

Maurizio Migliori

Plato's Sophist
Value and Limitation on Ontology

Lecturae Platonis 5

A cura di Maurizio Migliori

Volume 5

Maurizio Migliori

Plato's Sophist

Value and Limitation on Ontology

Five lessons followed by a discussion with
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Lucia Palpacelli, Diana Quarantotto

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I wish to dedicate this work
To the memory
Of my dear friend
Mauro Mattioli

*True friendship remains
One of the deepest emotions
That a human being can experience
Throughout his short life*

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Preface

First of all I must thank my friend and colleague Bruno Centrone for asking me to hold this round of lectures at the Department of Philosophy and Human Sciences at Pisa University. This has enabled me to achieve two results.

To begin with, the invitation to speak at such an esteemed university before so many eminent scholars and students keen to discover a subject matter in many ways “new” to them, has “prompted” me to examine more closely and review a whole host of data I had been poring over for some time. These elements are outlined here first, and are dealt with in more depth in response to the important issues arising from the debate.

Secondly, this opportunity has allowed me to appear in the series of *Lecturae Platonis* that I have been holding in Macerata for years, and which has had the privilege to host esteemed scholars such as C. Rowe, D. Sedley, G. Ferrari and (next year) S. Scolnicov. I would have never done a *Lecture* in my “home turf” as one of the main goals of this exercise is to foster debate and discussion among scholar and students that are used to other approaches. Only away from Macerata, then, would I be able to deal with this *Lecture* “fairly”. I am happy to say that the experience in Pisa has further strengthened my belief that only when *in terra infidelium* – so to speak for a joke, can the resilience of one’s own interpretational framework be truly put to the test.

The reader may appreciate this himself in the closing pages of this book, in the hefty section aptly entitled *Exchanges with the Author*.

At least, a special thanks to Marilisa Cannarsa for her help in editing work and to Alex Bygate for his kind assistance in the complete revision of the translation.

First Lecture

Plato's Writings and Dialectical Dialogues

To some extent my reading of the *Sophist* differs from tradition in both form and content. It is common knowledge that Plato's writing technique represents one of the central issues any Plato commentator will have to deal with at some point. It is both restrictive and misleading for the whole debate on the need for a fresh new interpretation on Plato to be merely confined to the, albeit crucial, question of his *Unwritten Doctrines*. The Athenian thinker has certainly "not written" his philosophy, as he claims himself in the *Seventh Letter*, 341 C: a simple effort to reconstruct his doctrine of ideas thoroughly will reveal this. Nonetheless, he has also written for sure about philosophy, and extensively to boot. It therefore becomes essential to understand the how, why and wherefore of his writing.

1. A necessary premise

An author is read in accordance with the way he writes. Hence, if he writes in prosody and is not read accordingly, much of what he has said is lost; if he writes to be read aloud, as Plato certainly does, and he is read mentally, much is also lost.

I "discovered" this aspect while studying *Parmenides*: after poring over the classification of arguments in the second part of the dialogue, I understood that Plato provides us with a clear suggestion that, once put into practice, helps reconstruct the framework of the arguments while leaving only a couple of residual issues (as proof that the model works). The suggestion is to be found in the answers of young Aristotle (who will become one of the Thirty Tyrants): mainly phrased as pauses (yes, forsooth, why not?) they sometimes turn into proper questions (what are you saying? What do you mean?). In this second instance they hint at problematic passage or a crucial issue. The point is that, reading the text in our

minds, we skip the youth's speech as it adds nothing to the furtherance of the reasoning and turn our attention to Parmenides' line of thought; by doing this we are unable to appreciate how the question interacts "theatrically" with the thread of the enquiry.

This example alone gives rise to a first suggestion: Plato is as good a teacher as he is master of the written form, maintaining that a writer is responsible for his works not unlike a father¹, and consequently never abandons his reader. In this sense we can talk of writings with a "protreptic" goal. I have already grappled with these thoughts before and laid them down in a more articulate and, hopefully, convincing manner in two essays². Here, I shall briefly put forward those key arguments that can shed some light on the *Lecture* I suggest.

2. *An extreme example*

At times Plato is commonly known to perform operations in his dialogues that (seemingly) lack sense and anyway escape (immediate) logic. This often gives rise to random critical sniping: it is rather commonplace, then, for Plato scholars to chance upon interpretations whose baffling and unbearable "licence" demonstrate just how little reverence the original text is afforded.

Nonetheless, it is also fair to say that Plato himself does undertake some extreme deeds, such as, notably, making wilful mistakes (which he then points out, as all fine teachers do). For us to talk of "wilful mistake", I think three conditions need to be met first:

¹ Cf. *Phaedrus*, 257 B, 261 A, 275 E, 278 A.

² *Tra polifonia e puzzle. Esempi di rilettura del "gioco" filosofico di Platone*, in *La struttura del dialogo platonico*, a cura di G. Casertano, Loffredo, Napoli 2000, pp. 171-212; *Comment Platon écrit-il? Exemples d'une écriture à caractère "protreptique"*, in *La philosophie de Platon*, sous la direction de M. Fattal, II, L'Harmattan, Paris 2005, pp. 83-118; Italian version: *Come scrive Platone. Esempi di una scrittura a carattere "protreptico"*, «Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e filosofia dell'Università di Macerata», 37 (2004), pp. 249-277.

1. the mistake must be manifest and not something we have inferred as a result of critical reasoning;
2. the mistake must be manifest from the viewpoint of Plato's logic; in short, the evidence must spring from the Author's words;
3. to establish the mindset we seek to illustrate, the text must contain a hint whose sole purpose is to allow the reader, who has meanwhile caught on to Plato's "game", to solve the mistake or at least understand its root cause. If this were not so we should think that, for all his preaching about educational caution, Plato is actually an irresponsible teacher for putting the philosopher reader in a position where he will be exposed to misleading information.

These three conditions are met in a passage in *Philebus*, 33 C - 35 C, which deals needlessly necessity with a pivotal concept in Platonic philosophy: namely, anamnesis.

Socrates seeks to stress the paramount role of the soul in all its affections, even those that are normally regarded as pertaining to the body; his argument aims to prove that the soul is the seat of desires, even physical ones such as hunger and thirst. To reach this conclusion, Plato must expound a treatment on forms of knowledge, drawing a distinction between 1) weak affections that escape the soul, in which case we experience no sensations, and 2) affections that seep from the body into the soul, thus giving rise to sensations. The *conservation* of such sensations is known as memory.

The first "oddity" is that Plato has embedded within such a straightforward discussion a wholly different issue, which seemingly lacks any connection whatsoever with the reflection underway here. Indeed, by taking on memory the boundary with reminiscence can be drawn (*Philebus*, 34 B 2 - C 2):

SOCRATES – But do we not distinguish memory from reminiscence?

PROTARCHUS – Perhaps.

SOCRATES – And is this the difference?

PROTARCHUS – What?

SOCRATES – When the soul alone by itself, without the body, lives again and completely the sensations which she experienced in company with the body, we say that she has reminiscence. Or not?

PROTARCHUS – Certainly.

SOCRATES – And when she recovers again of herself the lost recollection both of some consciousness and of knowledge, those acts we must term reminiscences.

Socrates thus suggests a deep rift opens between memory, purely receptive and passive, and reminiscence, active and autonomous: this is an action undertaken by the soul alone; a strong feat, a “reliving”, that is experienced at a sensorial plane and *on an intellectual level* in the empty space caused *in this case* by forgetting.

