

ANAI DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

The Children's Prayer: saving the Phenomena in Plato's *Sophist*.

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ABSTRACT: Plato builds an ontology capable of saving the Phenomena in the *Sophist*. By doing so, he distances himself from Parmenides. This article analyses the children's prayer (*Soph.* 249 d 5) in order to sustain this thesis and evaluate the platonic proposal, along with the role of the negation and the heteron in the communication of the Kinds.

KEYWORDS: ontology, phenomena, heteron, negation, synanphotera.

RESUMO: Platão constrói uma ontologia capaz de salvar os fenômenos no diálogo *Sofista*. Fazendo isso, distancia-se de Parmênides. Este artigo analisa a passagem conhecida como “a demanda das crianças” (*Soph.* 249 d 5) com o intuito de sustentar essa tese e avaliar a proposta platônica, através do papel da negação e do heteron na comunicação dos gêneros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ontologia, fenômenos, heteron, negação, synanphotera

Introduction

In this paper I analyse and evaluate Plato's attempt to save the phenomena through an historical and theoretical analysis of Plato's *Sophist*. It is common knowledge that the *Timaeus* is taken as a point of reference concerning cosmology (Heisenberg¹ himself regarded Plato as the predecessor of modern and contemporary physics). However, I have chosen to refer to a theoretical dialogue, the *Sophist*, which is intended to highlight the analysis of an ontological proposal. While in the *Timaeus*, Plato provided (mathematically speaking) a mechanical interpretation of the universe connected with the theory of forms² in his attempt to save the phenomena, in the *Sophist* he tried to build a new sense for the Being and the non-Being.

In spite of Parmenides' rigorous denial of the change, the Eleatic visitor vindicating Change and Changelessness for what it is: ‘the task of the true philosopher is to defend the

¹Heisenberg, 1953, pp. 137-140.

²Brisson, 2005, pp. 20-21 .

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thesis that both the Being and the All consist of Changeless and Change (Plato, *Soph.* 249 D5). Plato pretends to save the ever-changing phenomena along with the Truth, which according to the same platonic philosophy needs stability.

Being conscious of those who look down on us³ and hold too much contempt against the crowd we form part, he wishes to save the multiplicity existing in the world.

Will this attempt be accomplished? Which kind of ontology must be built? Has Plato reached his goal?

The context

In the *Sophist* 242 c-249d, Plato offers a strident critique of a pair of extreme positions. The first position analyses a quantitative question about the Being: 'is the Being one or many?' However, the second position analyses a qualitative question: 'is the Being the same thing as the body or is just something ideal?' Therefore, he criticizes the Pluralists (known as Dualists) and the Unitarians who denied multiplicity; he levelled fierce criticism against those who only believe in perceptible and material objects ('the sons of the earth') and also against those who only perceive the world through ideas ('the friends of the forms'). The sons of the earth support a motion being, whereas the friends of the forms believe in a motionless being.⁴

According to some scholars⁵ Plato himself was considered as "a friend of the ideas". It is precisely in the *Sophist* where he would overcome this position (after the great criticism against the ideas as separate entities to be found in the first part of the *Parmenides*), which expresses clearly the ontology of the middle dialogues, particularly the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*. Indeed, Plato goes beyond the very separation among ideas and sensible things requested by the theory of the ideas (or theory of forms), conferring the concept of movement within the field of the Being.

In the children's prayer (249d5), Plato wishes the same changeable beings were stable so as to not being reduce to mere appearance like in Parmenides' philosophy (a view developed by Plato's lecture). Thanks to a literary analysis, it will be possible to highlight the particular relevance of the expression 'children's prayer'. The prayer refers to auspice: the

³Plato, *Soph.* 243 A.

⁴See Palumbo, 1994, p.p. 73-94, for an interesting attempt to go any more deeply into the theory of the Being before Plato.

⁵For a bibliographic reconstruction: See de Rijk, 1986, p. 102.

