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SEVENTH SYMPOSIUM

Falsehood, Forms and Participation
in the Sophist

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I

The *Sophist* is one of Plato's most constructive dialogues, and one of the most cleverly constructed. Feigning pursuit of the essential sophist, Plato analyzes in turn (a) δύναιμις as the mark of what is, (b) collection and division as the source of "the free man's knowledge," (c) the modes of combination among the forms, (d) Difference as the nature of "that which is not" and, in culmination, (e) the distinction between false and true judgment which separates the sophist from the philosopher. These results surpass in their solidity any positive contribution of the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*. Yet they are achieved with a more austere conception of the forms than any found in these earlier dialogues. The structure of this more mature conception, I believe, is best illustrated in Plato's analysis of true and false discourse. My purpose in this paper is (1) to recapitulate what I take to be Plato's analysis of truth and falsehood in the *Sophist*, (2) to contrast the theory of forms presupposed by this analysis with the theory of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, and (3) to sketch against this background the theory of participation which seems to be implicit in the *Sophist* and other late dialogues. My contention, in preview, is that a form in this later context is a kind

definable in terms of criteria for membership, and that participation is the relationship by which individuals qualify for membership in a kind.

II

The Stranger's final discussion of true and false discourse comes at 263B-D, immediately following his elucidation of "that which is not" as the Different rather than the nonexistent. Just as the not-Beautiful comprises every form different from the Beautiful itself, and hence exists like any other form, so in general any form A has its complement not-A which comprises every form different from itself. The form Difference thus is revealed as the "real character of 'not-being' (258D)," of which the not-Beautiful, the not-Sitting, and all the rest are parts. The relevance of this discussion of the Different is apparent, for the Stranger now can avoid the danger threatened at 237E of having to admit that to say what is false is to say what is not, and hence to say nothing at all. To say what is not, he may now insist, is to say what is different from what is, thereby steering free from the Parmenidean paradoxes involved in speaking of "things which are not" as if attributing characteristics like unity and plurality to what does not exist. Given his concern to show how "that which is not" blends with thinking and discourse (260C), the importance of coming to terms with Parmenides is abundantly clear.

What has not been clear among commentators, however, is the relevance of the passages about combination among forms to Plato's subsequent analysis of true and false discourse. Yet for this purpose, the Stranger insists, we need "to come to an agreement about the nature of discourse (260A)," and about how "any discourse we can have owes its existence to the weaving together of Forms (259E)." A superficial manifestation of the difficulty here is Ackrill's poser about the illustrative statements "Theaetetus sits" and "Theaetetus flies," in neither of which apparently is involved a *plurality* of forms to be woven together. Apart from grammatical niceties, however, there is the more compelling problem of what Plato's account of the combining forms contributes to his distinction between true and false statements. Faced with the flights of ingenuity to which this problem has inspired recent commentators (reviewed in *Plato's Analytic Method* (PAM), III, 7, 8), we may wonder with Theaetetus (260B) why it is important to agree in this

connection that discourse by its nature depends upon combination among the forms.

Now there is a deceptively simple distinction between true and false statements as such which I imagine Plato found tempting and which, given his account of “that which is not,” would have been available without additional discussion of the way forms interrelate. A consideration of this distinction may heighten our appreciation of why further discussion was needed. In the *Phaedo* (100C-101C), Plato explains a principle of causality according to which the participation of an individual in a form is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for having the corresponding property or character (PAM, I, 1). All and only beautiful individuals, for example, participate in the form Beauty, and participation in Beauty accordingly is the cause of beauty in an individual. I find no reason to suspect that Plato ever rejected this principle of causality. Given this principle, however, it appears at first blush that the difference between a true and a false statement is merely that between participation and failure to participate in the form corresponding to the predicate. Thus “Theaetetus sits” would be true if the individual Theaetetus participates in the form Sitting, while “Theaetetus flies” would be false simply if Theaetetus does not participate in Flying. In general, given the form A corresponding to the property α , a statement in the format ‘ x is α ’ is true if and only if the individual x participates in A, and false otherwise, for as noted at 262E any given statement must be either true or false in character.

