

Negation and Not-Being: Dark Matter in the *Sophist*

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Charles Kahn's work on the verb "be" in ancient Greek has sparked what he has "modestly called [his] version of the Copernican Revolution: replacing existence by predication at the center of the system of uses for *einai*."¹ In gratitude for the stimulus I have gained from this rich seam within Kahn's wide-ranging work, and for fruitful exchanges on *einai* over the years, I am very happy to contribute these tentative remarks on a stretch of Plato's *Sophist*. His insight about *einai* and predication will prove to be an important key in unlocking some of the difficulties I examine below.

My aim is to try to understand what I regard as the most difficult stretch of the *Sophist*, 257–259. In responding to a particularly impenetrable claim made by the Eleatic Stranger (ES), Theaetetus announces at 258b7 that they have found τὸ μὴ ὄν (not being), which they have been searching for on account of the sophist. He is thinking, of course, of what sparked the long excursus into not being and being: the sophist's imagined challenge to the inquirers' defining his expertise as involving images and falsehood. Here's that challenge: speaking of images and falsehood requires speaking of what is not, and combining it with being, but to do so risks contradiction and infringes a dictum of Parmenides. This heralds the puzzles of not being, and of being, which are followed by the positive investigations of the *Sophist's* Middle Part. So Theaetetus' *eureka* moment ought to signal some satisfying clarification and

¹ Charles Kahn, *The Verb "Be" in Ancient Greek*, reprinted by Hackett (2003), x. The new introduction, from which the above quotation comes, is reprinted in the welcome volume *Essays on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

closure to the discussions. But in fact the stretch it is embedded in is singularly baffling, and the subject of continuing debate among commentators.² There is little agreement about what issues Plato is discussing in this section, let alone about any supposed solutions.

My strategy is to try to read the passage without preconceived ideas about what it ought to contain. Some of the most celebrated discussions fall down, in my view, precisely because they have an agenda about what *must* be found there. For instance, many commentators note that an account of negative predication is a desideratum. This is to fill the gap between 256e, (by which point we have an account of “Kinesis is not being” where this is a denial of identity between Kinesis and the kind Being) and 263, where we are given an account of the false predicative sentence “Theaetetus flies,” which seems to require that Plato has already offered an account of negative predication. So some critics attempt to find an account of negative predication at a point in our stretch where the topic is, I submit, quite different: see my analysis of Stage 2 below.³ To take a different example, Owen’s celebrated essay locates the key error exposed by Plato as that of taking “is not” to mean “is not anything at all,” and Owen sees a reference to this at 258bff., where the ES remarks that in revealing τὸ μὴ ὄν (not being) they have not been so bold as to say that the *contrary* of being is. To justify that account (which may well be correct), Owen offered a very forced reading of the opening of our problem stretch—I label it Stage 1 below—believing that there the ES is explaining the negation of

² I list here and in the next two notes some of the major discussions. I have learned from them all, and from many others not mentioned: M. Frede, *Prädikation und Existenzaussage*. Hypomnemata 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967). G. E. L. Owen, “Plato on Not-being,” in *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays* 1, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971), 223–267. Owen’s essay is reprinted in *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, ed. G. Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). E. N. Lee, “Plato on Negation and Not-being in the *Sophist*,” *Philosophical Review* LXXXI.3 (1972), 267–304. D. Bostock, “Plato on ‘Is Not’,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 2 (1984), 89–119. M. Ferejohn, “Plato and Aristotle on Negative Predication and Semantic Fragmentation,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 71 (1989), 257–282. M. Frede, “Plato’s *Sophist* on False Statements,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 397–424.

³ J. van Eck, “Falsity without Negative Predication: On *Sophistes* 255e–263d,” *Phronesis* 40 (1995), 20–47, exposes the drawbacks of this approach.

“. . . is . . . ” by an analogy with the negation of “large.” Again, careful reading of that passage reveals—I shall argue—that Owen’s account of it cannot stand.⁴

I start by outlining three problems concerning our passage.

First: *the obscurity problem* (whence my title’s “dark matter”).

The topic or topics of the section are hard to discern, and have given rise to a plethora of very different readings. The section culminates in two accounts of not being, both of them worded obscurely and hard to fathom. The accounts are apparently meant to be equivalent (258d), though they seem to be rather different, as I discuss below.

Second: *the sandwich problem*. This obscure stretch comes between two very carefully written and highly important stretches of the work. It follows the “Communion of Kinds” section, where Plato makes the ES set out four quartets of statements showing how Kinesis combines with the four other kinds. He shows how both (1) “Kinesis is the same” and (2) “Kinesis is not the same” can be true, and explains why this is so, in a manner which can explain the parallel claims that Kinesis both is and is not different, and Kinesis is and is not being.⁵ Though scholars are divided over how to read the lines in which the ES explains why (1) and (2) are not, despite appearances, contradictory, it is clear that the Communion of Kinds section is carefully written and fully signposted by Plato. And the section that follows our problem stretch—that on *logos* and false *logos*—is even more carefully signposted. From 260b–261c, the ES explains patiently that the new problem—that of not being as *falsehood*—is different from the topic of not being discussed

⁴ J. Kostman, “False Logos and Not-Being in Plato’s *Sophist*,” in *Patterns in Plato’s Thought*, ed. J. M. E. Moravcsik (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1973), already made such objections to Owen’s argumentation.

⁵ In L. Brown, “The *Sophist* on Statements, Predication and Falsehood,” in G. Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 437–462, I discuss the Communion of Kinds stretch at 444–451. Agreeing with Kahn, *The Verb ‘Be’*, 372, 400, I find no grounds for saying that an “is” of identity is marked off, either in that passage or elsewhere in Plato or Aristotle. I prefer instead to see Plato noting a distinction between kinds of statement (predicative versus identifying statements). In this essay I argue at greater length for the interpretation of 257a-c adumbrated in that paper at 456–457.

before. And what follows—the stretch in which the ES explains what a *logos* is, and how a false *logos* is possible, 261d–264b—is another brilliant stretch of dialogue. So our problematic stretch is sandwiched between two careful, lucid and successful discussions.

