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The Eleatic Stranger and Parmenides in Plato's *Sophist*

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At the center of Plato's *Sophist* the Eleatic stranger undertakes an examination of being and non-being in order to refute the claim of his teacher Parmenides that it is impossible for (the) things that are not, to be. The stranger must attempt to refute this claim in order to defend his own assertion that the sophist is a producer of falsehood, for falsehood first comes to light as the opinion that the things that are not are, which opinion would be impossible without the being, at least in some sense, of non-being (240d2-e4; cf. 237a3-9, 241d1-242a4).[1] Yet it is noteworthy, and surprising, that before turning to this refutation, the stranger first attempts to *support* Parmenides' claim with arguments of his own. Why does he do this? From the character of his arguments, it appears that he is concerned to rule out non-being in one particular sense of the term, which he will

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[1] The words that I have here translated as "non-being" (237a3) – the singular definite article together with the negative particle and the participial form of the verb "to be" – will sometimes be translated instead as "that which is not." There is an ambiguity here that arises because this definite article together with any adjectival form means primarily "that which has the designated characteristic," but it can also mean "that which has this characteristic, insofar as it has it," i.e., the class-character of the class in question. In the case of the verb "to be," then, the definite article together with the participle means primarily "that which is," but it can also mean "that which is, insofar as it is," i.e., "the being of that which is," or simply "being." In my translations and paraphrases, I will use the expression "that which is" or "being," or in the negative "that which is not" or "non-being," as seems appropriate in the context. But the reader should always keep the alternative sense in mind. If the definite article is plural, I will translate the words either as "the beings" or "the things that are," or in the negative "the non-beings" or "the things that are not." If there is no definite article, the participial form might mean "a thing that is" or "a being," as well as (the generic) "that which is" or "being," and I will sometimes translate it as "(a) being," or in the negative "(a) non-being," in order to remind the reader of this possible ambiguity. If there is no definite article in the plural, as in the citation from Parmenides' poem that I refer to in my first sentence, I have used the translation "(the) things that are not" for the same reason. The word "being" can also be used as a translation for a different Greek word (ἡ οὐσία), which might in some cases be translated as "beingness" if that were English. Whenever I use "being" for this Greek word, I will include the Greek οὐσία in parentheses.

References to Stephanus pages, such as the ones here, are to the *Sophist*, unless otherwise noted. All references to the *Sophist* are to the Oxford Classical Text edited by Duke *et al* (1995). Line numbers do not correspond exactly to those of the older Burnet edition.

later speak of – in contrast to otherness, or the non-being that he claims to have shown to be – as the "opposite" of being (258e6-259b1). He argues, first, that the term "non-being," since it cannot refer to anything that is, cannot refer to anything at all, and so cannot enter into meaningful speech. He then adds the argument, which he presents as the first and greatest of the perplexities about non-being, that non-being itself is unthinkable and unsayable, on the grounds that one could not even think it without thinking of it as one (or else as many) and that one and many, like anything else that is, can be attributed only to being, or that which is. These arguments, however, prove to undercut themselves, for the stranger is compelled to admit that in his own claim that non-being (in the singular) is unthinkable and unsayable, he has violated his own prohibition by presuming to speak of it as being and as one. And thus he finally confesses that for a long time, as well as now, he has been defeated "concerning the refutation of non-being" (239b2-3; cf. 237b10-239a12). To this difficulty we might add the consideration, which the stranger alludes to later, that even if non-being is indeed unthinkable and unsayable, this does not necessarily mean that Parmenides' original claim is true, for it is not simply evident that the unthinkable and unsayable cannot be (259a1). And so we are left with our original question, of why the stranger prefaces his refutation of Parmenides with an effort to support his claim, together with the further question of the implications of his failure in this effort.

Let us return for now to the former question. Since the stranger presents his arguments as support for a claim by Parmenides, it may be helpful to look to the extant fragments of Parmenides' poem itself in order to understand why a philosopher might seek to refute non-being. What we find there is that Parmenides

had also asserted that non-being is unthinkable and unsayable, using this assertion as grounds for his rejection of the way of inquiry which claims that "it is not" (fragment 2, v. 6). For to assert that "it," or being, is not is to have made a claim about what is not, but such a claim presupposes a conception of what is not, or of non-being, the possibility of which Parmenides here denies. Still, why would anyone even be tempted to assert that being is not? Parmenides suggests an answer to this question in another of his fragments, where he argues that being, or being as a whole, is ungenerated and imperishable. For if it were generated, it would presumably have to have been generated from non-being; but Parmenides forbids the assertion of such an origin on the grounds that it would involve the inconceivable thought of a prior state in which being is not (fragment 8, vv. 1-9). In other words, Parmenides argues that there are only two fundamental alternatives, either the conceivable one that being is, and that it is necessary and eternal, or else the inconceivable one that being is not. What might seem to be a third alternative, that being is, but only as a consequence of having first come into being, is by this argument just another version of the second. And although it is hard to imagine anyone even trying to assert the absurdity that being is not, the claim that it has come into being has in fact been made by serious thinkers.

