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THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY AND THE ELEATIC SCHOOL*

Abstract. This text exposes and analyses the references to the Eleatics starting from the hints to Gorgias and Zeno in the *Phaedrus* 261c–d and from the eristic arguments of Euthydemus which are evidently influenced by the way of arguing of the Eleatics. Naturally, the greatest attention is reserved for the dialectical dialogues: with a real *coup de théâtre*, the Eleatics pass from being (almost) unknown figures to becoming masters. First Parmenides and then the Stranger of Elea give Socrates important suggestions about method and content. This sequence is even more exceptional because it is the only case in which we find some internal references in Plato's corpus, where the author usually never mentions his own writings. These analysis highlights, among other issues, the importance of dialectics, the treatment of not being as different, the denial of the so-called parricide by the Stranger of Elea.

Keywords: Gorgias, Zeno, Eleatics, dialectics, eristic.

1. The Plato's problem

In this specific contribution, I cannot discuss Plato's way of writing.[1] The ultimate meaning of the reflection which Plato presents in the *Phaedrus* is that

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[1] Concerning this topic, I refer to M. Migliori, *Il disordine ordinato ...* , vol. 1, pp. 25–190, ch. 1: *Come scrive Platone*. The crucial point is the definition of the written philosophy as *a game* which is, however, so serious that a person may choose to devote his or her whole life to that commitment.

he only reveals what he considers to be necessary for the reader's philosophical growth. This allowed him to build a huge *Protreptic*, starting from very simple dialogues and extending to increasingly complex works.

Here I wish to explore a particular consequence of this state of affairs. The interlocutors featured in the first part of platonic *corpus* are mostly sophists, rhetoricians and, more generally, representatives of Athenian culture. Instead, philosophers—and therefore, Eleatics, too—remain in the background. This does not allow us to say they are ignored by the author. Rather, we have to test two hypotheses: either we accept a (highly improbable)[1] form of ignorance on Plato's part or we acknowledge the game which he built into his texts. One of the aims of this essay is to show the unacceptability of the first hypothesis and to suggest how the second one may be explained.

2. Some references to the Eleatics

First of all, the fact that Plato ignores the Eleatic School before the *Parmenides* is not true at all, as may be inferred from a series of facts.[2] Some references show that Plato believed the great sophists to be operating in an anti-Eleatic context.[3] In particular, he states that Gorgias' dialectical treatise has Eleatic-Zenonian roots. This emerges from *Phaedrus* 261a–e. Socrates speaks about the antilogic art, i.e. the art of contradiction, which makes the same men believe that the same thing can be both right and wrong, good and bad. In this context, the first character to be mentioned is Gorgias (261c2). Then Socrates plays with the gorgian treatise's title (*Defence of Palamedes*) and mentions *the Eleatic Palamedes*, Zeno, who is capable of making the same thing appear similar and dissimilar, one and multiple, still and in movement (261d6–8). Therefore, in an antilogical context, Plato correctly links[4] Gorgias and his rhetoric to Zeno.

But it is especially the two eristic characters of the *Euthydemus*, Dionysodorus and Euthydemus, that make this link evident.[5] Let's take the text at 283a–d as an example. Socrates talks about virtue and, stressing the need to pay attention to what Dionysodorus says, he seems to be heralding something important.[6] The eristic orator asks Socrates 1) if his wish for Clinias to become

[1] Plato was a young man from a good family. Therefore, tradition ascribes him to an early personal acquaintance with teachers like the Heraclitean Cratylus and Hermogenes, who followed Parmenides' philosophy (Diogenes Laertius III, 6, strangely suggests that Plato spent time with parmenidean philosophy after he had already grown close to Socrates, but it seems far more logical to me to assume that he did that before, at the time of his youthful education).

[2] One of these facts (the characteristics of the Idea—intelligibility, immateriality, being in the full sense, immutability, distinctiveness—are clearly derived from the Eleatics) has a theoretical nature, so I will not be taking it into consideration, since it is not a written piece of evidence and therefore remains entirely hypothetical.

[3] On this link between sophistic and Eleatic School, see M. Migliori, *Gorgia quale sofista di riferimento di Platone*, M. Migliori, *La filosofia dei sofisti* ... & F. Eustacchi, *Il movimento sofistico*.

[4] Plato was familiar with Gorgias' treatise *On Not-Being*, which deploys an Eleatic structure based on Zeno against Eleaticism itself, and concludes, in its first thesis, that *nothing is*.

[5] We are dependent on this dialogue from the work of L. Palpacelli, *L'*Eutidemo *di Platone*.

[6] See M. Erler, *Der Sinn der Aporien in den Dialogen Platons*, pp. 360–361.

wise is serious and 2) if Clinias may be wise now or not. The answer to the first question is positive; the answer to the second one negative. The eristic debater, therefore, concludes:

> *You wish—he said—for this man to become wise and for him not to be ignorant* [...] *Therefore, you wish him to become what he is not and not to be what he is now* [...] *Therefore, considering the fact that you don't want him to be who he is now, what else do you want, if not for him to die?* (283d1–6)

The argument is based on an acceptance of the pair *being–not-being* in its absolute value, just as in the Parmenidian Poem:

> *The core of this sophism is the univocal meaning of the verb* to be*: the verb* to be *is not used like a copula, but like a verb that states existence and, therefore, when it is used in a negative way, it negates existence itself.*[1] *The background against which this sophism is set is that of Eleaticism and post-Eleaticism (including the Megarians): indeed, the solution to escape from this trap will be provided by Plato, who will state that Being can have many meanings. Obviously, the sophism here is not solved because Plato will solve it in the* Sophist*. When he wrote the* Euthydemus*, he was presumably facing a problem that he chose only to formulate. This is because he would have had to mention the Eleatics in order to solve it, but they were only to make their appearance later on, in the* Parmenides*. Eleatic thought is present, because it is a component of sophistry, but there are no the Eleatics*.[2]

In this context, it is all the more significant that Ctesippus is indignant and intervenes in the conversation by saying that Dionysodorus is lying.[3] Euthydemus replies by asking if it is possible to lie. Indeed, he who lies has to mention the object he is talking about:

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[1] Both M. Erler, *Der Sinn der Aporien in den Dialogen Platons*, p. 361 & R. S. W. Hawtrey, *Commentary on Plato's* Euthydemus, p. 97, reveal the ambiguity in the use of ὅς, which can be interpreted as a relative, *which*, but also as οἷος, *what*, which would indicate the existence not of an object, but of a quality. If we interpret the sentence in this way, the term in question would not link the verb *not being* to death, but would simply indicate a change, as R. K. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy*, p. 13, suggests: *Therefore, you wish him to become what he is not and not to be what he is now*. Both scholars acknowledge that the true core of the sophism is the ambiguity of the use of the verb *to be*. The verb *to be* is firstly used as a copula: to be ignorant and be wise (pointing to two qualities of Clinias); then, with an existential meaning: not being anymore = dying. This sophism reveals the application of the *a dicto secundum quid ad dictum simpliciter*: the transition from an affirmation with a relative value to one of absolute value: being wise/ignorant simply becomes being in an absolute sense (existing). Socrates could explain the ambiguity of the use of the verb *to be*, just as in the first and in the second sophism he explained the ambiguity of the verb *to learn*, but what Plato is interested in now is to elicit a reaction from Ctesippus, who—as we will see—is deeply offended by the two characters' words.

[2] L. Palpacelli, *L'*Eutidemo *di Platone*, pp. 128–129.

[3] This raises the problem of the false (283e–284c), which constitutes the main theme of the ontological treatment in the *Sophist*.

> *Therefore, if you say it, do you mention any of the other things, beside the one you are talking about?* [...] *Does the thing mentioned exists among the other existing things, independently from the others?* [...] *But he who says what is and the things that are, tells the truth. Therefore, Dionysodorus, if he speaks about the things that are, he is telling the truth and he is not lying about you at all.* (284a1–8)

This statement has a clear Eleatic flavour because of its identification between saying, thinking and being, and the absolute sense of the verb *to be*. Ctesippus' answer is a smart one: he

> *grants Euthydemus the truth of his conclusion, but he disputes the fact that Dionysodorus, in that specific case, has spoken about things that are. He states: it is true that* if *the one who speaks is talking about things that are, he's telling the truth.* But *Dionysodorus didn't speak about things that are, therefore he lied. Briefly put: it is true that if A (he talks about the things that are), then B (he tells the truth); but if not-A, therefore not-B. The true issue discussed here is the possibility to understand*[1] *Being in many senses*.[2]

Basically, Ctesippus states that the defeating of this *Eleatic*[3] position happens on a relationship level between reality and thinking. Anybody familiar with the *Sophist* (see then, pp. 28–32) will notice that Plato is foreshadowing what will be debated in that dialogue.[4]

The presence of Eleatic elements, mediated by Gorgias' treatise, is confirmed by Euthydemus' answer, which Palpacelli schematises as follows: 1) what is not, is not; 2) what is not, is not in an absolute sense; 3) nobody can do something which does not exist in an absolute sense; 4) when rhetoricians speak, they act; 5) speaking is a way of doing; 6) in conclusion, nobody can speak about what is not, because they would be doing something that does not exist.[5] In this way, [n]*ot-Being, which was initially in the background, now becomes a more explicit topic. Later on it is pointed out that the Not-Being mentioned is meant in an absolute sense:* Therefore, aren't the things that are not not-being in an absolute sense? *(284b4–5).*[6]

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[1] See T. H. Chance, *Plato's* Euthydemus, p. 88.

[2] L. Palpacelli, *L'*Eutidemo *di Platone*, p. 131.

[3] *Eleatic* in the structure of its argumentation, not in its aims, just like Gorgias' treatise.

[4] See L. Palpacelli, *L'*Eutidemo *di Platone*, p. 269: *Euthydemus and Dionysodorus act in the dialogue scene following a script that will find its clarification and justification in the* Sophist. *So, on the one hand, the* Euthydemus *constitutes an* ante litteram *practical demonstration of the* Sophist. *On the other hand, the* Sophist *completes what the* Euthydemus *only shows* in opere operato, *and it gives the theoretical reasons for it*.

[5] See L. Palpacelli, *L'*Eutidemo *di Platone*, p. 131.

[6] L. Palpacelli, *L'*Eutidemo *di Platone*, p. 132.

It would be possible to continue much further in this direction, to show how much *Eleaticism* Plato is ascribing to the two eristic interlocutors. While the text we are dealing with is almost certainly a plausible historical testimony, this in no way changes the fact that Plato deliberately chose to build the scene in question and selected some of the arguments that the eristic debaters had brought up to suit his own purposes. It is therefore impossible to suppose that the author did not have a deep knowledge of Eleatic and post-Eleatic philosophy. The absence of explicit references to Elea's most important teachers in the dialogues written before the *Parmenides* looks like a conscious choice that deserves deeper scrutiny.

