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Plato's Description of Dialectic in the "Sophist" 253 d I-e2

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## *Plato's description of Dialectic in the Sophist 253 d 1-e2*

ALFONSO GÓMEZ-LOBO

In the *Sophist* there is an obscure and much disputed passage (253 d 1-e 2) which professes to say something about what is proper to the science of Dialectic (... μῶν οὐ τῆς διαλεκτικῆς φήσομεν ἐπιστήμης εἶναι; 253 d 2-3)<sup>1</sup>. The *communis opinio* is that we are offered there a description of the Method of Division. The facts that the passage is introduced by the expression τὸ κατὰ γένη διαιεῖσθαι, that it appears in a late dialogue and moreover in a dialogue where that method is explicitly practiced (218 b 5-236 c 8 and 264 b 9-268 d 5) seem to be very strong reasons for suspecting that here Plato must have in mind the Diaeretic Method. This conviction seems to be almost unavoidable when one takes the lines as an "*ausführliche Definition des Dialektikers*" (Stenzel).<sup>2</sup> If it is such an exhaustive definition, how could Division be missing from it?

I would like to challenge the generally accepted view and show that another quite different interpretation gives a better sense to the text and solves some problems which otherwise must remain puzzling.

Since nearly all recent interpretations depend on Stenzel's, I shall discuss it first (I). Then (II) I shall put forward the main theses of my interpretation and lastly (III) I shall paraphrase the whole text.

Since it is useful to have the passage under our eyes, I reproduce Burnet's text, dividing it for convenience into Prologue (P), Text (T)

<sup>1</sup> I shall be using throughout Burnet's text (Oxford, 1905). References to the *Sophist* will be made according to pages, paragraphs and lines in Stephanus without repeating the dialogue's title. Other references to Plato's writings will be self-explanatory. My thanks are due to Prof. G. Vlastos (Princeton), Prof. E. Tugendhat (Heidelberg) and Prof. M. Reck (Puerto Rico) for their helpful criticisms and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Julius Stenzel, *Studien zur Entwicklung der platonischen Dialektik von Sokrates zu Aristoteles*, 2. Auf., Leipzig, 1931 (reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), English translation by D. J. Allan, *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, Oxford, 1940. Quotations or my own translations from the German original will be identified by 'orig.' Quotations from Allan's translation are identified by 'trans.' Occasionally Allan's version is inaccurate; in such cases I have referred to the original German text.

and Epilogue (E). I assign numbers and letters to the subsections in order to make references more economic.

- P1   ΞΕ.     Τὸ κατὰ γένη διαιρεῖσθαι  
 2           καὶ μήτε ταῦτὸν εἶδος ἕτερον ἡγήσασθαι μήτε ἕτερον ὄν  
               ταῦτὸν  
 3           μῶν οὐ τῆς διαλεκτικῆς φήσομεν ἐπιστήμης εἶναι;  
               ΘΕΑΙ.   Ναί, φήσομεν.  
 T     ΞΕ.     Οὐκοῦν ὃ γε τοῦτο δυνατὸς δρᾶν
- T1a           μίαν ἰδέαν  
 b           διὰ πολλῶν,  
 c           ἐνὸς ἐκάστου κειμένου χωρὶς,  
 d           πάντη διατεταμένην  
 T           ἱκανῶς διαισθάνεται,
- T2a           καὶ πολλάς  
 b           ἐτέρας ἀλλήλων  
 c           ὑπὸ μιᾶς ἕξωθεν περιεχομένας,
- T3a           καὶ μίαν αὖ  
 b           δι' ὄλων πολλῶν  
 c           ἐν ἐνὶ συνημμένην,
- T4a           καὶ πολλάς  
 b           χωρὶς  
 c           πάντη διωρισμένας·
- E1           τοῦτο δ' ἔστιν,  
 2           ἧ τε κοινωνεῖν ἕκαστα δύναται καὶ ὅπη μή,  
 3           διακρίνειν κατὰ γένος ἐπίστασθαι.

The letter T alone appears twice because it is obvious that the two items to which it is assigned form together a single phrase that subordinates four accusatives (T1a, T2a, T3a and T4a). Theaetetus' answer receives no numeral because it is irrelevant to our discussion.

## I

Stenzel's task, due to his assumption that we here have a definition of *Dialectic*, consisted especially in bringing into congruence the wording

of T1-T4 and what he otherwise knew about the Method of Division. Concerning this method Stenzel had constantly in mind the visual image of “*eine Pyramide über- und untergeordneter Begriffe*”.<sup>3</sup>

After defending the kinship of T2 and T4<sup>4</sup> and rejecting, rightly as I think, the view which sees material objects in T1c, it was most natural for Stenzel to start by looking for a clause where the activity of dividing the *eide*<sup>5</sup> should be made clear, i.e. in his image: the descent from the summit of the pyramid to its base. This he finds in T3. There, he argues, lies the “result of the division of concepts [*das Ergebnis der Begriffsspaltung*]”<sup>6</sup> which is itself a Form whose definition was sought. “An Idea passing through several ‘wholes’,  $\delta\lambda\alpha$ , is combined to form a ‘unity’”.<sup>7</sup> This in its turn gives a reasonable sense to T4: it mentions all the Forms that are “*utterly separated* from the desired one”<sup>8</sup> (Stenzel’s emphasis).