The most important of these thinkers, from the perspective of both Parmenides and the Eleatic stranger, is the poet Hesiod, who tells us in his *Theogony*, or rather whose Muses tell us there, that "at first Chaos came into being," followed by Earth, Tartarus, and Eros, and in each case from nothing at all, so far as we are told (*Theogony* v. 116-122). Hesiod or his Muses further tell us that all the gods, though they have come into being, are nevertheless immortal and continue to

live forever (*Theogony* vv. 21, 33, 43, 74, 118, 120, 128, etc.). And Hesiod's acceptance here of the traditional view that the gods have come into being and yet continue to live forever does more than anything else, I think, to explain his bold suggestion that there were first gods who came into being from nothing. For if the gods are generated but immortal, then even though they are not necessary beings, i.e., even though it is possible in principle for them not to be, as their origin shows, this possibility will never manifest itself in the future. But this implies that in a decisive sense, despite the fact that they are said to have parents, they do not come *from* anything at all: they do not come from any material, for any material of beings like these, which are presumed not to have always been, would for that reason have to have inherent tendencies that do not simply serve their being, and that would eventually destroy them. Accordingly, Hesiod's suggestion that there were first gods who came into being from nothing is meant as an indication of what must be presupposed by those who accept the Olympian gods. And there are further consequences of this supposition. For if something can come from nothing, then anything can come from anything. Any kind of fruit, for instance, could come from any kind of tree (cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Book I, vv. 159-166). Men and women who are born as mortals could become immortal through the help of the gods, as in fact Hesiod says that some do (cf., *Theogony*, vv. 940-955). And in general beings, or kinds of beings, would not have unchanging natures, or limits to what they can do and what they can suffer. And if the beings, or kinds of beings, have no fixed limits to what they can do and what they can suffer, there could be no knowledge of what they are, as distinct from mere acquaintance with them. No wonder, then, that a philosopher, or a seeker of such knowledge, would attempt to

refute Hesiod's suggestion, since if it were true philosophy itself would be a vain endeavor.

Parmenides' claim, however, that it is impossible for (the) things that are not, to be goes well beyond a denial that being as a whole could have come into being from nothing. For one thing, his use of the plural form in the expression "(the) things that are not" helps call our attention to the fact that he never speaks of what truly is, in the extant fragments at any rate, except in the singular. And he later tells us explicitly that the fundamental error of mortals is a version of the belief in multiplicity, namely, in the duality of opposite forms as perceived by the senses (fragment 8, vv. 50-59). Accordingly, his denial that (the) things that are not can be is also a denial of multiplicity, or a denial that there can truly be beings that are not one another (cf. *Sophist* 242d4-7). And in addition to this, there is a further sense in which things that are not might be thought to be, and there is explicit evidence that Parmenides' denial extends to it as well. For beings that come into being and perish, or that undergo change in any respect, are not, or not of some particular character or in some particular place, at one time, though they are at others. And Parmenides asserts in a later passage that coming into being and perishing, as well as change of place and change of color, are mere names (fragment 8, vv. 36-41). For him to say, then, that it is impossible that (the) things that are not are – or, as we can also translate his words, that (the) things that *were* not are – is to assert the illusoriness not only of multiplicity, but also of change (fragment 7, vv. 3-6; cf. fragment 6, vv. 4-9).