This analysis also seeks to explain the nature of pleasure and desire and their origin (34 C-D). An announcement of this kind seems baffling *in this context*.

The treatment below establishes that the seat of desires is the soul, for what is desired when the body is empty differs from what the body feels: namely, to be filled. Desire thus resides in the soul, which acts on the strength of sensation and memory (*Philebus*, 35 A 3 - C 1):

SOCRATES – Then he who is empty desires, as would appear, the opposite of what he experiences; in fact, he is empty and desires to be full.

PROTARCHUS – Clearly so.

SOCRATES – And yet we say that he who desires, surely desires something.

PROTARCHUS – Of course.

SOCRATES – He does not desire that which he experiences; in fact he experiences thirst, and thirst is emptiness, and he desires replenishment.

PROTARCHUS – True.

SOCRATES – Then there must be something in the thirsty man which has some connection with replenishment.

PROTARCHUS – There must.

SOCRATES – But that cannot be the body, for the body is empty.

PROTARCHUS – Yes.

SOCRATES – The only remaining possibility is that the soul itself has some connection with replenishment by the help of memory; as is obvious, for what other way could that be?

Obviously, the text is plainly simple and straightforward. Unfortunately, though, it features a bizarre section that we have removed and marked with asterisks. This part raises an issue, the “first time”, which appears not only “worthless” here but also unsolved. Yet, we shall see that it will be instrumental in spotting the slip Socrates makes at the end of the passage:

SOCRATES – But how? Can a man who is empty for the first time, attain either by perception of replenishment or by memory to any apprehension, of which he has no present or past experience?

PROTARCHUS – How can he do it?

Logically, the text rules out that memory may be resorted to. This claim is as unrequired by this reasoning as it is irrefutable, although it is expressly at odds with the solution put forward at the end of the section quoted. Having dismissed the idea that the soul may draw upon memory for the first time, Plato stresses that memory is the only way to explain desire.

Let us first say, however, that we are not looking at an unwitting mistake on Plato’s part. Indeed, it is only thanks to the section marked with asterisks that our attention has been drawn: this is what forces us to acknowledge that the suggested solution is incorrect, as it does not apply to the “first time”. Yet Plato also utters the rueful statement about «the only remaining possibility» and the question «for what other way could that be?». The underlying question is this: given that there is a “first time”, if memory alone cannot always underpin the spiritual nature of desire, what else can we appeal

to? The watchful reader, who far from browsing the text is actually philosophizing along with it, ought to recall the “worthless” emphasis placed on the difference between memory and anamnesis, knowing that Protarchus can and must provide another answer based on the soul’s active function.

This kind of process reveals a style of writing bent on urging the reader to *do* philosophy rather than *learn* philosophy. This goes some way towards explaining the framework of this otherwise absurd section.

Other examples of this seemingly paradoxical approach are to be found in the articles quoted. My interest at present is to show that we are witnessing a radically different style of writing from what we are used to: a writing that confronts the reader with “issues” while nonetheless providing the necessary tools to tackle them.

3. *Neither True nor False*

I now wish to put forward a second kind of observations to show that Plato is not lying, for sure, but is failing to tell the truth; rather, he speaks the truth to the extent and with the clarity that behoves his argument. This time I draw my examples from the *Apology*, a so-called “early work” in which Plato displays the cunning and drive of a skilled master, however.

This stands out with regard to the character of Socrates chiefly: Plato endeavours to defend him against charges of haughtiness and portrays him in such a manner that one speaks of a “Platonic” Socrates. At the same time Plato *must* adhere to the “historical truth”, as handling a trial that resulted in a conviction required due care and attention. Hence, the pressure applied to his theatrical twist is such that it ultimately gives rise on a contradiction (though undetected by most, a testimony to the author’s skill).

We are now in the second phase of the trial: once sentenced the defendant could propose an alternative punishment to the one requested by the prosecution, which in this case had called for the

death penalty. Diogenes Laertius³ tells us that Socrates first proposed a 25 drachmae fine. When confronted with the judges' anger at the meagreness of his proposal, he then claims he ought to be kept at State expense. The outcome of this clash is that while Socrates had been found guilty by a vote of 280 to 220 in the first round, after his speech the judges voted massively in favour of the death penalty: 360 against 140. The narration is perfectly logical and convincing.

Things don't quite take this turn in the *Apology*, however, as Plato makes some low-key yet important changes. Socrates starts with reflecting on what is good and what is not, reminds the court of his merits, and finishes off by claiming that though penniless he is a benefactor to the city and should at least have more than the Olympic victor's reward of maintenance in the Prytaneum. As for the penalty, his position is clear-cut and ethically grounded:

As I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not do myself an injustice and I will not say to my prejudice that I deserve any evil and will not propose any penalty against myself (37 B 2-5).

Socrates is therefore unable to propose an alternative penalty as he *would do an injustice*. Plato thus provides the "true" motive behind what could be mistaken for haughtiness in Socrates: his master, a true philosopher and upright man, could not perform an unrighteous deed, and certainly not directed against himself. The facts, however, took a different turn and Plato cannot ignore them. Indeed, the contradiction looms at the end of this speech:

Also, I have never been accustomed to think that I deserve to suffer any harm. Had I money I might have suggested an offence that I was able to pay, because I would not have been the worse, But I have none, unless you proportion the fine to my means. Perhaps I could afford a mina, and therefore I propose

³ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II, 41-42.

that penalty. But here are Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Apollodorus, who bid me say thirty minae, and they will be the sureties. Let thirty minae be the penalty; for which sum they will be ample security to you. (38 A 8 - B 9).

The contradiction is out in the open, yet it could not be avoided for Plato had only two alternatives to choose from: he could either tell a lie but jeopardize his future credibility, as many eyewitnesses to the trial were still around, or he could refrain from defending his master at his own theoretical level. As the narrative of the story lends itself to this manoeuvre, Plato switches the order of the factors, placing the bid of maintenance at State expense on a theoretical level and reducing the counter-penalty of a fine to little more than a concession to friends. Yet the contradiction stands: the very unrighteous deed Socrates still ends up committing against himself is the one he had strictly ruled out beforehand. Anyhow, since most readers fail to notice this, Plato's literary and philosophical genius remains unvanquished (as is mostly the case).

Interestingly, this dialogue features another elaborate switch of data, this time pertaining to the actual charges. Diogenes⁴ and Xenophon⁵ record the wording of the indictment as based on two elements: Socrates 1) does not believe the gods of the state but introduces new divinities, *as well as* 2) corrupting the youth. Here Plato performs a dual operation. First, he keeps the indictment (obviously) but changes the order of the factors. The education issue thus becomes foremost, and thereon hinges Socrates' defence. In confirmation of the true state of things, though, the text says the charge of harming youth flows from the other, i.e. not believing in the same gods as the city (26 B). Plato then mentions in passing that the order in the indictment was: you do not believe in the gods of the city *and thus* you corrupt the youth; still, this does not alter the fact that the

⁴ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II, 40.

⁵ *Memorabilia*, I, 1.

charge pertaining to religion ranks lower in the defence framework (26 B - 28 A).