If there were no difficulty with this simple account, I think Plato would have adopted it and chosen other circumstances to discuss modes of combination among the forms. But there is a difficulty; and the avoidance of this difficulty, as we shall see, does require some account of the way forms relate to other forms. The difficulty arises in connection with the conditions for the truth and falsehood of negative statements. Consider a statement in the format ‘ x is not α ’—for example, “Theaetetus is not flying.” One way of rendering this statement is to construe it merely as the denial of “Theaetetus flies.” In this construction, however, the conditions for the truth of the negative statement are identical with the conditions for the falsehood of the affirmative statement. And while there is nothing flatly wrong with this, having different accounts of truth for negative and for affirmative statements falls short of the formal elegance which characterizes Plato’s analysis elsewhere in the dialogue. This duality, moreover, invites further complications, as with

the decision whether “Theaetetus is dissatisfied” is a negative or an affirmative statement for purposes of truth analysis. Surely, we may with sympathy imagine Plato insisting, the conditions for the truth of a given statement cannot depend ultimately upon the accidents of its grammatical form.

Another way of interpreting “Theaetetus is not flying” is to construe it affirmatively as asserting that Theaetetus participates in the form not-Flying. An elliptical version parallel to “Theaetetus sits” then would be “Theaetetus not-flies.” In this construction, a statement in the format ‘x is not- α ’ will be true if and only if x participates in the form not-A, and false otherwise. Thus we may say with satisfying generality, disregarding the quality of the verb, that a statement is true if and only if its object participates in the form to which its predicate corresponds.

The logical objections against this interpretation, however, are overwhelming. Consider first that ‘x is not- α ’ would be false if and only if x does not participate in not-A. But since an individual participates in not-A if it participates in any form other than A, ‘x is not- α ’ would be false only if x participates in A alone, a condition unlikely ever to be realized. Consider, on the other hand, that ‘x is not- α ’ would be true if x participates in any form B different from A. It then becomes apparent that merely by participating in any two forms A and B an individual x might render true both ‘x is α ’ and ‘x is not- α ’ simultaneously. Hence contrary to our ordinary understanding of the statements, “Theaetetus is not sitting” could not serve on this account as the denial of “Theaetetus sits.” Some more sophisticated account is needed to bring both affirmative and negative statements under the same formula of truth-making conditions.

We may note in passing that these infirmities remain if we rephrase the truth and falsehood conditions of ‘x is α ’ as requiring respectively that A is the *same* as some form in which x participates (which amounts to x participating in A) and that A is *different* from any form in which x participates (which amounts to x not participating in A). This, reflecting his concern to find a role for the forms Sameness and Difference, is Cornford’s account as I understand it from his generally excellent commentary, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge*.

I have defended in another context (PAM, III, 8) an interpretation of Plato’s remarks on truth and falsehood which avoids these difficulties, and which moreover relies essentially upon his earlier account of combination among the forms. In the frequently

discussed passage between 254B and 255E, Plato observes that some forms (e.g., Existence) combine with all others while some (Rest and Motion) do not. Regardless of how one construes the term *συμπλοκή* in this passage, the cash value of the relationship is that the combination of two forms A and B is sufficient for the possible participation of a single individual in both forms. If contrariwise A and B do not combine, then it is not possible for one individual to participate in both simultaneously and in the same respect. In this fashion, with minor qualifications (below, p. 86), we may construe combination among forms as the relationship of compatibility.

Now the truth of the statement "Theaetetus sits" as I read it is that no form in which Theaetetus participates at the relevant moment is incompatible with the form Sitting. There are some forms, of course, in which Theaetetus *cannot* participate while sitting, such as Running, Jumping, and Lying. But since he is not participating in one of these at the moment, the statement that he is sitting is true. The statement "Theaetetus flies," on the other hand, is false because none of his various activities is incompatible with his not flying. In general, a statement in the format 'x is α ' is true if all forms in which the individual x participates are compatible with the form A which corresponds to the property α predicated of x. Such a statement is false, however, if all the forms in which x participates are compatible with the complementary form not-A.

