

IS THE SENSIBLE AN ILLUSION? THE REVISITED ONTOLOGY OF THE *SOPHIST*

[THE REVISITED ONTOLOGY OF THE SOPHIST]

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we argue that, in the *Sophist*, Plato provides the reader some elements about a revision of his ontology behind the discussion about the nature of non-being. We would want to show that the analysis of the notion of image gives some indications concerning the nature of the sensible, which is usually described as an image of the intelligible.

KEYWORDS: ontology, *Sophist*, Non-being, Plato

RESUMO: Neste artigo buscamos mostrar que, no *Sofista*, Platão apresenta alguns elementos sobre arevisão de sua ontologia que subjaz à discussão sobre a natureza do não-ser. Objetivamos mostrar que a análise da noção de imagem nos dá algumas indicações em relação à natureza do sensível, que geralmente é descrito como uma imagem do inteligível.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ontologia, *Sofista*, Não-ser, Platão

INTRODUCTION

I want to argue in this paper that, in the *Sophist*, behind the discussion about the nature of non-being, Plato provides the reader some elements about a revision of his ontology. First, the analysis of the notion of image gives some indications concerning the nature of the sensible, which is usually described as an image of the intelligible (*Republic* 509a9 and 509e1-2, *Timaeus* 52c). Second, since the dialogue seems to assume that not only Forms are part of the realm of being, but what is in motion too, it will appear that sensible objects must somehow belong to being. The focus of this paper is the revision of the nature of the sensible.

Naturally, it is well known that the question of the Forms in the *Sophist* is highly controversial, and the recent discussions about the dialogue have been considering mainly the different senses of the verb “to be”. A tendency to read the *Sophist* as a piece of semantic work has appeared in the last sixty years among the scholarship, and the metaphysical value of the dialogue has been questioned. For Owen (1986), Frede (1967) and Acrill (1957), the *Sophist* distinguishes explicitly the different meanings of the verb *einai*: Frede argues that the existential sense (complete) is not present in Plato, and when the philosopher is using this verb, it is always in a predicative (incomplete) sense. In this way, in the *Sophist*, the distinction between *auta kath'hauta* and *pro alla* points out two

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different sorts of predication of *einai*. Other scholars argue as well about the primary sense of being in the *Sophist*: it is essentially copulative (Kahn (2003)) or existential (Brown (1986)). Finally it has been asked and discussed if for Plato it was possible to attribute properties to a non-existent object (Malcolm (2006) and Leigh (2007)). Without going into too many details, it seems clear that limiting the interest of the *Sophist* to the question of what are the different senses of “to be” does not allow a full understanding of what is happening in this dialogue: is it highly plausible that a discussion concerning the meaning of the verb “*einai*” has much to do with the nature of the Forms, especially if we keep in mind that, for Plato, the use of names is based on the existence of the Forms. Another question arises here: does the arguments concerning the nature of an image have nothing to do with the description of the sensible as an image of the intelligible?

It might seem suspicious to *use* the *Sophist* in order to draw ontological consequences concerning the Forms and the sensible objects, nevertheless, it appears clear that, indirectly, the dialogue deals with some essential aspects of Plato’s metaphysics. In the book V of the *Republic* (476c-479d), Plato has asked a delicate question: if the intelligible is equivalent to the reality of being, what can be said about the sensible? As knowledge is related to what is and ignorance to what is not, what are then the objects of opinion? The answer is clear: opinions are opinions of sensible objects. Now, sensible objects are not equivalent to being but to becoming. But here, we seem to have a difficulty: becoming is neither being nor non-being. How then can sensible objects be neither being nor non-being? They are only four possibilities and none of them seems to apply to sensible objects: are they being, non-being, both being and non-being, or a third ontological category beyond being and non-being. As it appears that for Plato 1) the alternative being/non-being is exclusive and 2) that there is no third ontological category, then sensible objects cannot be “being”, “non-being”, a mixture of being and non-being or a third ontological category. Plato, clearly affirms that when he has Socrates say: «καὶ οὐτ' εἶναι οὔτε μὴ εἶναι οὐδὲν αὐτῶν δυνατόν παγίως νοῆσαι, οὔτε ἀμφοτέρω οὔτε οὐδέτερον.» (*Republic* 479c3-5)

