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# Real Resemblances: Falsity and the Kinds of Being

Elisa Galgut

Department of Philosophy, University of Cape Town

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the discussion of the kinds in Plato's *Sophist*. The kinds are posited as ways of allowing for the possibility of speaking about negation and difference. In order to claim that certain kinds of activities speak falsely, it is necessary to illustrate that speaking of what is not does not involve a logical contradiction. This discussion also has important consequences for a view of the arts that is representational in essence.*

In this paper I shall examine the discussion on the nature of the kinds in Plato's *Sophist*. This discussion is important insofar as resolving the nature of the kinds, and determining how the various kinds interrelate or mix and are essential both for discourse and for ontology. Indeed, the nature of discourse is seen to rely on the nature of being. The discussion on the nature of the kinds is prompted by the analysis – by the method of division – of the nature of the sophist. In order to define the sophist as someone involved in the realm of appearances, it becomes necessary to be able to give an explanation of non-being. Failure to do so may result in a contradiction on the part of the Stranger, for if one cannot speak of what is not, then the sophist cannot be accused of speaking falsehoods, a crime of which the Stranger accuses him. Language must allow for the possibility of representing what is not in order for the sophist to be able to speak falsely. As Zuckert notes, "The problem with speaking falsely ... is that one cannot be properly said to speak or to talk about nothing. Such a person should rather be said not to be speaking or thinking at all. Yet, the Stranger points out, they have contradicted themselves indeed just now by talking about that which is not!"<sup>1</sup> Thus in order to trap the sophist in definition, the Stranger must be able to give an account of non-being, and hence must be able to give an account of being. The two projects are seen as united – the Stranger says that "since reality and unreality are equally puzzling, there is henceforward some hope that any light ... thrown upon one will illuminate the other to an equal degree."<sup>2</sup> As Benardete notes, "The impasse that

nonbeing makes for anyone who attempts to deny that it suggests to the Stranger that the fault lies with an understanding of being".<sup>3</sup> Although this claim by the Stranger will be taken at face value for the purposes of present discussion, it is important to keep in mind the question of whether the Stranger is sincere in making it. It certainly seems to be the case that knowledge of reality, of being, is important for unravelling falsehood or non-being, because the former is more fundamental than the latter. Falsehood or non-being conceptually and ontologically dependent on being, and understanding the nature of reality can clarify the nature of non-reality. There is a question, though, of whether the implication holds the other way round; can an understanding of non-reality shed light on reality? Surely not, one would think. Moreover, the Stranger cannot afford to assent to this implication, because it may give the work of the sophist a legitimacy the Stranger denies: if being and non-being are "equally puzzling", and if light "thrown upon one will illuminate the other", then the sophist can argue that talking of non-being can shed light upon being. This is a conclusion that the Stranger must repudiate. I shall return to this worry about the mutual dependence of being and non-being later in the paper. For now, I shall look at the issue of philosophical method by which the Stranger teases out the different kinds of being.

The method by which reality is to be understood is by the analysis of the nature of the *kinds*, and it is this discussion that I shall examine more closely in this paper. What is also interesting, however, is the question to which the kinds are posited as an answer. More precisely, the Stranger hopes to catch the sophist in the web woven by the method of division. But the method cannot be fully carried out until we are able to define *being*. I am interested to examine the relationship between the method of division, and the examination of the mixing of kinds. The former – the method – is the epistemological project that the Sophist uses in order to arrive at knowledge of reality; ontology determines method. It is this closeness between ways of coming to know, and kinds of being, that is both taken for granted and investigated in detail in the dialogue. Reality is perceived as being multi-faceted and complex, a complexity made possible by the "mixing of kinds". If the mixing of kinds is seen as something that must be solved in order for the true, or at least more correct, definition of the sophist to be reached, then this allows us to say something about the slices of ontology that the method of division picks out. If language is to reflect reality accurately, then our method of arriving at knowledge – in this case, the method of division – must correspond to the divisions that exist in being itself. Thus, it will be interesting to look at the nature of the kinds picked out by the method of division, as well as the relationship between the various art forms that are analysed by this method. The point is, I think, that there is a

relationship posited between epistemology and ontology – between what is known or what can be said, and what exists. It is my hope that a discussion on the method of division and of the mixing of the kinds will shed some light on this area.