But why does Parmenides attempt to deny the apparently obvious facts of multiplicity and change? In order to begin to answer this question, it is helpful to

consider the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which Aristotle presents the denial of change, at any rate, as a response by some of the early philosophers to a difficulty in the teachings of their philosophic predecessors. Most of the early philosophers, according to Aristotle, thought that the only principles of all things were of the material kind, such as water or air, out of which all things come into being and into which they perish. More precisely, they thought that this principle (or these principles, if there are many) is the true underlying being, and that what we speak of as coming into being and perishing are in fact only changes in the incidental attributes of this nature, which is always preserved (*Metaphysics*, 983b5-18). Aristotle adds, however, that it was eventually seen to be necessary to seek another kind of cause as well, since even on the assumption that there are one or more permanent natures underlying all coming into being and perishing, there remains the question of what is responsible for these changes in attributes. And he goes on to say that some of those who spoke of only one underlying being, "as if defeated by this inquiry," came to the position that this one, or nature as a whole, is unchanging, not merely with respect to coming into being and perishing – the denial of which had been agreed to by all the philosophers – but with respect to every other kind of change as well (*Metaphysics* 984a16-b1; cf. 986b10-17). Aristotle does not explain here why the question of what is responsible for changes in the attributes of the underlying being or beings should be so difficult as to lead to such a paradoxical response. But the reason would appear to be this. If the allegedly permanent being or beings can change in at least some of their attributes without our adequately understanding why, as in fact we do not, this shows our ignorance regarding the beings themselves as well. Can we say, then, that we know the limits of what they

can do and what they can suffer? Do we truly know that they are necessary beings, or even that they could not have arisen from nothing, as Hesiod suggests that the first beings did? And if we do not know this, as we seem not to, the attempt by the earliest philosophers to rule out the Hesiodic alternative, or to secure the intelligibility of the world by showing it to be grounded in some permanent and necessary substrate, is unsuccessful. Accordingly, Parmenides and the Eleatic school tried to buttress their other – not wholly conclusive – arguments against the alternative of coming into being from nothing with the claim that change itself is illusory. Confirmation, moreover, that at least in Aristotle's view Parmenides was led to his denial of change by this concern to defend the presupposition that being is intelligible appears in the third book of his *On the Heaven*, where he states that Parmenides and his followers were the first to conceive [that there must be] natures like the ungenerated and altogether unchanging beings [of metaphysics] if there is to be knowledge or wisdom. And since, he continues, they did not understand there to be anything else beyond the being (οὐσίαν) of the perceptible beings, they transferred the accounts appropriate to those beings to these, i.e., they asserted that coming into being and perishing, and indeed all change, is illusory (*On the Heaven*, 298b12-24).

As for the denial of multiplicity, to the extent that this is not simply a consequence of the denial of change and therefore of the evidence of our senses, one of Aristotle's main criticisms of this position in the *Physics* suggests that here too Parmenides was led to his claim by a concern to secure the intelligibility of being. Aristotle presents Parmenides as arguing that since there is nothing other than being

or that which is, and since the term "being" has a single meaning, then that which is must be one. But in addition to denying at least the latter of these two premises, Aristotle objects to the argument itself that even if we consider only the white things, and even if white has only one meaning, the white things (and, indeed, even a single white thing) would still be many, since to be white is different from that which receives whiteness. This is the case even if that which receives whiteness is inseparable from its being white, for there is still a distinction here, one that according to Aristotle Parmenides did not yet comprehend (*Physics* 186a22-32; cf. *Metaphysics* 986b27-31). However, it seems impossible that Parmenides could have simply failed to understand such a commonly acknowledged distinction as that between a characteristic and that which possesses it. And so let me suggest, rather, that his denial of multiplicity was an attempt to reject this distinction in the case of being itself, and with the aim of overcoming doubts as to its intelligibility. For no matter how intelligible a characteristic, including the characteristic "being," may be, the distinction between it and that which possesses it – at least if we apply this distinction, as is reasonable, to all characteristics – implies that this possessor, and thus the being as a whole, is not simply intelligible. Just as the fact that white things can change color reveals that there is something about them other than their being white, and indeed something that we do not adequately understand, so the very distinction between characteristics and that which possesses characteristics implies that we do not fully understand any particular being as a whole. We do not, therefore, know the limits to what it can do and what it can suffer, and we cannot even wholly rule out the alternative that it may have come into being from nothing. And it was in an attempt to escape this difficulty, with its threat to the possibility of

philosophy, that Parmenides denied the particularity of being by making the paradoxical suggestion that being is only one.