This account is easily extended to cover the truth and falsehood of negative statements. The truth of the simple statement "Theaetetus is not flying"—elliptically, "Theaetetus not-flies"—consists in the compatibility of all forms in which Theaetetus participates with the form not-Flying. "Theaetetus not-sits," on the other hand, is false because all forms in which Theaetetus participates are compatible with the complement of the predicate form—namely, the form Sitting itself. In general, a statement in the format 'x is not- α ' is true if all forms in which x participates are compatible with the form not-A which corresponds to the predicated property, and false if all such forms are compatible with the complement of that form. Thus the same formulae for truth and falsehood apply to both affirmative and negative statements. Since the conditions for the truth of 'x is not- α ' turn out to be identical with those for the falsehood of 'x is α ', moreover, and those for the falsehood of the former identical with those for the truth of the latter, either of the two statements "Theaetetus sits" and "Theaetetus is not sitting" effects the denial of the other.

This account of truth and falsehood which I have reconstructed in Plato's name may be summarized as follows: a statement attributing a property to an individual is true if and only if all forms in which the individual participates at the relevant moment are compatible with the form to which that property corresponds, and the statement is false if and only if all such forms are compatible with the complement of that predicate form. For completeness I may add that all forms in which a given individual participates are compatible either with a given form or with its complement, which is to say merely that for any given individual there is no property which it has and does not have simultaneously and in the same respect.

III

I shall attempt now to describe the conception of the forms presupposed by this analysis of truth and falsehood, and then to contrast this conception with that from the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. One requirement is the familiar principle (1) that individuals take on their characteristics by virtue of participation in the forms. To subscribe to this principle is not to choose among possible interpretations of the participation relationship, and it seems clear to me that Plato continues to subscribe to it in his later dialogues.

A further requirement, satisfied between 254B and 255E, is that any two forms might be conceived either to combine or to fail to combine with one another. In either case the relationship holds between forms themselves without regard to the individuals that happen from moment to moment to participate in them. Sitting and Talking, for example, are compatible; hence Theaetetus can participate in both at the same time. But the reason Sitting and Talking are compatible is not that Theaetetus or another individual happens to sit and talk simultaneously. Similarly, Rest and Motion are incompatible because of what they are themselves, and not because of the perpetual failure of any individual to participate in both simultaneously and in the same respect. Thus we may state as a second requirement (2) that forms exist independently of all individuals that happen at one time or another to participate in them.

Another consequence of what has just been said is (3) that the forms are changeless, since they are what they are independently of changing things. Further, since forms do not depend upon particulars, they must be known independently of sense perception. The dialectician's analysis, by which he traces out natural relations

among the forms, proceeds on the conceptual level without benefit of sensation. Hence there must be a sense in which it is correct to say (4) that forms are directly knowable. The forms, that is, are knowable without mediation, save perhaps that provided by a conceptual analysis of formal relationships. Although none of these presuppositions is explicit in the *Sophist*, each plays a part in the discussions of the "free man's knowledge" and of statemental truth and falsehood which are so prominent in that dialogue.

In each respect this conception of the forms accords nicely with what is said in earlier dialogues. Participation as the cause of characteristics in individuals is explicit in the *Phaedo* which, with the *Meno* and the *Republic*, is a prime source also for the doctrine of the independent existence of the forms. The possibility of unmediated intellectual access figures in most passages descriptive of the philosophic enterprise, notably in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, and the changeless or absolute character of the forms is discussed almost as frequently as the forms themselves.