Since ontology precedes epistemology, I shall examine first the nature of the kinds in the *Sophist*, and then I shall later explore the method of division. The discussion on the nature of the kinds begins with a discussion on the nature of *being* – in the debate between the gods and the giants the Stranger comes to the conclusion that real being possesses a power “to affect anything else or to be affected” – “real things ... are nothing but power”.<sup>4</sup> The further conclusion that is reached is that reality consists in all that is changeable and unchangeable. This leads to a problem – the possibility of infinite regress (third man argument); if reality consists in movement (changeable) and rest (unchangeable), it cannot consist in them “both at once”, but it must be a third thing in which motion and rest alternatively participate. This point leads to the discussion on what we must allow to be blended together, and what must remain separate; whether we should allow that all things are capable of blending together, or whether nothing is capable of mixing with anything else, or whether some forms of combinations are allowed. The possibility that all things are capable of blending together is untenable, as it will deny that motion or rest (or anything else) has any existence, as nothing will be able to participate in *being* and retain its distinctive features. Such blending will result in annihilation rather than existence. The possibility that everything blends with everything also leads either to contradictions, or else it leads to the problem of infinite regress. With respect to contradiction, the reasoning is as follows: if both motion and rest are capable of blending, then motion can remain at rest, and rest would be in motion. This clearly contradicts the nature of each kind. Furthermore, we would have a contradiction in *being* itself, for being would be defined as existing *both* in motion and at rest. We could avoid the contradiction by denying that being is neither intrinsically defined by either motion or rest – in other words, we could claim that being is some other third thing. But this move leads to infinite regress – by positing *being* as existing apart from motion and rest, we are led back to the third man argument. Thus, it cannot be the case either that all things are capable of blending together, or that nothing is capable of mixing with anything else. So the solution posited is that certain kinds are capable of blending, and certain kinds are not.

The argument for the mixing of kinds is important not only for ontological considerations, but also for language. To hold that no forms combine is a self-refuting position, although, as Ackrill points out<sup>5</sup>, we must be careful to state in what way they combine – not all combinations are

going to be symmetrical, and some Forms will participate in others without themselves being participated in. This is emphasised by the Stranger at 260a – “any discourse we can have owes its existence to the weaving together of forms.” This is so because once we have the five kinds – being, sameness, difference, rest and motion – we are able to speak of things that are *not* just as we are able to speak of things that *are*. Both negation and the assertion of identity *presuppose* difference – the former because we can say that something is not only if we have a sense of what it means for it to be other than itself, and *mutatis mutandi* with respect to the *assertion* of identity. We can say that motion is different from rest and at the same time assert that motion is the same as itself – i.e. it is intelligible to speak of that which *is not* in one respect, but still maintain that it *is* in another respect. Indeed, the former presupposes the latter. Similarly, we are able to say of motion that it exists, while deny that it is to be identified with *being*. This argument attempts to disprove the position of those “late learners”, who deny that one can predicate something different of a subject other than what exhaustively defines it – for instance, they deny that one can say of a man anything other than that *he is a man*. The Stranger wants to argue that one can intelligibly predicate things of a subject other than simple identity. So the mixing of kinds is essential not only for discourse concerning what exists, but also for discourse *about negation*. If (one of the) central concern(s) in the *Sophist* is the meaningfulness of false statements, and if the discussion on the nature of the kinds is important for allowing for the possibility of speaking falsely, then one of the jobs of the kinds must be to allow for negation.