In this way, if Forms are the only reality which belongs to the family of being, the nature of the sensible, as being between being and non-being (described several times as “intermediary” - “μεταξύ”) appears quite problematical. Now if the *Sophist*, following Parmenides’ injunction, asserts that there is only being (237a-239c), which is for Plato, the intelligible, then no status can be guaranteed to the sensible. Since, in the *Sophist*, Plato is precisely going to show that what is not true (the false) insofar as it is a non-being, has somehow *to be*, otherwise no sophist could ever be criticized, since the sophist is producing false discourses, it seems plausible that the elucidation of the nature of non-being, exemplified by the notions of falsehood and *image*, will hold some interest for the question of the sensible as an image of the intelligible. Let’s ask the following question: is the sensible an image of the intelligible? If yes, what sort of image is it, and finally what is the nature of such an image according to the *Sophist*?

1. IS THE SENSIBLE AN ILLUSION?

The general argument of the *Sophist* is the following: if we want to give an account of the sophist in order to be able to criticize him, and if there is a kind of equivalence between, on the one hand, being and truth, and on the other one, non-being and falsehood, then we need to be able to find out a definition of non-being, since if non-being does not exist, as Parmenides seems to have asserted (237a-b), then false discourses could not be explained, and consequently, the sophist could not be painted as a producer of false discourses. If there is no false discourse possible, then everything

can be qualified as true discourse, a claim which would clearly satisfy the sophist. Thus, the old Parmenidian saying which assumes that “non-being is not” has to be clarified and revised (237b-239c). The dialogue will result by a definition of non-being as “the different” (239d-259d), which will have as a consequence that the false will be described as *what is different* of the true. Thus the sophist will be described as an impostor who is dealing with illusion and not reality (233a-237b). In this way, the sophist is a producer of images of reality. Now an image, since it is not *really* what it resembles, is different from its model, and in this sense, is a non-being.

The sophist does not know everything, although he claims it, but possesses merely the appearance of the knowledge of things. He can be defined as a magician, or as an imitator of the real things (235a1: «πότερον ἤδη τοῦτοσαφές, ὅτι τῶν γοήτων ἐστί τις, μιμητῆς ὢν τῶν ὄντων, (...)). However they are two different ways of making imitations: 1) the first one consists in making a copy of an object, a copy which would respect the initial properties or proportions of the model; 2) the second consists in adjusting these properties in order to make a more beautiful result that it would have been if the artist would have kept the original proportions: «Ἄρ' οὖν οὐ χαίρειν τὸ ἀληθὲς ἔασαντες οἱ δημιουργοὶ νῦν οὐ τὰς οὐσας συμμετρίας ἀλλὰ τὰς δοξούσας εἶναι καλὰς τοῖς εἰδώλοις ἐναπεργάζονται; (236a4-6)». Would the original proportions have been preserved, the copy would not have appeared beautiful *to the observer*. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that this copy has to be called an illusion/appearance (φάντασμα), since it possesses only an appearing beauty:

Now, what are we going to call something that appears to be like a beautiful thing, but only because it's seen from a viewpoint that's not beautiful, and would seem unlike the thing it claims to be like if you came to be able to see such large things adequately? If it appears the way the thing does but in fact isn't like it, isn't it an appearance?¹ (translation N.P. White)

In this way an imitation, which appears like (φαίνεται) an object without being really like (ἔουκε) it, should be referred as an illusion (φάντασμα). Even if the aim of this passage is primary to reach a definition of the sophist as a producer of illusions, it might be relevant to compare it with the allegory of the Cave: the *dunamis* mentioned here can be associated with the capacity of seeing the reality for what it is, and not for what it appears to be, capacity that will possess the prisoner of the Cave once he will be freed. After having seen the real world, he shall eventually make the difference between the original and its copies:

When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before were non-sense (i.e. illusions) (φλυαρίας), [d] but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly?² (translation G.M.A. Grube)

Here as well, Plato describes a capacity to distinguish between what is the reality and what is merely an illusion of reality (φλυαρία - non-sense). Furthermore, education, conceived as a conversion (περιάγω) of the soul towards what really is, makes it possible to distinguish between the original and its copy. This capacity of distinction is underlined again a few lines after:

When you are used to it, you'll see vastly better than the people there. And because you've seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you'll know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image.³