3. The contribution of the dialectical dialogues

What we have is the umpteenth proof of a controlled way of writing, whereby the author always decides what information to give: the Eleatics emerge exactly when it is no longer possible to proceed without that dialectic that Plato *invented* by redeveloping the Zenonian technique. With a real *coup de théâtre*, the Eleatics pass from being unknown figures to becoming masters: first Parmenides and then the Stranger of Elea give Socrates important suggestions about method and content.

The extraordinary structure of the *dialectical* dialogues establishes one of the many *games* through which Plato offers the reader stimuli, but also hints (as in this case). We have a solid trilogy—the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*, and the *Philosopher* (unwritten)[1]—with a perfect sequence of place and characters, to clarify what a philosopher is by distinguishing him from similar figures, such as the sophist and the politician.

This trilogy is linked to the *Theaetetus* in an extraordinary way.[2] Indeed, at the end of this dialogue, we find a classic device in Platonic dramaturgy: deferment to another meeting. However, the characters *never* meet again in a following dialogue. Instead, the *Sophist* begins the next morning with the meeting of the same characters (and the Stranger of Elea), who recall the decision made the day before.

But this is not all: this sequence is all the more exceptional because it is *the only case in which we find some internal references* in Plato's *corpus*, where

[1] On this (apparent) oddity of a trilogy (or even a pentalogy) centred on an unwritten dialogue, see the brief section *Il filosofo non scritto* [the unwritten *philosopher*] in: M. Migliori, *Il disordine ordinato ...* , vol. 1, pp. 110–113.

[2] The Socratic and introductory functions of the *Theaetetus* allow you to avoid the already beaten path. As A. Becker, *The structure of knowledge ...* , p. 37 points out, some scholars—he mentions E. Heitsch, *Überlegungen Platons* ... & M. Burnyeat (in: Plato, *The* Theaetetus [*of Plato*])—consider it a good starting point for an epistemological reflection, thereby downplaying its metaphysical weight. Others—like F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* & D. Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism*—instead believe that the theme of the Ideas is central to the dialogue, which would show that there cannot be any true knowledge without them. Becker (p. 38) believes that it is possible to support both of these arguments because the *Theaetetus* tries to understand Ideas by reducing the weight of ontological assumptions in favour of language. All of these interpretations have the same limit: they try to identify *one and one only* characteristic of dialogue. On the contrary, the Platonic approach is multi-focal, which means that the dialogues—including the simpler ones from the first period—never have only one purpose or topic. On this topic, see M. Migliori, *Plato: a nascent theory of complexity* & M. Migliori, *Lifelong Studies in Love with Plato*.

the author usually never mentions his own writings. These references involve a fifth dialogue, the *Parmenides*.[1] If common sense is anything to go by, a text that mentions another text has to be regarded as subsequent to it and hence will usually be read after it. We find ourselves facing a pentalogy with two premises: an *apparently enigmatic* premise that serves an exemplifying function (the *Parmenides*) and one that *draws a balance* on Socrates' contribution (the *Theaetetus*); the latter premise is followed by two dialogues, the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, both of which are functional to a third one, the *unwritten Philosopher*.

Plato sought to provide an indication through these references: these four dialogues must be read in a sequence and not as a single block. While I cannot analyse thoroughly this topic here, a specific point needs to be underlined: these works enhance the Eleatic dialectical contribution.[2]

Finally, we need to consider the disconcerting beginning of the *Sophist*. There is a new character, who is introduced by Theodorus as belonging to the school of Parmenides and Zeno. At this point, Socrates asks an apparently nonsensical question: whether Theodorus, without realizing it, has brought some sort of disguised deity among them, a god of confutation. The fact that Socrates' question is not a joke is proven by the serious answer that Theodorus gives him, which clarifies two things about the guest: he is moderate in discussions and, although he is no god, he is *divine* because he is a true philosopher (216b8–c1). Thus, Plato has informed us that both dreadful refuters[3] and true philosophers come from Elea. Moreover, the interlocutor's nature itself offers a pretext to embark on an investigation about the philosophy, by distinguishing it from sophistics and politics.

Actually, the choice seems somewhat inevitable: given the link between sophistics and eleaticism, which will later be confirmed in other dialogues,[4] only a dialectic of Eleatic origin (firstly introduced in the *Parmenides*, then discussed in the *Sophist*) can remove the problems.

4. The *Parmenides*' game[5]

In the *Parmenides* Plato makes certain choices to clarify his view of Eleaticism. There are a lot of important elements that I can only recall here.

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[1] The *Parmenides* is mentioned in *Theaetetus* 183e and in *Sophist* 217c; the *Theaetetus* is recalled at the beginning of the *Sophist* (216a), and twice in the *Statesman* (257d & 258a), where the expression ἐν τῷ σοφιστῇ looks more like a cross reference to a text than a discussion.

[2] Even the *Theaetetus* too mentions Eleaticism, but the core of the analysis is Heraclitean-Protagorean. Therefore, the discussing of Eleaticism is postponed (183c–184b).

[3] It is impossible here not to think of Gorgias and the eristic debaters.

[4] The sophist's strength lies in the Parmenidean prohibition to say *[it] is not*, which entails the not-existence of falsehood.

[5] See F. W. Niewöhner, *Dialog und Dialektik* ... , p. 77: *No Platonic dialogue has ever had been subjected to so many opposite interpretations as the* Parmenides. See also G. Huber, *Platons dialektische Ideenlehre* ... , p. 7. These range from the Neoplatonics' theological interpretations to the understanding of this dialogue as a pure logical exercise designed entirely for school purposes. See M. Migliori, *Dialettica e verità*, pp. 56–68, with further bibliography.