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platonic desire of fulfilling the prayer's requirements along with the necessity of help (even a celestial one!) in order to obtain his requests.

I also would like to draw the attention to the fact that this prayer is made by children, which consequently applies to naivety (in the Greek world only the elderly are regarded as wise), and likewise to the youth's courage and reckless behaviour attached to their wish to perform something new and against traditions (i.e. the Parmenides' philosophy).

This prayer invoked by children must become the aim of the true philosopher.

The similarity between the philosopher and the child is of such relevance that will call the Greek conception of wisdom into question. However, if we do take into consideration child psychology, we can understand their negation of the non-contradiction principle in their capacity to imagine contradictory and conflicting worlds; yet this controversy is not possible in Parmenides' philosophy, which is based in a non-controversy⁶ principle. The children also represent the greed, wanting to grasp everything. In the present case: both the motion and the rest.

As a consequence, Plato's attempt may be compared to an impossible prayer. But all the same, he challenges the impossible, and with the creation of a newborn ontology makes possible what is considered to be impossible by the Parmenides' tradition. That is precisely what a true philosopher must do!

Plato is not a child thinking in a contradictory way but a courageous and reckless young man who leads a battle⁷ against tradition (Parmenides) in order to conquer a new non-contradictory sense of the Being and the non-Being.

The Plato's challenge

In order to be able to keep together the Rest *and* the Motion, the Sensible *and* the Idea, the Difference *and* the Sameness, Plato, through the Eleatic visitor, studied the relation among: Being, Change, Changelessness, Sameness and Difference (the most important kinds). He also instituted the difference between the concept of absolute non-being, that cannot be said neither thought, and the concept of relative non-Being, that in some sense also 'is'⁸.

The kinds of Being, Change and Changelessness which come from previous investigations about Plato's predecessors are related with the first part of the argumentation.

⁶Regarding the presence of the principle of non contradiction in Parmenides' philosophy, see specially Severino, 2005, Tarca, 2001.

⁷Note here that the literary analysis allows us to get one of the philosophical meanings of the numerous war images appearing in the dialogue.

⁸Plato. *Soph.* 257 b 1.

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The aforementioned connection (Change and Changelessness are not equal) gives rise to another two concepts: the Sameness and the Difference. Each one of them is equal to itself and different from the others. By this communication of kinds (*megista ghene*), we can appreciate how everything takes part of the Being and the Different.

The Being is a definite gender composed of a finite number, while the Different (which represents the relationality of the reality) is a gender composed of infinite elements. For instance, although the movement is different from the being at the same time participates of the Being. Thus, it is the Being and the non-Being at the same time. This diverse relationship shows us a non-contradictory meaning concerning the Being. We are dealing with a determined non-being that appears in the relationship. One example might be: the Change is different from the Changelessness and consequently, it is not the Changelessness; the Change is different from the Identical, and thence it is not the Identical but 'participates' of the Being. The determined non-Being is something: it is a Being.

Therefore, the main achievement of overcoming the position of "the father" Parmenides is to distinguish between the two senses of non-Being. In the *Sophist*, the Being becomes each determination of what it is thanks to the relational power of the determined non-Being. The Being comprises the *to on* but does not comprises the indeterminate *einai* (as does the Parmenides' Being).

Only by the two senses of the non-Being, Plato accomplishes the foundation of the differences. The concept of the relative non-Being (*heteron*) represents every single being that is different from another as well as the diversity present in the relation that makes possible the differentiation within the Being. This differentiation constitutes the essence of every being and makes it different.

Not only does the ontology of communication of kinds emancipate itself from an absolute non-Being, but it also liberates itself from the pure absolute Being. Moreover, it asserts the Participation and denies any identification with the *einai*.

