A two-worlds, two-semantics interpretation of Plato's *Sophist*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The avowed purpose of Plato's *Sophist* is to characterize the sophist. In the first part of his book, Plato employs the method of divisions to obtain this characterization, and eventually arrives at the conclusion that the sophist is an imitator and that "there is an art, concerned with speeches, by which it is possible to beguile the young" (234c).[§] From here it is short shrift to arrive at the problem of falsity. This problem is, I claim, the philosophical *leitmotiv* that drives the discussions in the second part of Plato's *Sophist* (after 236d). One should be clear about what exactly this problem consists of. In the *Sophist*, Plato is *not* concerned with the problem of the meaningfulness of false statements concerning some high-minded realm of objects (e.g., forms) - quite to the contrary (see the epilogue). Plato is concerned with falsity in *ordinary statements*. This is worth emphasizing: Plato's main problem in the *Sophist* is to account for the meaningfulness of such simple and prosaic (false) statements as 'Theaetetus is flying' (263a).

It is perplexing for the modern hears that ordinary statements like 'Theaetetus is flying' should pose a problem by the sole virtue of being false. Indeed, there must be something deeply wrong and misguided with doctrines that preclude the possibility of falsehoods in ordinary speech. Such doctrines were, however, common currency in Plato's Athens among the sophists, and they can be traced to the stage influence of Parmenides. I call this influence *the Parmenidean misconception*. It turns out that it was not an easy task for Plato to break away from this misconception, as Plato himself was acutely aware. In fact, one of the two main characters of the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger

[§] The bracketed numbers in the text refer to the traditional pagination (Stephenus edition) of Plato's *Sophist*.

(the other being Theaetetus), tells Theaetetus "how it is altogether difficult to see how one must speak in order to say or to have an opinion that what is false really is and in uttering this not be involved in a contradiction" (236e).

To be sure, the route that Plato takes in the *Sophist* to solve the problem of falsity is framed within his general theory of forms. Let me put it in a nutshell: For Plato, the problem of falsity is the problem of the *interweaving* of suitable forms, viz. of Not-Being with Speech (260e). In the *Sophist*, Plato refines and extends his theory of forms in order to account for the meaningfulness of this mixing and, conspicuously, of its component Not-Being. This refinement/extension is part of one long philosophical argument aimed at showing how false opinions are possible.

II. ONE LONG ARGUMENT

Plato's one long argument is divided into four steps. The first step explains non-identities between forms. In the second step, 'Not-Being' is given a sense as a *stand-alone* mixture of forms. The third step recasts the problem of falsity in terms of inquiring whether the mix Not-Being interweaves with the form Speech. These three steps are, I shall argue, still framed within the bounds of a Parmenidean misconception. More specifically, I claim that Plato is working within a so-called referential theory of the meaning of sentences (an RTMS, for short), according to which sentences are names of facts and their meanings result from them. This has the effect that, in the first three steps of his argument, Plato's philosophical uses of the Greek verb *esti* have always an underlying existential force, viz. that of sustaining that a particular fact does exist. However, this existential force does not preclude the verb *esti* from having other functions, according to the nature of the fact in question. These functions include the use of the verb *esti* in its incomplete senses, namely the predicational and the identificational senses.

The above three steps form an irremovable part of an elaborate strategy to explain the possibility of false opinions. The explanation is finally achieved in the fourth step: the climax of Plato's one long argument. In this last step, Plato finally introduces a *conditional* semantics for the realm of appearance, by means of which he is at long last

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able to escape the Parmenidean predicament. Plato's *Sophist* is philosophical analysis at his best.

III. THE PARMENIDEAN MISCONCEPTION

Parmenides' attack on the cosmologies of his time is the corollary of a much broader attack against natural language as a whole. It posed a serious philosophical challenge to those not willing to accept the Parmenidean conclusions. The main philosophical legacy of Parmenides is a double question: How can one speak falsely? How can one account for true negative statements? In a previous paper of mine (see [1]), I defended that the Parmenidean misconception is rooted in an erroneous theory of the meaning of sentences. According to an RTMS, the meaning of "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" is (results from) the historical fact of the crossing of the Rubicon by Caesar. Such a theory of meaning presupposes an ontology of facts (which may, or may not, live along with an ontology of objects), and necessarily fails to make sense of falsehoods. For instance, Othello falsely believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, but the sentence 'Desdemona loves Cassio' is meaningless since the love of Desdemona for Cassio does not exist.

In Parmenides' hands, the RTMS took a particularly extreme form. Not only falsehoods are meaningless, but so are true negative assertions as well. However, an RTMS does not preclude *per se* an account of true negative assertions. Let us see why with a toy example:

Syntax. There are eight sentences: **S3**, **S4**, **T3**, **T4**, **-S3**, **-S4**, **-T3**, and **-T4**. The first four sentences are affirmative, while the others are their (respective) negative counterparts.