At this point one may ask why it is that we cannot allow for negation using the ontology of the Forms. Without wanting to digress too far in this discussion, I would like to examine some of the differences between the *Forms* and the *kinds* in an attempt to point to the need to develop this later ontology. The discussion will be by no means exhaustive. The Forms of Plato’s earlier dialogues are not the kinds of things that are able to combine with anything else – they are eternal and unchanging, and thus their natures are immutable. If this is so, then it does not make sense to speak of reality as changing in any way – to speak of what is real is to speak only of *being*, of what is. Forms do not participate in other Forms, but are rather participated in by all other things in the material world. Forms are thus unable to combine with one another.<sup>6</sup> On this analysis, the theory of the Forms is dangerously similar to the position of the friends of the Forms in the *Sophist* – the friends of the Forms deny that the “power of acting and being acted upon ... is compatible with real being” (248c) On their account, not only can real *being* not be known, as this would imply that *being* must be in some relational mode to a knower, which would imply that it is being acted

upon, but any talk of non-being collapses into absurdity, since non-being is regarded as no being of any kind. The theory of the kinds allows Plato to develop a "relational notion of not-being and [show] this to be paradox-free;<sup>7</sup> the development of the theory of kinds allows us to posit reality as inter-woven."

That the theory of the kinds allows us to say something more illuminating about non-being can perhaps be illustrated in the following way: the question can be raised why Plato does not deal with non-being by using the theory of the Forms, and explicate non-being in terms of non-participation. For instance, if we want to say that Socrates is not wise, why not simply do this by saying that Socrates does not participate in the Form of Wisdom? The reason is that non-participation in Forms does not reveal the full significance of what we mean when we say that Socrates is not wise. We say of other things – stones and trees – that they are not wise, but what we mean is something quite different. In the case of Socrates, we want to say that wisdom *could* be applied to him, but doesn't, but in the latter case the predicate "wise" is inapplicable in principle to stones and trees. An analysis that seeks to explain both uses of "not wise" only in terms of non-participation fails to distinguish between the two cases – in the case of Socrates, we want to say that, corresponding to the form of wisdom there is a form of non-wisdom that applies to him, whereas there is no corresponding form that applies to trees and stones. The theory of the kinds, insofar as it allows different kinds to mingle, does allow for this distinction in usage. It allows us to carve reality in such a way that both positive ( $x$  is  $F$ ) and negative ( $x$  is not- $F$ ) predicates can intelligibly be asserted of a subject, whereas the theory of the Forms allows us to only assert or deny predication – either it is the case that  $X$  is  $F$ , or it is not the case that  $X$  is  $F$  [which we can write as: *not* ( $X$  is  $F$ )]. So the theory of the kinds allows us to say that Socrates is not-wise, where "not-wise" is itself a kind, whereas in the case of trees and stones we would assert simply that it is not the case that trees and stones are wise (trees and stones are not the kinds of things of which the term predicates "is wise" and "is not wise" could intelligibly be asserted). This division of the realms of discourse is discussed by the Stranger at 257c – "The nature of the different appears to be parcelled out, in the same way as knowledge." For every predicate  $F$  that can be asserted of  $X$ , there is a corresponding predicate non- $F$  that can be asserted of  $Y$ , where  $Y$  is contrary to  $X$  in respect of  $F$ .<sup>8</sup> The assertion that  $X$  is non- $F$  becomes an assertion of *difference* rather than one of existential negation. This is emphasised at 257e, 258a and 258b – the not-beautiful and the not-tall are said to be parts of existence – they are not "contrary to 'existent', but only ... different from that existent." So the mingling of kinds, by allowing relations between different kinds, allows us to speak of that which is other.

This may assist us in explicating the Stranger's claim that "since reality and unreality are equally puzzling, there is henceforward some hope that any light ... thrown upon one will illuminate the other to an equal degree." If the notion of non-being that is under discussion here is understood within the discussion of predication, then this claim is unproblematic, for understanding that or why X is F rather than G sheds light on both properties F and Y, and also on X. However, if we move from the realm of predication to that of existence, the Stranger's claim becomes nonsensical, because non-being, not having any existence, cannot be known and hence cannot be a vehicle through which being is known. This provides further evidence for the distinction that is made in this dialogue between the kinds and the Forms, and it illustrates the nuances of distinction to which the former can be put in a method of discourse.