Plato actually pulls this off, also thanks to another operation he performs in this field. Socrates rightly recalls that old charges have been laid against him: even the judges have heard them since their earliest years, and Socrates fears them more than the accusations of Anytus and Meletus. Notably, mention is made of the *Clouds* by Aristophanes, first put on 24 years earlier in 423 BC, when the philosopher was 45 years old. There, Socrates is represented with two main traits: as a person who searches into things under the earth and above the heaven, and as one who turns the worse case into the better. In short, he is portrayed as a physicist and a Protagorean. The text does not say this is the actual accusation of Meletus, merely that it is rooted therein, but it does say this view breeds the conviction that, along with physicists and sophists, he too does not believe in the gods (23 D; cf. 26 D).

The consequence being that his defence is wholly grounded upon the blatant contradiction inherent in the charge of atheism (this is not the accusation raised by Meletus, though, but is the fruit of widespread public opinion), while stressing how Socrates sees his philosophizing as a kind of service to the gods (30 D - 31 A). The point here is that had Plato made Socrates deal with issues such as the relationship with God, holiness and unholiness, quite a different array of arguments would have had to be displayed. Moreover, these indictment elements were far too relevant to be left unaddressed: indeed, Plato put them on the agenda in *Euthyphro*, surely written at a time close to when the *Apology* was completed.

In short, this “minor” operation allows Plato to defend his master whilst preserving the substance of both prosecution and defence, all the while steering clear of issues he could not handle in the context of a public speech and would leave until a later dialogue. Judging from his mindfulness as to what can and cannot be said, his appreciation of the “how and when”, and the freedom and skill he dis-

plays in weaving arguments and factual truths together, one is hard pushed to view this as an “early” work.

4. *A Flaunted omission*

One last observation centred on *Euthyphro* allows us to grasp another stock element of Plato’s writing technique, albeit in its heightened form: the omission⁶.

The dialogue is said to contain many definitions of holy. The first round of so-called definitions, though, is actually a sequence that by subsequent changes reaches back to a formula, first mentioned by Euthyphro, and later amended and revised: what all the gods love is holy, and what they all hate is unholy (9 D-E). However, this definition does not hold up against the overriding objection based on the alternative: is holy that which is loved by the gods or is it loved by the gods because it is holy? Perhaps too forcibly Plato puts forward an argument (10 A - 11 B) based on a distinction that will turn out to be decisive also for our reading of the *Sophist*: the difference between active and passive, between doing and suffering. The conclusion is that being loved is a mere attribute, a consequence that sheds no light on the nature of what is holy, which, in turn, is so in itself and thus is loved by the gods for what it is.

At this point, Socrates delivers a speech teeming with mathematical and geometrical references, odd for an “early” work, in which he suggests a diairesis, a speculative tool that we therefore encounter in Plato’s works much sooner than scholars traditionally recognize. Justice is then divided into a part that attends to men and one that attends to the

⁶ I do not confront again the issue of Plato’s manifest decision not to “define” the Good; cf. on this subject M. Migliori, *Sul Bene. Materiali per una lettura unitaria dei dialoghi e delle testimonianze indirette*, in *New Images of Plato, Dialogues on the Idea of the Good*, edited by G. Reale and S. Scolnicov, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2002, pp. 115-149.

gods. This type of attending (a further diairetic passage) does not improve or benefit the recipients of such care, as this is impossible in the case of the gods, but amounts to partaking in the attainment of a result, such as servants do to their masters.

This leads us straight into the key issue: what work must men partake in for their actions to be holy? In other words, what are the results the gods seek to attain by the help of our services? Euthyphro's answer "they are many and fair" is idle as it can apply to other activities, such as war and husbandry. A specific answer must be sought that explains what these many and fair results the gods strive towards are. But this is where the dialogue stalls:

SOCRATES – And of the many and fair things done by the gods, which is the chief or principal one?

EUTHYPHRO – I have told you already, Socrates, that to learn all these things accurately will be very tiresome. Nevertheless let me simply say that: if someone is able to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices, these are holy actions, that are the salvation of private houses and public goods of the state; just as unholy actions, which are contrary to those loved by the gods, are the ruin and destruction of all (14 A 9 - B 7).

Significantly Euthyphro has plainly reverted to a previous definition: pleasing the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifice. Rather than ask himself what goal might the gods urge men to attain, he repeats that holy is what is pleasing to the gods, while forgetting that this tells us nothing about the nature of holiness.

This could be regarded as a token of the deep-seated weakness in the traditional view of God, and it would not be farfetched. But Socrates' comeback is truly shocking:

You could have answered in much fewer words the chief question which I asked, Euthyphro, if you had chosen to. But I see plainly that you are not willing to instruct me: indeed even now, just as you were about to, you drew back. Had you answered me I should have fairly (ἰκονῶς) learned of you what is the holiness. Now, as the loving follows necessarily

the beloved, whither he leads, what you think is the holy and the holiness? (14 B 8 - C 5).

If we really seek to understand what is going on, we must withstand the spell of the dialogue and remind ourselves that neither Socrates nor Euthyphro exist, and that Plato's hand has written the words we are poring over; be it Euthyphro's *error* or Socrates' rebuke, when he retorts that another answer should have been given; this answer was possible and it would have clarified the definition of holiness fairly. The author knows this answer, indeed he makes Socrates say that had it been uttered, *i.e. if Plato had written it*, he would have known, *i.e. the reader would have read*, what holiness is. Yet the author is unwilling to say so! Still, he does suggest *the whereabouts* of the error responsible for bringing the dialogue to an "aporetic" conclusion.

5. *An early conclusion*

The examples could keep rolling in, but we must stop and think as to why Plato does all this. Here is not the place to reassess the whole question of Platonic writing. Let us simply record that he devises a style of written communication, which he refers to as unserious and playful activity both in *Seventh Letter* and in *Phaedrus*, going on to claim that a philosopher is

the man who thinks that in the written word there is necessarily *much that is playful*, and that no written discourse, whether in prosody or in prose, deserves to be treated *very seriously* (*Phaedrus*, 277 E 5-8)⁷.

And in *Seventh Letter*, 344 C 1 - D 2:

So, every serious man must carefully avoid writing really serious things, lest thereby to prey those to the dislike and stupidity

⁷ Cf. *Phaedrus*, 276 C 2-3; 278 D 3-6.

must tell whether sophist, statesman, and philosopher are regarded as one and the same or separate figures. Purposefully, the Stranger's first claim is that they are regarded as three distinct figures (*Sophist*, 217 B), and by quite a length. As if to confirm the deep-rooted bond among this set of dialogues, Socrates mocks Theodorus at the beginning of the *Statesman* for rating the three issues all at the same value and placing them in perfect sequence, as if in an arithmetical ratio (1, 2, 3). Instead they are actually three separate concepts that are more detached from one another than in an arithmetical ratio (1, 2, 4) (*Statesman*, 257 A-B).

At the same time, these terms often overlap and merge: it is no accident, then, that as the *Sophist* progresses we shall come across both the Statesman and the Philosopher, just as the Sophist and the Philosopher are also encountered in the *Statesman*¹².

In short, a clear design can be said to emerge from the set of dialogues:

- after an historically accurate introduction that provides an outstanding example of dialectic philosophy (*Parmenides*)
- the issue of science is confronted, thereby ousting Protagorean relativism (*Theaetetus*),
- and the dialectic process is first employed to mark out the Sophist's opposite character (*Sophist*),
- then to highlight the features of a character that has much in common with the Philosopher (*Statesman*),
- and, ultimately, to attain the Platonic solution (the unwritten *Philosopher*)¹³.