But let us return to the Eleatic stranger, for it was in an effort to understand his reasons for trying, at first, to support Parmenides' claims that we were led to this consideration of Parmenides' reasons for making them. Now the stranger clearly shares his teacher's concern to secure the possibility of philosophy, as can be seen most simply perhaps from the central argument of the dialogue as a whole, which seeks to defend the view of the sophist as a deceiver and a producer of falsehood by refuting the sophist's argument that there is no falsehood (240c8-241b3; 260b7-d3). Like Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, the stranger is well aware that the possibility of knowledge or science (ἐπιστήμη), and hence of philosophy, is incompatible with the sophistic claim that all opinion is true in the sense of being true for the one who holds it. But unlike Socrates, his explicit statements about philosophy and its presuppositions do not set them against the alternative of sophistic relativism. Rather, he presents philosophy as following from the assumption that some kinds of things, but only some, can mix with or share in one another, in the sense, for instance, that motion and rest can be said to share in being, since they both are. For since, he says, only some kinds of things can mix with one another, there is a need for a science, which he calls dialectics and which he assigns to the philosopher, to determine which can mix with which and which cannot (252e9-253e5). The alternative presuppositions, which the stranger rejects, are that nothing or no kind of thing can mix with anything else, or that everything can mix with everything. Now the stranger explicitly characterizes the former of these views, since it implies that nothing can be said of anything else, as being destructive of all speeches, and hence

of philosophy (259d9-260a7). And though he doesn't say so explicitly, the view that everything can mix with everything else is also destructive of philosophy, for if it were true, then horses might talk, humans might grow wings, and so on: the beings would have no fixed natures or limits to what they can do and what they can suffer, and on these grounds, as I have argued earlier, philosophy would be impossible. The stranger's argument, then, that some, but only some, kinds of things can mix with one another is designed to show the possibility, as well as the necessity, of philosophy. And it thus stands to reason that his earlier arguments in support of Parmenides' denial of non-being, with its implicit denial of coming into being from nothing (and of all that would follow from it), were also motivated by the concern to confirm this possibility. Now of course those arguments in support of Parmenides proved to be unsuccessful. But since this later argument appears to succeed in ruling out the two alternatives incompatible with philosophy, the failure of those earlier arguments might no longer seem to be so important. For if it has been shown that there is mixing of kinds, but only within definite and stable limits, there may be less of a need for a further argument against non-being. However, it turns out that the argument for accepting the conclusion that only some of the kinds can mix with one another is far less adequate than it first appears.

Initially, it was Theaetetus who had claimed to be able to settle this question about the mixing of kinds, and he tried to do so by arguing that motion and rest cannot mix with or share in one another, on the grounds that such mixing would require motion itself to be altogether at rest and rest itself to be in motion (252d2-

11). But why couldn't motion be at rest or unchanging[2] in some respects without being "altogether" at rest? In the light of this possibility, it is noteworthy that the stranger expresses only tentative agreement, if any at all, that it is impossible for motion to be at rest and for rest to be in motion. Later, moreover, he reconsiders the alternative that motion might indeed have a share in rest – on the grounds, perhaps, as he had earlier suggested, that motion, insofar as it is intelligible, must have a fixed or unchanging character (256b6-8). And at this point, Theaetetus suggests that he could perhaps admit that there is such mixing, in which case motion would be spoken of as stationary, as long as they will agree that while some of the kinds are willing to mix with one another, some are not. Theaetetus seems more concerned, then, that there be *some* kinds that cannot mix with one another than with persisting in his earlier claim that motion and rest are among these kinds. The stranger replies that they have already demonstrated that some and only some of the kinds can mix with one another, by proving through refutation that this way is in accord with nature (256b9-c2). But in fact the only "proof" they have offered that there are some kinds that cannot mix with one another was based entirely on Theaetetus' earlier argument that motion and rest were such kinds. If this claim is abandoned, there is no longer even the appearance of a proof. And to speak of what is "in accord with nature" hardly seems sufficient in this context, since the very possibility of nature, or of fixed limits to what the beings can do and what they can suffer, is precisely what is in doubt. Now it seems to me that by his manifestly false claim to have given a proof

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[2] The Greek word κίνησις means not only motion, i.e., change of place, but also change in the widest sense of the term, and its contrary, στάσις, or rest, is thus opposed not only to motion in particular but also to change in general. I will use the word "motion" rather than "change," for the most part, because it is the more usual English expression for what is opposed to rest. But the reader should keep in mind that by "motion," as well as "change," I mean the Greek κίνησις.

regarding this matter, the stranger indicates that he is aware that there has been no adequate argument against the alternative that all of the kinds, or at least all those that can be imagined to do so without evident contradiction, might be able to mix with one another. And though he chooses to conceal this difficulty from Theaetetus, who is too easily discouraged as it is (cf. 261a5-c4), this challenge to the possibility of philosophy remains unresolved.