Third: *the résumé problem*. After a preamble from 258e6, the ES gives (from 259a4) what purports to be a résumé of our problem passage, but it signally leaves out what had appeared to be its key moments, the accounts of what the form of not being is.

Stranger: [Intro.] Then let no-one say against us that it is some contrary of being which we are bringing to light when we make bold to say that not being is. As far as some contrary of it goes, we long ago said goodbye to such a thing, (259a) whether it is or is not, whether any explanation [*logos*] can be given of it, or whether it's utterly unexplainable [*alogon*]. But as for what we've just now said not being is—if someone wants to try to refute that and to persuade us that it's not correct, let them do so; but until they succeed, they must say just what we say on these matters: [Résumé] viz., that the kinds mix (a5) with one another, and that being and the different pervade all the kinds and each other.⁶ The different shares in being and is, because of that sharing, not that in which it shares, but different, and, because it is different from being, (259b) it clearly has to be that it is not being.⁷ And, being, in turn, because it shares in the different, will be different from the other kinds, and, being different from them all, is not each of them or all of them except itself.⁸ So being, in turn, undeniably is not a thousand things, while those other kinds in the

⁶ Cf. 255e4.

⁷ Cf. 256d11–e1.

⁸ Cf. 257a1–5.

same way, each and every one of them, is in many ways and in many ways is not.⁹

There is a question what the introductory lines refer to. There may be a reference to 257b1–c4 (discussed below), but it seems more likely that the back reference is to the aporetic passage at 238c–239a. What is quite plain is that in the résumé proper, the ES rehearses points that had been established in the discussion of the Communion of Kinds, as my footnotes marking some of the parallels indicate. That is, *before* our problem passage begins at 257b1. This difficulty faces everyone trying to understand our stretch, but it poses an especially severe problem for those (such as Michael Frede and others) who hold that here Plato has set himself and accomplished the novel task of explaining negative predication. Frede holds that a key advance is made in our stretch, with the much-desired account of negative predication, an advance that is crucial, in his view, to the account of falsehood that follows. But, as Frede admits, “it has to be granted that it is puzzling that Plato in the summary [i.e., 259a3–b6, above] returns to the cases of not being that do not seem worrisome and that, in any case, we are not worried about if we are worried about false statements.”¹⁰

I now turn to our problem passage itself. I divide it into four stages, as follows:

First stage, 257b1–c4: the meaning of negative expressions: “*not contrary but only different*.”

Second stage, 257c5–d13: the parts of the different and their names compared to the parts of knowledge and their names.

Third stage, 257d14–258e5: more on the parts of the different, culminating in two accounts of what “the form of not being” is.

Fourth stage, 258e6–259b7: conclusion with résumé (quoted and discussed above).

⁹ Cf. 257a4.

¹⁰ Frede, “False Statement,” 211; others including Lee, “Negation,” 299n53, note this enigma.

STAGE 1: WHAT NEGATIVE EXPRESSIONS MEAN

(I justify this controversial title below)

- 257b1 **ΞΕ.** Ἴδωμεν δὴ καὶ τόδε.
ΘΕΑΙ. Τὸ ποῖον;
ΞΕ. Ὅποταν τὸ μὴ ὄν λέγωμεν, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὐκ ἐναντίον **A1**
 τι λέγομεν τοῦ ὄντος ἀλλ' ἕτερον μόνον.
- b5 **ΘΕΑΙ.** Πῶς;
ΞΕ. Οἷον ὅταν εἴπωμέν τι μὴ μέγα, τότε μᾶλλον τί σοι **A2**
 φαινόμεθα τὸ μικρὸν ἢ τὸ ἴσον δηλοῦν τῷ ῥήματι;
ΘΕΑΙ. Καὶ πῶς;
ΞΕ. Οὐκ ἄρ', ἐναντίον ὅταν ἀπόφασις λέγῃται σημαίνειν, **A3**
 συγχωρησόμεθα, τοσοῦτον δὲ μόνον, ὅτι τῶν ἄλλων τι
- b10 μὴνύει
 c τὸ μὴ καὶ τὸ οὐ προτιθέμενα τῶν ἐπιόντων ὀνομάτων,
 μᾶλλον
 δὲ τῶν πραγμάτων περὶ ἅττ' ἂν κέηται τὰ ἐπιφθεγγόμε-
 να
 ὕστερον τῆς ἀποφάσεως ὀνόματα.
- Str. Now then, let's look at the following as well—
 Tht. What?
 Str. Whenever we speak of not being, (so it seems), we don't speak of
 something contrary to being, but only different. **A1**
 Tht. How so?
 Str. For example, when we call something “not large,” do you think we
 signify small by that expression any more than same-sized? **A2**
 Tht. No.
 Str. So, when it is said that a negative signifies a contrary, we shan't agree,
 but we'll allow only this much—the prefixed word “not” indicates
 something other than the words following the negative, or rather,
 other than the things which the words uttered after the negative ap-
 ply to. **A3**
 Tht. Absolutely.