¹² About the presence of the philosopher in the *Statesman*, cf. M. Migliori, *Arte politica e metretica assiologica. Commentario storico-filosofico al "Statesman" di Platone*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 1996, pp. 349-354.

¹³ About the reasons for not writing this dialogue, cf. *Arte...*, pp. 369-371.

Besides, in this diairesis Plato begins to wake us up to the truth that the diairetic process ought to be much more complex in practice. When discussing the hunt of tame animals the Stranger outlines several problems; these include man not being a tame animal or not being hunted. Theaetetus obviously puts forward a solution that speeds up the process, but it is easy to see that any other answer would have doubtlessly raised other different considerations (222 B).

The truth is that here we encounter a concise summary of a lengthy analysis and discussion, which Plato has conducted orally and certainly could not render in the dialogue. Anyhow, the first sophist's definition displays a number of negative features, such as his yearning to seize (let alone "kill" as in hunting) or his nature as a sham educator, wilfully deceiving for the sake of material gain from this fraudulent activity.

The **second diairesis** (223 C - 224 E) provides us with **four definitions** that are variants of the *sophist merchant and manufacturer of cognitions for the soul*. Sophistry is an acquisitive art whereby goods are exchanged by selling both own products and those of others, taking place in the city or trading with another city (wholesaler), and such are cognitions for the soul and about virtues.

	<i>art</i>	
productive	<i>acquisitive</i>	
	hunting	<i>exchange</i>
	of giving	<i>selling</i>
	direct selling	<i>mercantile</i>
	own products	<i>products of others</i>
	retailer	<i>wholesaler</i>
	for the body	<i>for the soul</i>
	pleasantness	<i>cognitions</i>
	of other arts	<i>of virtues</i>

The development of this diairesis is far more complicated than this scheme suggests, though. First we are told this is the "second" definition after the one of the sophist as hunter of rich young men (224 C 9 - E 4), but a third definition is made to follow thereafter (τρίτον, 224 D 4), emphasiz-

We have found only one reason to explain this “necessity”: in this first section the Author seeks to present a somewhat exhaustive classification of the sophists operating in his day.

We may then assume that for his contemporaries every one of these figures had to correspond to a distinct character. Nonetheless, given the dearth of our sources, this kind of name game is downright hazardous for us, if not impossible⁴.

Were this argument, quite legitimately, rejected, one should then undertake to identify the reasons that led Plato to deploy an “odd sophist” such as Socrates.

If it is accepted, however, this passage can be seen as evidence of the Author's fairness: driven by his will to recreate the “types” of sophist, he cannot earnestly leave his master out. At the same time, in an attempt to steer clear of any confusion that would have been unbearable to him, he repeatedly underlines (again, in the final summary in 231 E) the problems this odd presence evokes: from the wolf and dog comparison, via the opposition of functions, to the diversity of the diairesis, everything points at the need to set apart this character from the previous ones.

Finally, as evidence of the absolute anomaly of this subject, when shortly before the last diairesis Plato recalls the previous ones belonging to the acquisitive art, only the hunter, the fighter and the merchant (265 A) are cited.

There is one last, important observation to be made. We have omitted from the diairesis a number of passages that have little bear-

⁴ For instance, I used to believe (quite wrongly) that Hippias might be among those importing and selling all kinds of wares; now I am quite sure it is Protagoras, since a practically identical definition is found in the dialogue bearing the same name (313 C-E). As for the first subject, it could be Prodicus, notorious for his greed (Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum*, I, 12, DK 84, A 2; *Greater Hippias*, 282 C; *Cratylus*, 384 B). It is clear, though, that the terms of reference are too weak for us to construe verifiable theories thereupon.

Third Lecture

The driving force of Plato's Philosophy

It is normally held that it is ontology which is at the heart of the Platonic philosophy which emerges from the *Sophist*. Here we shall endeavour to show that such a heart is *explicitly* located elsewhere by the very words of the Stranger of Elea.

As we have already indicated in the previous *Lecture*, following the summary which in some way closes the series of the first diaireses (231 C-E), Plato presents us with a new point of departure of a sort which is initially introduced without diaireses, neither in law nor in fact. Instead a line of reasoning is developed which (and Protagoras is quoted in this long section), by defining the unifying element in the various activities of the sophist in the art of disputing of all things, allows us to come to an immediate conclusion: namely, such a technique is devoid of real depth, and only rich in apparent knowledge (232 D).

Plato's objection to this is less naive than it might appear. He does not deny that one may learn to dispute everything, with an expert too, but excludes that this may be done on a "scientific" plane, as he indeed affirms (233 A 5-6):

But how can anyone who is in himself ignorant contradict he who knows, saying something valuable ?

This affirmation renders explicit the basic reason for the Platonic rejection of this practice which would be permissible only if one knew everything, which is impossible. In this respect, it may imme-

STRANGER – Indeed you speak most truly; if being having been affected is one in any way, appears not the same as the one, and the all (τὸ πᾶντα) will be more than one.

THEAETETUS – Yes.

The question is very straightforward: can the being that partakes of the one, understood as a whole, to be one and whole⁸? The query may seem odd for Plato had claimed only a few lines earlier:

nothing prevents that which is divided in parts suffers the One's action in all its parts and in this way, being an all and a whole, may be one (245 A 1-3).

Some variations apply but the question remains unchanged; even though this sentence seems to imply that the all is a whole and also one, in that it partakes of the one. Now, conversely, the issue is taken up once again, assuming that this one is also multiple, and turning the question of the whole into a problem. Hence, the all is one and many, while the being (understood as the reality) is one-many, a unified multiplicity.

But is it necessarily a whole, too? Plato puts forward a series of arguments to demonstrate that it is impossible to claim the opposite.

⁸ As one can see, the terms to be deployed are three and not two, as is often the case; on this, see for instance the treatise by G. Sasso, *L'essere e le differenze, Sul "Sofista" di Platone*, pp. 57 ff., above all pp. 62-63; by failing to grasp the difference between sum of the parts and whole, and therefore between a total of parts "abstractly" lacking true unity and a "whole" that is truly unified by a principle of order, he believes that the being all already implies partaking of the One. The upshot being that the difference in wording which Plato showed such keenness for, as we shall also see in *Appendix I*, has been lost. Perhaps this depends on the type of approach adopted by the author, which is overtly theoretical (see p. 7), and therefore causes him to express surprise that Plato does not "establish" «the concept of all as "total of parts", as "unity of parts", as an organic "interweaving" thereof» (p. 64). Yet the very reference to the "organic" should allow the difference to arise between a corpse (total of parts) and a living body (endowed with an organic principle of order).

duces, while what is brought into existence is produced (219 B). Indeed, by reason of its profound importance, this theme recurs with even greater bearing in a series of other texts that we cannot analyse here. For further reading please go straight to *Appendix II*.

