

Plato's Theory of Forms: being and not-being in *Sophist*

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Abstract

Gilbert Ryle argued that the late Plato abandoned his theory of Forms. With reference to the discussion of not-being in Sophist, I argue that the late Plato significantly modifies his theory of Forms, but that this modification is best seen not as an abandonment, but as an expansion. This expansion represents a principled accommodation of both Parmenidean and Heraclitean notions of being.

Keywords : Plato, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Sophist, Theaetetus, theory of Forms, being and not-being, epistemology, Ryle

Parmenides apparently held that true being is some kind of intelligible and bodiless unity (*Sophist* 246b): that 'all is one'. 'What is not' is not anything, and is completely unthinkable and unknowable: there can be no thought or statement that 'not x'. Differentiation of parts is impossible, since a part involves 'what is not' (each part is NOT any other part, and is NOT the whole). Attempts to account for the phenomenal world in terms of the interactions of a duality (or plurality) are simply false. Since any description of change involves the passage of something (at least, a state of affairs) into, and from, 'what is not' it is therefore unintelligible, and there can be no growth, decay, or motion. Parmenides instructs us to use reason, not the ordinary habits of speech and the data of sense perception, to assess his words. Parmenides seems to toy with introducing duality in an attempt to provide an account of the phenomenal world, but rejects this 'Way of Seeming' as involving not-being (Furley 1967: 49).

Meanwhile, Heraclitus apparently held that being is body or corporeality (*Sophist* 246ab): the things which can be seen, heard, and so on. This multiplicity of being consists of opposites and 'cosmic masses' (something like ele-

ments) engaged in eternal strife. Pairs of opposites can be related in a number of ways, either logically indistinguishable (like the beginning and end of a circle), in unvarying mutual succession (like day and night), or necessary for the distinction of each from the other (like disease and health). Stokes suggests (1967: 478) that '[f]or Heraclitus, such a connection proved opposites the same'. Whether or not this is so (the interpretation of Heraclitus' few remaining fragments is problematic precisely because they are so few, and – taken from a variety of times and contexts – suggest no single coherent position), there is unity and permanence for Heraclitus in these oppositions themselves, in the principles of flux. The object of knowledge is this permanent unity, the way the world functions – the Logos, or the plan by which all things are steered (see for example Kahn 1979, D.K. 41).

Plato dramatizes these two positions in the *gigantomachia*, a battle with the giants, with the gods representing Parmenides' position and the giants that of Heraclitus (*Sophist* 246a). He writes of the opposition between the two, and the need to 'defend ourselves and escape' lest we end up 'seized by both sides and pulled in contrary directions' (*Theaetetus* 181a).

Plato clearly thought highly of Parmenides. He is favourably portrayed in the dialogue bearing his name, and Plato has Socrates calling Parmenides 'as awesome to me as uncanny', and of 'altogether grand and noble depth' (*Theaetetus* 183e-184a). In *Sophist*, the capable Stranger is of the Parmenidean school, and Plato takes himself to be squarely on the side of the gods – that is, of Parmenides (it is suggestive that the *gigantomachia* is called this rather than, say, the war against the gods). As Dorter notes (1994: 140), the Stranger's comment 'Don't take me to be, as it were, a kind of parricide' suggests that Plato thinks what follows is not fundamentally fatal to Parmenides' position. The giants, meanwhile, are described as 'terrible men' Theaetetus knows well, who are probably beyond improvement or reasoned argument (*Theaetetus* 246bd).

Indeed, Plato's theory of Forms in many ways follows the Parmenidean conception of 'being'. The Forms are *intelligible*, accessible to reason rather than the senses, and *bodiless* eternal species. They provide the stability that language and knowledge require, unchanging distinct natures for the desig-

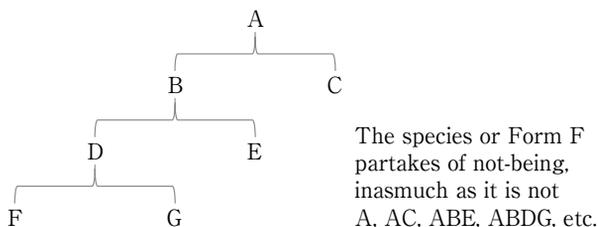
nates of universal terms (see for example Shorten 1977: 7). Plato holds that if something is in flux we cannot address it properly, because ‘it’s always slipping out and away while one’s speaking’, because knowledge becomes non-knowledge (*Theaetetus* 182c-e). A multiplicity without unity can have neither number nor properties (*Parmenides* 159d, 160ab): intelligibility presupposes permanence and stability. Indeed, Plato follows Parmenides in holding that *total* not-being is impossible. ‘[I]t’s possible neither to utter correctly, nor to say, nor to think “that which is not”’ (*Sophist* 238c) as neither the plural nor the singular can properly be used (*Sophist* 237b-239b). The notion of a negative being, or a negated noun, is nonsense (*Sophist* 258e-259a, 261e-263d).

