



## Plato's Isolation of a Kind Being or Why in the *Sophist* To Be Is Not To Be *Something*

Roberto Granieri (KU Leuven)  
[roberto.granieri@kuleuven.be](mailto:roberto.granieri@kuleuven.be)

### 0. Opening

#### ➤ *Topic*

- Plato's conception of being in the *Sophist*
- Background: Being qua single Kind vs Being qua whole intelligible realm (cf. *Dam. Pr.* II 56.9-16 Westerink-Combès, *Simp. in Ph.* 136.21-7 Diels)

#### ➤ *Received view*

- 'To be is to be something' (introduced by Owen 1965: 71: 'to be is to be something or other'; then expressly shortened in Owen 1971: 265 n.178 as 'to be is to be something', which Owen presumed more perspicuous; echoed by many): for Plato to be is always to exemplify or instantiate a determinate property and not just to exist (e.g. 'motion is' means not that motion just exists; but motion *as moving*, or is *in motion*, or is *in motion by its own nature*, i.e. it is *motion itself*, the *essence* or *nature* of motion)
- View orthogonal to the analytic-continental divide, cf. e.g. Gilson 1952: 15, 33.

#### ➤ *My view*

- When being is metaphysically analyzed in terms of participation in or combination with the Kind or Form of being, it does not mean to be something, or to be itself, or to be variously characterized (*vel sim*), but to exist.

#### ➤ *Plan*

1. To be is not to be something: *Sph.* 250a8-d3 disproves the consensus view
2. To be is to combine with the Kind Being: *Sph.* 250a8-d3 broaches a conception of being whereby something *is* due to its combination with (or participation in) the Kind Being. This explanatory pattern is consistently deployed throughout the *Sophist*
3. The Kind Being is not a genus of all genera: criticism of a rival construal of the Platonic notion of a Kind Being
4. Conclusion: contrast between Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of being (which the consensus view takes to be in harmony)

### 1. To be is not to be something

#### ➤ *Context: the Sophist's inquiry into being*

- Definition of the sophist > paradox of falsehood > not-being > being
- Inquiry into *what being is* (cf. 243d9-e2; 244a5-6; 244b6-7; 246a1-2)
- Cross-examination of rival views on being (dualists, monists, gigantomachy). All succumb.
- Last attempt: 'children's prayer' (249d3-4): 'being and the all are as many things as are both immovable and in motion' (ὄσα ἀκίνητα καὶ κεινημένα, τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν συναμφότερα).

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➤ *Remarks on the argument against the ‘children’s prayer’*

**T1** *Sph. 250a8-d3*

{ΞΕ.} Εἶεν δὴ, κίνησιν καὶ στάσιν ἄρ’ οὐκ ἐναντιώτατα λέγεις ἀλλήλοις;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Πῶς γὰρ οὐ; [250.a.10]  
 {ΞΕ.} Καὶ μὴν εἶναι γε ὁμοίως φῆς ἀμφοτέρα αὐτὰ καὶ ἐκάτερον;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Φημί γὰρ οὖν. [250.b.1]  
 {ΞΕ.} Ἄρα κινεῖσθαι λέγων ἀμφοτέρα καὶ ἐκάτερον, ὅταν εἶναι συγχωρηῆς;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Οὐδαμῶς.  
 {ΞΕ.} Ἄλλ’ ἐστάναι σημαίνεις λέγων αὐτὰ ἀμφοτέρα [250.b.5] εἶναι;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Καὶ πῶς;  
 {ΞΕ.} Τρίτον ἄρα τι παρὰ ταῦτα τὸ ὄν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ τιθεῖς, ὡς ὑπ’ ἐκείνου τὴν τε στάσιν καὶ τὴν κίνησιν περιεχομένην, συλλαβὸν καὶ ἀπιδὼν αὐτῶν πρὸς τὴν τῆς οὐσίας κοινω-[250.b.10]νίαν οὕτως εἶναι προσεῖπας ἀμφοτέρα;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Κινδυνεύομεν ὡς ἀληθῶς τρίτον ἀπομαντεύε-[250.c.1]σθαι τι τὸ ὄν, ὅταν κίνησιν καὶ στάσιν εἶναι λέγωμεν.  
 {ΞΕ.} Οὐκ ἄρα κίνησις καὶ στάσις ἐστὶ συναμφοτέρον τὸ ὄν ἀλλ’ ἕτερον δὴ τι τούτων.  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Ἔοικεν. [250.c.5]  
 {ΞΕ.} Κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν ἄρα τὸ ὄν οὔτε ἔστηκεν οὔτε κινεῖται.  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Σχεδόν.  
 {ΞΕ.} Ποῖ δὴ χρηὶ τὴν διάνοιαν ἔτι τρέπειν τὸν βουλόμενον ἐναργές τι περὶ αὐτοῦ παρ’ ἑαυτῷ βεβαιώσασθαι; [250.c.10]  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Ποῖ γάρ;  
 {ΞΕ.} Οἴμαι μὲν οὐδαμῶσε ἔτι ῥάδιον. εἰ γάρ τι μὴ κινεῖται, πῶς οὐχ ἔστηκεν; ἢ τὸ μηδαμῶς ἐστὸς πῶς οὐκ [250.d.1] αὖ κινεῖται; τὸ δὲ ὄν ἡμῖν νῦν ἐκτὸς τούτων ἀμφοτέρων ἀναπέφανται. ἢ δυνατὸν οὖν τοῦτο;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Πάντων μὲν οὖν ἀδυνατώτατον. [250.d.4]