It remains, however, that Plato has twice defined the power of doing or suffering as a fundamental hallmark of the whole reality. On this matter he debates fiercely with the Friends of Ideas who acknowledge the power of doing and suffering, but confine it to the sole dimension of becoming, while excluding it from being. Naturally, Plato's position contemplates the power of doing-suffering even in the upper sphere. To be fair, the objections raised by the Stranger affect Philosophy at all levels (248 A – 249 B):

1. on a *psychological plane*, the fact that the soul knows and the being is known implies doing and suffering, something that they will deny lest they contradict themselves;
2. on a *gnoseological plane*, they would have to admit that a being (known by a cognitive act) is in motion by reason of being known; this is unfeasible for the motionless reality such as the one they envisage;
3. on a *cosmic plane*, features such as movement, life, soul and intelligence cannot be allowed to go missing from a reality which is all, and that, steeped in its sanctity, would be devoid of intelligence and immobile; even less bearable is the idea that it may possess intelligence but not life, or that it may feature both but is devoid of a soul. Ultimately, it would be nonsensical to endow it with a soul but make it immobile.

It must then be recognized that what moves as well as movement are real¹³.

¹³ Note that moving things as well as movement itself are entities (καὶ τὸ κινούμενον δὴ καὶ κίνησιν συγχωρητέον ὡς ὄντα, 249 B 2-3). This is no oddity. In the aforementioned articles we have tried to underline how in the *Timaeus* Plato places much emphasis on the position of “generation” as a freely existing reality among the original actions behind the formation of the cosmos.

First aporia (237 C - 238 A): Not-being is not applicable to any being, and neither to something; in fact, “something” is not a word that can stand alone for it is always referred to a being. Moreover, this “something” may be one, two, or many. Whoever does not say “anything”, then, must say absolutely nothing; yet, as it is impossible for a man to say and say nothing, he must be said not to say at all. Hence, if we claim that someone says “not-being”, then we are acknowledging that who says not says anyway.

There is a strong case underpinning this argument: any kind of argument refers to an ontological dimension: it is always a matter of “being that is said”. There is a significant point to be mentioned, however, as it is patently non-Eleatic: along with the ontological dimension Plato calls attention to the numerical one.

Theaetetus believes the argument can go no further, but an even greater aporia lies in wait, and it deals with the same principle of the discourse.

Second aporia (238 A-D): whereas “that which is” may be attributed to some other things “which are”, on no account can anything which is be attributed to “that which is not”; indeed, this will be neither singular nor plural in number. In this case, however, it cannot be expressed in words, as we use the singular or plural when we speak, even of “not-being”. Hence, if it cannot be defined by number, we must say that not-being is unutterable.

This argument clearly bolsters the authoritativeness of the numerical dimension in the sphere of predication. With yet another twist the Stranger admits that he was mistaken in reckoning this aporia as the graver one, for an even more serious case lies ahead.

Third aporia (238 D - 239 A): this very much deals with an Eleatic philosopher who seeks to confute not-being: he is forced to contradict himself. He spoke of not-being, in fact, and meanwhile he has said it is unutterable and unspeakable. In order to refute not-being, he has spoken of it as existent, in the singular, and implying a form of unity, all the while maintaining that it is unutterable.

rings in Theaetetus' words, which tell us we stand before a momentous passage:

It would be most correct, if we shall concede that some of the genera are willing to mix with one another, and some not (256 B 8-9).

The answer all but beggars belief. Surely, the second part of the sentence can be construed as some kind of warning, reinforcing the conviction that R and M cannot mingle. But the text plainly makes no such claim, especially if we consider that the Stranger has merely enquired whether M can be said to be at rest.

One is warranted in inferring that, this way, Plato is trying to steer the reader's attention towards a particular situation. In reality, insofar as their definitions R and M have been reckoned incompatible; however, insofar as partaking they are compatible but cannot be coexistent (an object cannot be at one and the same time in motion and at rest). With regard to the Same, though, we have just warranted the need to assess matters from two different perspectives, which may give rise to seemingly contradictory assertions. This can be a patently undeveloped example of a like situation, to which it is directly linked; a situation in which a thing may most certainly be said to be moving yet at rest. If we take a man seated on a train we can truthfully claim he is both at rest and in motion. Moreover, if we take a motion that is steady and equidistant from a given point, how does it relate to that point?

In confirmation of this view, Plato immediately sets forth another example of a seemingly contradictory statement⁷.

5. M is other than O, as it is other than S and R, thus it can be said to be other and not other.

⁷ Another famous, even obvious, example applies. Plato ultimately claims that all realities partake of the same and of the other, which surely is not a problem, unless these terms are tinkered with indiscriminately (259 C-D).

ing this approach seriously is just as new to the problem as a child would be (259 B-D).

That is why we must seek to establish the possible connections by carefully fine-tuning our choice of concepts. Indeed, separating all from all is wrong and utterly baneful for philosophy and the Muses, as all reasoning is blighted. In this case we cannot say anything (258 E - 259 B).

False speeches

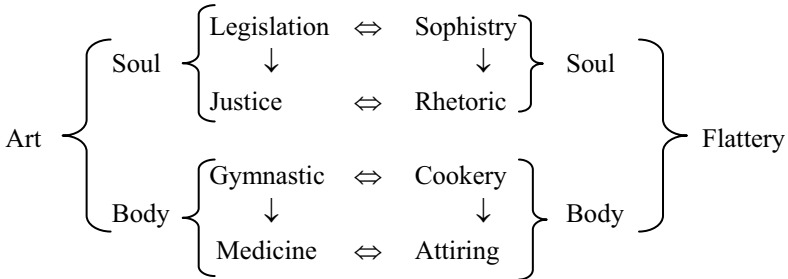
There is clearly little to be gained by wasting time toying around with concepts, so we must all the more be capable of confuting the sophist thoroughly. The strong condemnation of sophistry by no means forestalls Plato's argumentative process, quite the opposite in fact. The Author plainly seeks to afford no respite to his opponent. Amazingly, a key point has been scored, and yet a further escape route for the sophist may be glimpsed. And this is the path the Stranger has now set out to obstruct.

The strength of the sophist's starting position lay in the fact that, given the impossibility of thinking not-being, he could deny the existence of falsehoods and mistakes. The mere assertion of not-being thwarts this belief, but not completely. One must also show how relative not-being can mingle with discourse and opinion, thus yielding falsehoods. The sophist will duly reject this mingling, and will deny again the existence of falsehoods, claiming that in this sphere everything is being and one cannot speak of not-being. In short, he could say that the art of appearance does not apply in absolute sense to all sectors, for opinion and language are not allowed to mingle with not-being (260 A-E).

As Theaetetus himself notes, this heightens the difficulties that are faced in this "pursuit": no sooner is one hurdle, the being/not-being connection, overcome than it confronts us again in the guise of the not-being/language connection (261 A-B). The time has now come to conduct the enquiry in this sphere, that of language and opinion.

appears early on in the Platonic dialogues. To my mind, the distinction between the two strands of wisdom, as highlighted in *Apology*, 20 D-E, already presupposes a diairetic activity. This seems to appear in the *Euthyphro*, 7 B-D in the distinction between enmities about numerical data and those about ethical judgments and qualitative assessments, and to a greater extent in the distinction, submitted by Socrates, between that part of justice which attends to the gods and the one which attends to men (11 E - 12 D). The next distinction (13 A-E) is just as diairetical: the attention that either benefits whom it is given or is a sort of collaboration to a project, an aid to realise something.

If one seeks something more clearly structured and “undeniable”, the diairesis of *Gorgias*, 463 A - 466 A; 500 E - 501 C; 513 D-E; 520 A-B, seems rather articulate, as summarised below:



Nonetheless, there is no doubt the “diairetic” dialogue par excellence is the *Sophist*. The method is outlined here in a clear and uncomplicated manner, and then consistently applied to the very end. Still, this new “introductory” dialogue does appear wanting in a few crucial aspects, which appear settled in the *Statesman*, and in later works as well.