Nevertheless, there is still the identity of the *to on* which affirms that everything represents its own self (the Changelessness is the Changelessness and thence participates of the Being). From a non-Being point of view, the denial of the non-Being stands against the Being (as stated by Parmenides) and the affirmation of the non-Being stress on the concept of diversity as a relationship: the Changelessness is not the Change; the Changelessness is

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different from the Change. Therefore, the relationality as an intentional potency (*dynamis*⁹) constitutes the main theoretical discovery of the dialogue, and so it finds the new meaning of the Being and the non-Being. This also has value at an ontological, gnoseological, and linguistic level. However, in the *Theaetetus*, the relationality is understood as an interrupted motion, which makes impossible the Knowledge.¹⁰ *The Sophist* answers the questions proposed in the *Theaetetus* through a different conception of *dynamis* that is attributed to the relationships capabilities of the Being. This conception brings order and at the same time maintains the movement, rather than being immediately attributed to the Phenomena.

The school of Marburg has strongly emphasized the cognitive and predicative value of the communication of kinds. The predicative character of this theory appears clearly at the conclusion of his exposition (*Soph.* 259 a 5-6, 262 d 8-9) with a particular emphasis on the speech as one of the genders of the Being, being itself a relationship, or rather a combination of names and verbs, which in turn derive from the combination of vowels and consonants. The same narrative framework (the possibility of uttering falsehoods and thus the possibility to define the *Sophist*) which constitutes the perfect justification to analyse the Being and the non-Being and manifests the gnoseological and predicative meaning of the Theory. Moreover, taking into account the subject of the conference, I shall now concentrate on its ontological value.

Plato's solution centres on three main points (1) to bring motion to the ideas, through the communication of the Kinds (according to some scholars¹¹: even inside the ideas themselves), (2) to bring rest and stability into the sensible world (transmitting the idea as *paradigm*), and (3) at the same time, incorporate multiplicity (attributable to the relational figure of the *heteron*) and unity (attributable to the ideas).

Plato performs the foundation of the differences and saves the *physis* using this new sense of Being and non-Being.

The *heteron* as relational being

The non-Being is not the contrary (*enantion*) of the Being but the different (*heteron*). The latter will be analysed and set out as the one which relates everything through the negation. In the *Sophist*, Plato proposes a new meaning for the non-Being. And although it does not have the characteristics of the absolute non-Being, which possess the power of

⁹See: Gonzales, 2011, pp. 63-95.

¹⁰See: Ambuel, 2007, p.p. 113-117.

¹¹For a reconstruction of the problem, see: Fronterotta, 2007, pp. 9-135.

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"making disappear", it is something that "shows". To quote Heidegger¹², 'non-Being "shows" by means of relation'. Relationality allows us to discern the traces of B in A and the traces of A in B. The *Sophist*, therefore, gives to the non-Being a relational status. The infinite relations of the Being through the *heteron* are the *pollakos* mentioned by Plato in the *Sophist*. Relationships are logical; they have a linguistic aspect along with an ontological one. Being is not just one, but many, in the same way that reality has a dialectical structure.¹³

Which is the role played by the negation in this relational structure? Which kind of identity emerges by the negation? A relation connects two things. Something is different only in relation to something else: a difference (*pros heteron*, 255 d 1).

It is always a diversity from the diversity itself (*ton heteron heteron* 255 d 6-7); by rejecting the identity between the Two, gains its own identity of everything: A is A because is "non non-A" (double negation). In this way, the non-Being discovered by Plato becomes a relational non-Being or we might even call it: a Being that institutes relations by negation.

From an ontological point of view, the *heteron* cannot be considered as a relative non-Being in the sense of a stage of the Being which finds itself in the middle (*metaxy*); between the absolute Being and the not-absolute Being¹⁴. In the *Sophist*, Plato formulates a new ontology, excluding Parmenides' absolute concept of the Being and the non-Being. Moreover, he defines the new coessential characteristics of the Being and the non-Being in the figure of the potency and the relationality.