Not only, then, has the stranger failed in his attempted refutation of non-being, but also the argument that he seems to endorse against an unlimited mixing of kinds is not really an argument. He is too sober, moreover, to try to secure the intelligibility of being that philosophy requires by following Parmenides in his denial of multiplicity and change. He argues explicitly against the Platonist "friends of the forms," but also against Parmenides and his school, that if there is to be knowledge of even the truest and most unchanging being or beings, there must necessarily be the motion or change involved in its becoming known – a change, as he even suggests, that must affect such being itself (248a4-249b6, especially 248d10-e5; 249c10-d4, 242d5-7). And as for multiplicity, he argues for it explicitly as well, starting with the suggestion that those who try to speak of being as one (or, as he puts it, of the one as being) are by that very fact compelled to acknowledge manyness, since the terms "one" and "being" do not mean the same thing (244b6-c2 ff.). It is true that the manyness on which he most focuses is the manyness of kinds (γένη or εἴδη), especially those that are called the "greatest" kinds, such as being, motion, and rest, rather than the manyness of particulars, which I have argued presents the greatest challenge to philosophy (cf. 254c1-4). But what he means by kinds is in fact classes, i.e., classes of particular beings or attributes, and so he thus

acknowledges that there are also many particular beings.[3] Indeed, it is most likely because of his thinking of the beings as particular beings primarily that he has suggested that being must be changeable if it is to be known; for if the kinds are classes, they cannot be known without having come into being as the kinds they are through acts of a mind that first surveys the given particulars. And it is the limitedness of our knowledge of these particular and changeable beings that is at the root of the challenge to philosophy that we have been dwelling on.

It now appears that the failure of the stranger's arguments in support of Parmenides' denial that non-being can be is part of a more general failure to show that being is intelligible, or to secure the possibility of philosophy by refuting Hesiod's suggestion that there can be coming into being from nothing. And if the stranger indeed fails to show this, it would follow that when he speaks about philosophy and its lofty task he is speaking with less than certain knowledge. Or is there a way in which he can respond successfully to the challenge that Hesiod's suggestion poses to the possibility of philosophy? Now unfortunately, I am unable to give an adequate answer to this question. But I think I can show that the stranger's argument *against* Parmenides, in which he shows that that which is not is, contains an element that at least makes intelligible a basis on which he might begin to respond to Hesiod's challenge. In order to show this, let me first remind us of my

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[3] That the stranger thinks of the kinds as classes of particulars is evident from a number of textual details, including the fact that he speaks of non-being, since it is a characteristic of each of the kinds in its being other than, i.e. its not being (identical with), being, as infinite in multitude (256d11-e6; cf.257a5-6). For the infinity that he has in mind must be the infinity of particular beings, each of which is other than each of the (finitely many) kinds. Indeed, the stranger's reference to particular beings explains why he says in this context that "all" of the kinds, and not merely all of them other than the kind being itself, are other than being, since even the kind being, understood as a class, is (in a sense) other than each of its members, which are primarily the particular beings or things that are. The stranger's understanding of the kinds as classes of particulars is also clearly indicated in the *Statesman*, where he goes so far as to speak of the kind "herd animals characterized by walking" as itself a herd, which he proceeds to divide into its horned and hornless parts (*Statesman* 265c6-8, in relation to 266a2, b1, b5, c4-5, e5; cf. 266e6).

earlier suggestion that his assertion of coming into being from nothing makes sense, to the extent it does, as a necessary consequence of belief in the Olympian gods as beings who come into being but never perish. For what if there are no such gods? These non-beings would still have to be in some sense, since after all we are able to speak of them; but they would have no being apart from human opinions and human speech (cf. 234c2-e2, 240d9-e4, 241a8-b1). And if this is true of the Olympian gods, the evidence that they seemed to provide would prove to be no real basis for the claim that there is coming into being from nothing. To be sure, this would not prove that the assertion of coming into being from nothing is false. But to the extent that genuine evidence is lacking for what is – if I may be allowed the liberty of saying so – an unsayable and unthinkable notion, awareness of this lack of evidence would certainly strengthen the case for its being impossible. And so let me now suggest that the stranger's argument for the being of that which is not is the first step in an attempt to show that there is a kind of being which is only in speech, for if this is indeed the kind of being that belongs to the Olympian gods, there might be a basis for an adequate response to Hesiod's challenge to the possibility of philosophy.