The first major clarification is that the division must not always be twofold. As we have seen, this point was made as early as the *Sophist* with regard to clear-cut statements as well as for the presentation of different sophist characters. If we were to outline a comprehensive diairetic tree of the sophists found in Greece, we would have to split it three ways:

of all, but then it would surely have to be a part of itself, which is impossible. Yet, if it is not a part of any, it can be a part of none, and even less of all, for it faces the risk of coming to nothing: it would be a part that is a part of nothing. The conclusion serves to reaffirm and shed light on the above:

Then the part is not a part of the many, nor of all, but is of a certain Idea and of a certain one, which we call a whole, which reaches its perfection as unity of all; of this the part will be a part (157 D 7 - E 2).

Thus all the elements are revealed: the part is not a part with reference to the group of parts it belongs to (be it the many or all); instead, it pertains to a unity, warranted by a logic that is the Idea, a whole that exists all the time and reaches completion at the very moment it embodies the totality of the parts. The part is a part of this whole.

An early outcome of all this is to bear down on how manifold reality itself is perceived.

If, then, the others have parts, they participate in the whole and in the one.... Then the others than the one must be one, a perfect whole having parts (157 E 2-5).

Briefly, if we speak of a manifold reality as having parts, we speak of it as a unity, i.e. as a reality that participates in the whole and in the one. And this applies to the single part, too:

And the same argument holds of each part, for the part must participate in the one too; for if each of the parts is a part, the term "each" means, certainly, that it is one separate from the others and being in itself; if it must be "each"... But clearly, participating in the one it must be other than one; for if not, it would not merely have participated, but would have been the one; whereas except the one itself no thing can be one.... Both the whole and the part must participate in the one; for the first will be one whole, of which the parts are parts; and the second one, as part

model. In this light the abovementioned *perceptibility* stands out in all its ambiguity; it finds radically different application (or non-application) depending on whether the subjects of the analysis are primary realities, primary elements, or non-primary elements. As Plato says in the *Timaeus*, if primary elements, for instance, cannot be perceived by the senses, the parts of a machine or the letters that make up a syllable indeed can. At the same time, some primary realities may not have *logos* but be just as knowable by an immediate insight, an intuitive foreknowledge of this reality. The whole reasoning we are set to examine, then, is marked by a bizarre indistinction of data that, instead, ought to be utterly set apart from a merely platonic viewpoint.

Socrates draws the conclusion that, according to their position, the soul that has true opinion without *logos* is true but cannot know, for it is unable to motivate its opinion. If, instead, it acquires *logos* it also acquires full scientific knowledge. In his answer to Socrates, Theaetetus confirms he has already been acquainted with this same “dream” that has just been outlined (202 B-C).

Socrates expresses his glee in triumphant tones, for there can clearly be no knowledge without true opinion and without *logos*. At the same time, however, he raises an issue regarding one of the statements made that he is unhappy about, despite its elegance. As usual Plato “plays” but he cannot be allowed to bear the responsibility for misleading his reader: somehow important matters must be better clarified.

An in-depth look at letters and syllables (202 D - 206 C)

The question is to take up again this distinction between elements (free of the “primary” tag, here) that are not knowable, whereas the “class of combinations” (202 E 1) is knowable. The relationship between letters and syllables is thus resumed, and with it the whole-parts connection but not from the point of view of “primary” elements. Indeed, letters are primary in relation to the simplifying grammatical process; yet one only need think at the difference be-

ing an action only occurs when an action takes place; in turn, this hinges on the nature of the agent, not of that which suffers.

We are just looking at nothing more than a warning sign here. More relevant still are a number of passages, in which Plato bluntly highlights the importance of this pair with respect to ontology. One only need consider the famous passage in *Phaedo*, 97 B - 99 C, in which topics discussed included the philosophical education of Socrates and the Anaxagoras' philosophy, and his regulating Mind:

I argued that if anyone desired to find out the cause of the generation or destruction or existence of anything (γίγνεται ἢ ἀπόλλυται ἢ ἔσται), he would have to find out what state of being or suffering or doing was best for each thing (ἢ εἶναι ἢ ἄλλο ὅτιοῦν πάσχειν ἢ ποιεῖν) (97 C 6 - D 1).

The text moves along from classic ontological concepts (being, generating, destroying) to this “odd” association between being and doing/suffering. This pair reappears when Socrates says it would have been enough for him to understand

how it is best for each one to do and suffer what he suffers (καὶ ποιεῖν καὶ πάσχειν ἅ πάσχει) (98 A 5-6).

Plato rejects the absolute One in an equally telling manner, by re-submitting an argument first set forth in the *Republic*:

For, reality as a whole cannot at the same time both suffer and do (πέισεται καὶ ποιήσει); if so, one would be no longer one, but two (*Parmenides*, 138 B 3-5).

The same thing cannot do and suffer (τάναντία ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν) opposite things (*Republic*, IV, 436 B 8).

Then nothing will convince us that the same thing can suffer or be or do opposite things. (τάναντία πάθει ἢ καὶ εἶη ἢ καὶ ποιήσειεν) (*Republic*, IV, 437 A 1-2).

3. *The view of reality in the Philebus*

If timely hints and quotations may leave us somewhat cold, then an elaborate theoretical proposal that casts its shadow over an entire

At this stage, however, one cannot ignore the fact that Aristotle, who is also the main witness to the *agrapha dogmata*, seems not to have lent much weight to the possible super-essentiality of One or of Principles. In his criticism of the substantiality of One and Being, viewed by Platonists as genera, they seem to be pegged at the same level and the issue is famously regarded as the most important and necessary one for establishing truth (*Metaphysics, Beta, XI aporia*). From an esoteric perspective that hinges largely upon the reliability of the Aristotelian account, this aspect becomes hard to disregard. Yet, if cutting ontology down to size is a reasonable effort, the *Sophist* of all the dialogues seems like the least suitable for the purpose.

3. *The supreme genera*

The *Sophist's* partial downgrade is tied with the idea of the protreptic game, which Migliori insists upon at several stages. He claims one of the signals that Plato is speaking “in jest” is to be found in the less than unequivocal indications given on the number of classes. Although the number is set to five, the reservations and allusions are such that Migliori concludes the terms involved are actually eight, having previously added absolute not-being, relative not-being and relative being. Now, one can safely agree that the number five has no definitive connotation, if anything because even the “supreme” becomes a relative term when there is a *plurality of megista*. But what are the terms involved actually? Are they ideas, meta-ideas, genera, classes, mere logical connections? An underlying problem of the *Sophist* is the nature and actual status of the *ghene*. Migliori speaks of ‘meta-ideas’, or at times only refers to this genera as ‘ideas’. He also considers those categories obtained by negating a term, i.e. not-beautiful, not-big, not-good (cf. pp. 84-86) to be genera. At this point, clearly, the genus loses any ontological heft as it is unable to carry out an effective division of reality. After all, academics had notoriously disregarded any ideas concerning negative realities.

As Migliori notes, this dialogue clarifies many of the operations performed in the *Sophist* and where «Plato expressly state how sometimes it is impossible to make a twofold division, and so one must proceed as when slaughtering sacrificial livestock, neatly carving limb from body (287 B-D)» and that «one must first identify the “limb” of the object under scrutiny»¹⁰.