Stenzel makes then a long reference<sup>9</sup> to T3b because it is precisely a phrase which tends to make his interpretation most convincing. Every Kind is a whole and Division proceeds by breaking it up into two *eide*, one of which in its turn is a new whole which is next going to be divided and so forth until the indivisible Form is reached.<sup>10</sup>

As an explanation of T3c Stenzel draws attention to his previous statement that “when any concept has been finally determined, all the various higher concepts on the side of ‘being’ are ‘brought together’ and the ‘proper’ definition of the concept results”.<sup>11</sup> A very clear example of what is meant is found in 221 b. But there is some trouble in using this as an explanation of T3c. If it were right, we should expect some reference to a *plurality*, say, of concepts or determinations being brought together in a unity but our text speaks of the “one Form being connected in a unity” (or perhaps “in one Form”), *συνημμένην* and not,

<sup>3</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 69 orig.

<sup>4</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* pp. 63-64 orig.

<sup>5</sup> In the following I shall be using *idea*, *eidos*, *genos* and Idea, Form, Kind as synonyms.

<sup>6</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 65 orig. Allan’s “a completed classification” misses the point.

<sup>7</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 99 trans.

<sup>8</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 99 trans.

<sup>9</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* pp. 99-101 trans.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 264 d 10-265 a 2. I shall be using the expressions “*atomon eidos*”, indivisible Form” because Stenzel employs them. They are not to be found in Plato’s texts.

<sup>11</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 93 trans., referring to 224 c and 268 c.

for instance, *συνημμένας*.<sup>13</sup> The phrase is of course obscure but I call attention to it in order to show that Stenzel's interpretation of it is at least doubtful.

Let us turn now to what Stenzel has to say about T1 and T2. In these lines he has to find some reference to the initial part of the activity of Division: the uniting of terms given to us as separate.<sup>13</sup> In T2 these terms or lower Forms are presented, according to Stenzel, as subordinate to a higher Form. But in reading 'comprehended from without' (*ἔξωθεν περιεχομένας*) as subordination he has to face the objection that this phrase was used in 250 b of Motion and Rest as comprehended by Being. Stenzel dismisses the difficulty of positing Being as a higher *genos* divided exhaustively in this way into Rest and Motion with a vague indication that "Plato could also apply his classification method . . . to logical states-of-affairs where, according to present day concepts, other logical relations have to be assumed."<sup>14</sup> Even if this were correct (and I think it is not), one should note that there is no indication whatsoever in 250 b of a dividing (*διαίρειν*, *διατέμνειν*) of Being.

Since the subordination of lower Forms under a higher one occurs in T2, Stenzel has to find a referent for T1. Previous interpreters used to see the generic unification of many lower Forms in T1,<sup>15</sup> but Stenzel rejects this and commits himself to the view that in T1 "we are shown the real and decisive *synopsis* [*Zusammenfassung*] of forms under a higher unity which takes place in segment 2 [= T2]: the objects which are to be united must first be known in their separation; it is necessary to grasp the *principle* of the separation, which extends through all the instances and explains why we are confronted, as we are, by many discrete unities".<sup>16</sup> Stenzel is thinking here about Otherness (*θάτερον*) and takes this Form to be a precondition for unification.

<sup>13</sup> A. C. Lloyd ("Plato's description of division" *apud* R. E. Allen (ed.), *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, London: Routledge, 1965, p. 228) is wrong for the same reason when he says "*ἐν ἐνι συνημμένῃ* is a variation from *ὑπὸ μιᾶς ἰδέας περιεχομένη*". This last singular, borrowed from 250 b 8, actually stands for a plural, as the context shows, and refers to a multiplicity (not just one Idea) embraced by a Form. For an alternative interpretation see below.

<sup>14</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 102 trans.

<sup>14</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 68 orig.

<sup>15</sup> There is a trace of this in the highly speculative and untenable interpretation of our passage in the Pleiade translation (Platon, *Oeuvres Complètes* traduction nouvelle et notes par Léon Robin, avec la collaboration de M. J. Moreau, Paris: Gallimard, 1950, Vol. II, p. 1450 n. 137).

<sup>16</sup> Stenzel, *Studien* p. 103 trans. Allan's italics, not Stenzel's. My brackets.

Stenzel's interpretation then implies that we start at the base of the pyramid (T1), where different concepts stand apart from each other due to the Idea of Otherness, then we ascend towards the summit and at T2 we reach a higher Form to which the lower are subordinate. We descend after that until we reach, at the base, an Idea in which we bring together the pertinent halves of all the *eide* we have split into two while descending (T3). The indivisible Form that has been defined is now completely apart from the other *atoma eide* at the base of the pyramid (T4).

Summing up then, Stenzel makes the following identification of items:

T1a	μίαν ιδέαν	= Otherness (at the base)
T1c	ἑνὸς ἐκάστου	= Forms (at the base)
T2c	ὑπὸ μιᾶς	= a very high divisible Form not identical with the one Form at T1a (the summit of the pyramid)
T3a	καὶ μίαν αὖ	= a low Form that has been defined (at the base)
T3c	ἐν ἐνὶ	= the unity of the low Form just defined (= T3a)
T4a	καὶ πολλὰς	= Forms at the base of the pyramid other than the defined Form

At first sight this looks like a brilliant illumination of a very dark passage and it has found wide acceptance.<sup>17</sup>

However some difficulties should be noted before we proceed:

(1) Stenzel's interpretation does not take into account the immediately surrounding context where invaluable help is found for the correct grasping of the text. Moreover, when he does point to the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1935, pp. 266-267. Cornford is followed closely by K. M. Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969. A. C. Lloyd (in the paper mentioned in note 12) has built a geometrical interpretation upon the traditional one but it will hold if and only if Stenzel's holds. H. Meinhard, in a book which is almost entirely devoted to the exegesis of 253 d (*Teilhabe bei Platon*, Freiburg und München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1968), follows Stenzel closely in the identification of items but departs from him in that he sees in our passage not a description of Division but of the "*Grundstruktur des Teilhabe-Geflechtes der Ideen*" which in its turn is the condition for Division. His interpretation will also only hold if Stenzel's does.

context he displays a serious misunderstanding of Plato's main line of thought. Let me substantiate this statement. Stenzel says: "At 255 e Plato has certainly declared Rest and Motion to be 'altogether different', but he believes that combination is possible even between 'being' and 'not-being' (the proof of this is indeed the principal aim of the dialogue), hence Motion and Rest also cannot exclude each other as it is inferred from this sentence that they do; both participate in 'being' which 'comprehends' them (250 b). It must, after all, be possible, says Plato, to bring them into relation with each other (256 b)".<sup>18</sup> If we look at the texts Stenzel cites, we see that they do not prove that Rest and Motion combine. The fact that both Rest and Motion *are* does not imply that they do combine because all *eide*, however exclusive of each other, partake of Being (cf. 259 b 5-6). The reference to 256 b, on the other hand, certainly shows a wrong understanding of the text. Stenzel takes the (false) antecedent of a conditional as a cautious assertion.<sup>19</sup> The important point in this context is that Stenzel's inference from the combination of Being and Not-Being that Motion and Rest also combine (they certainly do not, they are *ἐναντιώτατα ἀλλήλοις*, 250 a 8-9),<sup>20</sup> implies that he is not sufficiently aware of the fact that throughout the exposition of the Communion of the Forms Plato is trying to press the distinction between Forms which combine with all, even with their apparent contraries (e.g. Being and Not-Being), and such that exclude universal combination, even if they are very general (e.g. Rest and Motion). I shall have more to say about this below.

(2) Another important argument against Stenzel is the fact that in 253 d there are no hints whatsoever in the Greek text that could suggest that Plato has in mind anything resembling a pyramid as a de-

<sup>18</sup> Stenzel, *Studien*, pp. 97-98 trans.

<sup>19</sup> This problem has been thoroughly and convincingly discussed by G. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, Princeton: University Press, 1973, pp. 272-294. I can not repeat his well founded arguments here.

<sup>20</sup> Notice should be taken here of Prof. Vlastos' important thesis concerning the distinction between Ordinary Predication and Pauline Predication (cf. the article "An ambiguity in the *Sophist*" in his *Platonic Studies*). According to it we can understand *κίνησις ἴσταιται* either as a statement concerning the Form Motion (in which case it is true) or concerning the individuals that partake of the Form Motion (in which case it is false). The cited phrase in 250 a 8-9 shows that in our context it should be taken in the latter sense. For the main thesis of this paper, however, the distinction is not directly relevant because my proof is not invalidated by the acceptance of the fact that statements involving combination of Ideas are ambiguous in the aforesaid sense.

scription of the order or relation among the Forms mentioned in these lines. There are no words suggesting the metaphor of higher and lower *eide* or, in general, of verticality<sup>21</sup> (ὑπὸ μιᾶς in T2c is simply the agent for the passive περιεχομένης, it is not implied that something is *under* that Form but that many *eide* are embraced by it).

(3) When Division is mentioned in the *Phaedrus* (265 c ff.) we hear of two operations of the Dialectician which could be fairly described as ascent and descent (a metaphor that can also be applied to the practice of Division in the *Sophist* cf. 235 b 9: καταβάντας εἰς αὐτήν), but in our text there is no such distinction of operations. The Dialectician simply “discerns clearly” (Cornford) four items.

(4) I have already indicated that the interpretation of ἐν ἐνὶ συνημμένῃν is unsatisfactory as it stands. It seems to make little sense to say that an Idea, the *definiendum*, which is itself a unity, should be ‘combined to form a unity’. It would make better sense if one said that the plurality of elements in the *definiens* were brought together in a unity. On Stenzel’s interpretation, then, a plural would have been much better.

(5) At the outset Stenzel emphasizes (correctly, as I think) the symmetry of the text: One (T1) – Many (T2)/One (T3) – Many (T4), but if we follow his interpretation the symmetry breaks down at an important point. The Form in T1 (Otherness) is of a completely different nature from that in T3: it is an *eidōs* which admits universal combination, whereas in T3 we have a Form which by no means combines with all other Forms, such as the fisherman in the example at the beginning of the dialogue (218 e-221 c). Moreover in that exercise and also in the subsequent efforts to define the sophist, there is nothing explicitly corresponding to the point of departure at the Idea of Otherness which Stenzel stresses for 253 d.

(6) Stenzel’s interpretation tends to assimilate P2 and E2-3 and, I would say, has to assimilate them in order to have from ‘Prologue’ to ‘Epilogue’ a single uniform description of Division.<sup>22</sup> However it is clear upon examination that both phrases point to two completely different operations: P2 mentions the study of the relation of identity between Forms, whereas E2-3 refers to the study of the way in which Forms can and can not combine.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Stenzel, *Studien*, p. 96 trans.

<sup>22</sup> Stenzel, *Studien*, p. 107 trans.

<sup>23</sup> This has been emphasized by Sir David Ross, *Plato’s Theory of Ideas*, Oxford: University Press, 1951, p. 117.