An immediate difficulty with this last suggestion arises from its implication that there are degrees of being, or that there is a kind of being, which we can also call non-being, that is in a lesser sense than the genuine beings. For in the stranger's argument that non-being is, he explicitly claims not only that it is, but that it is in no lesser a sense than being itself, as that which is not big and that which is not beautiful belong among the beings just as much as the big and the beautiful do

(257e9-258c4). It seems to me, however, that this explicit claim[4] does not correspond to the stranger's true opinion, as we can begin to see, I think, by reflecting on the following difficulty in his account of non-being. The stranger concludes his refutation of Parmenides by saying that not only have they shown that the things that are not are, thus successfully disobeying Parmenides' prohibition against trying to think this thought, but that they have even identified the species of non-being (258d5-7). This species, he goes on to say, is the part of the nature of "the other" opposed to each being or thing that is. That which is other than beautiful, then, or other than big, i.e., not beautiful or not big, is not merely analogous to the species non-being, but an instance of it. However, the stranger is also well aware that we sometimes say, not that something is not beautiful or not big, but that it is not simply or, to use his expression, that it is not (a) being. And his account of non-being includes an attempt to explain what we mean by this. For his discussion of the interrelations among the five most comprehensive classes culminates in the assertion that that which is not necessarily is in the case of motion and all the classes, on the grounds that motion, which is his example, both is and is not (a) being, since it shares in being while itself being other than being (256c10-e2). Apparently, then, whereas to say that something is not beautiful means that it has no share in the class beauty, to say that it is not (a) being does not mean that it has no share in the class being, but rather that it is itself other than that class. But to leave aside for the moment any other questions as to the adequacy of this account, is the

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[4] More precisely, the stranger explicitly claims that it is "the opposition" (ἡ ... ἀντίθεσις) between non-being and being that is no less being (οὐσία) than being itself (258a11-b1, and contrast 258e2). The construction with the noun ἀντίθεσις at 257e6, which might seem to suggest that by "the opposition [between non-being and being]" he means "non-being, in its opposition to being" is not quite parallel to the one at 258a11-b1.

class motion really other than the class being? To be sure, what we mean by the term "motion" is not what we mean by the term "being," so that to say that something is, is not the same as to say that it moves. But does not the class of that which is comprise all that moves as well as all that does not, so that the class motion would be a part of, and not other than, the class being (see *Statesman* 262c10-263b11, especially b2-6)? The stranger had seemed to suggest as much for a moment, only to reject this alternative by speaking of being as a third class, which is other than the classes motion and rest together (250b8-11, c1-d3, 254d4-15; cf. 243d8-244a3). But in speaking in this way has he not substituted otherness in the meaning of the terms "motion," "rest" and "being," or in the defining character of these classes, for otherness of the classes themselves? This dubious understanding of the class being reappears on two other occasions, where the stranger claims that it is other than, not only motion and rest, but all the other classes, either singly or taken together (257a1-6, 259b1-5). On these occasions, however, the stranger invites anyone who is not persuaded by him to disagree or to say something better, an invitation that he makes nowhere else in the dialogue.[5] And so let me suggest that he means these invitations seriously, and that he thus acknowledges that the class being is not, as he appears to believe, one among a number of distinct classes, but rather consists of all the other classes taken together. Indeed, his concluding statement about non-being, namely, that it is the part of the nature of the other opposed to *each* being or thing that is, implies that the class being is nothing else than the totality of different kinds of beings. And if this is true, to say that something is not, or that it is not (a) being, could not mean that it is some particular class other than the particular class being.

[5] I read the passage from 259a2-b5 as a single statement.

But what else could it mean to say that something is not (a) being? I have already suggested that according to the stranger it can mean that it has no being apart from our opinions and our speech, as opposed to the genuine beings, which invite speech on the basis of an antecedently given character. And in order to see how the stranger directs us toward this view, let us consider the immediate sequel to his argument for the being of non-being. Having succeeded in making this case against Parmenides, he tells Theaetetus that they must next consider what speech is, and whether non-being mixes with opinion and speech (260a7-b11). His stated reason for these further questions is that in order to show that the sophist is a deceiver or a producer of falsehood, they must show that there is falsehood, which there cannot be, he argues, unless non-being is capable of mixing with opinion and speech. But from this perspective their discussion is of questionable value, since it never seriously confronts, as Socrates had done in the *Theaetetus*, the sophist's claim that there is no false opinion, or that all opinion is true for the one who holds it (260c1-2, d6-e3; cf. *Theaetetus* 167a6-8). Instead, they simply take for granted the falsity of the stranger's sentence, "Theaetetus, with whom I am now conversing, flies," which falsity they then interpret as the attribution to Theaetetus of things that are not [the case] concerning him. No wonder, then, that the stranger tells Theaetetus, who had expressed discouragement at having to face these additional questions, that false opinion and speech have been discovered more quickly than they had feared (264b6-9). But since this part of their discussion achieves so little with a view to its stated purpose, let me suggest that this was never its only aim. To see what other aim it might also have, it is worth noting that opinion and speech are not the only subjects that are here at issue. For when introducing his account of