ES: Very good. You treat motion and rest, don’t you, as most contrary to each other? THT: Of course. ES: And yet you make the same claim of both and of either of them that they are? THT: Yes, I do. ES: Is that because when you agree that they are, you’re saying that both and each of them are moving? THT: Not at all. ES: Well then, when you say that they both are, are you indicating that they’re at rest? THT: How would I be? ES: In that case in your mind you’re assuming that being is a third thing over and above these, on the basis that both rest and motion are embraced by it; you’ve taken the two of them together and noted the way they both share in being, and that’s why you also say they both are – right? THT: It’s probably true that when we say motion and rest are we have an obscure notion of being as a third thing. ES: In which case being is not motion and rest together but something other than these. THT: It seems so. ES: So then being is not by its own nature either at rest or in motion. THT: I suppose not. ES: So where else is left for a person to direct his thought in order to establish some clarity for himself on the subject? THT: Where indeed! ES: I don’t think there is any easy way forward. If a thing is not moving, how is it not at rest? Or if it is in no way at rest, how is it not moving? Yet being has now revealed itself to us as falling outside both motion and rest. Is that possible, then? THT: No, nothing could be more impossible!

1. [250a8-9] Motion and Rest are most contrary to each other (ἐναντιώτατα [...] ἀλλήλοις);
2. [a11-12] and yet both are, and ‘to be’ (εἶναι) is said *in the same way* (ὁμοίως) of *both and each* (ἀμφοτέρα αὐτὰ καὶ ἐκάτερον) of them;
3. [b2-7] for *both and each* of them ‘to be’ does not mean either ‘to be in motion’ (κινεῖσθαι) or ‘to be at rest’ (ἐστάναι);
4. [b8-c8] instead, Motion and Rest are due to their combination with Being (τὴν τῆς οὐσίας κοινωvίαν), which is a third thing along motion and rest (τρίτον ἄρα τι παρὰ ταῦτα) and encompassing them (περιεχομένην);
5. [c3-4] Being is not Motion and Rest together (συναμφοτέρον) but something other than these (ἕτερον τούτων).

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6. [c6-7] by its own nature, Being is neither in motion nor at rest (κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν ἄρα τὸ ὄν οὔτε ἔστηκεν οὔτε κινεῖται);
7. [d2-3] Being falls outside both Motion and Rest (ἐκτὸς τούτων), meaning that it does not instantiate either Motion or Rest, i.e. it neither moves nor rests.