In the first part of the dialogue we have a debate between Zeno and a very young Socrates.[1] The dialectician of Elea has brought his book to Athens for the first time, but Plato dismisses the contribution provided by the pupil of Parmenides in a number of creative ways.[2] The first is the transformation of the Parmenidean's *ontology* into a *monism* based on a simplified view of Zenonian dialectic: Zeno attacked the *many*, because he was trying, evidently, to defend the *One* of his teacher. But this is not a major theoretical move: Zeno only proves that those who makes fun of his teacher's argumentation (*only the One is*)[3] end up incurring more ridiculous consequences.[4] Socrates expresses appreciation of the dialectical method invented by the Eleatic philosopher, but notes that the latter applies it to material reality, with an unacceptable fall away of the theoretical level. Finally, the fact that physical reality may be one and multiple is unsurprising and does not engender any contradictions if the theory of Ideas is applied.[5]

The following speech by Parmenides confirms the complete unreliability of the scene: Socrates' impudent attack does not provoke an irked response at all. Instead, the opposite happens, as Socrates' words receive the approval of the old teacher, who does not defend his friend Zeno at all. He only shifts the attention to the issues that the theory of Ideas has to face, a topic that we cannot analyse here. Anyway, we are still left with some noteworthy elements: this *ideal* Parmenides, a great metaphysician[6] and dialectician,[7] does not attack the theory of Ideas at all, but analyses the topic with the young man (130b–d). He *says (a) to be extremely sure about the existence of the Ideas corresponding to*

[1] Clearly, this meeting could never have occured for chronological reasons. Let's suppose that Socrates was 19 years old (we must bear in mind that Aristotle, one of the future Thirty Tyrants, is the youngest and risks to become a child): the year is 450 BC. Therefore Zeno, who was 40 years old, would have been born in 490 BC and Parmenides, who was 65, would have been born in 515 BC. The gap between this dating and the one we can find in other sources is at least 20–25 years for Parmenides (see G. Reale, *Melisso*, pp. 4–6) and 10–15 years for Zeno. H. D. P. Lee (in: Zeno of Elea, [*A Text*]), p. 5, has argued that it would be difficult to make sense of Plato's chronological preciseness if the time reference he provides wasn't correct, but actually, the writer's ability allows him to *seem precise without actually being precise*. Plato used *a little trick*: he brings the dates for the Eleatics closer while *keeping Socrates' age very vague* (this was the chronological information easiest to check in his own day) *by describing him as very young* (127c5, σφόδρα νέον; A. Diès (in: Platon, *Parménide*, (ed.) A. Diès), p. 10, underlines that it is no coincidence that this vague indication is kept both in the *Theaetetus* 183e8 (πάνυ νέος) and in the *Sophist* 217c6 (ἐγὼ νέος ὤν)).

[2] Starting from the *news* that this text, in which many Athenians are so interested, would only be an early work, stolen by strangers and published without his permission.

[3] This is incorrect because Parmenides' fundamental concept is *Being* and perhaps the attribute *one* is not even present in Parmenides' fragments. See G. Reale, *Eleati*, pp. 196–201.

[4] But two ridiculous argumentations do not make a reasonable one.

[5] The true problem comes from the possibility for the Ideas themselves to be interwoven. This topic will be addressed by Parmenides in the dialogue named after him and by the Stranger of Elea, in the *Sophist* and in the *Statesman*.

[6] This is also correct. See L. Palpacelli, *Senofane e gli eleati*, p. 50: *While the Ionian philosophers, in their search for the primary and fundamental principle, take for granted, so to speak, that the things they are talking about are real, Parmenides, first of all, approaches the realities and the things* qua *they are*, qua *entities: the first* experience *that one can have about any reality lies, first of all, in the fact that* it is*. With Parmenides, therefore, philosophy focuses on the* being *of the many realities, what Aristotle will define as being* qua *being*.

[7] Therefore, Zeno's contribution is absorbed by this teacher's figure.

ethical values, (b) to have had some perplexity about admitting Ideas for natural objects (such as man, water, fire and the like), (c) not to admit Ideas of hair, mud, stains and despicable things in general.[1] Parmenides considers this limitation inappropriate and rebukes the young man with mild words, while utterly rejecting his perspective: *Socrates, you sure are still young and, in my opinion, philosophy still hasn't got you like it will the day you'll stop despising all of these realities. Instead, now, because of your young age, you value people's opinions* (130e1–4).[2]

Moreover, this *Parmenides* argues for the impossibility of separating the two levels of reality (133a–134e), because in this case we would be conscious of the realities which are close to us but would not comprehend any of the Ideas, and therefore would not have any true knowledge. Worse still, God would possess only knowledge of Ideas but would have neither power nor knowledge about our world (Socrates finds this last affirmation particularly unacceptable, 134e7–8). Finally, he states that without the Ideas, philosophy itself would perish:

> *If someone does not want to admit that Ideas* [εἴδη] *of realities exist, because of all the aporias already debated and others in addition, and refuses to associate an Idea* [εἶδος] *with every single reality, he won't have a point of reference in his thinking, because he won't assume an Idea* [ἰδέαν] *for each of the realities that exist, which is always the same for each reality: in doing so, he will destroy the power of dialectic* [τὴν τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν]. (135b5–c2)

One can (and must) find away out of these difficulties through the full adoption of the kind of dialectic developed by Zeno. Without this, the outcome can only be negative, as Plato underlines with so much emphasis:

> *In this case, the listener finds himself in a hard place and may object that* [scil. the Ideas] *don't exist or that, if they do exist, they are necessarily unknowable by human nature; in saying so, his words would seem to make sense and, as we have stated before, it would be hard to convince him. Only a very gifted man will comprehend that there exists a genus for each reality and a substance in itself; only an even more gifted one will discover this and will be able to teach it to someone else, after analysing it in all its aspects*. (135a3–b2)

This dialectical elaboration is presented as a very complex process:

> *Briefly, given the fact that for each object one always hypothesizes <1.1> its existence, <1.2> its not*

[1] G. Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, pp. 371–372.