Is it legitimate to compare the passage of the *Sophist* with the ones of the Cave, since the first one compares what is really beautiful and what has only the appearance of it, whereas the two other ones compare the original and its images. In the case of the Cave, is it possible to conceive the sensible reality as an illusion (φάντασμα)? In other words, a comparison between the model and its images is a different thing if the image is a faithful copy, even of a lesser value, or if it is an illusion. What is the real objective of the argumentation in the *Sophist*? If the sophist is described as a producer of illusions, it is important to be able to define what an illusion is. An illusion is what has the appearance of a reality without sharing the same properties. But in the case of the discussion quoted above, Plato argues that the fact of considering an object beautiful, whereas this object has merely an appearance of beauty (and is so an illusion of beauty), *is generated by* the point of view of an observer. Now, this is precisely the situation of the prisoners in the Cave. Plato insists on that fact that there are two different ways of considering the sensible objects: either as i) originals, or ii) as images of the Forms. The Cave describes precisely the situation of men who take copies for originals, whereas philosophers should take them for what they are, namely images of the Forms. In this way, when we take the sensible objects for the originals and not for images, we attribute to them a reality that they don't really have. Nevertheless they are not totally deprived from reality precisely because they are images of the Forms. This does not indicate that sensible objects are illusions but that the *situation* which consists in taking them for what they are not, namely originals instead of images, is equivalent to a process which makes them appear, according to some point of view, as illusions. In fact, an illusion fools the observer with regards to the nature of the object. Now this *error* does not depend necessarily on the nature of the object, but can also depend on the way in which this nature is considered. In other words, sensible objects are not illusions *in themselves*, however if they are taken for what they are not, they would, in consequence, belong to the domain of illusions. As in the situation of the prisoners deep inside the Cave, the sophists try to make us take an image for an original, and in this sense, they produce illusions. In short, the prisoner in the Cave is in the same situation as all of us *when* the sophists fool us.

One might object that in the *Sophist* the question is not the nature of the sensible objects as images of the Forms, and that Plato's metaphysical hypothesis is not explicitly expressed in these pages. As in the *Republic* Book X (595a-597b), these lines deal with a theory of production of images and not with the nature of sensible objects. This should point out that nothing allows associating sensible objects with illusions, especially if illusions are described as fooling images *presented to a spectator*. If this spectator would come closer to an illusion, which does not respect the original proportions, for instance, she would immediately understand that she has an image in front of her (236b). Does the question of the point of view of the spectator disqualify any metaphysical interpretation of this passage?

The doctrinal unity, which can be found in Plato, might as well indicate that his theory of art has to be justified by a metaphysical basis. As we have just said, the introduction of the spectator does recall the situation of the freed prisoner who realized that he was contemplating illusions. The last division (265b-269b) of the dialogue suggests with more strength this idea. In 266a, Plato distinguishes between human and divine productions. It is true that the analysis is only going to deal with the former. However, since in both situations, we face the cases of production of images according to a model (as well as according to other images), it seems legitimate to ask the question of the link between the divine production of the images and the fashioning of the *cosmos* in the *Timaeus*, a dialogue in which the model is explicitly identified with the Forms (30c-d)⁴. Furthermore, in the case of human images, the introduction of the observer will complete the picture: in order for a spectator to have the impression that

he is looking at a faithful copy, the *eidōlourgikē* must change the original proportions. Furthermore, there is a fundamental difference between a copy and an illusion: the first one is related to the model whereas the second one is an imitation of a copy.

This, naturally, recalls the analysis of *Republic* Book X about the difference between imitating an object as it is or as it appears (See 596e-597a). Insofar as an image can either be a copy or an illusion, and since the difference depends on what is chosen as a model, it might be possible to understand this division as depicting two ways of considering the image in relation to a model, the model being intelligible or not. Finally, the differentiation in the fourth division between a scientific mimesis («μετ' ἐπιστήμης ἱστορικὴν τινα μίμησιν»: 267e2) and a doxomimetic one («μίμησιν δοξομιμητικὴν»: 267e1) seems to imply that the first one has to be an imitation of the intelligible, since an imitation based on the science cannot have sensible entities as objects. Thus, considering an image either as a copy or as an illusion could well indicate, in an extra-artistic level, that for human beings, as spectators of the world, we apprehend the sensible either as a copy or as an illusion. But, and that is the important point, this does not depend on the nature of the sensible objects, which are in themselves copies of the intelligible and not illusions. On the contrary it is only a question of point of view.