However, it is clear that the *gigantomachia* is resolved with *both* sides making concessions. Much of *Sophist* is an examination of how to some extent not-being *is*. Plato distinguishes between verbs and nouns, and suggests that negation can be attached to the verb but not the noun (*Sophist* 261e-263d). Thus ‘[w]henver we say “that which is not”, we’re not saying, it seems, something contrary to “that which is” but only other’ (257b). Discussing a patently false statement such as ‘Theaetetus is flying’, Plato’s Stranger says:

Although, then, the other things are spoken as the same and the things which are not as the things which are, they are still spoken about you, however, and it seems that a composition of this sort, which comes to be out of verbs and names, proves to be altogether in its being and truly a false speech. (*Sophist* 263d)

Not-being in the sense of otherness is therefore possible and thinkable, rather than nonsense. In disagreeing with Parmenides’ naming theory of meaning, Plato allows both falsity (‘Theaetetus is flying’) and negation (‘Theaetetus is not flying’, Theaetetus is doing something other than flying).

With not-being possible, Plato can differentiate parts of the All. A part is not another part (is other than any other part), and is not the whole (is other than the whole). Thus Plato can allow species (Forms) to be multiple, partaking of both being and not-being: ‘So for each of the species, then, “that which is” is extensive, but “that which is not” is infinite in multitude’ (256e). Bernadete (1984: 154) offers this illustration of not-being:



Plato tells us that knowledge of F, the speech of F, requires knowledge of the whole (see *Theaetetus* 208ab, Bernadete 1984: 121, 154-5). Full knowledge of F involves knowledge of the respects in which F is not-being. The All is essential to the part *qua* part; only by depriving the part of this, by taking it as a part apart from the All, does it become partially intelligible.

To give a concrete and modern example, understanding a kidney cell as a part requires knowledge of the whole kidney. Understanding the whole kidney as a part requires knowledge of the kidney's place in the body (the kidney apart from the organism is only *partially* intelligible). But the organism is merely a part in a larger context (familial, social, genetic, physical ...). Full understanding of the organism involves understanding it as a part of wider systems, and so on for ever-larger systems. In the limit, full knowledge even of the kidney cell requires knowledge of the All.

Ultimate knowledge, then, is of ultimate being, which is the All. Any part of the All contains not-being inasmuch as it differs from the All. The All, presumably, can be made out to contain no not-being, differing from the All in no respects.

This multiplicity, as Parmenides seemed to realise with the 'Way of Seeming', is required to give an account of the world. The mind – an organiser of the matter with which it concerns itself – requires a prior multiplicity (to organise, or unify), just as action requires change. Plato accepts that reality contains mind (and life), and that intellect cannot belong to anything absolutely immobile, that knowledge comes and goes in the mind (249ab): mind requires motion, and motion requires differentiation. The method of classification employed in *Sophist* (see for example 235c) and in the figure above requires there to be a multiplicity of parts. If only undifferentiated unity existed, there would be no asking questions, let alone answering them. A differ-

entiation of unity into parts is a precondition for philosophy, mind and language. While these are partake of not-being, denying them even partial being (reality) in favour of a unitary (Parmenidean) or dual account of reality is perplexing and mystical, like a myth for children:

[I]t will ... be evident to whoever says that 'that which is' is only some two or one that thousands upon thousands of different points have severally been the recipient of unlimited perplexities. (*Sophist* 245de; see also 242c)

On the other hand, while thought and language require multiplicity, some ultimate unity (as in the figure above) is also a necessary condition:

[T]o loosen each thing away from everything is the most complete way to make all speeches disappear, for it's on account of the weaving together of the species with one another that speech has come to be for us. (*Sophist* 259e)

It seems, then, that Plato has found a middle way between Parmenidean and Heraclitean notions of being. Indeed, though a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, in Plato's *Timaeus* (Taylor 1928), the way that the Demiurge brings Reason (the Forms) into connection with materiality figuratively *is* this linking of the All with multiplicity, of universals with particularity. Going in the other direction, as in the *Sophist*, ever away from particularity, the Forms are seen to meld into one. From the Parmenidean end, being is eternal, unchanging, and unitary; the universal and unchanging are apprehended by reason. It becomes possible to give an account of the world only by moving away from this 'true being' towards not-being. (Plato is willing to do this where Parmenides was not.) From the Heraclitean end, becoming is particular and in flux, a multitude of bodies apprehended by the senses. Giving an account of the world becomes possible only by looking towards the universal and unchanging (for Heraclitus the *Logos*, for Plato the ultimate Form)⁽¹⁾. Even Theaetetus' comments (above) that the giants are terrible and beyond improvement start to look more like comedic ribbing and less like serious denigration – Theaetetus makes a point of saying he has often met them, after all.