The key to understanding this problematic stretch lies in seeing the relation between the claims I have labelled A1, A2 and A3. And to do so it helps to pay close attention to Theaetetus' responses. A1 makes a claim that Theaetetus doesn't understand. Once the ES has explained it with an example or illustration in A2, he has got the point; he now understands what the ES means by “not contrary but

only different.” The ES then repeats the point at A3, and Theaetetus now concurs fully.¹¹

From this we must conclude that at A1 $\delta\acute{\omicron}\tau\alpha\nu\ \tau\acute{\omicron}\ \mu\eta\ \delta\acute{\nu}\ \lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega\mu\epsilon\nu$, the ES is referring to every time we speak of (or say) *not being something*; an example of such speaking is when we say “not large.” This is somewhat surprising, since we might expect the phrase to mean “when we use the expression $\mu\eta\ \delta\acute{\nu}$.” But taking the passage as a whole, I find strong reasons against that initially suggested reading, and in favor of the one I have just offered.¹² We must, contra Owen and others, understand $\omicron\iota\omicron\nu$ as “for example,” so that speaking of not large is an *example*, a case, of speaking of $\mu\eta\ \delta\acute{\nu}$.¹³ As we see from A3, where the point is repeated, the topic of this stretch is negative expressions generally: compare $\tau\acute{\omega}\ \delta\acute{\eta}\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ in b7. At A2, we are given “not large” as an example of such a $\delta\acute{\eta}\mu\alpha$ or phrase.¹⁴

In what follows, I will proceed on the assumption that the passage is discussing negative expressions generally. Later in this essay, I return to give further reasons for rejecting Owen’s rival interpretation, on which we should translate $\omicron\iota\omicron\nu$ “just as” and read the passage as explaining the negation of “is” *by analogy with* the negation of “large.”

So the passage tells us in A1 that we don’t mean the contrary of something when we say not something, but “only different”; and this is recalled in A3 with the claim that a negative expression

¹¹ I am in considerable agreement here with Kostman’s valuable article, “False Logos,” section IV, though I do not agree with him that we have to translate *heteron* as incompatible.

¹² Compare the following imaginary dialogue: “When we say ‘mighty’ something, we don’t mean ‘strong’, we mean to intensify.” “How so?” “For instance, when we say ‘mighty rich,’ we mean ‘very rich’, not ‘strong and rich’.” I take A1 in a similar way, that is, roughly as: when we say “not something” . . .

¹³ In support of the translation “for instance,” note that in all the following places $\omicron\iota\omicron\nu\ \delta\acute{\omicron}\tau\alpha\nu$ is used to introduce an illustration of a general claim: *Phaedo* 70e6, *Cratylus* 394d6, *Cratylus* 424e1, *Republic* 462c10.

¹⁴ Note that at 257b8 “not large” is called a *rhema*, while at 257c1, the ES refers to the words (*onomata*) which follow the negative. This is keeping with Plato’s standard usage (prior to the *Sophist*) of *onoma* for single word, *rhema* for phrase. In 261dff. he will announce, with considerable fanfare, a new usage for the two terms.

“only indicates this much, one of the others τῶν ἄλλων τί.”¹⁵ To explain the terms *contrary* and *different*, the ES takes the case of “not large” and offers “small” and “same-sized” as “contrary” and “only different” respectively: *not large* doesn’t mean large’s contrary, *small*. I take it that both *small* and *same-sized* are different from *large*, while *small* (but not *same-sized*) is contrary as well as different. So contraries here are polar contraries, i.e., contraries at opposite ends of a single scale.

Before asking how to understand “different” we should clarify the terms *large*, *small*, *same-sized* (ἴσον). Plato is clearly thinking of the trio *larger than*, *same-sized as*, *smaller than*, a trio he often discusses together.¹⁶ Though he here uses the terms *large* and *small*, rather than *larger than/smaller than*, it is clear that he has the above trio in mind.¹⁷ The point made in A2 alludes to the fact that what is not large (in comparison to Y) need not be small (in comparison to Y) but may be the same size (as Y). One who recognizes that “large” is interchangeable with “larger” and who has an elementary understanding of the relations between *larger than*, *smaller than* and *equal to/same-sized as* would understand the point at once, as Theaetetus does.¹⁸

¹⁵ I am making two assumptions: a) that Plato does not intend to distinguish between what *we* mean (A1, A2) and what *an expression* means, and b) that he intends the three verbs to be roughly, if not exactly, equivalent: A1 λέγομεν, A2 δηλοῦν and A3 μνησκει. We can explain the weaker μνησκει by the vagueness of the claim that “not F” means “one of the others.” See M. Dixsaut, “La Négation, Le non-Etre et L’Autre dans le *Sophiste*,” in *Etudes sur le Sophiste de Platon* (Paris: Bibliopolis, 1991), 195. I do not agree with J. McDowell, “Falsehood and not-being in Plato’s *Sophist*,” in *Language and Logos*, eds. M. Schofield and M. Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), ch. 6, 119, that Plato is not making a semantic point in A3.

¹⁶ *Phaedo* 75c9 and *Republic* 602e4–5 both cite the trio using comparatives: larger than/equal to/smaller than. *Parmenides* 167c has the trio largeness/smallness/equality. See D. Sedley, “Equal Sticks and Stones,” ch. 4 of *Maieusis*, ed. D. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 70. I choose the translation “same-sized,” given the connection with large and small, though “equal” is also a possible translation. Owen’s translation “middling” is adopted by many, but is unwarranted.

¹⁷ See previous note, and, for *large* and *larger than* as equivalent, see *Phaedo* 100e5.

¹⁸ Cf. Sedley, n16, “Equal Sticks,” 69–72.