[2] On the process of *hyper-metaphysicisation* of the Ideas, which was already taking place in the Academy and which probably lies at the basis of this criticism, see M. Migliori, *Platone*, pp. 101–102.

> *existence*[1] *and <1.3> any other quality, you have to analyse <2> the consequences <2.1> for the single object itself, <2.2>, for each of the other objects individually, whichever you choose, <2.3> for many objects intertwined, <2.4> and for all objects altogether. Moreover, you also have to analyse <3.> the other objects, <3.1> in relation to themselves, <3.2> in relation to any other object you want to choose, <3.2.1> with the hypothesis that it is or <3.2.2.> not is, if you want to see* the truth [τὸ ἀληθές] *with certainty after having fully completed your exercise.* (136b7–c5)

Therefore, the endless game characterising Plato's dialectic is described as the child of Eleaticism. Zeno's invention, which he used in an uninteresting way, is a necessary tool for philosophical and metaphysical reflection.[2] The first part of the *Parmenides* underlines the importance of this school, that taught the young and immature Socrates a metaphysical outlook supported by a dialectical perspective. Indeed, since this young man does not fully understand what this enquiry is all about, Parmenides is forced to provide a little example of dialectical elaboration, which constitutes the second part of the dialogue.

Given the limited space available, I will only mention some data, starting from the first thesis (137c–142a), which is the most clearly *Eleatic*: the One–One resists all possible predicates.[3] The basic reason for this is that if it accepted any predicate at all, it would no longer be one, but two.[4] Clearly, it does not even partake of being and is unknowable. The Neoplatonists believed to have found here a statement of the One's complete transcendence and Plato is well aware of the possibility of this kind of theoretical interpretation. Therefore, he makes the young and inexperienced Aristotle make a strong statement: *<P> Is*

[1] This is yet another proof of the fictional nature of the scene: the author of the Poem posits the negative (not-being) as a necessary step. This indication originates almost naturally from the use of dialectic already made by Gorgias in his treatise.

[2] Plato says so explicitly: *<P> What will you do about philosophy? What will you rely on, if you don't have a solution for these problems? <S> I don't see any [solution] coming. <P> Indeed, Socrates—he says—you tried to define beauty, justice, goodness and each single Idea too soon, before exercising yourself adequately. In fact, I understood that the other day, while I was listening to you discussing with our Aristotle here. The drive pushing you towards these topics is beautiful and divine. But, since you're young, you need to practice by becoming committed in this activity that may seem useless to you and that most people consider a pure game of words, for otherwise the truth will slip away from you. <S> But, Parmenides, what is this exercise you're talking about? He asked <P> The one you heard from Zeno—he replied.—Except for what I was pleased to hear coming from you, that is that you don't accept that the enquiry be applied to sensitive things or be limited to them, but that it ought to be addressed mainly to those things that are grasped by reasoning and that can properly be considered Ideas* [εἴδη] (135c5–e4).

[3] It has no parts and is not a whole, it has no geometric form, it isn't in any place, it is neither moving nor still, it is neither identical nor different, it has neither equal nor unequal measures, and it is fully external to time.

[4] See 137c4–5: *Well—said Parmenides—if One is one, isn't it true that it could in no way be many?*

it possible, then, that this is the One's condition? <A> It doesn't seem possible to me. (142a6–8)[1]

The conclusion leaves no doubt as to the fact that the argument is over, as also seems obvious in the light of a theoretical evaluation.[2] Indeed, Plato devotes the beginning of the second thesis (142b1–c7) to discussing a shift from the *One–One* to the *One-that-is*, repeatedly underlying that this is a fresh start. But since this would lead us to talk about a One-that-is that is far from Eleaticism, we have to leave this topic and turn to the Fifth thesis instead (160d–163b, the first of the hypotheses that *the One is not*).

This thesis obviously starts with the acknowledgement that the negation of the One, that is the negation of any reality that has its own identity, implies that this is something defined and knowable. Indeed, this negation is different from the complete negation of the Not-One that-is-not: in this first negative thesis we do not have a pure and complete negation (160c–d). Therefore, this One that is not turns out to be defined and knowable, to have many participations, to be similar to itself and different from everything else, and so on. This becomes particularly important since it is stated that the One must somehow partake of being.[3]

Given the complexity of the text (162a4–b3),[4] I will introduce it here by dividing it into short passages.

> *So, if this* [scil. what-is-not] *must not be, it must have, as a link to not-being, the being that is not, just as what-is, in order for it to fully be in its turn, must be able* [ἔχειν + infinite] *to not be what is not* [Δεῖ ἄρα αὐτὸ δεσμὸν ἔχειν τοῦ μὴ εἶναι τὸ εἶναι μὴ ὄν, εἰ μέλλει μὴ εἶναι, ὁμοίως ὥσπερ τὸ ὂν τὸ μὴ ὂν ἔχειν μὴ εἶναι, ἵνα τελέως αὖ [εἶναι] ᾖ].[5]

What is clear is that Plato here reveals in advance the core of the philosophical reasoning we will see in the *Sophist*. Indeed, he states the being of the Not-Being, that is the positive existence of the Not-Being, without which any

[1] On this sharp judgment, see M. Migliori, *Dialettica e verità*, pp. 219–220.