In the light of these objections, our conclusion must be that Stenzel is at least guilty of a great amount of *Hineinlesen*. That his interpretation is untenable as a whole will be seen once an alternative is offered.

## II

I should like to put forward a completely different reading of our text.

My main contention is that at 253 d 1-e 2 there is neither a definition of the Dialectician (Stenzel) nor “a description of *the* capability of the Dialectician”, as a German scholar has recently put it,<sup>24</sup> but the description of one,<sup>25</sup> more formal skill that the Dialectician is seen to have if he is able to carry through successfully not only classifications of Forms in “pyramids” but also identifications that do not depend on Division.

The description of this skill is

- (a) carefully introduced for the reader (252 e 9-253 c 10) and
- (b) exemplified with certain amount of detail (254 b 7-259 d 8).

It is important to realize that Plato anticipates the basic results he reaches at 258 d 5-259 b 6. Since at this stage of the dialogue he can not betray those results, the text is necessarily obscure and elliptical. A reference to Division, on the contrary, could have been made quite openly because it had already been introduced at length. The correct interpretation of our text depends then on the understanding of 251 a 5-259 d 8 as a whole.

I contend that 253 d 2 ff. is carefully introduced for the reader because it is the last step of what Aristotle would call a Socratic *ἐπακτικός λόγος*.<sup>26</sup> First Grammar (252 e 9-253 a 12) and Music (253 b 1-4) are mentioned as particular instances, then the generalization is reached (253 b 5-6) and at last the application of the general principle to Dialectic takes place (253 b 8-253 d 4). Dialectic receives a longer treatment than the other arts for obvious reasons (253 d 5-e 2).

<sup>24</sup> W. Detel, *Platon's Beschreibung des falschen Satzes im Theätet und Sophistes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1972, p. 84. My stress. Detel also follows Stenzel in his interpretation of 253 d.

<sup>25</sup> The *Seventh Letter* (343 d) also records two skills expected from the Academic Dialectician which can not be easily identified with the indications of the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, nor with the practice of Division in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Metaph.* M, 4, 1087 b 27. Examples of what Aristotle had in mind can be found in Xenophon, *Mem.* 3, 3, 9 and Plato's *Gorgias* 460 b ff. Cf. K. Praechter, *Die Philosophie des Allertums* (1927), Basel-Stuttgart: Benno Schwabe Verlag, 1960, p. 142.

An important feature in this inductive argument is the way in which each of the instances is presented: firstly, a field of objects is determined; secondly, the need of a τέχνη for approaching the field is stressed and thirdly, the name of the τέχνη or ἐπιστήμη is offered.

The common characteristic of all three fields (those of Grammar, Music and Dialectic) is that some of its objects combine (or mix or blend or fit together) while others do not. The skill in each case consists in knowing which do and which do not fit together.

There is a further characteristic common to the fields of Grammar and Dialectic which does not hold for Music: their objects are sharply divided into two sets. Grammar has to deal with consonants (some of which fit together while others do not) and vowels. The latter ολον δεσμός διὰ πάντων κεχώρηκεν, „as a sort of bond pervade them all” (after Cornford). In the case of Dialectic the text (253 b 8-c 3) mentions:

- (A) *gene*, some of which can combine, some of which can not, corresponding to the consonants, and
- (B) other *gene*, analogous to the vowels since they pervade the other ones, which are divided into two subsets:
  - (B1) *gene* which hold them together so that they can combine, and
  - (B2) *gene* which are the causes of division.

It should be noted that the reference to all these different types of *gene* is done in the form of indirect questions:

“... is not some science needed ... if one is to succeed in pointing out *which* Kinds are consonant, and *which* are incompatible with another; also *whether* there are certain Kinds that pervade them all ... and again ... *whether* there are certain others that ... are responsible for the division”<sup>27</sup>

The task of the Dialectician is then to identify the pairs of elements in A that combine with one another and those that do not. A particular Form must appear on both lists because it combines with some but not with others. Concerning *gene* in set B the task of the Dialectician is pictured as altogether different. What is now demanded from him are proofs of the existence of some Forms satisfying the corresponding descriptions, i.e. of some Forms that operate on the other ones so as to cause their combination or separation.

The analogy with the letters (consonants and vowels) and the way the text introduces the different tasks for which the science of Dialectic is needed, show clearly that the important distinction within the field

<sup>27</sup> 253 b 11-c 3. Cornford's translation. My emphasis.

of the Forms is that between Forms in set A on the one hand and Forms in sets B1 and B2 on the other. *Eide* in sets B1 and B2 I shall call from now on *pervasive*, *eide* in A *non-pervasive*.

I contend that in 253 d 4-e 2 the Stranger emphasizes exactly this distinction and as a consequence presents the Dialectician as capable of discharging the tasks assigned to his art at 253 b 11-c 3.

Before I come directly to this, I have one more point to stress concerning 253 b 8-c 3. The context makes it clear that *διαίρεσις* is here applied *not* to the division of an *eidos* (and in this case it should have been a non-pervasive *eidos*) into two lower *eide*, but to the separation of one non-pervasive *eidos* from any other Form. In opposition to it stands not *συναγωγή* but *σύμμιξις* (252 b 6; see further 253 c 2 and 252 d 2). As examples of the latter the Stranger proposes *κίνησιν ἴστασθαι, στάσιν κινεῖσθαι* (252 e 2) which is rejected as absolutely impossible. Therefore Motion and Rest are a good instance of those pairs of *eide* "that do not want to mix" (252 e 2). To keep Motion apart from Rest in a negative statement is to "divide" them.<sup>28</sup>

Let us now try to determine which Forms are causes of combination (B1) and which of division in the aforesaid sense (B2). A clear-cut answer is found in 259 a 4-7:

λεκτέον . . . ὅτι συμμείγνυται τε ἀλλήλοις τὰ γένη καὶ τό τε ὄν καὶ θάτερον διὰ πάντων καὶ δι' ἀλλήλων διεληλυθότε. . .