Now to the contested question: how to understand the claim that *not . . .* does not mean *the contrary of . . .*, but only *different*. It is crucial that the “only different” term (see A1, A3)—that is, *same-sized* in A2—as well as the “contrary” term *small*, excludes *large*. To repeat what I have written elsewhere: “think how laughable it would have been if the ES had chosen a random attribute—say, yellow—different from large and said ‘When we say ‘not large’ do you think we signify small any more than yellow?’ Being yellow does not rule out being large, so appealing to it in the explication of ‘not large’ would be ridiculous.”¹⁹ Not any old term referring to a property different from large could be used in A2; and it is clear that the ES has in mind a range of incompatible properties, *F, G, H*, and so on, such that not *F* does not (or need not) mean the contrary of *F* but only a different one from *F* in that range.²⁰

But, critics protest, *heteron* means different, not incompatible. Indeed it does, and we must concede this point: *heteron* and *allo* continue to mean different, that is, non-identical. But the analysis the ES offers of negative expressions makes crucial use of the understood notion of a range of incompatible predicates, which A2 proffers precisely to explicate the point that “not . . . doesn’t mean contrary but only different.” So a different term will, since it belongs to such a range, pick out an attribute which is in fact incompatible, as *equal to Y* is indeed incompatible with *larger than Y*, while not its contrary.²¹ We have such a locution in English: if I say “the policeman was other than helpful,” you will understand me to mean that his attitude was different from and incompatible with being helpful.

The upshot of this reading of Stage 1 is that, contrary to first appearances, the ES is not offering an analysis of the expression $\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$, but rather taking $\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$ to stand in for any expression “not *F*.” I noted above that this may seem surprising, but Charles Kahn’s work has paved the way for an understanding of Greek *einai* such

¹⁹ L. Brown, “The *Sophist* on Statements”, 457.

²⁰ I pass over the question of how exactly to construe the positive thesis about the meaning of not large. The issue is, in part, whether one takes “one of the others” *de re* or *de dicto*.

²¹ Ferejohn, “Semantic Fragmentation,” 262ff.

that to talk of being is, first and foremost, to talk of predication; the predicative function of *einai* is central to understanding it.

So I read Phase 1 as offering an account of negative expressions of the type “not *F*,” an account which makes key use of the notion of a range of incompatible properties such that to be not *F* is to have a different property (taken from that range) from the property *F*ness. Now many critics have resisted attributing such an account to Plato, since it has a serious drawback. It offers at best a sufficient condition, but not a necessary condition, for being not *F*. As Price remarked in opposing such a theory, it is true and meaningful to insist that virtue is not square, although it is not the case that virtue is some shape other than square.²²

A rival interpretation of Phase 1 may be labelled the extensional interpretation. It agrees that Phase 1 focuses on negative expressions generally, rather than on the expression $\mu\lambda\grave{\iota}\ \delta\upsilon\nu$. It takes Plato to be explaining negative predications “*x* is not *F*,” but reads the account very differently from the way proposed above. The advantage of this alternative interpretation is that it finds Plato offering an account of “*x* is not *F*” as “*x* is different from all the *F*s”; and the two are indeed materially equivalent. But to find this reading in the text is—I submit—impossible, in spite of the ingenious arguments offered in its support.²³ The interpretation focuses on the claim, in A1 and A3, that “not . . .” means “different,” but it cannot adequately explain the way this is elaborated, either in A2 or in A3. It is particularly hard to get the reading Bostock wants from the sentence at A3, since that speaks of “not” signifying “one of the others ($\tau\hat{\omega}\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\omega\nu\ \tau\acute{\iota}$) than the words following the negative, or rather, than the things the words . . . apply to.” I submit that this cannot be read as telling us that to say that “*x* is not *F*” is to say that *x* is one of the others than, that

²² Brown, “The *Sophist* on Statements,” 458n5, notes that the incompatibility range account of negation and falsehood was supported by Mabbott and Ryle in an Aristotelian Society Symposium in 1929, and effectively criticized by H. H. Price.

²³ Frede, *Prädikation*, 78, and “False Statements,” 408–409, offers this interpretation but does not show how he derives it from A3. Bostock, “Is not,” 115, admits it is a strained reading of A3 but tries to justify it; cf. next note.

is, that x is different from *everything that is F* .²⁴ The reading I have given, on the other hand, fits the preceding sentence perfectly. Just as “not large” need not mean “small” any more than “same-sized,” so in general “not F ” means “one of the others than F ” (that is, one or another from the understood range of properties other than F , and not necessarily the contrary of F). Since Bostock supports his reading by appealing to a sentence from Stage 2, I will have a little more to say about it below.

Our conclusion about Stage 1 is that it is best read as offering a tempting, if flawed account of expressions such as “not F ” and/or of their use in negative predications of the type, “ x is not F .” (It is tempting to think that “ x is not white” means “ x is some color other than white,” but careful reflection shows that this cannot be correct.) Paying attention to the illustration in A2, we saw how to interpret contrary (viz., as polar contrary) and different (viz., as a different one from a range of incompatible properties). No other interpretation offers an adequate explanation of the point of A2. I prefer an interpretation that makes good sense of the text, even if it credits Plato with a less than watertight account of negation, to ones that do Procrustean violence to what Plato wrote.

STAGE 2: THE PARTS OF THE DIFFERENT AND THEIR NAMES, COMPARED TO THE PARTS OF KNOWLEDGE AND THEIR NAMES

The following passage, and particularly the closing sentence uttered by Theaetetus, has given rise to a popular but incorrect reading. Frede, Bostock and others find in the remark by Theaetetus at 257d11–13 an account of negative predication (of “ x is not beautiful”) such that it is to be read as “ x is different from all the beautiful

²⁴ Bostock, “Is not,” 115, notes the expression “the things which the words following the ‘not’ stand for” *πράγματα περὶ ἅττ’ ἂν κέηται τὰ ὀνόματα* and suggests that here Plato is talking not about forms (as the things the words apply to) but about instances of forms, the terms being assigned what Bostock calls their generalizing role. But this does not fit with the full version of what the ES says, for he begins by saying that “not” indicates “one of the others than the words” and then corrects himself—“or rather, than the things, etc.” That slip could hardly have occurred if the ES was all along thinking not of forms but their instances.

things.”²⁵ But a closer look at the passage shows that its function is not to give an account of negative predication, but to introduce a novel notion, that of a “part of the different”—named by a phrase such as “not beautiful” by analogy with a part of knowledge, named by (for instance) “geometry.” This is the prelude to further discussion of negative forms in the succeeding lines.