One and the other (*synanphotera*)¹⁵

In order to save the phenomena, Plato establishes an ontology that I will define as 'one and the other'. This poses many hypothetical questions: (a) what do we need to save the Phenomena? (b) Do we need a material level or an ideal level? (c) Do we need the Being or the non-Being? (d) Do we need Change or Changelessness? (e) Do we need Sameness or Difference? All these questions would be answered by Plato saying: 'one and the other'.

The ontology of the *synanphotera* represents the children's prayer entirely: 'I am begging for "one and the other": this and that'. More than thirty years ago Jacob Klein¹⁶

¹²Heidegger, 1997, pp. 386-389.

¹³See especially Sasso, 1991, p.p. 81-29, about the systematic structure of relationships among the Kinds.

¹⁴See the Neoplatonic tradition.

¹⁵I have underlined the *synanphotera* ("one and the other") within the context of the *Sophist*, although Diotima underlines the *oute-oute* ("Neither-Neither") in the *Symposium*. In my opinion, both expressions refer to the exclusion of isolated logic and tend to emphasize the relational aspect.

¹⁶Klein, 1977, p. 60.

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proposed an interesting research about the expression 'one and the other', appearing in the *Sophist*. Klein wondered why this expression was so frequently used. He counted up to 32 till 259D, and thereafter another two times, reaching a total amount of 34 reappearances in the whole dialogue (6 in the first part and 28 in the second one). Klein's answer is based on the dual nature of the Being, the intentional nature of the Different and the nature of the Intelligible.

On the whole, I personally agree with the essence of Klein's ideas, yet there is a more simple reason from which the answers of Klein could come as specifications. Plato wanted to establish a new image of the *physis* as a correlation of the Ideal, namely, a novel cosmology able to manifest a rule of stability and truth in the same forthcoming phenomena¹⁷. Actually, he suggested an ontology capable of supporting the theory of forms by solving the related problems induced by *chorismos*¹⁸.

From a logical point of view, Plato does not claim the coexistence of contradictions but that of the contraries. Being and Not-being are not opposed as *enantia*, their opposition is an *antithesis*. For instance, it is possible for Socrates to be neither good nor bad, but he must be either good or not good. Therefore, it can be concluded that Plato through the ontology of the 'one and the other' has not denied the non-contradiction principle.

Has Plato met the challenge?

This is not an easy question to answer because encompasses a lot of intricate questions stratified not only in the history of modern western Philosophy, but also in the history of science, physics and mathematics.

One may say that each philosopher has been looking for a different answer to the problem given by Plato, either for or against it. We can affirm, therefore, that the great merit of Plato was offering us a masterly question along with the answer.

From a theoretical point of view, Plato's answer looks interesting to me provided that the platonic ontology would represent a dual relationality instead of a dualistic opposition (this is what I have try to demonstrate in this article).

Taken the platonic ontology as a starting point, a different way from both dualism and monism can be considered. This way will be able to combine unity and multiplicity through a

¹⁷See Plato's *Timaeus*.

¹⁸A relevant conclusion about the image of the *physis* can be drawn from the reading of the article proposed in *the Sophist*. Obviously the interlacement between the Being and the non-Being has another repercussions. For instance, to give reason for the existence of forgery. See Palumbo, 1994, p.p. 67-73.

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dynamic and relational Being. The revaluation of the platonic ontology is fertile even from the point of view of the history of the philosophy. In recent years, some attempts have been made to prove that the platonic philosophy is not dualistic, neither from the ontogeneseological point of view nor from the ethic-anthropological point of view.

My personal contribution to the matter, aimed to prove the repercussions caused by the relational ontology on the *physis*' image, belongs to this hermeneutic line. Therefore, it is possible to understand and be aware of the *physis* in a non contradictory way, thanks to the *dynamis* of the Being, by the proposal of an ontology capable of enlighten the relationship between the sensible world and the ideal world.

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