In this way, the analyses of the *Sophist* concerning the nature of an image clarify an important point: an image in itself has not to be an illusion but can simply be a copy. Since the sensible is an image of the intelligible, it was legitimate to wonder if this image was an illusion or not. The *Sophist*, following the *Republic*, claims that the fundamental difference between an image and an illusion is related to the point of view of the observer. Now, since the sensible is an image of the intelligible, it can be claimed that it is a copy, which can be considered as an illusion when it is taken for what it is not, namely an original and not an image. This is of some importance concerning the metaphysics of the sensible: sensible objects are deficient of the Forms they participate in. This does not imply that sensible objects are completely different from the Forms in terms of properties, but that they possess some degree of resemblance with the Forms. More than that, sensible objects possess some intelligibility in them, exactly as copies possess some of the properties of the original even if they are fundamentally different from it. An illusion, on the other hand, does not possess any property of the original, since the original proportions are not even conserved, but still resembles it. Thus, it seems that after having clarified the question of the point of view, Plato needs to turn now to the general nature of the image, as an entity which reassembles another one, if he wants to go beyond the *aporia* of *Republic* V, concerning the situation of the sensible between being and non-being. This is precisely what's going on in the following pages of the dialogue.

2. WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

The Eleatic Stranger (ES) explicitly recognizes in the next lines the problematic nature of the image:

This appearing, and this seeming but not being, and [e] this saying things but not true things—all these issues are full of confusion, just as they always have been. It's extremely hard, Theaetetus, to say what form of speech we should use to say that there really is such a thing as false saying or believing, and moreover to utter this without being caught [237] in a verbal conflict.⁵

This passage draws a link between what appears (φαίνεσθαι) and what is not true (ἀληθῆ μή). Now, what is not true is the same thing as the false (ψευδῆ). As it seems

that the sophists deal with the false, and so produce illusions, it has to be recalled that, according to the *Republic*, knowledge is related to being and ignorance to non-being (477a), which implies that only Forms are objects of knowledge. Furthermore, sensible objects are objects of opinion, an intermediary between knowledge and ignorance (478d5-9). Thus, neither sensible objects nor a discourse which concerns them can be associated directly with the false.

If an illusion has, as object, the false, which is coextensive with non-being, then it has to be supposed that the false is somehow something (237a3-4: «Τετόλμηκεν ὁ λόγος οὗτος ὑποθέσθαι τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι· ψεῦδος γὰρ οὐκ ἂν ἄλλως ἐγίγνετο ὄν»). In order to refute the sophist, we need to be able to affirm that an image (and consequently an illusion) possesses some degree of existence. Now to do that, we need, if we admit the strong link between falsehood and non-being, to grant falsehood and non-being some degree of existence. Plato seems to assume here interconnectivity between non-being and image since an image *is not* what it is a copy of, exactly as a lie *is not* the truth. On the one hand Parmenides, according to the ES, has asserted the impossibility for non-being to be: «Οὐ γὰρ μὴ ποτε τοῦτο δαμῆ, φησίν, εἶναι μὴ ἔόντα· ἀλλὰ σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήμενος εἶργε νόημα.» (237a7-8); on the other one, Plato seems to transform this affirmation by interpreting it as concerning only what is absolutely not (137b7-8: τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν). What is then the problem about the being of non-being? The argument goes like that:

VISITOR: But anyway this much is obvious to us, that that which is not can't be applied to any of those which are.

THEAETETUS: Of course not.

VISITOR: So if you can't apply it to that which is, it wouldn't be right either to apply it to something.

THEAETETUS: Why not?

[d] VISITOR: It's obvious to us that we always apply this something to a being, since it's impossible to say it by itself, as if it were naked and isolated from all beings. Isn't that right?⁶

Although this passage is difficult and controversial (the first “*ti*” if assumed would ruined the argument⁷), it seems that it clearly distinguishes between two meanings of being, namely being something (sense attributive) and being *tout court* (sense existential), so that it would claim that in order to attribute a property to an X, this object must beforehand exist. This would imply that non-being if it is attributed to a determined object, should at the same time be attributed to an object which exists. Now, since it is impossible to attribute non-being to being (in an existential sense), then non-being cannot be attributed to a *some-thing* (*qua* a property of a being). This implies that if a property has to be really attributed to an object, this object must before all exist (note that this is a different problem from the question of imaginary beings). Furthermore, Plato seems to assume the reciprocal conclusion as well: if to be something, an object must beforehand be (exist), it seems that to exist, an object has also to be something. There is no such thing as a pure existent being without properties. It appears that after having distinguished between being something and being *tout court*, Plato asserts that both are related and each of them does not go without the other: there is no attribution without existence and there is no existence without attribution. From this argument, the ES goes on by pointing out that Parmenides' words should be applied to non-being in itself:

VISITOR: Do you understand, then, that it's impossible to say, speak, or think that which is not itself correctly by itself? It's unthinkable, unsayable, unutterable, and unformulable in speech.⁸

This passage is actually by no means in contradiction with the precedent. No need here to presuppose the existence of a Form of Non-Being, but, on the contrary, *which is not itself by itself* could refer to what does not exist. Thus, there is no ontological status for what does not exist. However the last passage claimed as well that, as existence and properties are linked, there is no room either for what has no properties, since *to exist* signifies to have some properties. It can be underlined here that this is in agreement with the hypothesis of Forms: *qua* perfect paradigms, Forms are fully what sensible objects only possess deficiently. Forms are fully existent beings and perfect properties at the same time. In this way, the two senses of being cannot be dissociated with regards to Forms. What about sensible objects? It seems to have two alternatives: i) either they possess only in appearance the properties that the Forms fully *are*, and in this way, they are only illusions and non-beings in the sense that they are an ontological modulation of the false, ii) or they possess *somehow* these properties, and cannot be consequently non-beings. As we have suggested, the *Republic* points out clearly that sensible objects cannot be non-being, and the *Sophist* by distinguishing between an illusion and a copy, could as well be suggesting that sensible objects as copies of the Forms cannot be non-being/existing entities, but must somehow belong to the category of being. Illusions, insofar as they are synonymous with falsehood, are non-beings in the sense that they are *different* from being. This will be Plato's answer in the *Sophist*. Still, are the other types of images different from being as well?

3. IMAGE, SENSIBLE AND BEING

What kind of being is an image in general? This is precisely what the ES will ask in the next lines by examining the nature of an image. This seems to go beyond the initial aim of criticizing the sophist as a producer of illusions: we shall argue here that through the analysis of the notion of image (declined as illusion *and* copy), Plato will bring some relevant elements with regards to his metaphysics and more precisely with regards to the nature of sensible objects *qua* images of Forms.

If they are three types of images (1: a copy-duplication, 2: a copy-imitation and 3: a copy-illusion), it might be relevant to ask, what kind of images are the sensible objects in Plato's mind? It seems clear that, since Forms and sensible objects are different ontological levels, we do not face here a theory of duplication. Furthermore, as we have seen, there might be two ways of considering sensible objects: i) either as images of Forms, or ii) as originals. In the latter case, it seems reasonable to affirm that, if a person takes an object for what it is not, then this object will be *somehow* an illusion to him. But what exactly signifies *to take an object for what it is not*? And more generally, what is the difference between an object and its images *even when they are taken by the observer* for images?

In this way, the nature itself of an illusion depends on the fact that an object is presented a) by someone b) to someone c) according to some point of view. Since sensible objects take part in Forms, they possess in themselves some degree of intelligibility and are, nevertheless, radically different from Forms. Thus they are images and not illusions, and an elucidation of the notion of image is important here. This is precisely what takes place in the following lines of the *Sophist*:

THEAETETUS: What in the world would we say a copy is, sir, except something that's made similar to a true thing and is another thing that's [b] like it?

VISITOR: You're saying it's another true thing like it? Or what do you mean by like it?

THEAETETUS: Not that it's true at all, but that it resembles the true thing.

VISITOR: Meaning by true, really being?

THEAETETUS: Yes.
 VISITOR: And meaning by not true, contrary of true?
 THEAETETUS: Of course.
 VISITOR: So you're saying that that which is like is not really that which is, if you speak of it as not true.
 THEAETETUS: But it is, in a way.
 VISITOR: But not truly, you say.
 THEAETETUS: No, except that it really is a likeness.
 VISITOR: So it's not really what is, but it really is what we call a likeness?
 THEAETETUS: Maybe that which is not is woven together with that which [c] is in some way like that—it's quite bizarre.⁹

It seems always suspicious to translate «ἀληθινός» by *really* instead of *truly*, as does for example Ambuel¹⁰x, especially in the context of the *Sophist* which insists on the strong link between being and truth. Nevertheless, this passage appears to associate the true (ἀληθινός) and what is really (ὄντως ὄν). The latter expression is usually used to describe the intelligible as being precisely what is the *truest* reality. The association between the true and the real, which is usually endorsed by Plato, is put forward in this argumentation, precisely because the aim of the argument is to show how false discourses, produced by the sophist, even if they do not refer to non-being (in an existential sense), do not have as objects what really is. The argument goes like that: 1) what is true, really exists; 2) what is not true, as it is the contrary of the true, does not exist really; 3) what is like is not true; 4) an image is like an original, so 4) an image is not really. The most important point is that an image is not true, hence not real. Now this can be applied to both a copy and an illusion. Both of them are not really the thing they are images of.