➤ *Problems with the consensus view*

- Cf. e.g. Frede 1967: 49: ‘„Bewegung ist“ [...] zu „Bewegung ist in Bewegung“ ergänzt werden sollte’; Seligman 1974: 69: ‘[when Plato] says “motion is” or “motion and rest are” he does not use the verb “to be” in our “existential” sense. *Motion is as moving, and only as moving*, it is as a “what” a “nature”’; Seligman 2002: 157: ‘[Being is predicated of Motion] can be read as an existence claim, [but] it is best understood to signify that [Motion] has its own distinctive nature’; Gill 2012: 165: ‘“the statement, “Change is, because it partakes of Being” (256a1), states of Change something quite definite [...]: Change is *itself* (changing) *by itself* (in virtue of Change). That is [...] what it means to say “Change is” (full stop) or “Change partakes of being.” The “is” is complete, since we need not look outside the subject to determine what Change is; instead we analyze the subject—look inside it—to uncover its nature’.
- Analysis of Statement 3:
  - 3a) for Motion to be is *neither to be in motion*, nor to be at rest;
  - 3b) for Rest, to be is *neither to be at rest*, nor to be in motion;
  - 3c) for both Motion and Rest, to be is *neither to be* in motion, nor to be at rest.
- Motion is in motion *by its own nature*, not due to its combination with some other thing
- No single nature or essence that could be shared by both Motion and Rest
- Statement 3 is not a misstep in the argument and is not retracted in the remainder of the dialogue

## 2. To be is to combine with the Kind Being

➤ *Positive view*

- [4] → Motion and Rest *are* because of their combination with being (τὴν τῆς οὐσίας κοινωνίαν), i.e. the Kind (γένος) or Form (εἶδος) of Being, one of the *megista genê*

➤ *The property of being and the Kind Being*

- 2 familiar and closely interconnected explanatory strategies
  - a) Accounting for something’s possession of a given attribute or property by appealing to its combination with (or participation in) a Form or Kind which *is* that property by its own nature and whose name names that property (e.g. something is beautiful by partaking in the Form of Beauty, cf. *Phd.* 100b3-d7; *Hp. Ma.* 300a9-b2; *Symp.* 210b1-211b3).
  - b) ‘One-Over-Many’ argument
- Assumption that the property of being is a *natural* one and that the predicate denoting it is univocal
- To be is not to be identical to itself: The property of ‘being the same as itself’ is due to sharing in the Kind Identity, not in the Kind Being (256b1-2)
- Existence

➤ *A recurrent pattern*

**T2** *Sph.* 254d10

Τὸ δέ γε ὄν μεικτὸν ἀμφοῖν· ἔστιν γὰρ ἄμφω που.

Being is mixed with both of them, since both of them presumably are.

**T3** *Sph.* 256a1 & d9

Ἔστι [κίνησις] δέ γε διὰ τὸ μετέχειν τοῦ ὄντος.

And yet [motion] is, because of its partaking in being.

Οὐκοῦν δὴ σαφῶς ἡ κίνησις ὄντως οὐκ ὄν ἐστι καὶ ὄν, ἐπεὶ περ τοῦ ὄντος μετέχει;

It's clear, then, that motion really is a not being and a being given that it partakes in being?

**T4** *Sph.* 259a6-7

τὸ μὲν ἕτερον μετασχὼν τοῦ ὄντος ἔστι μὲν διὰ ταύτην τὴν μέθεξιν

difference, partaking in being, is, because of that participation.

**T5** *Sph.* 259a6-7

τὸ μὲν ἕτερον μετασχὼν τοῦ ὄντος ἔστι μὲν διὰ ταύτην τὴν μέθεξιν

difference, with its share in being, is, because of that sharing.

### 3. The Kind Being is not a genus of all genera

- Alternative reading: the Kind Being is *a most generic genus of all genera*, located atop of a universal Porphyrian tree (cf. e.g. Bury 1897: lxxi, 210-1; Stenzel 1931 [1917]: 94-7; Seligman 1974: 43, Frede 1996: 197-8, but even Heidegger 1996-7 [1936-46]: 211, who probably took it from Stenzel, cf. Günther 2000)
- Objection: the Kind Being does not stand with its participants in a genus-species relation → The genus-species relation is never symmetrical (cf. e.g. e.g. *Cat.* 2b20-21 and *Top.* Δ 1.121a10-4); the relationship between Being and its participants can be symmetrical, e.g. with Difference (259a4-b7), or with Identity (as both Being and Identity are all-pervasive, cf. 256a7-8, 256d12-e3 and 259a5-6).

### 4. Conclusion: Plato and Aristotle

- Menn 2021: 'F is' > 'S is F'; to explain the fact that F exists we need not look for a cause that supplies existence to F, but for something that supplies F-ness to some subject S (primarily the *per se* subject of F).
- Plato thinks that to explain the fact that F exists we need to look for an entity that supplies existence to F: this entity is the Kind Being.
- Pace Owen 1965: 71: '[Plato's] analysis becomes the direct parent of Aristotle's'

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