This passage is parallel to 253 b 8-c 3. We have here a set of *eide* which in general combine<sup>29</sup> (= A) and two *eide* (observe the dual participle) which pervade them all and pervade each other. They are Being (= B1) and Otherness (= B2). But since the identification of Not-Being and Otherness first takes place from 256 c 11 to 258 e 3, it is safer to understand 253 c 3 as a reference to Not-Being.<sup>30</sup>

If the foregoing is correct, then what we should expect is a development of the idea that the Dialectician has to have a sufficient view (cf. *ἰκανῶς διαισθάνεται* in T) of the relations between the A Forms and the B1 and B2 Forms, just as in the case of letters the combinations could be performed sufficiently (cf. *δρᾶν ἰκανῶς*, 253 a 9) by the grammarian who distinguishes consonants from vowels.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Aristotle's technical use of *διαίρεσις* and *διαίρεισθαι* for negations in *Metaph.* E, 4, 1027 b 20-24 and Θ, 10, 1051 b 1-5.

<sup>29</sup> That some do not combine is probably omitted for need of brevity: the lines stand in a résumé.

<sup>30</sup> This agrees with Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 261-262.

I contend then that *at T2 and T4 in our text we have a reference to many A Forms in opposition to which there is at T1 one Form: Being, and at T3 a different one: Not-Being* (cf. 254 c 3-6).

That the proposed (and generally accepted) interpretation of 253 b 8-c 3 should be carried over to 253 d 1-e 2 is further confirmed by the striking correspondence between *διὰ πάντων* (of the Ideas that are responsible for combination) and *δι' ἄλων* (of those that account for separation) in the former text, and *διὰ πολλῶν* (of the first single Idea) and *δι' ἄλων πολλῶν* (of the second single Idea) in the latter. The Dialectician in his exercises does not scrutinize all Forms but, understandably enough, examines only some of them, contrasting them with Being and Not-Being. At the end of the discussion however the universalization, which is of course philosophically very important, is once more put forward (*διὰ πάντων*, 259 a 5).

As the reader will presently realize my interpretation rests on the assumption that the sense of the verb “be” involved here is not the existential (Cornford, Ackrill) but the predicative with ellipsis of the predicate noun or verb.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand “Not-Being” stands for the negation of identities (cf. 255 e 11-256 b 4; 256 e 5-6; 257 a 4-6; 259 b 5-6; 263 b 11-12).

Let me state in a few words the general import of these schematic statements on the senses of “Being” and “Not-Being”.

The central problem of the *Sophist* is how something can seem to be and not be, and how we can state that falsehood – defined as saying that which is not – really is. In both cases we would be implying that what is not nevertheless is, which is a contradiction (236 e 1-237 a 4). Plato’s way out of it is that

“*A* is *F* and *A* is not *F*”,

where *A* and *F* stand for Forms, should not be understood as

“*F*(*A*) & —*F*(*A*)”

which is of course a flat contradiction, but as

“*F*(*A*) & (*A* ≠ *F*)”

<sup>31</sup> I can not indulge here in a full exposition and defense of this thesis. The main ideas of this line of interpretation are found in J. Malcolm, “Plato’s analysis of *to on* and *to me on* in the *Sophist*”, *Phronesis* 12 (1967) 130-146 and G. E. L. Owen, “Plato on not-being” in G. Vlastos (ed), *Plato I*, Metaphysics and Epistemology, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970, pp. 223-267. Cf. also Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* pp. 283-292; 294-305, 336. J. L. Ackrill’s well known paper “Plato and the copula: *Sophist* 251-259” is also included in Vlastos, *Plato I*, pp. 210-222.

which amounts to saying that some individual Form participates in another Form but is not identical with it (256 a 11-b 4). The symbolism is of course awkward for the modern logician due to the twofold presence of “*F*”, first as a predicate letter and then as a *sui generis* individual constant, but the Platonic interpretation of “is *F*” (= “participates in *F*”) and “is not *F*” (= “participates in Otherness in respect of *F*”) shows that for Plato *F* denotes the same in both phrases. It is the ambiguity of “Being” and not of “*F*” that according to him causes the apparent contradiction.<sup>32</sup>

The important consequence of these results for the present discussion is that there is no exact symmetry between the use of “Being” and of “Not-Being”. Not-Being is not τούναντίον τοῦ ὄντος (257 b 3-4 and 258 e 6-7). This lack of symmetry implies that if the identifications among non-pervasive Forms (which are done by Division) and among pervasive Forms (exemplified at 254 d-258 e) are to be successful, the Dialectician has to see clearly that Being stands in relation to many other Forms in such a way that its predication does not imply identity between them but only capacity of receiving positive predicates. Not-Being, on the other hand, does not imply a contradiction to the affirmative attribution of those predicates to each of the many Forms but only the assertion that these are different from the Forms denoted by the corresponding predicates. This is thoroughly worked out from 256 e 8 onwards. At 253 d it could only be advanced obscurely to the reader, as I have already argued.