This clarification in the *Statesman* actually seems to hold true for the *Phaedrus* as well; the diairesis Plato implicitly employs here and reveals only later on¹¹ does not proceed rigorously by two. Indeed, once the presence of two kinds of madness is established (μανίας δέ γε εἶδη δύο) (265 A 9), and having set apart the human and negative side of the μανία from the positive, divine one (265 A 9-11), the latter is further split into four parts:

The divine madness was *subdivided into four kinds* (τέτταρα μέρη διελόμενοι), with reference to four gods: we have assigned the prophetic inspiration to Apollo, the initiatory to Dionysus, the poetic to the Muses, the erotic to Aphrodite and Eros¹².

If we can observe for *Phaedrus*, as Migliori has done for the *Statesman* and the *Sophist*, that «the division will hinge on the reality before us, and does not have a sole and exclusive formal structure»¹³, it should also be said that the clarification of the diaireses completed within the dialogue comes with the emphasis that the discourse

¹⁰ *Fifth Lecture*, p. 100.

¹¹ As M. Migliori has noted in *L'uomo fra piacere, intelligenza e Bene, Vita e Pensiero*, Milan 1993, pp. 21-22: «Plato's game often consists in hinting at things and, later, revealing what has just been hinted, or in not finishing an argument and then submitting a conclusion without declaring it as such».

¹² *Phaedrus* 265 B 2-5.

¹³ *Fifth Lecture*, p. 100.

of deceit will all be picked up and developed in the *Sophist* and the other dialogues belonging to the same batch of writings.

If this reading is legitimate, then perhaps one could attempt to add another element to the picture of connections and complementarity outlined by Migliori²⁸, by saying that prior to the *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman* block, and before the «introduction» represented by the «outstanding example of dialectic philosophy»²⁹ provided by the *Parmenides*, it seems possible to establish a “poetical introduction” of the *Phaedrus* who conceals precious indications on content and methodology behind his «flowing vein»³⁰, preparing the reader for the wearisome meander down the path of dialectics.

²⁸ Cf. *First Lecture*, pp. 24-27.

²⁹ *First Lecture*, p. 27.

³⁰ The expression belongs to L. Stefanini, *Platone*, 2 voll., Padua, 1932-1935; new updated edition 1949²; anastatic reprint of II ed., Istituto di storia della Filosofia, Padua 1991, vol. II, p. 24, who believes some scholars place *Phaedrus* behind the dialectical works for an eminently “aesthetic” reason: «the consensus is due to an aesthetic need for balance and proportion, which critics unwittingly heed when they claim the doctrinal roughness of the *Republic* is followed by the flowing vein of the *Phaedrus*, and in forestalling that, once the uphill climb of dialectics has been resumed in the *Theaetetus* or in the *Parmenides*, this is cut short again by the maddening force of the *Phaedrus*».

from you. What else can it mean if not that saying falsehoods is impossible? (286 C 1 - 6).

Socrates speaks of this reasoning on the impossibility of saying falsehoods as a very commonplace and unoriginal discourse, also used by others: the followers of Protagoras, whom he explicitly refers to, and «others before them». Critics unanimously see in them the Eleatics, to whom these sophisms must be necessarily reconnected, as we have seen.

Indeed, while starting off from very distant positions, Eleaticism and the Protagorean doctrine achieve the same result on this ground, negating the possibility of falsehood and contradiction; after all, that is just what Eristics are interested in⁵. By taking Protagoras' thought to its logical consequences, one can reach the stage of negating falsehood, bestowing values of truth to every opinion; basing oneself on the Parmenidean univocal Being, one reaches the point of negating falsehood, because falsehood leads back to Not Being that can neither be spoken of nor thought. Furthermore, playing on the Eleatic univocity, the sophists are capable of making their interlocutors constantly fall into contradiction.

Based on this argumentation, I think Plato can be said to at least hint at Eleaticism, even though obviously in an undeclared and technically shallow manner, much before the dialectic dialogues. After all, this manner of proceeding by hints and references that is found in the *Euthydemus* agrees perfectly with that «extremely well-crafted form of writing, intent on measuring the information the bare necessities»⁶ that Migliori recognises as typical of Plato: this dialogue is among the early dialogues and it is clear that – in line with

⁵ Cf. L. Maccioni, *Filosofia e matematica in Platone. Osservazioni sull'Eutidemo*, il Tripode, Naples, 1978, p. 52.

⁶ *First Lecture*, p. 25.

that is, in that it is, rather than realities that are distinct from and antecedent to being, also appears corroborated by the structure of Platonic enquiry on being, as developed in the *Sophist*. This enquiry on being, in fact, immediately takes the shape of a search for its quantitative and qualitative properties (242 C 4-6, 250 C 1-10): the aim is to establish what is being and what are its predicates. The main motivation for such a structure, that is, the idea that being is endowed with qualitative and quantitative properties, is to be found in the first critique of monistic theories: if being were in want of determinations it would be unutterable, in other words it would be kindred to absolute not-being (244 B 9 - D 12). Out of all the infinite properties of the things that are, one and many, the whole and the parts, doing and suffering perform a very special role because they embody attributes of being in that it is: indeed, these properties are not only shared by all things that exist, but are intrinsic conditions of their being.

The perspective of the enquiry on being and not-being, furthermore, is not of genetic-evolutionary kind but is static. It hinges on demonstrating the possibility of falsehood by defining the bonds of *participation* occurring between genera in relation to one another. The issue centering on the priority or antecedence of relations among genera or “dimensions” of reality therefore appears beyond the scope of the research presented in the *Sophist*.

These considerations aside, I agree on the point that “the foremost problem” in the dialogue is not that of ontology. My impression, which I summarize hastily as a mere talking point for the debate, is that this problem is less concerned with one or many, whole or parts, doing or suffering, all viewed as conditions or preconditions for being, than with the relations occurring among being, thought and speech: the criteria whereupon the inner workings of being are defined coincide with its criteria pertaining to its intelligibility and utterability.

The issue of the relations among being, thought, and speech seems indeed to constitute one of the recurring themes in the *Sophist*, as well as the theoretical picture wherein the search is devel-

that is also exemplified in the sequence of dialogues themselves, steadily more revealing while being more difficult and obscure at the same time).

The main issue for me was to reinforce this kind of approach to Plato's "philosophical writing", while I am sure that only a whole book of "examples of games" drawn from almost every Platonic dialogue can show in a suitably convincing way that this is the underlying technique of Platonic writing. Naturally, I am sure that all the examples provided may, and will, be re-interpreted in a manner unlike mine, but I hope that the sheer quantity and variety of the evidence put forth can generate enough *critical mass* to persuade as to the *appropriateness* of regarding this approach as not only correct but also necessary.

Rules against misuse (to be expected and easily practiced)

This applies to the future, however, which lies in the lap of the gods as the saying goes. Insofar as the present day, I must clarify my point. For sure, Centrone is right to be wary and I should be just as much as him, if not more: for sure there is a clear danger that this model might open the floodgates to the kind of mishandling, or worse, done in the name of irony, the master key to open all doors in the difficult passages of the dialogues. For this reason we should establish sound rules to agree upon.