- 257c5 ΞΕ. Τόδε δὲ διανοηθῶμεν, εἰ καὶ σοὶ συνδοκεῖ.
 ΘΕΑΙ. Τὸ ποῖον;
 ΞΕ. Ἡ θατέρου μοι φύσις φαίνεται κατακεκερματίσθαι
 καθάπερ ἐπιστήμη.
 ΘΕΑΙ. Πῶς;
 10 ΞΕ. Μία μὲν ἐστὶ που καὶ ἐκείνη, τὸ δ' ἐπὶ τῷ γιγνόμενον
 μέρος αὐτῆς ἕκαστον ἀφορισθὲν ἐπωνυμίαν ἴσχει τινὰ
 d ἐαυτῆς ἰδίαν· διὸ πολλὰ τέχνηαι τ' εἰσὶ λεγόμεναι καὶ
 ἐπιστήμαι.
 ΘΕΑΙ. Πάνυ μὲν οὖν.
 ΞΕ. Οὐκοῦν καὶ τὰ τῆς θατέρου φύσεως μόρια μιᾶς
 5 οὔσης ταυτὸν πέπονθε τοῦτο.
 ΘΕΑΙ. Τάχ' ἄν· ἀλλ' ὅπη δὴ λέγωμεν; (1995 OCT ἀλλὰ πῆ)
 ΞΕ. Ἔστι τῷ καλῷ τι θατέρου μόριον ἀντιτιθέμενον;
 ΘΕΑΙ. Ἔστιν.
 ΞΕ. Τοῦτ' οὖν ἀνόνημον ἐροῦμεν ἢ τιν' ἔχον ἐπωνυμίαν;
 10 ΘΕΑΙ. Ἔχον· ὁ γὰρ μὴ καλὸν ἐκάστοτε φθεγγόμεθα,
 τοῦτο οὐκ ἄλλου τινὸς ἕτερόν ἐστιν ἢ τῆς τοῦ καλοῦ φύσεως.
- 257c5 Str. And we should consider the following, if you agree.
 Tht. What?
 Str. It seems to me that the nature of the different is to be par-
 celled out, just like knowledge.
 Tht. How so?
 c10 Str. Well, knowledge also is a single thing, surely, but each of its
 parts that applies to something is marked off and gets some special
 name of its own. That's why there are many skills and kinds of knowl-
 edge that get spoken of.
 Tht. Certainly.
 257d4 Str. And so with the nature of the different: though it's a single
 thing, it has parts in a similar fashion.
 Tht. Possibly, but shouldn't we say how?
 Str. Is there some part of the different that is set against the
 beautiful?
 Tht. There is.
 Str. So shall we say it's nameless, or that it has a name?

²⁵ Frede, *Prädikation*, 86–89; Bostock, “Is not,” 115–117.

257d10 Tht. That it has a name; because what—from time to time—we put into words as “not beautiful”, it’s this that is different from nothing other than the nature of the beautiful. (*In other words: the name you just asked me about—of the “part of the different set against the beautiful”—is “not beautiful.”*)

Once again the ES begins with a claim Theaetetus doesn’t understand. But the young man rapidly catches on, this time without the help of an example, and at 257d3 signifies that he understands how the parts of knowledge, each applied to something, have names of their own. Still, let’s supply some examples, using names of “parts of knowledge” from the dialogue in which we first meet him.

	Knowledge		
APPLIED TO:	producing shoes	shapes	numbers
NAME:	<i>cobbler</i>	<i>geometry</i>	<i>arithmetic</i>

The ES proceeds with his analogy, and gets Theaetetus to agree that there is a part of the different set against the beautiful, and to name it. The young man obliges with the name “not beautiful.”

	Different		
FROM:	beautiful	large	etc.
NAME:	<i>not beautiful</i>	<i>not large</i>	

That is the entire message of this short passage. It does not, pace Bostock and Frede, offer an account of negative predication, and *a fortiori* does not offer one in extensional terms. Both scholars interpret Theaetetus as offering an analysis of “*x* is not beautiful” as “*x* is different from everything that is beautiful.” But to take the phrase “different from nothing other than the nature of the beautiful” to mean “different from everything which is beautiful” is a desperate expedient, and the alleged parallels cited by Frede go no way toward making this interpretation plausible.²⁶

²⁶ Frede, *Prädikation*, 88, cites *Phaedrus* 248c, 251b; *Republic* 429c, for “the nature of *F*” meaning simply “the *F*s.”

Here is how Bostock argues for his view. Taking his start from the phrase ὃ γὰρ μὴ καλὸν ἐκάστοτε φθεγγόμεθα, he writes: “the subject expression must be taken as ‘whatever is not beautiful’ for otherwise the word ἐκάστοτε has no intelligible function. [He is assuming that ἐκάστοτε must be translated “on each occasion,” which I dispute below.] But then it follows that ‘the nature of the beautiful’ must also be taken as generalizing, and equivalent to ‘whatever is beautiful’ if we are not to credit Plato with obvious nonsense. Of course we do not call things not beautiful just because they are other than the form of beauty.”²⁷ Reply: indeed we do not, but the better inference is that “the nature of the beautiful” does indeed mean the form of beauty, and that the subject expression therefore should *not* be understood as referring to whatever is not beautiful.