[2] Indeed, an unknowable One is not useful for a dialectical reflection on the various aspects of Ideas and empirical realities.

[3] Here Plato faces the dialectic of being which he will correctly perform in the *Sophist*. Here he cannot do it and therefore the discussion has strong ambiguities. In particular μετέχειν does not have the technical sense of *to partake*, but is used with the value given at the beginning with the word δεσμός, that is *nexus, bond*. Otherwise, the text necessarily requires some changes.

[4] I translate the Greek expressions τὸ ὂν–τὸ μὴ ὂν with *what-is* and *what-is-not* and τὸ εἶναι–τὸ μὴ εἶναι as *the being* and as *the not-being*. I do not really like the resulting translation much, but I am seeking to be as faithful to the Greek text as possible.

[5] This Greek sentence has a strange construction and an even stranger nexus, τὸ ὂν τὸ μὴ ὄν. If we link them we would have an unacceptable repetition of the article between ὄν and μὴ ὄν; moreover, we would also lose the parallel between the two expressions. I prefer to link τὸ μὴ ὄν to ἔχειν, with an infinitive clause with τὸ ὄν as subject and the verb ἔχειν, whose object is μὴ εἶναι τὸ μὴ ὄν, producing an inversion of the first expression: τὸ εἶναι μὴ ὄν–μὴ εἶναι τὸ μὴ ὄν. In this vision, the τὸ ὂν τὸ μὴ ὄν pair has the function of highlighting—in a very disconcerting way—the core of the (apparently) extraordinary statement made by the Stranger of Elea. I got this suggestion from L. Palpacelli, whom I wish to thank.

negation would be impossible. At the same time he reiterates, in accordance with the Eleatics, that the affirmation of the Being implies the radical negation of the Not-Being, i.e. of the Nothing. All these notions will later be confirmed in the *Sophist*.

> *In this way,*[1] *what-is can fully be and what-is-not can not be* [οὕτως γὰρ ἂν τό τε ὂν μάλιστ' ἂν εἴη καὶ τὸ μὴ ὂν οὐκ ἂν εἴη].

Plato specifies the meaning of the two statements: not only they are necessary for negation, but they also allow what exists to fully be, which entails yet the confirmation of the fact that what-is-not cannot be.

> *What-is partakes of the reality of the Being that is, and of the unreality of the Not-Being that is not, if it is fully to be* [μετέχοντα τὸ μὲν ὂν οὐσίας τοῦ εἶναι ὄν, μὴ οὐσίας[2] δὲ τοῦ <μὴ>[3] εἶναι μὴ ὄν, εἰ μέλλει τελέως εἶναι].[4]
>
> *What-is-not partakes of the unreality of the Not-Being that is not, and of the reality of the Being that is not, if also what is not must fully not be* [τὸ δὲ μὴ ὂν μὴ οὐσίας μὲν τοῦ μὴ εἶναι μὴ[5] ὄν, οὐσίας δὲ τοῦ εἶναι μὴ ὄν, εἰ καὶ τὸ μὴ ὂν αὖ τελέως μὴ ἔσται].

Plato keeps on reiterating what he cannot explain in this dialog, but wishes to affirm it anyway. What-is and what is-not, i.e. what becomes, must accept the existence of the Being that is and of the Being that is not. When we are talking about the becoming, we always have to deal with this intertwining of being and not-being. On the other hand we must always deny the existence of a Not-Being that is not, i.e. of the Nothing.

Plato has thus shown four possibilities: 1) the affirmation of the Being in its purity, 2) the negation of the pure Nothing; 3) and 4) the relative affirmation of the Being and of the Not-Being in the becoming. The reality partakes of the two factors, being and not-being: the former is affirmed in its pure form, the latter is negated in its pure form, but both are necessary, if what-is must somehow be in the form of the becoming. These are topics that will be clarified in the *Sophist*.

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[1] I take οὕτως γὰρ to be more linked to the previous sentence than to the following two, as many translations instead suggest.

[2] Here, the negation is linked to οὐσίας and opposed to the first positive statement; therefore, I believe that all translations that link the negation to the μετέχοντα, so as to read *it doesn't partake of reality* instead of *it partakes of unreality*, are unacceptable.

[3] P. Shorey, *On Parmenides 162 A. B.* adds and J. Burnet [in: Plato, *Parmenides*, (ed.) J. Burnet], accepts.

[4] Plato seems to be consciously *having fun* here by making this passage extremely complicated through the use of the *partake* and the οὐσία not in its usual meaning of *substance/essence*, but in a more generic sense.

[5] In this case I am not following J. Burnet's [in: Plato, *Parmenides*, (ed.) J. Burnet] version.

5. The *Sophist*'s contribution[1]

The *Sophist*'s main character is the Stranger of Elea, who is emphatically introduced as a true philosopher. He seems conscious of the following fact: in order to defeat the sophist—who is a conscious deceiver, as clearly emerges from the last diairesis—it is necessary to modify the Eleatic thought.