### III

I shall now try to substantiate my thesis piecemeal following the order of the text and explaining if possible every phrase out of the near context in the *Sophist*. I hope this will show unambiguously that T1-T4 are not describing συναγωγή and διάρσεις<sup>33</sup> and that therefore Stenzel’s interpretation and those resting on it are definitely wrong.

<sup>32</sup> This way of putting things owes much to Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, p. 291 note.

<sup>33</sup> Division of course rests on the set of relations suggested at 253 d because when we divide a non-pervasive *eidōs* into two, in order to reach the *eidōs* we want to define, in every section we get an *eidōs* which *is* and at the same time is *other* than the other one. But this happens within the pyramid and there is no question here of a Form’s σύμμετξις or διάρσεις with or from another Form belonging to a completely different pyramid.

## PROLOGUE

P1. There can hardly be any doubt that the expression τὸ κατὰ γένη διαιρεῖσθαι refers to the Method of Division. A look at 264 c 1-2 (κατ'εἶδη διαιρέσεων) and 267 d 5-6 (τῆς τῶν γενῶν κατ'εἶδη διαιρέσεως) will confirm this. But the reference here to this practice of dividing each *eidos* into two lower ones (cf. *Statesman* 262 d 7: κατ'εἶδη δύο διαιρεῖν and 262 e 3-4: κατ'εἶδη καὶ δίχα διαιροῦτ' ἕν) should not obscure the fact that at 253 c 3 διαίρεσις was the separation of any Form from another one expressed in a true negative statement, as I have shown above. The Stranger is recalling Division at P1 in order to exhibit the link between the type of Dialectic practiced at the beginning of the dialogue and the one which is now going to be introduced. The former presupposes the latter.

P2. Not taking the same Form for a different one or a different one for the same is also something peculiar of the Method of Division, but not restricted to it. The purpose of Division is to avoid false identities, e.g. that of the πολιτικός and the δημολογικός, that of the σοφός and the σοφιστικός (268 b 8 and 10) and it also has to show the positive identity of the *definiendum* and the *definiens* (cf. 221 b 1). So far then, P1 and P2 mention the Method of Division such as it has already been introduced. Note that there is nothing here pointing to the analogy with Grammar and Music. The skill of avoiding false moves in identifications and distinctions is not restricted to the process of Division because in the text following 253 d the skill is displayed without any use of such method. Τὸ εἶν and ταύτόν, which at first sight looked like the same *eidos*, are shown to be different (255 b 9-c 3) and τὸ μὴ εἶν and θάτερον are shown to be one and the same (258 e 3).

P3. This question suggests that the two foregoing operations belong to Dialectic not in the sense that they are all there is to it, but in the sense that they can not belong to any other ἐπιστήμη or τέχνη, such as Grammar or Music (nor to the apparent σοφία called Sophistry). The question therefore should not be taken as introducing a definition of Dialectic nor as purporting to give an exhaustive enumeration of what the Dialectician is capable of performing.

## TEXT

T. Τοῦτο refers back to P1 and P2. Whoever is able to perform what we already know as the activity of the Dialectician has a clear view of certain objects. These are described in analogy to those of Grammar.

The skill of dividing *gene* and especially that of stating correct identifications and distinctions presupposes an exact knowledge of the Ideas of Being and Not-Being in contrast with the other Forms with which they are combined. The lack of this knowledge is mocked at in 259 d 2-7. T1-T2. These two should be taken together because they mark off the first opposition between the One and the Many, between a vowel-like Form and many consonant-like Forms. I think moreover that in both parts we have the same state of things envisaged from two different angles. The best thing to do is to start from the last phrase (T2c) because a very obvious parallel passage gives us a valuable clue to determine what Forms Plato had in mind when he used it. Three Stephanus pages earlier the Stranger had said:

τρίτον ἄρα τι παρὰ ταῦτα τὸ ὄν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ τιθεῖς, ὡς ὑπ' ἐκείνου τὴν τε στάσιν καὶ τὴν κίνησιν περιεχομένην, κτλ.<sup>34</sup>

Observe that ὑπὸ μιᾶς in our passage corresponds to ὑπ' ἐκείνου and περιεχομένης to περιεχομένην. The embracing Form is Being, the embraced are Rest and Motion. This suggests that the Idea at T2c is identical with that at T1a (viz. Being) and that among the many of T2a we should count at least Rest and Motion. These also satisfy the condition stated at T2b: Motion is “completely other” than Rest (255 e 11-12). After these considerations, T1b should not be difficult. In 259 a 5, where the generalization of what is here said is found, the Stranger states explicitly that τὸ ὄν (and θάτερον) traverse all (the Forms). Here the Dialectician is thought of as considering many Forms (not all of them) and it is implied that Being pervades the many Forms with which it is contrasted. That it should be further emphasized that Being is “extended everywhere” (T1d) is also quite natural: in order to fulfill its vowel-task, Being has to be coextensive with the whole field of Ideas. Wherever there is a Form, there is Being too in the sense that that particular Form can participate in many other Forms and, as a consequence, be the subject of many affirmative predications (cf. 263 b 11-12).

