὄντων), that is, the Beautiful. Through these two functions, Difference brings into being the part in question as the Not-Beautiful.

The Visitor’s paraphrase of T4 reveals the fusion of the function of Difference and its product: “the Not-Beautiful turns out to be a sort of *antithesis* of some being against some being” (257e6–7). This *antithesis* represents the specific function of Difference, in which a still indefinite being (ὄντος) is related to the Beautiful (πρὸς ὄν). As the Greek term ἔργον means both a function of something and a work produced by the function (cf. 218c2), the

⁷ Bluck 1975, 166; cf. 142, 148, 160.

⁸ Cf. Robinson 1999, 156–57.

Not-Beautiful is the specific work Difference produces in specializing the Beautiful, for which the phrase “a sort of (τις)” *antithesis* is used.

Not-Being as the Nature of Difference (258a1–e3)

The Visitor adds two more examples—the Not-Large and the Not-Just—and stresses that they are beings in much the same way as the Not-Beautiful (258a1–6). In general, since the nature of Difference emerges as one among beings, while being a cause (ἐκείνης δὲ οὐσης 258a8), we must also treat its parts as beings. In conclusion, the Visitor exposes the nature of Difference and its relation to Being itself:

T5 258a11–b4: Οὐκοῦν, ὥς ἔοικεν, ἡ τῆς θατέρου μορίου φύσεως καὶ τῆς τοῦ ὄντος πρὸς ἄλληλα ἀντικειμένων ἀντίθεσις οὐδὲν ἦττον, εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν, αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὄντος οὐσία ἐστίν, οὐκ ἐναντίον ἐκείνῳ σημαίνουσα ἀλλὰ τοσοῦτον μόνον, ἕτερον ἐκείνου.

T5 is a highly controversial sentence. From 257b3–4, we can infer that “ἡ ... ἀντίθεσις” in T5 refers to Not-Being and that it is characterized as no less οὐσία than Being itself. So, when asked what this *antithesis* is, Theatetus unhesitatingly answers, “Clearly, Not-Being, which we were seeking for the sake of the sophist, is precisely *this* (αὐτό ἐστι τοῦτο)” (258b7–8).

Different from “a sort of” *antithesis* at 257e6, this *antithesis* denotes a formula signifying two functions of the nature of Difference in general. After the generic function of Difference marks off a part of the nature of Difference, its specific function sets that part against a particular being, which gives rise to a particular not-being. Then, this *antithesis* functions as a bridge between a part of the nature of Difference and a part of the nature of Being, which indicates that μορίου φύσεως—not merely φύσεως—is mentally supplied to τῆς τοῦ ὄντος at 258b1.⁹ Consequently, T5 answers a fundamental question from the beginning of the “greatest Kinds” passage: “How [these Kinds] stand in respect of capacity (function, δυνάμεως) to combine with each other” (254c5–6), a reply to which will somehow account for Being and Not-Being (c6–8). As a vowel-like Kind, the nature of Difference functions as a special bond (δεσμός, 253a5) not only generically between Being itself and a part of it, but specifically between any indefinite being—a part of Difference—and a particular being, so that a particular not-being comes into being. If the interlocutors still regard οὐσία as δύναμις (capacity or function),

9 Robinson 1999, 157; Brown 2012, 249–50; cf. Lee 1972, 282–83.

the idea of which they introduced at 247e, we can legitimately reason that they identify Not-Being with this *antithesis* as the function of Difference, specifically with the bearer of the *antithesis*.

Finally, let us return to T1, which recapitulates T5¹⁰ and concludes this passage:

T1 258d7–e3: τὴν γὰρ θατέρου φύσιν ἀποδείξαντες οὐσάν τε καὶ κατακεκερματισμένην ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα πρὸς ἄλληλα, τὸ πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἕκαστον μόνιον αὐτῆς ἀντιτιθέμενον ἐτολμήσαμεν εἰπεῖν ὡς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐστὶν ὄντως τὸ μὴ ὄν.¹¹

For, having demonstrated that the nature of Difference *is* and has been cut up into pieces over all beings against each other, as to the part of [the nature of Difference] being set against each being, we dared to say that it is precisely *this* that really Not-Being turns out to be.

As noted in the Introduction, many scholars have identified Not-Being as *Part* of the nature of Difference, taking the proleptic, participial phrase “τὸ πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἕκαστον μόνιον αὐτῆς ἀντιτιθέμενον” to mean “the part of the nature of Difference set against each being,”¹² which αὐτὸ τοῦτο restates. However, instead of this identification, T5 showed that Not-Being is the *antithesis* of a part of Difference and a part of Being, which consists of the function of the nature of Difference, restated by “αὐτό ... τοῦτο” at 258b8. As T1 paraphrases T5, it seems reasonable to take the participial phrase at issue as expressing this function of Difference. But is this grammatically possible?

Since T5 and 258b7–8 focus on the *antithesis* that signifies Not-Being, insofar as the participial phrase rephrases it, the central factor of the phrase must be the participle ἀντιτιθέμενον, which might be grammatically called “a dominant participle.”¹³ In this case, the phrase emphasizes not the *part* of Difference, but the *function* of Difference that sets the part of it against a particular part of Being. If this participial phrase is “used like an articular infinitive with its subject” (Goodwin 1890, 332, §829 (b)),¹⁴ we can translate it as “the part of it [i.e., the nature of Difference] *being set against* each being,” as an example of the *ab urbe condita* construction. Therefore, in the ὡς clause, “αὐτὸ τοῦτο,” as well as “αὐτό ... τοῦτο” (258b8), signifies the very

10 Note ἐτολμήσαμεν εἰπεῖν (258e3) refers back to εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν (b2).

11 I adopt ἕκαστον (Simp. in Ph. 238.26) rather than ἐκάστου (MSS; Simp. 135.26) and take it with τὸ ὄν, not with μόνιον.

12 Brown 2012, 251. Interpretations vary depending on whether one takes ἐκάστου or ἕκαστον with τὸ ὄν or with μόνιον.

13 Emde Boas et al. 2019, 630–31, §52.45.

14 Cf. Smyth 1956, 456, §2053.

function of the nature of Difference, which ὄντως τὸ μὴ ὄν—the form of Not-Being—proves to be.

Conclusion

I have argued that Not-Being is identical to the nature of Difference. Many scholars have mistaken it as *part* of the nature of Difference, disregarding the dominant use of ἀντιτιθέμενον at 258e2.¹⁵ They have also paid little attention to the two ontological functions of Difference. The generic function of Difference [ἀφορίζειν] helps Being itself bring any being (Kind) into existence, whereas its specific function [ἀντιτιθέναι] makes this indefinite being into a particular not-being by setting it against a particular being. The nature of Difference is cut into pieces over all beings and, with Being itself, pervades all Kinds. Hence, 257c–258e shows that Not-Being, as such, has been scattered throughout all beings (τὸ ... μὴ ὄν ... κατὰ πάντα τὰ ὄντα διεσπαρμένον 260b7–8), thus contributing to the rest of Plato's *Sophist*.¹⁶

15 To my knowledge, only Van Eck 2002, 81–83 considers the participial phrase at issue to mean “the fact that a part of it [i.e. of the nature of the different] is set against the being of each” (81). However, not only does van Eck not explain the grammar of ἀντιτιθέμενον, but he also identifies Not-Being with Part of the nature of Difference; cf. 1995, 24; 2002, 73–74.

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