There is one aspect of the forms emphasized in earlier dialogues, however, which plays no role whatever in the incisive logical investigations of the *Sophist*. This involves the notion that forms in some sense *share* characteristics with individual objects. This notion finds various expressions in the middle period, often with the help of a metaphor. At *Phaedo* 75B, 76D, and *Republic* 472B-C, for instance, there is mention of particulars as being imperfect copies of forms as patterns. At *Euthyphro* 6E and *Phaedo* 75C, 76A, the forms are called standards or paradigms. At *Republic* 597A, however, particulars are said simply to resemble their forms, a manner of speaking which also occurs at *Phaedo* 74E. And in yet other contexts, Plato has Socrates speak directly of forms as perfect exemplifications of their corresponding attributes. Notable instances are at *Protagoras* 330C,D, where Justice itself is called just and Holiness holy, and at *Phaedo* 100C where absolute Beauty is said itself to be beautiful.

There are devastating absurdities lying in the way of extending this manner of speaking to the forms generally, and I think it no accident that there is little mention in the later dialogues of forms and particulars sharing the same range of characteristics. Although there may be something just about the Just itself, the form could not conceivably be just in the way of the just man. And there is no way whatever in which a form might intelligibly be said to be large, red, moving or changeable. Characteristics of forms, on the other

hand, by and large do not attach to particulars. Of the five “very important kinds” discussed in the *Sophist*, for example, only Difference corresponds to a feature shared by forms and particulars, while Existence, Sameness and Rest belong to the forms alone and Motion belongs exclusively to particular things.

This difficulty of shared characteristics, of course, is a difficulty regarding the relationship of participation, and Plato’s own criticism of this notion comes as part of his examination of various notions of participation in the first part of the *Parmenides*. Since it is only one answer among many to the question of the one/many relationship to say that forms and particulars are related by resemblance, rejection of this notion does not in any way require rejection of all relationships between forms and particulars. Nor does it require rejection of any entry in the list above of similarities between the forms in the *Sophist* and in earlier dialogues. Thus Plato is free to relinquish the resemblance principle without modifying other aspects of the theory of forms as it emerges from the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

For this reason, it is wrong to view the arguments in the first part of the *Parmenides* as a criticism of the theory of forms itself. They are criticisms, rather, of various specific conceptions of participation. Perhaps the best known arguments here are those two we speak of collectively as “the third man,” the first of which is directed against the notion that participation is sharing a form as a common property, and the second more generally against the notion that participation is sharing properties with the forms. I do not wish at this time to enter the discussion whether these are valid arguments. My contention merely is that Plato appears to have considered them conclusive against the resemblance notion of participation. Although the language of pattern and paradigm is not totally absent in the later dialogues, there is no context there (with the possible exception of some dark passages in the *Timaeus*) where this manner of speaking appears to be essential to the discussion.

It is at any rate undeniable that the resemblance notion plays no explicit role in the *Sophist*. Indeed it would seem natural, in this dialogue so fruitfully occupied with matters of philosophic discourse, for Plato to have experimented with other answers to the problem of participation which would be immune to the earlier criticism of the *Parmenides*. The fact remains that the Stranger’s remarks in the *Sophist* reveal no specific conception of the participation relationship between forms and particulars. Yet there is an

account of participation which is in accord with the discussion in this dialogue, and which I believe is strongly suggested by it. This account has the considerable advantage of being nonmetaphorical and perspicuous. I turn now to sketch the outlines of this account.

IV

Consider, as a beginning, the contrast between forms and classes. All individuals that participate in a given form of course are members of a corresponding class. For Plato, however, an individual has a particular characteristic and hence is a member of the corresponding class *because* it participates in the relevant form, and not vice versa. This is one reason why we cannot conceive participation in the later dialogues merely as a matter of class membership.

There are other reasons for not relying on this particular conception of causality. If κ and λ are classes and have the same members, then they are the same class, but the two forms A and B are not the same merely because the same individuals happen to participate in each. A particular class, moreover, ceases to exist as such when it ceases to have members—it ceases to be distinguishable, so to speak, from the null class. But forms do not cease to exist for lacking participants. Further, members of a class may have nothing in common beyond accidental spatial or temporal characteristics; and regardless of what Plato might have thought about hair and mud, surely he would not have recognized a form corresponding to things that merely happen to be gathered in this room at this particular time. For these reasons, no attempt to assimilate forms to classes would appear to be worth serious consideration.