My alternative translation “what—from time to time—we put into words as ‘not beautiful’” indicates that the topic is precisely the form or kind of the *not beautiful*, that is, the very part of the *different* set against the *beautiful* that Theaetetus was asked to name. I justify it by pointing out that Plato commonly uses ἐκάστοτε in contexts where it cannot mean “each time” but rather “from time to time.”²⁸ But even if we keep the traditional translation, the reading given by Bostock and Frede can be safely set aside, both because it ignores the context of Theaetetus’ remark, and because it gives a very strained, if not impossible, reading of the words “is different from nothing other than the nature of the beautiful.”²⁹

So what is the role of this passage? The analogy between knowledge and its parts, and the different and its parts, suggests the following. Knowledge is a form, and (probably) its objects are forms too; hence its parts—branches identified by their objects—are forms. And by comparing the *different* to *knowledge*, Plato suggests

²⁷ Bostock, “Is not,” 116.

²⁸ The clearest cases are *Theaetetus* 187e5, *Symposium* 177a5, *Republic* 393b7. It is striking how frequently Plato combines ἐκάστοτε with verbs of saying, often—it seems—as a sort of catchphrase. I have noted over twenty occurrences. See also *Sophist* 237d6.

²⁹ As van Eck, “Falsity without,” 32, argues persuasively, while keeping the traditional translation of ἐκάστοτε.

that, in just the same way, the *different* is a form, what each part of it is “set against” (ἀντιτιθέμενον) is a form (e.g., the beautiful), and so the resulting part itself, whose name is “not beautiful,” is itself a form. Those who might—with good reason—balk at such negative forms are to be lulled into acceptance by the analogy with the parts of knowledge; and comforted by noting a parallel between the ways each of Knowledge and the Different are parcelled out.³⁰ In the sequel, the ES will stress that the *not beautiful*, the *not large*, the *not just* and so on have an equal claim to being as the beautiful, the large and the just.³¹ This seems a strange thesis for Plato to be arguing for, and one that seems to conflict with Aristotle’s claims that the Platonists deny negative forms.³²

How are we to understand the positing of a form of not *F*, described as a part of the *different* set against *F*? How can we apply the moral of Stage 1 to this? One way to do so—though I don’t feel entirely confident it is right—is to carry over the idea that Plato has in mind a range of incompatible properties such that to be not *F* is to have some property *taken from that range* that is other than *Fness*. Thus the form *not large* is the form or property of being some size (relative to . . .) other than large. Likewise, the form *not beautiful* is the property of having some aesthetic property other than beautiful: perhaps plain, perhaps ugly. I have already noted, above, that this is unsatisfactory as an account of negation, even though it is an account that appealed to thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Bosanquet and Ryle. But if we set aside that objection, we can see the appeal of understanding “not square” as “having some shape other than square” and “not green” as “having some color other than green.” If you want to countenance negative forms/forms of negations, it is

³⁰ 257c. A further parallel is missed in English: knowledge of . . . and different from . . . are both expressed by the genitive case in Greek.

³¹ 258b9–10, not beautiful “is no less than” beautiful. 258a1–2, “ὁμοίως ἄρα τὸ μὴ μέγα καὶ τὸ μέγα αὐτὸ εἶναι λεκτέον”; 258b9–c4, indicates that these are regarded as forms.

³² *Metaphysics* 990b13–14, 1079a9–10. The issue is a complex one; see Frede, *Prädikation*, 92, and G. Fine, *On Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 113–116, with notes. I agree with Frede, against Fine, that this passage *does* assert the existence of negative forms/forms of negations.

comforting (if incorrect) to do so with some positive designation.³³ A more serious difficulty for this understanding of the notion of *not large* as a part of the *different*, is this: how do we apply this to the account—or rather the two accounts—of *not being* that follow?

STAGE 3: THE TWO FORMULAE FOR NOT BEING

In the third and most puzzling stretch, the ES will offer, in swift succession, two formulae for τὸ μὴ ὄν, not being. Let's call them the first formula for not being, 258a11–b8, and the second formula for not being, 258d5–e3. There is a sharp divide between scholars who favor

- the Analogy interpretation—whereby Plato offers an account of *not being* according to which it is one part of the different, the one set against *being*—by analogy with the *not large*, which is another part of the *different*, this time set against *large*,³⁴

and those who favor

- the Generalization interpretation—whereby *not being* is “the part of the *different* set against each being” (258e2, or against “the being of each” if we read *hekastou*); in other words, whereby *not being* generalizes over *not F*, *not G*, etc.³⁵ Hence “not being” does not refer to a single part, the unique part set against *being*, but is rather a general term covering each and every part that is set against some being or other.

Now the debate is a crucial one. If the analogy interpretation is right, the ES does indeed postulate a form of *not being*, in a manner

³³ Ferejohn, “Semantic Fragmentation,” 279, argues for this line, putting a lot of weight on the term *antiithesis*. See also M.-L. Gill at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/plato-sophstate/>>. Many scholars oppose this reading, including Lee, “Plato on Negation,” 292 and 296; Dixsaut, “La Négation,” 188n15.

³⁴ Owen, “Not-Being,” 232–241, esp. 239.

³⁵ Defended by, among others, Frede, *Prädikation*, 91–92, and J. van Eck, “Not being and difference: on Plato’s *Sophist* 256d5–258e3,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (2002), 68–83, at 73ff.

parallel to the forms of *not beautiful*, *not large* and so on that he had argued for in Phase 2. And indeed, much of his language suggests that he is doing precisely that. See 258b9–c5, at the close of which the ES remarks “just as the large was large and the beautiful beautiful, and the not large not large and the not beautiful not beautiful, so too not being in just the same way was and is not being.”³⁶ This seems to be a clear statement that there is a form of not being, in just the same way as (and in addition to) the other negative forms. So far the so-called Analogy interpretation of the first formula seems to be vindicated. But it faces serious difficulties. After setting out the relevant texts I shall argue that the so-called Generalization interpretation is probably the correct one. Before we proceed, note that on one point both formulae are in agreement: *not being* is *not* identified with the *different*, but with either one special part of it (as on the Analogy reading, suggested by the first formula), or with any part of the different (as on the Generalization reading).