I must therefore explain the sense of the second rule, which states that error must be visible in the light of "platonic logic". In fact, I am speaking in a technical sense here: employing contemporary logic to point to an error in the text seems irrelevant to me. Moreover, I would tread carefully also when employing Aristotelian logic. I contend that, whatever the issue, it had to stand out in the eyes of Plato and his readers of the time, and not to post-Aristotelians and post-Kantians like us. As I spell out in the text, «the evidence must spring from the Author's words» (p. 13) and not be drawn from our more sophisticated logical instruments. In this keynote I agree with Centrone on the fact that the error must be "*undeniably* apparent" (p. 128), as long as Platonic writing tech-

But it is now high tide the thematic issues are dealt with.

4. *The importance and the purpose of the Sophist*

Centrone is certainly right in urging me not to exaggerate in grading the relative importance of the individual dialogues, also because an operation of this kind can lend itself to misunderstandings, as if I failed to view the *Sophist* as one of Plato's "great dialogues".

Nonetheless, I was interested in highlighting three points:

- a) The *Statesman* reviews and expands on a number of key points in the *Sophist*, also including the very definition of sophist, as I have sought to show in the *Fifth Lecture*;
- b) The *Sophist* makes an analysis *in the negative* (in the sense that it gets to the bottom of an error) in order to dislodge a foe, the sophist; the *Statesman* carries out a like operation *in the positive* to establish the character closest to the philosopher, the true statesman;
- c) There is a sort of "theoretical ascent" towards the *Philosopher*, wherein Plato should have elaborated on "Exactness in itself (ἀντὸ τὰκριβὲς, *Statesman*, 284 D 2), but was *unwilling to commit it to writing*.

I now wish to add a fourth point to the above. I am convinced that understanding Plato's political philosophy (i.e. two texts with the gravitas of the *Republic* and the *Laws*) without the *Statesman* is an impossible task. In this dialogue Plato has "stowed away" the key to understanding his position⁶. Besides, this may perhaps help explain

lian expression "being in that it is being" and the like in a treatise on Plato (cf. pp. 161-164).

⁶ To back up these statements I must necessarily refer to my commentary, cited at p. 27 n. 12, and to my articles dedicated to Plato's ethical-political outlook (*La prassi in Platone: realismo e utopismo*, in *Il dibattito etico e politico in Grecia tra il V e il IV secolo*, edited by M. Migliori, La Città del Sole, Napoli 2000, pp. 239-282; *Cura dell'anima. L'intreccio tra etica e politica in Platone, «Ordia prima»* (Cordoba, Arg.), I, 2002, pp. 25-65; *La filosofia politica di Platone nelle Leggi*, in *Plato's*

the dialogue structure. Plato speaks of being and not-being and must do just that; he speaks of supreme genera in order to broach the Other, and emphasize the theme of relation and/or non-relation among genera. All this is acceptable. But why speak of whole and *dynamis*? What is the reason for this “pointless” digression that (apparently) bears no relation with the issue at stake? After having set forth the issue of not-being and even established the premises, the apologies, and the requests for attention (241 B - 242 B), why does Plato deliver an unusually lengthy speech (242 C - 249 D) that, far from dealing with either being or not-being, broaches other issues (concerning very relevant concepts), and ends with the decisive question of the rejection of the absolute immobility of Ideas?

My explanation for the “oddity” is that, conscious of the possible “ontological” reading of the treatise, Plato felt the need to point out that things were not as they might seem. He wanted his philosopher readers to have no doubts (!) that the issue at stake was neither that of the Parmenidean One, nor the generically Eleatic being. At the same time, he stresses repeatedly that the terms actually involved in explaining the nature of reality are of a different kind. And this he states outright: the hallmark of reality as a whole, and therefore of every single element, is that doing and suffering are.

Finally, other than a sense of ontological priority on his part (and I apologize for the unavoidable word play), I cannot seem to ascribe any interpretation to the statement in which Plato even highlights the subsistence of the whole; namely, when he says that

he who does not give whole a place among beings (ἐν τοῖς οὄσι) must not deem being (ὡς οὄσαν) neither being nor generation (245 D 4-6)¹⁶.

¹⁶ Special attention must be given to the fact that claiming the whole to be among the beings cannot be construed in favour of ontology, given that a statement of this kind concerns the ontological pair *par excellence*, being

absolutely and therefore cannot not be – the various genera would then possess a relative approach, which in one sense is and in another is not.

The problem arises from the fact that the features of the former do not seem to match those of the latter, since the former utterly rules out not-being whereas the latter implies it.

By the same token I have misgivings about the feasibility of considering “being for itself” and “being for another” as just two different ways of partaking in one being. What (i.e. which ontological dimension) would justify the difference in this different way of partaking? Our way of thinking along the lines of pure concepts, more or less loosely connected, seems to me unlike that of Plato. He establishes a rather strong link between conceptuality and reality, in such a way as to appear (almost) utterly alien to us.

6. *Not being*

The issue at stake is that of not-being, and that there are two “concepts” which I have dubbed “absolute not-being” and “relative not-being” for want of a better tag.

An insurmountable difficulty

First, however, it is worth recalling how Plato stresses the objective thorniness of this troubled topic. Well, it seems to me even Plato’s speech is fraught with such difficulties. His words ring as a kind of “warning”, so much that they underline the ongoing existence of the difficulties, in the past as well as the present (236 D 9 - E 3; cf. the text at p. 151).

But this is not the only warning sign: the solution eschewing contradiction is a tough one (236 D 9; 237 A 1); the sophist has fled to a reality that is intrinsically fraught with hardship (236 D 2: εἰς ἄπορον εἶδος; cf. then also, 239 C 6-7: εἰς ἄπορον τόπον). The Stranger asks not to be deemed mad if he turns things upside down and back again with every step (242 A). And in the end it even looks

First of all, he states: «It seems undeniable to me, however, that not-being can only be said to be part of the other at the extensional level. Having said this, though, the distinction is hard to keep up: it follows that whatever is not-x must be deemed other than x (and thus is a kind of the other), but it is also a kind of not-being on account of its being not-x. The part of the other that is opposed to being is a “genus” of all the other parts that are in opposition to big, beautiful, etc, and constitute the range of the other» (pp. 132-133).

As I have said already, the objection is right on the mark, but two problems follow, *with regard to Plato's text*: 1. not only it fails to explain the difference between the whole Other and the part, but also threatens to negate it; 2. it makes the assumption that the part (not being) is whole (genus) to the other parts (the many others); this perhaps explains why Plato favoured another approach: to ensure the Other only remained unitary, and therefore warrant the existence of realities that, as parts of the Other, are not pure negatives (as we shall shortly see).

Centrone goes on: «If the deduction of not-being as genus is based on its opposition to being in the range of the other, then all the “genera” of the other (not-big, not-beautiful, etc) are summoned to form as many genera, with seemingly disastrous consequences. In this way any casual cluster of composite beings would identify a *ghenos*» (p. 133).

It is another insightful objection, which I think may only be answered in three ways: 1. these are not random clusters since, with reference to Ideas, they must express an objective order; 2. Plato speaks of the not-large as an other and not as an opposite (257 B), i.e. he tries to grant him a dimension in the positive that seems applicable to both small and equal; 3. on the strength of what can a small or equal thing be said to be not-large, unless a *ghenos*? What does it partake in for us to grant it this quality? I think Plato's answer could be: in that part of the Other relating to large.