T1c is difficult. There is a grammatical problem and a problem of reference and the two are interlinked. The grammatical obstacle is that after μίαν ιδέαν we would expect μιᾶς ἐκάστης. Instead of this, the text has a genitive absolute which is probably neuter. Does it refer to spacio-temporal things or does it reflect the neuter *eidōs* which appeared a few lines before (253 d 1)? The fact that Plato has emphasized that Dialectic

<sup>34</sup> 250 b 6-7. I follow Burnet's punctuation.

tic has to do exclusively with Ideas (*Rep.* VI, 511 c 1-2) and that the pages of the *Sophist* we are commenting on deal only with *gene* show that the latter is probably the correct answer.<sup>35</sup> But what does the Stranger mean by “every *eidos* lying apart” (κειμένου χωρίς)? At 252 b 8-c 9 the error of those who argue that each Form is apart from others is that they already connect in their discourses the expressions corresponding to those Forms. “To lie apart” is there contrasted to “to be combined”. And I think this gives us for T1c a picture of this sort: the Dialectician sees τὸ ὄν extended throughout many Ideas. He sees that Motion is and that Rest is (250 a 11-12), and although both are embraced by Being (250 b 7-8) each of them is considered apart from the other. As a consequence the Dialectician perceives clearly that their common predicate (“Being”) does not imply their combinability nor their identity. The confusion between (i) having “Being” as a common predicate, (ii) combining and (iii) being identical provides the ground for fallacious arguments such as the one that is rejected at 250 a 11-b 6. Let me reproduce its structure briefly:

- (a) Motion is            (= is identical with Being)    M = B  
 (b) Rest is             (= is identical with Being)     R = B

then, by substitution of M for B in (a) and (b):

- (c) Motion moves    (= is identical with Motion)    M = M  
 (d) Rest moves      (= is identical with Motion)    R = M

and lastly, by substitution of R for B in (a) and (b):

- (e) Motion rests     (= is identical with Rest)       M = R  
 (f) Rest rests        (= is identical with Rest)       R = R

The fallacy leading to the false conclusions (d) and (e)<sup>36</sup> is due of course to the error of thinking that τὸ ὄν and ταύτόν are the same Form. The Dialectician avoids this insofar as he distinguishes sharply between Being and many other Forms which are not combined nor identified with each other by the fact of being compared to Being.

Let us go back to T2c and face the difficult problem of the word ἔξωθεν. In the *Parmenides* there is a passage where ἔξωθεν also appears in close connection with περιέχεσθαι.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Detel, *Platons Beschreibung* p. 85 note.

<sup>36</sup> Under Pauline Predication. Under Ordinary Predication (e) would be true. Cf. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* p. 269 ff.



Καὶ μὴν αὐτὸ γε ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὄν καὶ περὶ ἑαυτὸ ἂν εἴη ἔξωθεν, καὶ περιέχον μὲν μείζον ἂν ἑαυτοῦ εἴη, περιεχόμενον δὲ ἔλαττον, καὶ οὕτω μείζον ἂν καὶ ἔλαττον εἴη αὐτὸ ἑαυτοῦ τὸ ἓν.<sup>37</sup>

“Further, if it is in itself, it must also encompass itself on the outside; and as container it will be greater than itself, and as contained, less. In this way the One will be greater and less than itself” (Cornford)

The use of ἔξωθεν here seems to imply that a class or magnitude embraces elements or other magnitudes “on the outside” when it is greater than the embraced. When the embraced is not exceeded by the embracing Plato uses the expression ἐξ ἑσού (*Parm.* 150 d 8). This should lead us to think that ἔξωθεν in our passage points to the fact that the one embracing Idea determines a class that extends beyond the many Forms under consideration. These do not exhaust the domain determined by the predicate “Being”. Its domain is in fact *all* Forms (259 b 5-6). This makes us realize that here the many Forms are not taken themselves as classes but as elements. If we take e.g. Rest and Motion as the sets of all things that are at rest and of all things that move, then ἔξωθεν would make no sense. Both together cover ἐξ ἑσού the domain of everything that is because anything capable of receiving predicates either moves or is at rest (cf. 249 d 3-4). But we do have ἔξωθεν in the text. On the other hand it could be objected that 250 b 7-10 gives the impression that Being should be taken as the *genos* of Rest and Motion, much as Art was the *genos* of Acquisitive Art and Productive Art (219 d 1-2). This was Stenzel’s interpretation. But although this text gives us important clues for understanding 253 d, it should not be forgotten that it belongs to the diaporematic part of the dialogue, to the part where the Stranger is still showing that the referential use of “τὸ ὄν” leads nowhere. In fact 249 d 3-4 and 250 c 6-7 are intended as the last paradox in that discussion and the Stranger first announces formally at 250 e 5 the end of the *aporiai*. We should be extremely cautious with the use we make of statements standing before this turning-point and certainly Plato’s later insistence on the all-pervasive character of Being (259 a 5; b 5) precludes us from taking it as the exclusive *genos* of Rest and Motion, i.e. as a *genos* from which only these two Forms can be obtained by division. If this is correct, then it definitely rules out any interpretation that sees at T2c the higher Idea from which the process of Division is to start.

<sup>37</sup> *Parm.* 150 e 5-151 a 2.

T3-T4. Once more we have the opposition One-Many. The one Form at T3a is Not-Being and the many Forms at T4a are of the same type, i.e. consonant-like non-pervasive Forms, as at T2. They can also be exemplified by Rest and Motion.