FIRST FORMULA FOR NOT BEING, *SOPHIST* 258A11–B8

258a11 ΕΕ. Οὐκοῦν, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἡ τῆς θατέρου μορίου φύσεως
 b καὶ τῆς τοῦ ὄντος πρὸς ἀλλήλα ἀντικειμένων ἀντίθεσις
 οὐδὲν ἦττον, εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν, αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὄντος οὐσία ἐστίν,
 οὐκ ἐναντίον ἐκείνῳ σημαίνουσα ἀλλὰ τοσοῦτον μόνον,
 ἕτερον ἐκείνου.

b5 ΘΕΑΙ. Σαφέστατά γε.
 ΕΕ. Τίν' οὖν αὐτὴν προσείπωμεν;
 ΘΕΑΙ. Δῆλον ὅτι τὸ μὴ ὄν, ὃ διὰ τὸν σοφιστὴν ἐζητ-
 οῦμεν, αὐτό ἐστι τοῦτο.

Str. So, it seems, the setting-against of a part of the nature of the different and <a part of> of the nature of being, lying one against the other, is no less being [ousia] than being itself—if I may be permitted to put it like that—, for it signifies not a contrary of it, but just this: different from being.

258a11 Tht. That's very clear.

Str. So what shall we call this setting-against?

258b5 Tht. It's clear that this very thing is that not being which we have been searching for on account of the sophist!

³⁶ With the OCT, I accept the additions by Boeckh in 258c1–2. Those who prefer not to add them to the text must supply them mentally.

Theaetetus' response at b5 is surely meant to raise a smile from the reader. The preceding sentence is one of the hardest to fathom. Lee has discussed the many possible construals of the Greek, and has pointed out that in any event it is a small slip on Plato's part to make the antithesis subject of "signifies" (however we understand the antithesis in question). But the major issue is how we understand what the antithesis is between, and this hangs on whether or not we mentally supply <a part of> at b1.³⁷ If we do not do so, then the antithesis is between a part of the different and being, and this yields the Analogy interpretation favored by Owen and others. If we do make that mental supplement, then the formula can perhaps be seen to fall into line with the second formula, which (as I show below) seems unambiguously to favor the Generalization interpretation. For if we do, the effect is that *not being* is an antithesis between a part of the *different* and any part of *being* (for instance, the beautiful). It has to be admitted that this is a strained reading of the first formula, and, if the ES had stopped after the first formula for *not being*, the Analogy interpretation would prevail. As I noted above, the lines which follow the statement of the first formula, 258b9ff., certainly seem to point us to *μη ὄν* (*not being*) as a form in its own right, on a par with the *not beautiful*, the *not large* and so on. But the sequel, the second formula for *not being*, puts things in a different light.

SECOND FORMULA FOR NOT BEING, *SOPHIST* 258D5–258E5

258d5 ΕΕ. Ἡμεῖς δέ γε οὐ μόνον τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν ἀπεδεί-
 ξαμεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶδος ὃ τυγχάνει ὄν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος
 ἀπεφηνάμεθα· τὴν γὰρ θατέρου φύσιν ἀποδείξαντες οὐσάν
 e τε καὶ κατακεκερματισμένην ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα πρὸς
 ἄλληλα, τὸ πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἕκαστον μῶριον αὐτῆς ἀντιτιθέμενον
 ἐτολήσαμεν εἰπεῖν ὡς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἔστιν ὄντως τὸ μὴ ὄν.
 ΘΕΑΙ. Καὶ παντάπασί γε, ὦ ξένε, ἀληθέστατά μοι

³⁷ Lee, "Negation," 282–283, lists various interpretations with their adherents. He argues against supplying <part of> to yield either *part of being*, or *part of the nature of being*, protesting—strongly but not decisively—that we have not been introduced to the notion of a part of being. Frede, *Prädikation*, 91–92, defends supplying <part of>, to make the first formula cohere with the second.

e5 δοκοῦμεν εἰρηκέναι.

258d Str. Whereas we have not only demonstrated that the things that are not are, but in addition we've brought to light what the form of not being is. We've demonstrated the nature of the different, showing that it is, and that it's parcelled out³⁸ over all the things that are, set against each other³⁹; and the part of it set against each being—that very thing is what we've dared to say really is not being.
 e Tht. Absolutely, sir; I think we've spoken very truly indeed.
 e4

We must first try to identify the two achievements referred to by the ES: a) we have demonstrated that the things that are not are, and b) we have brought to light what the form of not being is. We may hazard that with a) the ES refers back to the Communion of Kinds section, with its final proof that the kind Kinesis really is not being and being, since it shares in being (256d8–9). If so, the *μη ὄντα*, the things that are not, are things which are not the kind being, as *kinesis* is not the kind *being*, but of course is a being. The additional feat b), of bringing to light what the form of *not being* is, is presumably what occurs from 257c onward, culminating in the first formula for not being that I have just discussed.

In the sentence beginning “We've demonstrated” then, the ES is offering to restate what the form of *not being* is. First he remarks that he has demonstrated that the nature of the *different* is. This may refer back to the proof that *same* and *different* were among the five *megista gene* (“very great” or “greatest” kinds, 254e2–255b6). But when he adds that he's demonstrated that it's parcelled out over all the things that are, we recognize our Stage 2, the analogy between *knowledge* and the *different*. Now comes the problematic part: the remainder of the sentence, which purports to remind Theaetetus what he had shown not being to be. Whichever textual reading we adopt, the upshot is effectively the same: the second formula says that *not being* is *the part of (the different) set against each being*

³⁸ Cf. 257c7.