falsehood, the stranger had presented its existence in opinion and speech as a premise for there being deceit, from which it would follow, as he claims, that all things are necessarily full of images, likenesses, and appearance (260c1-9). Accordingly, when he follows up on their account by claiming that since false speech and false opinion have shown themselves to be, there is room for there to be imitations of the beings, it seems that what he has in mind by imitations of the beings are not merely false opinions and speeches about them, but also images and appearances more generally (264d4-7; cf. 260e3-5, 264a4-b4, c10-d2). Now the dialogue has already characterized an image as a kind of non-being, a non-being that is, in a sense, but that is not genuinely or really, since it is not the genuine being that it resembles (240a4-c5). Moreover, the stranger's account of opinion and speech acknowledges that we do sometimes speak of the being (οὐσίαν) of (a) non-being (262c2-5), by which he implies that false opinion is not limited to attributing to a being something that is not [the case] concerning it, but also includes attributing genuine being to something that lacks it, e.g., an image.[6] He gives a further indication in the immediate sequel of how there can be speech about a non-being by reminding us that we sometimes speak of what are no longer or not yet beings (262d2-3). And in these cases, what we speak about is even less of a being than a portrait or other such image, for though a portrait is not truly what it resembles, it is

[6] It is true that the stranger also says in this context that a speech, whenever it is, must be a speech of (or about) something, and that he had argued earlier that to speak of something is to speak of (a) being (262e6-7; 237c10-d4). But it does not follow that every speech must be about a genuine being, or something that is in the full sense of the word "is." Indeed, this very claim that a speech must be a speech of (or about) something could be translated instead that it must be a speech of someone, i.e., that a speech, whenever it is, must have a speaker. As the discussion proceeds, moreover, the stranger couples this phrase, "of (or about) something (or someone)," with a different phrase that unambiguously means "about something" (262e13-263a11; consider the emphatic ἐγὼ at 263a9). By thus using the two different phrases, he calls attention to the ambiguity of his original claim about every speech, and he invites the interpretation of it that though every speech must have a speaker, a speech is not necessarily about something, at least not about a genuine being.

at least truly a kind of body, as opposed to these beings that are only in memory or anticipation. And so I suggest that what the stranger means by images includes beings that are only in speech, or more generally in the human mind, and that his account of false opinion and speech is intended at least in part to show the possibility of such beings.

Now the simplest instances of beings that are only in the human mind are those that the stranger has referred to explicitly, in the first place, former beings that are remembered as they once were. Similarly, there can be future beings that are anticipated as they will later become, to the extent at least that they will be similar to beings we know. But the most important instance, for my present purposes, is that of beings, or non-beings, such as I have suggested that the stranger held the Olympian gods to be, beings that neither were nor will ever be apart from human opinion and human speech. And though the stranger never speaks directly of any beings of this sort, his account helps us to understand how they might be possible. To see how this is so, let us consider the stranger's sentence that I cited earlier, namely, "Theaetetus, with whom I am now conversing, flies." For this is a statement not simply about Theaetetus, but about the Theaetetus with whom the stranger is conversing.[7] But what if the stranger had not been conversing with Theaetetus, but with someone else? In that case, the sentence, "Theaetetus is the one with whom the stranger is now conversing," would have been false in the ordinary sense of attributing to a being something that is not [the case] concerning it. But the falsity of the stranger's actual sentence would not have consisted merely in this, but also in its

[7] The stranger calls attention to the composite character of the subject of this sentence at 263c1-3, where he makes the odd claim that the sentence is necessarily one of the shortest, a claim belied by his previous two examples, "a human being learns" and "Theaetetus sits."

attributing something, i.e., flying, to what is not truly a being at all. Moreover, this subject, the so-called "Theaetetus, with whom I am now speaking," might have been given a name of its own as if it were just like any other being. More generally, every statement that attributes to a being something that is not the case concerning it, or that denies to it something that is the case, can serve as the basis for a new, composite, subject with a name of its own even though it is not truly a being at all. And in this way we can begin to see how there can be statements about the Olympian gods even if they are not genuine beings, since we can attribute deathlessness, i.e., we can deny mortality, to beings that otherwise resemble humans and then assign names to the so-called beings we have thus imagined (cf. *Phaedrus* 246c6-d2). These beings in speech would be a kind of image of the genuine beings we know from experience, not only by their pretence to be such beings themselves, but also by their deriving such intelligibility as they do in fact possess from their resemblance, or alleged lack of it, to these beings. And it seems to me that the stranger's discussion of the false sentence about Theaetetus is intended to help us to see the possibility of such images.

