ON "SOPHIST" 255B-E

Willem de Vries

At Sophist 255b7-e the Eleatic Stranger gives two arguments, one to show that being and identity are not the same, and one to show that being and otherness are not the same. Scholars have not paid them particularly close attention, but it seems generally agreed that the two arguments are quite different. In this paper I shall offer an interpretation which shows that the two arguments, though superficially quite different, are intrinsically and importantly related. Specifically, in the first argument the Stranger elicits an obvious falsehood from the hypothesis that being and identity are the same. I claim that in order to distinguish being and otherness an exactly parallel argument could have been given instead of the second argument we actually find. However, there are sound dramatic reasons why this was not done, for in this case the falsehood would not be obvious. Instead, the argument we are given takes us deeper and analyzes the source of the falsehood by introducing a distinction between absolute and relative uses of "being." This distinction, which has been misinterpreted in the literature, is then applied to the problem at hand and is used to distinguish being from otherness. Thus the fuller and apparently different argument to distinguish being and otherness succeeds by giving the deeper reasons for the success of the argument to distinguish being and identity. As a corollary to my interpretation, we can see that in these arguments other senses of "is," whether the "is" of existence or the "is" of identity, do not come into play, as other commentators have held.

The first section will discuss the first argument of our text, along with a recent interpretation of it. In the second section I shall introduce the argument to distinguish being and otherness and argue against Owen's interpretation. The third section contains my interpretation of this argument, and is followed by a summary fourth section.

I

A. In the first argument we are given an obviously false equivalence that is used in constructing a reductio argument. The argument runs:

But if there is no distinction of meaning between being and identity, on that view once more, when we say that motion and rest both are, we shall be talking of them as being both the same thing. [255b10-c, tr. A. E. Taylor.]

or:
But if being and identity indicate (mean) nothing different, then when we say again that both motion and rest are, we shall in this way declare that both these things are the same, because they are. [Charles Young, unpub. tr.]

Theaetetus immediately admits this last to be impossible, and the Stranger concludes that being and identity are not one thing. A short argument, indeed. Most commentators say little about the structure of the argument, but the simplest construction seems the best in this case. More schematically set out it would look like this:

To prove: Being and identity are not identical.
1. Assumption: Identicals can be substituted salva veritate.
2. If being and identity are identical, then the following should be at least equivalent:
   (A) Motion and rest are \( F \).
   (B) Motion and rest are the same \( F \).
3. (A) is true, but (B) is false.
4. Therefore (A) and (B) are not equivalent.
5. Therefore, being and identity are not identical.

Such an argument is quick, to the point, and effective.

B. Paul Seligman\(^2\) offers us a different analysis of the argument. He would translate and gloss the important sentence as:

If being and sameness were not different in meaning, once more, when we say that motion and rest both are, we shall thereby be saying that both are the same (i.e., sameness, tauton). [Seligman, p. 60]

He then points out that since it has already been shown that neither motion nor rest is sameness, it follows that being and sameness must be distinct. This is an interesting interpretation of the argument, and it has some initial plausibility, but on closer examination the balance of reasons is strongly against it.

First of all, on Seligman's interpretation it shouldn't matter that the Stranger talks of both motion and rest together. The argument could as well have taken several steps, thus:

If being is sameness, then when we say that rest is, we shall be saying that rest is sameness, but we've shown that it isn't. And the same argument applies to motion as well.

While this seems a possible scenario, on the interpretation I have proposed, Plato's argument is quite precisely phrased as it is and could not be recast in a sequential form without accepting as unproblematic the rather awkward sentence "Rest is the same," to which one naturally responds, "Same as what?"

But more importantly, if Seligman's interpretation is correct, one could reply that the argument doesn't show that being and identity are not the same. One could accept the idea that being and identity are the same and claim that this argument shows only that motion and rest are not
being, and that to say that motion and rest are is not to say that they are being. That is, Seligman's interpretation prompts making a distinction in order to avoid absurdity, but does not decide between introducing the distinction between being and identity and the subtler but still necessary distinction between being and participating in being. At this point in the dialogue it is clear that it is the former distinction that is to be made.

Essentially, Seligman's reading ignores the syntactic differences between the occurrences of "sameness" in the Greek. At 255b7 and 9, the two occurrences of "sameness" immediately prior to its last (supposed) occurrence in this sentence—in both of which "sameness" is clearly meant—Plato uses to tauton, whereas in its last purported occurrence only tauton appears, without the to. This syntactic difference cannot be ignored, however.

Seligman's interpretation of this passage does not afford any insight into the order of the arguments, for it gives us no clue why such an apparently different argument is used to distinguish being and otherness. On the whole, then, I conclude that my interpretation is superior to Seligman's.