Given the difference between the various sophists which emerged from the diairetical analysis, we must find a common element which links them all and enables the formulation of a single definition. The characteristic that seems to define the sophist himself is the fact that he is a real expert in the art of controversy (232b). The sophists declare themselves capable of teaching others how to refute any argument.[2] The Stranger instantly levels the following criticism: the sophist should know everything. Since this is clearly impossible, we should understand this activity as a purely mimetic game, which seems real but actually is not.[3] However, it is necessary to split the imitative art in two: one form of this art produces images that are conform to the truth, while the other only proposes appearances. The Stranger finds himself in a difficult situation and does not know which of the two belongs to sophists, meaning that he does not know whether they reproduce reality or only adopt the spectator's point of view. There is a basic theoretical reason for this difficulty he is facing: we are dealing here with

> *a difficult matter from all points of view. Indeed, this appearing and seeming without being, saying something but not saying the truth—all this always creates difficulties, in the past as much as in the present. Theaetetus, it is extremely hard for someone to say and think that the false truly exists without falling into contradiction when saying this sentence* [...] *This affirmation dared to suppose that the Not-Being is, for otherwise the false could not become real.* (236d9–237a4)

The sophist has taken shelter in a place that is very difficult to explore, namely the Not-Being, which is linked to the status of falsehood. The difficulty comes from the Eleatic logic, which denies the possibility of saying, in any way, *is not*, that is justified by a series of arguments (237c–239a).[4] Even he who wishes to refute the Not-Being is bound to fall into contradiction, because he

[1] For a deeper analysis of the *Sophist*—which some of my future affirmations presuppose—and for a clearer view of my reconstruction, I refer to M. Migliori, *Il* Sofista *di Platone*.

[2] In 317b–319a there is a reference to Protagoras' activity, who also presents his teaching in the dialogue named after him. His teaching is confirmed by the list of the works that have been attributed to him, which range from philosophy (*Truth*, *On Sciences*) to politics (*On the Constitution*) and theology (*On the Gods*).

[3] See Aristotle, *Confutazioni sofistiche* 1, 165a21: *Sophistry is a knowledge which seems so, but actually is not, and the sophist is someone who gains advantages from owning an apparent knowledge and not a real one* [retransl. from Italian].

[4] We cannot attribute not-being to a being, for this would be a contradiction; talking always means talking about something that is; you can add being to another being, but you cannot add something to not-being, which therefore will neither have multiplicity nor unity; you cannot talk about it, because you either talk in the singular or plural; therefore, not-being is unutterable.

will talk about a Not-Being which he deems to be unutterable. This sort of self-defeat is justified historically, rather than logically:

> *So, what can someone say about me? For I have already been defeated in the confutation of the Not-Being long time ago and still am now.* (239b1–3)[1]

The sophist has sunk into an inaccessible place (239c), from which it is easy for him to defeat his interlocutors by asking them what is *image*. The answer implies the affirmation of not-being: just as false opinion states that some not-existent things are (240d–e), so the image, which actually exists, does not really exist because it is only similar to what is real (240b). This paradox, for the sophist, is caused by not having respected the Parmenidean prohibition to say *is not*, by combining being and not-being (241a–b). The solution is not easy: this sophist, who relies on an absolute kind of rationalism, will always reject examples which involve water or mirror reflections (images) and he will even pretend not to know what sight is (239e–240a).[2]

Plato has proposed here a philosophical reconstruction of sophistry, which seems strong because of the Eleatic premise that makes it impossible to talk about not-being and therefore about falsehood, images, and deceit. For this reason, it is necessary to go beyond the Eleatic premises. This leads the Stranger to formulate a very particular request: *not to think that I have become a sort of parricide* (241d3).

The Stranger *fears* he will be taken for a parricide, someone who rejects Eleaticism, and therefore he *prays* his interlocutor not to make this mistake.[3] He wants to save ontology (Parmenides) and the only way to obtain this result is to somehow force the Not-Being to be: without this, it is impossible to avoid contradiction when we are

> *talking about false arguments or opinions, images or copies or imitations or appearances of these things.* (241e2–3)

Finally, the Stranger urges Theaetetus (in reality Plato is warning the reader) not to be surprised if it will look like he is turning everything up and down. This is indeed what we find in the text, but I cannot delve into the matter because it exceeds the boundaries of this article. Briefly put: Plato considers many meta-Ideas, *some of those considered to be the biggest* (254c3–4)[4] in order to evaluate the possible relations between them. Following this argumentation, Plato points to the possibility of saying *not being* not in a general sense, to mean *Nothing*, but according to a particular meaning, namely the Different:

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[1] When we talk about this defeat, which already happened long time ago, we cannot help but think of Gorgias and his pamphlet *On Nature or On Not Being*. In that work, the great sophist-rhetorician attacks the Eleatic school with the very arguments it had developed, with an aim which is not nihilistic, but anti-Eleatic.

[2] Even in this case it is difficult not to think of the dissertation in the second part of Gorgias' treatise.

[3] These are vain words that Plato addresses to the reader: while the Author denies it, the charge of *parricide* remains one of the most common misunderstandings in Platonic hermeneutics.