From the perspective we have now reached, it appears that the stranger's claim that non-being is in no lesser a sense than being itself, along with his corresponding claim that the class being is merely one among a number of distinct classes and his interpretation of what is not (a) being as whatever is other than that class, serves the purpose of avoiding thematic discussion of the kind of non-being that is only in speech (cf. again, however, 234c2-e2, 240d9-e4, 241a8-b1). And it makes sense that he should seek to avoid that discussion, since the acknowledgement of such non-being is, as I have suggested, meant as the basis for

the claim that the Olympian gods are only in speech. More specifically, I think that the stranger's view of the Olympians is that they are only "by convention," meaning that unlike manifestly fictional beings, they are regarded by some community or communities as truly being, whereas in fact they have being only by virtue of this belief (cf. *Laws* 885c7 with 889e3-890a2). That this is indeed his view of them is suggested most visibly by the myth he tells in the *Statesman*, where he says that the present age, the so-called age of Zeus, in which living beings grow older rather than younger, is as it is in this and other ways because the greatest divinity gave up his piloting of the cosmos, after which all the other gods who had been ruling with him also abandoned the parts of the cosmos that had been in their care (*Statesman* 272e3-273a1; cf. 271d3-e2). This explicit denial of providential care, at least for ourselves and the other living beings as we know them now, is as close to a denial of the Olympians as one could openly go in a mythical framework. And the stranger goes no further, either here or in the *Sophist* itself. For to deny openly that there are these gods could well have been dangerous for him and those around him, since he was a foreigner visiting in Athens, and in a political climate that was soon to lead to the trial and death of Socrates on the charge of not believing in the gods in whom the city believed (cf. *Theaetetus* 210d2-4). But I do think that he did deny them, and that his account of the being of non-being, and in particular of its presence in opinion and speech, is meant in large part to show that this denial is at least intelligible.

But to show that this denial is intelligible, or even that it is plausible, in the light of the stranger's experience of the world, is of course not to show that there are no Olympians, nor even that they could not have made themselves known in the

experience of others. And thus it is also not to show that there is no genuine basis for the belief in coming into being from nothing. Indeed, the difficulty of resolving the question of whether there are truly gods such as the Olympians can help to explain the connection between the most manifest teaching of the dialogue, namely, that there is non-being, including falsehood, and the argument I have tried to uncover about being in speech. For the sophist's denial that there is falsehood, or his assertion that all opinion is true for the one who holds it, may well have emerged as a response to the apparent insolubility of the conflict between the presuppositions of philosophy and the traditional claims regarding the Olympians. The sophist Protagoras in particular, who is famous for having refused to say or write anything about the gods, either that they are or that they are not, may have been trying above all to escape this conflict in abandoning the commonsense view of truth as being true for everyone and opposed to falsehood.[8] At all events, it is clear that his doctrine of the relativity of truth allows each side in this conflict, and thus in particular the nonbelieving side to which he seems to have belonged, to have its own truth without fear of being contradicted. And it seems to me that an adequate refutation of this sophistic doctrine of relativism, or an adequate completion of the dialogue's argument that there is falsehood, would have to resolve the impasse about the Olympians, which means for a philosopher that he would have to show the truth of the stranger's view that they are only in speech. Now whether the stranger thinks he

[8] Cf. *Theaetetus* 162d5-e2. Consider the difference indicated in the *Theaetetus* between Protagoras himself and those unnamed others who "do not altogether speak the speech of Protagoras," i.e., the conventionalists who assert the relativity of the noble, the just, and the holy, but who allow that judgments about what will be beneficial in the future are not merely matters of opinion (*Theaetetus* 172a1-c1). Protagoras' awareness of his lack of knowledge that there are no Olympian gods could well have made him dubious about all claims, including his own, to be able to promote the human good on the basis of merely human expertise (cf. also *Theaetetus* 178d10-179a3).

can do this, i.e., whether he thinks his denial of the Olympians has an adequate basis in knowledge, is a question I cannot resolve. But the fact that he has devoted this effort to making intelligible the manner of being of fictitious beings suggests that at least he is well aware of the important role that such knowledge could play in making up for the deficiencies in his earlier arguments in support of Parmenides and of the possibility of philosophy.