Ontology. There are precisely two facts: □ and △.

Discussion. If we think of **S** and **T** as names for the notions 'square' and 'equilateral triangle', and of **3** and **4** as names for 'three-sidedness' and 'four-sidedness' (respectively), we have a natural assignment of facts to sentences. In this setting, the true affirmative sentences **S4** and **T3** are meaningful and their meanings are (result from) the above two facts (from left to right, respectively). What are the meanings of the two true negative sentences, to wit **-S3** and **-T4**? An RTMS could just dismiss them as

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meaningless. A less extreme possibility is to say that **-S3** and **-T4** correspond (refer) to the very same two facts above (respectively). However, this entails (e.g.) that **-S3** and **S4** have the same meaning. This is not in general a defensible thesis, since it may not account for relevant distinctions of meaning. In effect, suppose that we admit also the notion of five-sidedness, denoted by **5**. Do the true negative sentences **-S3** and **-S5** have the same meaning, namely the meaning of **S4**? A solution for this problem is the following. Assume that we have an ontology of five notions (square, equilateral triangle, three-sidedness, four-sidedness and five-sidedness) and that each fact is a mix of two of these notions. For instance, the above two facts are mixes of, respectively, square and four-sidedness, and equilateral triangle and three-sidedness. Add now a new notion called Other, and *extend* the original ontology of facts by allowing this new notion to conveniently mix together with the previous notions, thus discerning four new facts, namely: the mixing together of square with three-sidedness and Other; of square with five-sidedness and Other; of equilateral triangle with four-sidedness and Other; and of equilateral triangle with five-sidedness and Other. It is clear that this ontological extension solves the problem of assigning facts to true (affirmative and negative) sentences in such a manner that distinctions of meaning are accounted for.

End of discussion.

Observe that the above solution for the problem of negativity is totally within the bounds of an RTMS. I call this solution *Plato's maneuver* (see [1]), since I believe that the above sketched plan is essentially what Plato was busy oneself with in the discussion of Not-Being between (254b) and (259e), namely: To account for true negative statements *via* an extension of the ontology of facts obtained through the participation of the new form Other in the mixes. This is not to say that the mixes that Plato discusses in the *Sophist* are as simple-minded as those of the above toy example. It is also not to say that Plato was mainly concerned with negations of predications. Although a detailed interpretation and commentary of the *Sophist* (254b-259e) is beyond the scope of this article, I shall briefly argue that accounting for non-identities between forms constitutes an important reason why Plato introduced the form Other. Only derivatively is Plato concerned with existence or predication in the *Sophist*.

IV. MIXING AND DIFFERENCE

In the first three steps of Plato's argument one sees a gradual softening of Parmenides original stringent RTMS. These steps are directed towards laying down an account of the problem of the meaningfulness of falsehoods through the mixing together of the form Speech with the form Not-Being. Hence, a preliminary step in Plato's strategy consists in making plain that forms do mix together, at least in a limited way - like the harmonic mixing of musical notes (253b) or the syllabic mixing of letters (253a). Plato attaches an extreme importance to the mixing of forms. This is beyond doubt, since Plato calls *philosopher* that person who is an expert in knowing which forms are willing (or not) to mix together (253c-e).

Plato chooses to concentrate on the study of five great forms and their mutual relationships, i.e., their pairwise willingness to mix or not to mix and, if so, in what manner. The focus on such a small number of forms is justified "lest we become confused in the multitude" (254c) but, even if this is an accurate justification, it does not explain the specific forms chosen, to wit: Motion, Rest, Being, Same and Other. The point is that Plato is concerned in establishing the forms Being and Other as individual *stand-alone* forms and, in addition, in attesting that the latter form has a special apartness role among forms. In (255e), the Eleatic Stranger says: "We'll say that it [the form Other] permeates them all [the other four great forms], for each one is other than everything else, not because of its own nature, but because of its participation in the form of the other." At least between (254c) and (257b), Plato endows the form Other with the role of setting apart different forms, the non-identities of which are precisely explained by the participation of the form Other in suitable mixings. As we shall indicate further along in section VI, these non-identities between forms constitute an ingredient in Plato's explanation of falsity.