Plato therefore makes good on each of Parmenides and Heraclitus in dif-

ferent contexts. Contentful falsity (not-being and sophistry) is in Heraclitus' phenomenal world. It becomes less, and in the limit is impossible, as we move towards knowledge and the universal. Although these two opposing positions are united in Heraclitean style, Plato comes out on the side of Parmenides. Although Heraclitus' bodies are the multiplicity necessary for life and philosophy, and have partial being and reality, each particular, each body, is *not* paradigm being. Each body is being only insofar as it participates in the being of the Forms, which are being insofar as they participate in the All. Plato deprecates empirical knowledge in favour of facts such as the internal angles of a triangle summing to 180° (which he argues are *a priori* or innate – see for example *Meno* in Allen 1984), but allows that it is only by connection with the particular and empirical that human knowledge is possible.

Though it becomes difficult to keep separate what we think Plato said, and what we think he *should* have said, it is tempting to try to make out a way in which the immanence of a universal is implied by the transcendence of Plato's Forms in the same way that their unity implies parts (Shorten 1977: 22, Collingwood 1945: 63-71). The transcendence of a multiplicity by a one is required so we can make it out as a unity, *one* quality; the immanence of the one is required to avoid a regress of Forms (the Third Man argument, *Parmenides* 131e-132b). Then transcendence and immanence would be simply Parmenidean and Heraclitean ways, respectively, of looking at the same universals.

Ryle puts forward a view whereby Plato grows out of the theory of Forms, suggesting that 'The Academy of the late Plato is the Academy of the young Aristotle' (1967: 325) and Plato is

... no longer spellbound by the idea of special entities, such as the concept-objects, or Forms ... in one passage in the dialogue he seems to hold himself aloof from the 'friends of the forms,' whom he criticizes for their reluctance to concede the reality of any objects other than their timeless concept-objects. (1967: 329)

On my interpretation, Plato is critical of the 'friends of the forms' without rejecting the Forms themselves; indeed, the Forms are *essential* to the intelligibility of the world. However, some degree of reality must be conceded to mo-

tion; motion is a *precondition* of mind (as are multiplicity, change and not-being). Conceding partial reality (being) to the particular and in flux is not a criticism of the theory of Forms, but a necessary part of it; indeed, required to make the Forms out as multiple in the first place. Ryle continues:

Doubtless one thing that moved Plato [to reject the Forms] was the impotence of the Theory of Forms to cope with Parmenides' difficulties with negation. For if there cannot be negative things, there cannot be negative concept-objects either. But then there would be no place in the reality constituted by these concept-objects for not being so-and-so; and consequently no negative truths, and therewith no affirmative truths, could be known or thought or stated about even these concept-objects themselves. (Ryle 1967: 329)

However, Plato does not seem to feel that his theory of Forms is in these respects 'impotent'. He denies the possibility of negative things, but provides a plausible understanding of not-being as 'other than' (difference). 'Difference' and 'sameness' – preconditions of the distinction of parts from the whole (and thus of mind, etc) – are the fourth and fifth Forms after being, rest, and motion (*Sophist* 254d-255e). Place in reality to 'not be so-and-so' is afforded by participating in difference with respect to so-and-so. A negative truth about a Form – 'rest is not motion' – can be understood as 'rest participates in difference with respect to motion'.

The understanding of not-being developed in the *Sophist* *does* entail that the Forms are no longer paradigm beings; they, too, contain not-being. However, the Forms are still more real than any particulars. As particulars stand to Forms, so Forms stand to the All, 'being'. The theory of Forms is required for the intelligibility of particulars, and the All is required for the intelligibility of the Forms. The All, then, is like The Form of the Forms. This is an *extension*, a continuation, of the theory of Forms; if unity is required for intelligibility, this requirement doesn't stop at the Form of kidney cell, but continues up to the All. Ryle is right when he says Plato is 'no longer spellbound by the idea of ... Forms', plural, only insofar as Plato is now spellbound by 'The Form', singular. However, this is an extension of the theory of Forms, rather than a rejection.

Note

- (1) This tension between being (a rational unity, perfect knowledge) and becoming (particular phenomena) dogs us even today in epistemology and science: both reasoning untutored by phenomena (being without becoming), and phenomena unstructured by reason (becoming without being), are worthless. However, reasoning about phenomena gives us access to knowledge. Thus, Plato's marriage of Parmenides and Heraclitus offers a principled response to the tension between 'on the one side a coherentism that threatens to disconnect thought from reality, and on the other side a vain appeal to the Given, in the sense of bare presences that are supposed to constitute the ultimate grounds of empirical judgements' (McDowell 1994: 24).

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