It seems clear that this argument comes from a Parmenidean vision of being, as Plato interprets it, with a strong link between truth and being, and consequently between falsehood and non-being. However an image, which is not really, is really something, namely an image (εἰκὼν ὄντως), and so, in that sense, being and non-being are associated in a strange (ἄτοπον) way. The ES is anticipating here the final thesis of the dialogue, which is that non-being exists, not as the contrary of being, but as what is *different* from being (239d-259d). The image is different from being in the same sense that it is different from the model, and at the same time it possesses its own identity and being, namely by the fact of *being* an image.

In this way, an image will be some being (and exist) in so much as it is *really* an image. This is why the ES is lead to revise the thesis of Parmenides, not by committing a parricide (241d), but by assuming, not only that non-being, under some conditions, is, but also that being is not: «Τὸν τοῦ πατρὸς Παρμενίδου λόγον ἀναγκαῖον ἡμῖν ἀμυνομένοις ἔσται βασανίζειν, καὶ βιάζεσθαι τό τε μὴ ὄν ὡς ἔστι κατὰ τι καὶ τὸ ὄν αὐτὸ πάλιν ὡς οὐκ ἔστι πῆ» (241d5-7). It has to be noted here that it is somehow the opposite of Parmenides' thesis for whom being was and non-being was not. Plato admits in this way that being is not and non-being is, and this idea has to be directly applied to the relationship between a model and an image. In this way, a model and an image are, both of them, beings. They possess their own identity, and, at the same time, they are non-beings in the sense that there are different one from each other. This argument turns out to imply that an image is a determined being and possesses its own identity: *insofar as* it is different from the model, it is *not* the model. This conclusion might seem quite trivial, but if we recall the *aporia* of *Republic*, Book V, concerning the problematic nature of the sensible objects between being and non-being, the lesson of the *Sophist* is quite useful: if the sensible is an image of the intelligible, then it cannot be an intermediary between being and non-being: it has to belong somehow to being. Now, one might argue that there is an indirect link between the question of the nature of the

sensible between being and non-being, and the notion of image as being *really* an image, but perhaps, the following lines of the dialogue will help to dismantle this objection.

4. THE QUESTION OF BEING

The *Sophist* will turn now to the question of being and the ES will come up with his own history of ontology. The different alternatives are described as a sort of myth (*muthos*, 242c8) and will evocate an opposition between monists and pluralists with regards to being. The Stranger will easily show that both alternatives have to be rejected, using a method of refutation which recalls the argumentation of the *Parmenides*. The conclusion of the two refutations (243a-244b and 244b-245c) implies that it is necessary to come up with a *different* definition of being. It appears that not only non-being, but being itself is difficult to understand. After the question of its quantity, comes the more interesting one of its quality: what is being? This is the moment when the ES decides to describe a fight between the Giants and the Gods (*γίγαντομαχία*: 246a4). This fight illustrates two tendencies which oppose themselves since always: «ἐν μέσῳ δὲ περὶ ταῦτα ἄπλετος ἀμφοτέρων μάχη τις, ἧ Θεαίτητε, ἀεὶ συνέστηκεν» (246c2-3). The first category of ontologists is the one of the materialists, which affirm that only exists what can be touched: «τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐφαπτόμενοι πάντων δυσχυρίζονται τοῦτο εἶναι μόνον ὃ παρέχει προσβολὴν καὶ ἐπαφήν τινα» (246a9-b1). For them, the reality has to be reduced to the corporeal (*σῶμα*), which implies that not only the soul (thesis which could be defended and has probably been by Democritus), but also wisdom and justice must be bodies. Since such a view cannot be accepted, the ES decides to modify himself the conception of the materialists in order to make it acceptable. Now, this modification is substantial:

VISITOR: I'm saying that a thing really is if it has any capacity at all, [e] either by nature to do something to something else or to have even the smallest thing done to it by even the most trivial thing, even if it only happens once. I'll take it as a definition that those which are amount to nothing other than capacity.¹¹