³⁹ Cf. 258b1.

or “*the part of (the different) set against the being of each*.”⁴⁰ Even if we follow a translator such as White and understand the phrase as “*each part of the different set against being*,” the effect is the same: not being is identified with *each and any part* of the different set against a being.⁴¹ It is *not* identified with a single part, the one set against *being*. In other words, *not being* is explained as not being beautiful, or not being large, or not being just, or . . . and so on. The second formula for not being clearly offers the generalizing account of not being.⁴² And since it is introduced as a restatement of what he already delivered (note ἀπερηνάμεθα and ἀποδείξαντες in 258d8), we should try to make the two formulae cohere, if possible. That is why I favored the less obvious way of interpreting the first formula, as discussed above.⁴³

Let us take stock of the upshot of this discussion. Is it a surprise to find the ES explaining the much trumpeted form of *not being* in this way: reducing it, in effect, to not *F* or not *G* or not *H*? For this is how—as I have just argued—the second formula for not being must be read.

Once again I appeal to the important insight due to Charles Kahn, who emphasized the centrality of predication in the Greek concept of being. Given that the core of being is being something, it is not so surprising to find Plato explaining not being as not

⁴⁰ We find both forms in Simplicius: at *In Phys.* 135.26 the MSS quote the *Sophist* using *hekastou*; at 238.26 using *hekaston*.

⁴¹ To see that both interpretations yield a reading whereby *not being* is understood as *any* part of the *different*, not just one part, compare the following phrases: 1) *each threshold set against a door*, and 2) *the threshold set against each door*. In both cases, the phrase generalizes over thresholds set against doors; in neither case does it pick just one threshold.

⁴² See Frede, *Prädikation*, 91–92. Even Owen, “Not Being,” 239–240n33, gives this generalizing interpretation of the second formula, despite his taking the opposing view both of Stage 1 and of the first formula.

⁴³ Lee, “Plato on Negation,” 282n21, has a different way of reconciling the two formulae. He insists, plausibly, that the first formula discusses “Being Itself” but suggests that between the first and second formula Theaetetus’ incorrect way of understanding that notion is corrected by the ES.

being large, not being beautiful and so on. Indeed this was the very understanding of Stage 1 that I argued for above. A careful reading of that stretch showed that what the ES was explicating was negative expressions in general, even though he introduced the point with the remark *ὅποταν τὸ μὴ ὄν λέγωμεν*, “whenever we speak of not being.”

Now, as we saw, Owen favored a different interpretation both of Stage 1 above, and of the formula for not being, whereby not large and so on were analogues for not being (rather than, as on my view, examples of not being). But, as Owen himself implicitly recognized, the alleged analogy simply doesn’t work. Owen explained the analogy he discerned in Stage 1 as follows. The ES points out that not large needn’t mean the contrary small, since same-sized (or middling, as Owen prefers to translate *ison*), which is not the contrary, is available as the meaning of not large. This, according to Owen, allows us to recognize by analogy the following point: negating “is” does not yield “is not in any way” (the contrary of “is”) but “is not something.”⁴⁴

. . . <i>not</i> . . .		<i>contrary</i>
not large	same-sized	small
is not	is not something	is not anything at all

But as the table shows, and as Owen in effect accepts, there is a strong *disanalogy* between the two points he sees Plato making.⁴⁵ For what is not large may be either same-sized or small; so in this case the contrary is *possible*, but is not *required* by the negative expression. But things are quite different with the negation of “is.” Owen takes Plato to be making the point that the contrary of being, viz., “what is not in any way” *cannot be applied to anything*.

⁴⁴ Owen, “Not-Being,” 234, “. . . just as . . . calling a thing not white does not relegate it to the other extreme black, so . . . saying that it ‘not is’ does not relegate it to the other extreme from being.”

⁴⁵ Owen, “Not-Being,” 234: “The conclusion he is leading us to is that in one case <sc that of the negation of ‘is’> this latter option is not open. With the verb ‘to be’ the negative construction not only does not mean the contrary (which is what the analogy is designed to show) but cannot even be applied to anything in the contrary state.” Kostman, “False Logos,” 203, points out the disanalogy.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

That almost concludes my discussion of the dark stretch. I do not think I have shed much light on Stage 3, and I certainly am not convinced that “this carefully constructed doctrine of the Parts of Otherness” represents one of Plato’s “major ‘analytic’ achievements,” as Lee describes it.⁴⁶ So I find it less surprising than Lee does that it is left “totally unused in Plato’s subsequent account of falsity,” though I agree in finding it strange that it is not even mentioned in the *résumé*.

The role of Stage 1, however, seems to me clear. Whether or not Plato intended it as the missing account of negative predication, or simply as an account of the meaning of negative expressions—and I do not think we need to choose between the two suggestions, for Stage 1—he certainly introduced a key notion when he claimed that a negative term need not signify the contrary of *F* but “only different.” I have argued above that he gives a clear indication of his meaning here with the help of the example in A2 that invokes the trio large/small/same-sized (though commentators have been reluctant to take the hint, for fear of saddling Plato with an incorrect account), and that we must understand him to appeal to the notion of something different *chosen from a range of incompatible properties*. Plato will make use of the same disputed term, “different,” which he uses to paraphrase “not” in his account of what it is for “Theaetetus flies” to be false; and there too, as I and others have argued, we understand his account best if we invoke the notion of something different *chosen from a range of incompatible properties*.⁴⁷ There we are offered as a true statement, “Theaetetus sits,” and we note the relation of flying to sitting, just as we noted the relation of equal to large: not any old different attribute, but a different one from an understood range. On this point at least, our dark stretch helps

⁴⁶ Lee, “Negation,” 299n53.

⁴⁷ Brown, “The *Sophist* on Statements,” 456n52, cites Ferejohn, “Semantic Fragmentation,” n9, for a list of earlier advocates of this view, and adds M.-L. Gill, see note 33, and J. Szaif, *Platon’s Begriff der Wahrheit* (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1998), 487–499.

throw light on an important part still to come in the *Sophist*, the justly admired discussion of false statement.⁴⁸

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