II

A. The first argument is easy to discern. But I claim that the Stranger's argument to distinguish being and difference or otherness is not essentially different. However, the Stranger could not rely on exhibiting an equivalence which is obviously and palpably false in order to make his point. If he were to try a strictly parallel argument, it would look something like this:

To prove: Being and difference are not identical.
1. Assumption: Identicals can be substituted salva veritate.
2. If being and difference are identical, then the following would be at least equivalent:
   (A) Motion and rest are \([F]\).
   (C) Motion and rest are different \([F']\).
3. (A) and (C) are not equivalent.
4. Therefore, by reductio, being and difference are not identical.

But notice, the equivalence of (A) and (C) isn't as obviously false as that between (A) and (B), for (A) and (C) are both true. If Theaetetus were quite sharp he would recognize that the inference from (A) to (C) and back is bad, even though they are both true. But Theaetetus isn't quite that clever, or at least not yet that sophisticated, and he often doesn't understand the correct reasons behind the assertions he makes or the statements he accepts. Rather than posing this problem for Theaetetus, which he might well get wrong, the Stranger launches into an analysis of the reason behind the lack of equivalence, showing why it couldn't hold. The important point is not that (A) and (B) or (A) and (C) might
have different truth-values, but that they have different logical structures. But this is only brought out by analyzing being and difference more closely. And this gives good reason for not simply reproducing the same argument as he gave before, replacing “identity” with “difference”—it would be as good an argument, but would not be recognized as such.

B. Owen points out that the Stranger introduces the absolute-relative distinction at 255c10 with the remark, “I think you agree,” or “I believe you grant,” and that the future tense most translators insert here is not to be found. Owen then relates the distinction drawn here to the argument against the opsimaths and says that the absolute-relative dichotomy is the same as that between identity statements and predications which he finds in the earlier passage. Since Theaetetus has granted the possibility of both statement forms and the difference between them, the Stranger can simply assert that Theaetetus is familiar with the distinction he is drawing. Although Owen’s position is well argued, I cannot agree that this is what the absolute-relative distinction here amounts to. I would rather hold that Plato is here concerned with a more general distinction of kinds of predication—that he is beginning to develop a distinction between monadic and relational predicates, the germ of which some scholars see in earlier dialogues like the Phaedo.

First of all, not too much later [256b] the Stranger talks of identity as relative: “When we say that it is the same, we call it so by virtue of its participation of identity relatively to itself . . . ” Though the Stranger may not talk of any other kind of identity than self-identity, he seems quite aware that identity is a relational term. The correlate may not be something other, something different, but where are we to lay the emphasis in the phrase “relative to another?” It could as well be “relative to something” (pros ti instead of pros allo). There is good and simple reason why there is such emphasis in 255c-e on the otherness of the correlate: the discussion is about otherness itself. But for the general distinction to be drawn, the relativity is important, not the otherness of the correlate. Identity is relative, but what is identical happens not to be identical relative to something other, but identical relative to itself. This, as we will see, provides the clue to uncovering the common error in the purportedly equivalent statements (A) and (C) we looked at before.

Owen wants to hold that the absolute-relative distinction is the same as the distinction between identity statements and predications, apparently because predications seem to import reference to something else, even when analyzed. Thus, in either the statement “Socrates is a man” or its analysis, “Socrates participates in manhood” a reference to something other than Socrates is made, either “man” or “manhood.” In an identity statement, however, this does not occur, for these are of the form “A is A,” the predicate simply repeats the subject.

Owen has not established that relation to something other is crucial, rather than relation to something, so it is not clear that repeating the
subject as the predicate makes a significant difference. Furthermore, identity statements are of the form “A is A” only in their surface grammar, for we have seen that the Stranger uses “A participates in identity relative to itself” as the analysis of identity statements. If a sentence like “Socrates participates in manhood” testifies to a relation (the participation relation) between Socrates and manhood, “A participates in identity relative to itself” should also state the existence of a relation between A and identity—whatever we make of the added clause “relative to itself.” It would seem to go counter to the whole enterprise of analyzing the surface grammar of his sentences into a different deep structure if Plato were to rely on the surface grammar in the case of identity statements but not in any other. In the analyzed form, identity statements import reference to something else, namely identity, so in the deep structure, they would be relative on Owen’s interpretation. It would seem that if we discount surface grammar, for which there seems adequate reason, the only absolute statements for Owen would be self-predications, “X participates in X.” (And even so, we would have to worry about the reference to participation.) Owen’s analysis of the absolute-relative distinction seems self-defeating.