The theory of kinds is important, then, both for allowing for positive discourse and for negative statements. This is so because the theory of the kinds is a doctrine about *being* – the five kinds are the fundamental dimensions of Plato's ontology, they are the co-ordinates on which all things can be plotted and by which all things are measured. I would like to examine the five kinds and their relationship with one another; if the kinds are seen as fundamental and exhaustive descriptions of reality, it needs to be examined why *these* kinds and not others are posited. Why, for instance, do we not have the Beautiful or the Large as kinds? The answer to this lies in the understanding that the kinds define an ontology, and thus will be the most basic constituents of reality. They must therefore be the sorts of things that are not only common to all being, but they must be the elements *necessary* for anything to be at all. The kinds are constituted by two relational elements – Same and Different, two modes of *being* – Rest and Motion – and Being itself. The relational elements are necessary for identity and difference, and hence for both negation and for mixing. Rest and Motion – rather than say Beauty or Large – are the two modes presented as fundamental because these modes of being relate intrinsically to any ontology. In the debate between the gods and the giants, for instance, what one considers "real" is connected to whether one sees reality as moving or stationary.<sup>9</sup> In other words, answers to questions concerning "the one and the many", or answers that concern whether the material or the immaterial world is more real, depend on one's answers to whether Being is in motion or stationary. For instance, the question about whether the real is one or many, discussed at 245a ff, is a question concerning the *unity* of the real. Plato raises the question whether, if the real is one, it is a whole or a sum of parts. The relation of this issue to the issue of Motion and Rest is as follows: if reality is one and whole, then it seems that motion is impossible, for (to use an argument that I've borrowed from Locke), there will be nowhere for being to move, as it were. If Being is one, then

nothing exists outside Being. Furthermore, if Being is motionless, then it is also eternal and unchanging. So the kinds Motion and Rest must be fundamental and allow us to examine other ontological questions, the solutions to which depend on our views of reality as being in motion or at rest. Plato thus sees the five kinds as fundamental forms of ontology – they are the determining co-ordinates of all *being*.

I would like to relate the above discussion concerning the nature of kinds to the method of division. The method of division is used by the Stranger to arrive at a definition of the sophist. The method consists in dividing the arts into various categories – productive, distinguishing, acquisitive; the categories are then further divided by a method of binary division until the required definition is reached. The method attempts to define the definiendum, but it is acknowledged that the nature of the definiendum – in this case the sophist – is not exhaustively accounted for. This could be so for several reasons: it could be a statement about the sophist, that his nature eludes strict definition. Or it could be a more general statement that not all kind of terms or activities are strictly definable. It could also be the case that the method is simply unable to carry out the task. The method differs, say, from an Aristotelian method, where one is able to arrive at a unique defining characteristic of a species. If one defines man as, say, “featherless biped”, then this definition is not only true of man and nothing else, but it also captures the *essence* of what it means to be a man. From these unique differentia one can also trace back the higher species and genus from which this lower species is descended. Aristotle’s method of division is thus more strictly vertical. That this is not so with the Stranger’s method can be seen from the initial division of the arts, and the subsequent division of each category. If each division within the category attempts to say something true, if not strictly definitive, about the sophist, it must be the case that the definitions arrived at can be interwoven in order to capture the fuller picture of the thing defined. That is, each definition arrived at within the separate category is merely one aspect of the fuller picture. Of course, it may be the case that the earlier definitions are just wrong, and will be supplanted by the final definition, but I do not think that this is the case. For one thing, the various definitions are not contradictory or mutually exclusive; it may be possible for the sophist to be someone who argues for money as well as one who attempts to teach others although he is ignorant himself. If there is anything incomplete about these definitions, the implication is that it is the sophist who is involved in various diverse activities, and so does nothing properly or truly, but this is due to the wayward nature of the sophist himself, and is not a fault of the method.