What are the implications of saying that Being extends “throughout many” (διὰ πολλῶν sc. εἰδῶν) whereas Not-Being extends “through many wholes” (δι’ ὅλων πολλῶν where εἰδῶν should not be supplied)? Being, so to speak, crosses the space between all sorts of *eide* in order to bring each of them together with various *eide* (253 c 1-2). Not-Being on the other hand is the cause of division or separation of *eide*, but what is it that is here described as a “whole”, if this expression should be pressed at all? If we say “Motion is not Rest”, why should Motion together with Rest be considered as a whole? Or take “Justice is not Motion”; here the two elements taken together make up a still more awkward whole. I think the answer is to be found at 257 c 7-258 c 5, although no mention is made in these pages of the word ὅλον. The Stranger emphasizes first that the defining property of negation when put before names is to divide a domain not into a Form and its opposite but into a Form represented by the name following the negation sign and all other Forms (257 b 9-c 3). Then he goes on to explain this. One of the examples in the text is τὸ καλόν and τὸ μὴ καλόν. A single Form is either Beauty or it is not Beauty. If it is not Beauty it does not mean that it is the Ugly, which is the ἐναντίον of τὸ καλόν, it is simply any other *eidos* which is not identical with Beauty. Both then τὸ καλόν and τὸ μὴ καλόν are mutually exclusive parts of a whole. This shows once more that the many Forms are not taken here as classes. If they were conceived as such we could not classify, say, Justice under τὸ μὴ καλόν, as is required for the truth of statement “Justice is not Beauty”, but under τὸ καλόν because that virtue is certainly a noble thing. Negation then is the rejection of identity among Forms taken as elements of a whole consisting of a class with one element and its complement-class, i.e. all other Forms.

To this it could be objected that the Stranger speaks of wholes in the plural whereas the present interpretation establishes only one whole: the domain of all the Forms. A reasonable answer to this is contained, I think, in the way the text displays the different examples:

τὸ καλόν and τὸ μὴ καλόν  
 τὸ μέγα and τὸ μὴ μέγα  
 τὸ δίκαιον and τὸ μὴ δίκαιον.

It does make sense to say that these three conjunctions present the totality from different points of view (the ἀφορισθέν part is opposed each time to a different *genos*, cf. 257 e 2) and therefore in the eyes of the Dialectician they are different wholes.

The examples also indicate that the type of division practised here does not satisfy the criteria of the *Statesman* (262 a 8-263 e 5) for the correct pursuit of the Method of Division. There it is said that we should not divide Man into Greek and Not-Greek (= Barbarian) and this is exactly the way division has been pursued in the text we are dealing with. Once more: the division caused by negation, mentioned at 253 c 3, is not the division of *eide* according to the Method.

We have then one Idea (T3a), i.e. Not-Being, traversing many wholes (T3b), i.e. dividing one Form from the rest, but what does it mean to say that that Idea is ἐν ἐνὶ συνημμένῃ? My guess is that we should understand ἐν ἐνὶ sc. εἶδει just as in T1c we understood ἐνὸς ἐκάστου sc. εἶδους and see in the phrase, in accordance with my general strategy, an anticipation of 258 d 5-e 3: the Dialectician discerns clearly that for any *eidos* to be *F* is to participate in *F*, not to be *F* is to participate in Otherness with respect to *F*. The Idea of Not-Being is therefore tied up, bound together in one Form: the Idea of Otherness.<sup>38</sup> Since there is no corresponding property of Being (it is *not* identical with Sameness) we find nothing equivalent to this phrase in T1-T2.

T4 corresponds of course to T2 but the wording betrays some relationship to T1. T1b and T4a, T1c and T4b, T1d and T4c have certain resemblances. The many Forms which are seen in contrast with Not-Being are also considered apart from each other (probably *κειμέναι χωρὶς* should be understood, cf. T1c: ἐνὸς ἐκάστου *κειμένου χωρὶς*) but now, since Not-Being will be shown to be the negation of identity, it can be further said that the many Forms are entirely marked off from each other (T4c). As we saw, the function of Not-Being was to separate e.g. the Form Beauty from that which is not Beauty,

<sup>38</sup> Observe that the metaphor of being tied up *in* one Form differs completely from that of being tied *to* one Form. The latter would imply the combination of τὸ μὴ ὄν and θάτερον and it would express exactly the opposite of Plato's interpretation of the negation of Being. The former points rather to the fact that Not-Being with its apparent variety of manifestations in language is brought together in a Form which according to Plato reveals its basic structure. Aristotle uses the same metaphor (συνάπτειν ἐν τινὶ) to express that perfect friendship brings together in itself all the various attributes implied in different types of friendship. Cf. *E.N.* VIII, 3, 1156 b 18.

i.e. from all other Forms. When Not-Being is clearly perceived in contrast with many different uncombined Forms, it traces a clear boundary between each Form and the rest of them. Each Form is thus utterly delimited in all directions.

## EPILOGUE

E1-3. Τοῦτο refers back to T1-T4. The clear perception of many Forms and of how Being and Not-Being stand to those *eide* is what makes up the knowledge needed to discern in what sense the same two Forms can combine and in what sense they can not. This anticipates of course the solution of the main problem of the dialogue because it amounts to knowing what it means to state that something is and at the same time is not, without falling into contradiction. The example that Plato will later offer in the text to illustrate apparent contradiction is τὴν κίνησιν δὴ ταύτων τ' εἶναι καὶ μὴ ταύτων (256 a 10). It is the previous comparison of Being and Not-Being with other Forms which enables the Dialectician to grasp the exact sense of such a conjunction and therefore to know why it is not a contradiction: he knows that Motion can participate in Sameness (towards itself) and at the same time in Otherness (towards the Form Sameness). The lines E2-3 therefore include no reference whatsoever to the Method of Division. A different aspect of Platonic Dialectic has been sketched before being put in practice.

Summary: *Soph.* 253 d 1-e 2 does not describe Division, it anticipates the comparison of Being and Not-Being with other Forms which will ultimately provide Plato's answer to the dilemma of Parmenides.<sup>39</sup>

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