V. TWO SIMPLE INTERMEDIATE STEPS

After establishing the form Being as one of the individual forms and after making sense of non-identities between them, Plato takes two simple intermediate steps on the way to tackle the problem of falsity. The first of these steps consists in arguing that the form Being mixes with the form Other, yielding the mix Not-Being. According to a well-

known article of G. E. L. Owen (see [2]), Plato employs here an argument by analogy. I fully endorse Owen's interpretation. In (257b-e), the Eleatic Stranger remarks that the locutions 'not large' and 'not beautiful' do not apply solely to things that are contrary to being large and beautiful (viz., small and ugly things), but also to things that are other than large and beautiful (e.g., middle-sized). He concludes that 'not large' and 'not beautiful' each mark off a new kind on the basis that the first marks off what is other than large, and the second what is other than beautiful. Of course, Plato explains these new kinds in terms of the mixes of the forms Large (respectively, Beauty) with the form Other. Afterwards, in (258a), the Eleatic Stranger generalizes these mixings for an indefinite range of values of 'not-X'. Then, he applies this generalization to the particular form Being, thus getting the mixture of the form Other with Being, i.e., the kind Not-Being. In conclusion, Not-Being is a mix among other forms and mixes, not contrary to the form Being but merely different from it.

In the above discussion, I am not maintaining that the *manner* in which Not-Being is different from the form Being (and from the other forms and mixes) is of no importance. Even though that *manner* is indeed unimportant for the purpose of establishing Not-Being as a *stand-alone* mix, it is rather important for establishing the senses resulting from the mixes in which Not-Being does participate. Plato leaves this matter without much ado, letting the senses of Not-Being be context dependent. For instance, the third step of Plato's argument gives an important example in which the sense of Not-Being is entirely clear. In (260d), the Eleatic Stranger envisages a way for the sophist to escape classification: "perhaps he (the sophist) would say that some forms do participate in Not-Being, but some do not, and that Speech and Opinion are among those that do not so participate." He goes on rebutting this claim, thereby achieving an explanation of false opinion. Clearly, the sense of Not-Being in the above-cited passage is the veridical sense - that is to say, the sense of stated opinions *not being the case*. On the other hand, when the Eleatic Stranger sums up his account of Not-Being in (259a-b), the matters are rather unclear and (perhaps) purposefully so. That is, I am suggesting that when Plato is in the level of generality whereby he is considering Not-Being as a *stand-alone* kind, he needfully leaves indeterminate the semantic ways by which Not-Being may interact with

other forms, since such interactions may be either veridical, predicational or identificational in character.

VI. TACKLING FALSITY

Until the point where the Eleatic Stranger questions whether Not-Being participates in the form Speech (260d), Plato does not - indeed, does not *need to* - break away from an RTMS. However, in order to answer positively the above question, Plato needs to sort the Parmenidean misconception completely out. He has already done some moves in this direction by having loosened Parmenides' original stringencies. But now he must take a truly revolutionary step, and *invent* conditional semantics!

Plato prepares the ground for conditional semantics by analyzing the nature of speech (260a). His most important conclusion is that speech must be *about* something (the subject of a simple statement), *not* that speech refers to facts. The Eleatic Stranger illustrates this point with the examples 'Theaetetus is sitting' and 'Theaetetus is flying', both of which are *about* Theaetetus. But while the first one gathers (*legein*) a form, viz. Sitter, which is true of Theaetetus (at a given specified moment), the second one gathers a form, viz. Flier, that is different from any form which is true of Theaetetus (at the given moment). In short, Plato's new semantics is based on the primitive relation '(form) F is true of (sense-object) x', and renders the falsity of 'x Fs' by 'for all (forms) G that are true of x, G is different from F' (do notice the non-identity between forms in the account of falsity just sketched). In other words, the truth or falsity of 'x Fs' is conditional upon what are the forms that are true of x. If F is one of them, then 'x Fs' is true; if F is different from each one of them, then 'x Fs' is false. This rendering of the truth conditions of (what we now call) atomic sentences is materially equivalent to our modern rendering: It is a deeply un-Parmenidean rendering insofar as it is not based on the idea that sentences are names, and that their meanings result from the things which they name.

VII. EPILOGUE

It is interesting to observe, and it is certainly not a coincidence, that Plato only poses and tackles the problem of falsity for speech about the world of senses, not for the world of forms. Can't we also speak falsely of forms? Can't we also have *opinions* of forms? I

do not believe that Plato's *Sophist* ever considers these questions, let alone answer them in the affirmative. They are, I believe, quite foreign to Plato. *One* of the reasons they are so is, I suggest, that Plato has a semantics for the realm of knowledge (whose objects are forms and their mixes) and a different semantics for the realm of opinion (whose objects are the sensory objects). For the realm of knowledge, Plato has an RTMS semantics. Therefore, when one has knowledge that X, then X must be true, *not* on account of the semantics of the epistemic operator 'know that ...' but rather because of the semantics of the *simple* sentence X. Indeed, X must refer in order to make sense and, by virtue of referring, must be true. On the other hand, for the realm of opinion, Plato has (now) a conditional semantics that allows him to speak falsely of sensory objects.

I believe that one of Plato's greatest philosophical achievements was his semantic break with the Parmenidean misconception through his invention of conditional semantics, the key features of which we have all taken for granted ever since.

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