Another possible reason for the multiplicity of divisions could be to illustrate the multi-faceted nature of reality. It is interesting to note that,

whereas Aristotle's method attempts to define natural kinds, the method in the *Sophist* attempts to define human activity and "artistic" kinds. We are given analyses of the conqueror and tradesman, the angler, the fighter, the money-maker, and so on. The multiple levels of interpretation may simply reflect the multi-faceted nature of human endeavour. But it is also interesting to note that the method of division hopes to capture something, not only about human activity, but also about the Arts themselves, and, in the final division, about the nature of the Divine. The implication is, I think, that we should take seriously the method of division as a means of enquiring about reality itself. If the method is horizontally as well as vertically defined – and this is emphasised in the discussion of the final division – then this is so because reality is multi-faceted and interwoven. And here may be a link with the mixing of kinds; since reality consists in the weaving and mixing together of various kinds, so too must our epistemological method, our discourse, be flexible enough to capture all the various formulations of being. So the non-hierarchical method of division may not be accidental. Furthermore, the method divides the form of Art into various categories, but it does not seem that these divisions are exhaustive<sup>10</sup> – there may be other ways of dividing artistic activity. If this is so, then the method provides a conceptual scheme of the world that allows for analysis of kinds as defined by human activity and interest as well as of natural kind terms. Depending on how we decide to perform the cuts, we shall arrive at differing definitions that are more or less useful for our purposes. Furthermore, the method gives us a deeper understanding not only of the activity being defined, but also of the category of the arts that is being divided. By seeing, for instance, how the productive arts can be divided, and by seeing what sorts of activities are grouped together, we gain a deeper understanding of the various sorts of artistic categories. So, by seeing what sorts of activities hunters or fighters engage in, we develop insight into the nature of what it means to call something a productive art. Similarly with other categories of arts, and similarly for the form of the arts – dividing art into the three categories discussed in the dialogue presents us with a fuller understanding of the higher form.

So the classificatory system is informative not only because it clarifies the activity that is being defined, but also because it clarifies the art form that is doing the defining. The method of division does relate to ontology, but it is reflexive – its different methods of enquiry, or different ways of investigating the world, may result in different sorts of categories. This is not to deny the objective nature of being, because no method that arrives at knowledge of the world can provide the investigator with falsehoods. No accurate method will be inconsistent with another. Relating this to the mixing of kinds, we see that, not only does an understanding of the kinds allow us a deeper insight into the nature of existing things, into the understanding of



negation and discourse, but an examination of both language and existing things provides us with insight into the realm of the kinds; explanation is mutual and both horizontal and vertical, as is the final explanation of the nature of the sophist. So the flexible nature of the method seems necessary if we are to be able to describe the mixing of kinds in all their actual (and possible) variety. The mixing together of the various definitions to produce a fuller analysis of the sophist mirrors the mixing together of the kinds to produce a distinct entity of being. This illustrates once again the close connection between methods of discourse – epistemological enquiry – and ontology; depending on the way we examine reality, the picture we are presented with will be very different. Returning to the sophist, we are once again shown the dangers of speaking falsely. For if it is indeed possible to speak of what is not, as the Stranger has shown, then the discourse of the sophist, if false, can present us with a picture of reality that is also false. The sophist in this instance is more dangerous than the painter, who is blamed by Plato in *The Republic* for merely holding up a mirror to nature. The sophist does not even do this, but rather presents to his interlocutors a false and misleading picture. By speaking of “what is not”, the sophist neither reflects reality, nor reflects upon it, but rather leads us further away.

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### **Endnotes**

1. C. H. Zuckert, “Who’s a Philosopher? Who’s a Sophist? The Stranger v. Socrates”, p 181.
  2. *Sophist*, tr. F. M. Cornford, 251a.
  3. S. Benardete, S. “On Plato’s ‘Sophist’”, p 771.
  4. *Sophist* 247e.
  5. See Ackrill’s discussion on this point in his “Plato and the Copula: *Sophist* 251-259”, pp 4 ff.
  6. It may be that the “super” form of the Good in *The Republic* represents an effort to bring interrelationship to the world of the Forms.
  7. J. Moravcsik, *Plato and Platonism*, p 169.
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8. This may indicate that Plato did not want to treat "exists" as a predicate, for he would want to assert that we can say "X exists", but he would want to deny that asserting "Y does not exist" is a contrary, rather than a contradictory, statement. Saying "Y does not exist" is not asserting non-existence of something that "is", as would be the case with, say, "Y is not-beautiful".
9. This has echoes later in Spinoza's metaphysics, where he argues that Substance is eternal and unchanging.
10. See Wollheim's discussion on the "*bricoleur*" problem of art.