[4] Concerning the game Plato plays with the number of these meta-Ideas, which are always said to be five, but surely are six and actually eight, see M. Migliori, *Il* Sofista *di Platone*, pp. 74–75.

each being *is* in itself and *is not* in relation to every other possible genus. *Therefore, for each Idea, the* Being *is a lot, but the* Not-Being *is quantitatively infinite*. (256e5–6)

The Not-Being is not something opposite to the Being: the negative particle only applies to the term that is negated.[1]

> *We shall not admit that one could say that a negation means an opposition, but only this: that the negative particles placed before words state something different from the names that follow them, or better, from the things represented by the names, which follow the negation.* (257b9–c3)

But the negation does not affirm a radical opposition, whether it be an opposition or a contradiction, nor does it refer to an indefinite opposite; rather, it constitutes an opening to various possible positives.[2] Plato wants to help us understand that the different is the element that structures reality. Indeed, the Stranger states (257c–258b) that the different is structured like science: this is one, but it has different parts and names depending on the object to which it is attributed. All of these are equal parts and all are: beauty belongs to things that are just as much as not-beauty. Ontologically, the negative is not inferior to the positive which it negates: we have an opposition between two ways of being, one positively defined and one negatively: the differences exist because they come from a determined negation. Indeed, Plato states once again:

> *Therefore, by the looks of it, the opposition of a part of the nature of the Different and of a part of the nature of the Being, opposed to each other, does not have—if we may put it so—less reality than being itself, because it does not state an opposition, but only a difference.* (258a11–b3)

The different's part which is opposite to the Being shows the Relative Not-Being, which is different from the Absolute Not-Being, just as the Relative Being is different from the Absolute Being (we have already seen this in the fifth thesis of the *Parmenides*). This Relative Not-Being has no less being than the Relative Being, because it is opposite to it in a not-absolute way:

> *It is clear that the Not-Being that we were looking for because of the sophist is exactly this one.* (258b6–7)

At the end Plato explicits his own beliefs:

> *<1> So, let nobody say that we dared to affirm that the Not-Being* is, *because we showed that it is contrary to the Being. Indeed we had already abandoned the hypothesis of an opposite of the Being, whether it* is *or*

[1] But in itself it does not state anything positively certain: if I say *not big*, I indicate that the thing is either identical or small. See D. O'Brien, *Le non-être*, p. 14: *Briefly, Plato distinguished, in this page of the* Sophist *(257b–c), between the big, the not-big, which is its negation, and the small, which is its opposite. The negation (*not-big*) states the alterity (*different from *...), while it does not state the opposite (even if it can replace this)*.

[2] In this dialectical position the negation is not always a contradiction or a contrariety, but expresses a difference which is determined by the term to which it is applied, yet indeterminate for what it might positively state.

> *it* is not, *whether we could reason about it or not. <2> Instead, concerning what we have now said, that the Not-Being* is*, if someone doesn't agree with us, he should either try to convince us that we are not saying right, by confuting our thesis, or, if he can't do so, he should agree with us by saying that the genera mix with each other and that the Being and the Different pervade all the genera and each other, and that the Different, even if it partakes of the Being, it is not, because of this participation, what it partakes of, but is different; and since it is different from the Being, it is clearly necessary for it to be not-being. <3> And since the Being, in turn, partakes of the different, it will be different from the other genera; but since it is different from all of these, it is neither any of them, nor all of them altogether, but only itself. <4> Consequently, the Being indisputably* is not*, for many reasons and in countless cases; the same goes for all of the other genera which, taken one by one, as well as all together, in many respects* are *but in many other respects* are not. (258e6–259b6)

Plato's position is very clear. He states that:

1. his argumentation does not involve the Absolute Not-Being, which is the opposite of the Being, which cannot be and can only be negated;
2. as far as the being of the Not-Being is concerned, as long as the argumentation made is not refuted, it remains valid: the Different and the Being are pervasive, and consequently they necessarily become intertwined; the Different, which clearly partakes of being, is not the Being, it is different from the Being; in this sense, it *is not*: it expresses that particular meaning of the Different that is the Relative Being;
3. the Being is only one of the meta-Ideas, it is neither each of them nor all of them together, but it is only itself;
4. every genus, like the Being itself, in many respects *is* and in many others *is not*.[1]

Despite its importance, the Being is not the category that defines everything or the other meta-Ideas, neither as a group nor taken individually. But reality as a whole admits the Being and that Not-Being we have discovered as a part of the Different. As in the *Parmenides*, we have the Absolute Being opposed to the Absolute Not-Being, which turns out to be excluded, while in the reality there is a complex play between the Relative Being (that is determined) and the Relative Not-Being (that is potentially infinite, but, as a different, it is qualified in its opposition to a specific term).

[1] See M. Migliori, *Il* Sofista *di Platone*, p. 82.

The ontological argumentation is over, but Eleaticism has also shown the link between saying, thinking and being. Therefore, a linguistic and epistemological treatment follows—if only in a summary form—to prove that the argumentation is not an exception, as it also entails the link between being and not-being (260a–e). Each statement has to have an object (Theaetetus) and a quality (true–false). If we take the phrases *Theaetetus is sitting* and *Theaetetus is flying*, we have two different statements regarding Theaetetus; but one of them is true, the other is false. The one that is true states how things are, while the false one states some things that are different from what they are: it shows as being some things that are not, because they are different from the things regarding Theaetetus.

This is not strange: it is not an argument about no one, but about Theaetetus, and it does not say Nothing, but something, namely that he is flying. A false judgement talks about different things as if they were identical, about not-beings as though they were beings. The same reasoning goes for thinking, because thinking and talking are one and the same thing. The former is an internal dialogue of the soul with itself done without voice, the latter is an outer dialogue done aloud. Opinions, like sensations, can be true or false because they are similar to argumentation (263a–264b).

In summary, Plato shows that Eleaticism, through Zeno and Gorgias, furnished the tools for its own destruction, but at the same time it is the basis of dialectical philosophy.

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