Simple (monadic) predications turn out, in analyzed form, to be binary participation relations; identity and other relational predications turn out triadic or multiple relations in analyzed form. In any case, identity itself is not all that special. The general distinction between monadic and relational predication is the only distinction Plato needs to make here, and, I claim, is the only one to be found here.

My argument against Owen does not, however, destroy the force of his arguments that the absolute sense of being is not the existential “is.” I think that he is right in this. In the absolute-relative distinction Plato is struggling towards a theory of relational and non-relational predication, and this has nothing to do with the existential “is” directly.

But if Owen is wrong here and the absolute-relative distinction is not the identity-predication distinction or whatever distinction is drawn in the battle against the opsimaths, then how do we explain the Stranger’s implication that the absolute-relative distinction is one Theaetetus already agrees with? I believe that the Stranger thinks that Theaetetus, in seeing the falsity of the equivalence between (A) and (B), has already implicitly granted the distinction he is about to make explicit. Let us take a closer look at what that distinction actually is.

III

The distinction is made explicit only in the argument that being and difference are not one thing. Here we must emphasize again that the Stranger does not insist that all relatives are so called because they refer to an other, as Owen might have us believe. Rather, the Stranger first simply remarks on the distinction between the absolute and relative
entities, and then goes on to specify that what is called other "is only called other relatively to some other thing." The emphasis on the otherness of the correlate comes merely from the fact that the Stranger is discussing otherness here, not from the nature of relative terms.

What exactly is the distinction the Stranger is drawing here? Consider the sentence:

(C) Motion and rest are different $[F]$.

On the surface, this seems to be quite similar grammatically to

(A) Motion and rest are $[F]$.

But there is a significant difference. Sentence (A) can be equivalent to either

(A') Motion is $[F]$ and rest is $[F]$.

or

(A") Motion is $[F]$ to rest.

But (C) cannot be read as equivalent to

*(C') Motion is [a] different $[F]$ and rest is [a] different $[F]$.

We may put this by saying that the compound subject in (A) is separable but that the compound subject in (C) is not. Or we can say that "difference" is a joint predicate. In any case, difference is understood in (C) as a relative term, and we naturally read (C) as

(C") Motion is [a] different $[F]$ from rest.

Since difference is always relative, we take the double subject to be giving us the two correlative items.

The point here is familiar. In translating into quantificational symbolism, for instance, the two superficially similar sentences

(G) John and Mary are married.
(H) John and Mary are 25 years old.

receive quite different treatments, thus:

(G') $W(j, m)$
(H') $O(j) & O(m)$.

The Stranger is struggling towards a theory of relations here.

(A) Motion and rest are $[F]$}

does not dictate one particular structure. Depending on the complement $F$ it has, it might be a straightforward predication, asserting that motion is $F$ and rest is $F$. This would be an "absolute" occurrence of being. Or
it might assert a relation between motion and rest. This would be a "relative" occurrence of being. (C), in contrast, is not ambiguous in its logical structure; it receives only the reading (C") naturally. This is what the Stranger is pointing out when he says that "we find it to hold good without qualification that everything which is other is what it is—other—relatively to something other than itself" (255d, tr. Taylor).

The Stranger is pointing out a significant difference in the logical structure of (A) and (C) which makes equivalence, much less synonymy, impossible. In the material mode of speech we could say that since being participates in both the absolute and the relative, whereas difference participates only in the relative, they have different properties and must therefore be different things. Only if we could give (C) the reading (C'), if something could be other without being relative to something, could it be possible for being and difference to be one.

But the Stranger never exhibits a sentence of the form of (C). There is good reason for not doing this, however. The fact that the equivalence of (A) and (C) is not obviously false, since both are at least true statements, discourages the Stranger from using such a sentence. At this point in the dialogue it is easier and more illuminating to discuss the deeper difficulty which the sentence would only serve to illustrate anyway.

We can now easily see that the absolute-relative distinction does indeed afford us an analysis of the false equivalence between (A) and (B) also. In (A) motion and rest are still separable subjects; as before, (A) could be equivalent to either

(A') Motion is [F] and rest is [F],

or

(A") Motion is [F] to rest.

So the "is" here could be either absolute or relative. But in (B) motion and rest are not separable and (B) is not equivalent to

* (B') Motion is the same [F] and rest is the same [F].

This is because sameness is a relative term only and we naturally take this double subject to be giving us the two correlative items. Since sameness is relative, we automatically read a sentence of the form "X and Y are the same [F]" as "X is the same [F] as Y." Thus (B) can only be read as

(B") Motion is the same [F] as rest.

The assumption that (B") is the only acceptable reading of (B) is as natural in Greek as in English.