What is worth serious attention, however, is Plato's apparent assimilation in the *Sophist* of forms and kinds. How must kinds be conceived as different from classes to warrant this apparent equivalence in use of εἶδος and γένος? There must be differences at least in the three respects mentioned above: (1) two kinds are not identical merely for sharing the same membership (*featherless bipeds* and *rational animals* are not the same kind); (2) kinds do not become indistinguishable from the null class by ceasing to have members (the kind *unicorn* is distinct from zero); and (3) accidental groupings do not constitute kinds (an individual is of a different kind for being or not being a vertebrate, but not merely for entering or leaving this room at the present moment). With kinds dis-

tinguished from class in these respects, would we be justified in conceiving participation merely as a matter of an individual being an instance of a kind?

The answer I believe is still negative, for these reasons. First, I find no reason to suppose that Plato ever abandoned his principle in the *Phaedo* that a thing has a characteristic because it participates in the corresponding form. Theaetetus sits because he participates in the form *Sitting*. Theaetetus does not sit, however, merely because he is a member of the kind *sitting*; the opposite rather is the case. Hence being a member of a kind is not the same as participating in a form. Second, the concept of kind thus far discussed provides no explanation of what it would be for kinds to be compatible, or mutually exclusive. It would seem natural to explain compatibility of kinds in terms of the possibility of common membership. But forms, as we have seen, combine or fail to combine independently of their participants. Something more is needed to make *kinds* and *forms* in the *Sophist* equivalent concepts.

Now one aspect of the forms in both the *Phaedo* and the *Sophist* is that they can be grasped only conceptually, without benefit from sense perception. To grasp a kind conceptually is to grasp what it is to be a thing of that kind, which in turn is to grasp the conditions which are necessary and sufficient for its membership. These conditions constitute the criteria by which a particular thing becomes a member of the kind in question. My proposal, accordingly, is that a form in the *Sophist* is conceived not merely as a kind, but as a kind the criteria for membership in which can be articulated by dialectical analysis.

One meaning of the term ἰδέα, which also figures in the *Sophist* as a rough equivalent of εἶδος, is “general principle of classification.” A primary locus of this meaning in the dialogues (*A Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell and Scott, 1883 edition) is at *Phaedrus* 265D, where Plato first explicitly mentions the procedures of collection and division which play such a prominent role in the *Sophist*. If we gloss “principle of classification” as “standard,” we are able to recover a sense in which forms remain standards even in the later dialogues. The sense, however, is not that of paradigm or perfect instance as in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, but rather that of norm or criterion. The reason Theaetetus is sitting is not merely that he is a member of the appropriate kind, but rather that he meets the criteria by which the sitting kind of thing is defined. To meet the criteria for sitting, further, is necessarily to fail to meet the

criteria for standing or running. Hence the incompatibility between the kinds Sitting and Standing is not a matter of actual or potential instantiations, but a matter rather of incompatibility between their defining characteristics. It is the task of the dialectician, amply illustrated in the *Sophist*, to trace out the compatibilities and inconsistencies among these defining characteristics, the successful outcome of which is the *logos* or definition which constitutes the “free man’s knowledge” so described at 253C. Being defined independently of their instances, the kinds exist independently of particulars, are changeless, and are knowable independently of sense perception. Thus forms in this conception retain all the features which, according to the analysis above, carry over into the *Sophist* from the earlier dialogues.

Other advantages I claim for this conception of the forms in the *Sophist* are as follows. First, it provides all the relationships among forms necessary for interpreting the analysis of truth and falsehood, along with other important philosophic results in that dialogue. Second, it finds textual support with the use of the term γένος in that dialogue as equivalent to εἶδος. Finally, and most important for this short study, it enables us to provide a straightforward and easily intelligible sense in which individuals may be said to participate in the forms and thereby take on their various characteristics. A form is a kind definable with respect to its necessary and sufficient conditions for instantiation. And for an individual to participate in a form is nothing more nor less than for the individual in one way or another to comply with these conditions.