This definition of being as the capacity to act upon something or to be acted upon by something, might seem strange at first sight, however it has to be understood in the context of a revised version of the materialist thesis provided by the ES, so that entities like wisdom or justice can be included in the family of being. In this way, when justice or wisdom are acting upon the soul, she becomes wise or just (247a5). If we admit that being can be defined as this ability, then not only the soul, the virtues, but also bodies will be members of the family of being. However such a revision seems to denature the materialist thesis. The Stranger then adds:

"Fine. Maybe something else will occur to them later, and to us too. For now let's agree with them on this much."¹²

To the materialists are opposed the Friends of the Forms. The thesis they defend seems, at first glance, not to be the contrary of the materialist account, because the Friends of the Forms do not claim that only exists what is not material, but that there is a distinction, a separation between the sensible and the intelligible. Nevertheless, for them, the authentic reality corresponds to the intelligible one. In this way, they will refuse to include in the family of being all that is not intelligible. As the materialists have a problem with an ontological characterization of immaterial objects like virtues, the Friends of the Forms have to deal with the nature of the sensible objects. What are they, if they do not belong to what is?

The ES is describing such a position with the following terms: “You people distinguish coming-to-be and being and say that they are separate? Is that right?”¹³. It seems clear that the Friends of the Forms distinguish here, symmetrically (*χωρίζ*) two ontological categories: being (*οὐσία*) and becoming (*Γένεσιν*). Now, since being and becoming are exclusive, for the Friends of the Forms, the realm of becoming does not belong to being. As we have seen, according to *Republic* V, this position is delicate to defend. So, if we follow Parmenides’ prescription, and since becoming does not belong to being, then it has to be a non-being. This is the difficulty of the position of the Friends of the Forms: they distinguish between being and becoming, but if there is only being and non-being, then becoming as to be qualified as a non-being, which is, according to Parmenides, equivalent to nothingness. They end up defending the contrary position that the one of the materialists. As the latter reduce to nothing immaterial objects, the former reduce to nothing the becoming.

The ES then tries to associate the definition of being as a potentiality *and* the dichotomy between the sensible and the intelligible. The sensible is perceived by the senses, whereas the intelligible is reached by the intellectual part of the soul (248a-b). Now, the soul communicates with what really is, what is always identical with itself (*κατὰ ταῦτὰ ὡσαύτως*), whereas the becoming is always different (*ἄλλως*)¹⁴. In this way, for the Friends of the Forms, the intelligible is what is always identical with itself and the sensible is what is always different and has no stability. Forms are identical with themselves, whereas sensible objects are always different, since they are in a constant change. A question arises then: how can what is identical with itself be in a relationship of causality with what changes? Plato already had a similar interrogation in the second part of the *Parmenides*, namely how can an object which is in a perfect identity with itself, in a kind of autarky, be a cause of what depends completely on it in order to be what it is, without altering itself? In this way, the definition provided makes it impossible to find an agreement between the Friends of the Forms and the view of being as a potentiality:

VISITOR: In reply they say that coming-to-be has the capacity to do something or have something done to it, but that this capacity doesn’t fit with being.¹⁵

It appears consistent that if an object is in a state of a total independence and autarky, then it could neither act upon other objects nor could he suffer from the actions of other objects. This seems to be the case of Forms. This recall the first and third series of deductions (137c3-142a6 and 157b5-159a9) in the *Parmenides* which affirm that the One, itself by itself, which is related only with itself, could not be an object of knowledge, precisely because it is not related to any other *different* object, and conversely no object could be in relationship with the One. In other words, a Form, if it is exempt of any kind of relationship, as the Friends of the Forms seem to assume, could not be an object of knowledge. This is exactly the argument that the ES provides in the following lines: if the soul knows (*γινώσκειν*) and if the existing reality is known (*γινώσκεισθαι*), then necessarily what knows acts upon what it knows, and what is known is acted upon by what knows it:

VISITOR: Oh, I see. You mean that if knowing is doing something, then necessarily what is known has something done to it. When being is known by knowledge, according to this account, then insofar as it’s known it’s changed by having something done to it—which we say wouldn’t happen to something that’s at rest.¹⁶