There is an important difference in the logical structure of (A) and (B). The very point brought out by the use of the fallacious equivalence between (A) and (B) is that it makes sense to separate the subjects in
(A), while it doesn't in (B). We intuitively take (B) but not (A) to be asserting a relation. Again, in the material mode we would say that being participates in both the absolute and the relative, while identity participates only in the relative. Thus being and identity must be different things. The argument that being and identity are not one thing has the same deep structure as the argument that being and difference are not one thing.

IV

If my interpretation of this passage is correct, the Stranger could well have offered the following as his proof that being and identity are not one thing, for it is parallel to the argument he gives about being and difference. This argument would use the analysis of the falsehood which his actual argument about being and identity uses in order to make the point. The Stranger would first make the absolute-relative distinction. He could not assume that Theaetetus has already granted the distinction, however, for it would not have been introduced either implicitly or explicitly before this. But after getting Theaetetus to accept this distinction, the new argument would run exactly parallel to the argument about difference.

ES: You grant that some entities are spoken of as absolutes, others always as relative to something? (pros it, not pros allo)
Th: Of course.
ES: And that a thing is only called identical relatively to something? [or perhaps: relative to some identical thing?]
Th: Yes.
ES: But this would not be so if there were not a vast difference in meaning between being and identity. If identity, like being, participated in both forms, there would be cases in which an "identical" was identical without reference to anything. But in fact we find it to hold good without qualification that everything which is identical is what it is—identical—relatively to some [identical] thing [such as itself].

This doesn't have quite the rhetorical force of the same argument about difference, but it is logically as sound. We need only remember the Stranger's assertion at 256b that "when we say it [motion] is the same, we call it so in virtue of its participation of identity relatively to itself," in order to see that the Stranger would not find anything in the above argument terribly strange or objectionable.

The Stranger could then go on to complete his argument as follows:

ES: Notice, Theaetetus, that when we say that motion and rest are, we might thereby declare something of each absolutely.
Th: Of course.
ES: But when we say motion and rest are the same, we can no longer be declaring something of each absolutely, but we must rather be declaring of each relative to the other that it is the same as its contrary.
Th: But that is quite impossible.
ES: Yet we agree that motion and rest both are.
Th: Certainly.
ES: And if being and identity were one thing, we could say the same things of both.
Th: That seems true enough.
ES: And it is therefore impossible that identity and being should be one thing.
Th: Fairly concluded.
ES: And do you see how we can show that being and difference are not one thing?
Th: I am not sure.
ES: If there is no difference in meaning between being and difference, on that view once more, when we say that motion and rest are, we shall be talking of them as being both different.
Th: But that seems true enough.
ES: Yes, but do you see a danger hiding there?
Th: No, please explain.
ES: Again, when we say of motion and rest that they both are, we may thereby declare something of each absolutely.
Th: Yes.
ES: But when we say that motion and rest are different, we can no longer be declaring something of each absolutely, but we must rather be declaring of each relative to the other that it is different than its contrary.
Th: I see that.
ES: And whenever we speak of difference we speak relatively to another?
Th: Yes.
ES: If being and difference were the same, then whenever we spoke of being we would also have to speak relatively to another, or else when we spoke of difference we would be able to speak absolutely of each. But we have agreed that we can use being absolutely, but not difference. We therefore do not say the same thing when we speak of being as we do when we speak of difference, and being and difference must not be one thing.
Th: The facts are as you say.

This fancied version would make perfect sense within the context of the dialogue, and would not differ in the logic of the arguments given from the passage as Plato wrote it. However, it has none of the dramatic structure, efficiency of argument, and artistic development that the original passage has. Plato's passage is a marvel in many respects, and only by paying it careful attention can one do it justice. 6

University of New Hampshire

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NOTES

1. I believe, with Owen and Frede, that the existential “is” is not in question here, only its incomplete uses, and I put the bracketed “F” to remind us of this. After much debate scholars have now generally agreed that Plato did not separate the predicative “is,” the copula, and the “is” that a modern logician would call existential, which in modern
non-free logics is not captured in a predicative concatenation at all. This is expressed by Owen as a distinction between complete (existential) and incomplete uses of “is.” “X is” is an existence claim if viewed as a complete statement. If it is not so viewed, it must be taken as incomplete and short for “X is [F].” Owen further distinguishes two incomplete “uses” of “is,” viz., normal predications and identity statements. Cf. also Bluck and Frede and Ackrill.


5. I must thank Charles Young for his help with the Greek and for being a good sounding board; valuable comments were also received from Alexander Nehemas, Richmond Thomson, Jay Garfield, Michael Pakaluk, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

REFERENCES