Thus we have: what knows = acts upon and what is known = is acted upon. If the intelligible reality is known by the soul, then it follows that it would be acted upon and consequently altered. Since *be acted upon* implies to be moved by (*κινεῖσθαι*), it

seems that Forms will be moved. If knowledge implies that Forms are moved, consequently Forms will not be at rest. Naturally this consequence is utterly unacceptable for the Friends of the Forms. Then if they want to reject the idea that Forms are in motion, they have to reject the definition of knowledge associated with the notions of acting upon and being acted upon. However, strangely enough, the ES, in the following lines, will not provide such a criticism but attack the idea that the set of being has to be co-extensive with the set of immobility:

VISITOR: But for heaven's sake, are we going to be convinced that it's true that change, life, soul, and intelligence are not present in that which [249] wholly is, and that it neither lives nor thinks, but stays changeless, solemn, and holy, without any intellect.¹⁷

Clearly it is possible to admit that knowledge is a motion, as an activity, which does not imply the alteration of the object known, without assuming that such a motion has to be identified with any kind of physical motion (*kinein* refers both to change and to be in motion). In this way, Forms could be known without that their identity would be altered. However the tendency of this passage is different and states the following thesis: being, as it is known, must somehow be altered. This does not imply that Forms move or change but simply that they have to admit the possibility of being in relation with what knows them. Forms cannot be entities ontologically closed, radically separate from the sensible objects. Otherwise, they would be unknowledgeable.

5. CONCLUSION: A NEW REALM OF BEING

The Friends of the Forms have to admit that Forms are acted upon but not that they change. In this way, they could easily defend the idea that for a Form, to be known, does not imply any alteration or change. *Nevertheless*, they seem to accept another different thesis, namely that some objects that are in motion belong to the realm of being. The ES asks the question of the *pantelôs on* (248e7): this does not refer to what is really being (*ontôs on*), but to the total family of being. To this realm of being belong motion (*κίνησιν*), life (*ψυχῆν*) and intelligence (*φρόνησιν*). In this way, the *Sophist* does not only assert that an image cannot be reduced to non-being, but also that what is in motion is part of the realm of being. Those two elements seem to plead for a revaluation of the nature of the sensible, which has to be part of the set of being. We face an ontology with two degrees of being: the intelligible and its image, namely the sensible. The sensible is not reducible to an illusion or to falsehood (and nothingness), but is somehow a being. As the *Timaeus* will explain it, it is the image of the intelligible appearing into a *milieu* (the Receptacle), which guaranties to it some degree of existence (*Timée*, 52b3-d1).

In this way, the ES appears to affirm that what is in motion belongs to the family of being. But is it only the soul, life and intelligence *or* everything that is in motion? The conclusion that he draws seems quite broad: "Then both that which changes and also change have to be admitted as being"¹⁸. It is truth that Plato modifies here the logic of the argument by moving from "what exists changes" to "what changes exists"¹⁹, whereas the first alternative came from the introduction of the idea of alteration into the intelligible, the second one comes from the opening of the realm of being to what is in motion. There is no tension between the two parts: it is not the case that, because what really is (the Forms) changes, that what changes (what is in motion) is. However *some* things that are in motion, as for instance the soul, could not possibly not be. The conclusion is the following: what belongs to the realm of being is both what is in

motion and what is at rest. In fact, knowledge is a motion which cannot occur without a stable object, identical to itself: “τὸ κατὰ ταῦτα καὶ ὡσαύτως καὶ περὶ τὸ αὐτὸ” (249b12). This is why the ES can conclude:

VISITOR: The philosopher—the person who values these things the most—absolutely has to refuse to accept the claim that everything is at rest, either from defenders of the one or from friends of the many forms. [d] In addition he has to refuse to listen to people who make that which is change in every way. He has to be like a child begging for “both,” and say that that which is—everything—is both the unchanging and that which changes.²⁰

The realm of being does not only include what is at rest but also what is in motion. This does not imply that Forms are in motion but that, as entities known, they are somehow acted upon. What is in motion, life and soul (which is defined in the *Phaedrus* as a motion (245e7-246a1)) must somehow belong to the realm of being. It is true that this argument does not affirm that all sensible objects are part of the realm of being, however it has to be kept in mind that, since the soul is an intermediary between the intelligible and the sensible, and since the *cosmos* is a ensouled living creature, then it seems very plausible that sensible objects have to belong to the realm of being as well. With the question of the nature of the image and the discussion about the realm of being, it has appeared that Plato suggests in the *Sophist* a revised ontology in which the sensible, as an image of the intelligible, cannot be reduced to an illusion and to non-being.

5. REFERENCES

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