Who’s a Philosopher? Who’s a Sophist?
The Stranger v. Socrates

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Many readers have taken the Eleatic Stranger to represent a later stage of Plato’s philosophical development, because the arguments or doctrines the Stranger presents in the Sophist appear to be better than those Socrates articulates in earlier dialogues. In particular, in the Sophist Plato shows the Stranger answering two questions Socrates proved unable to resolve in two of his conversations the day before. In the Theaetetus Socrates admitted that he had long been perplexed by the fact of false opinion; he was not able to explain how it was possible. Likewise, in the Cratylus Socrates and his interlocutors were not able to determine satisfactorily the relation between names and the things to which they refer. Through his teaching about the idea of the other, the Stranger shows not only how false opinion is possible but also why names do not always correspond to the kinds or ideas of things. More generally, in the course of his account of previous thought the Stranger presents a fundamental critique of the teaching of “friends of the forms” like Socrates. When we examine the definition of the sophist to which the Stranger comes at the end of the dialogue, however, we find reasons to question the adequacy of his teaching and, consequently, his superiority to Socrates. If philosophy consists in knowledge—of the whole or merely of self—we are forced to conclude, neither the Stranger nor Socrates is a philosopher. Each or even both might appear, therefore, to be a pretender—or sophist. If, on the other hand, philosophy consists in the search for knowledge by means of a dialectical sorting of things according to kinds, Socrates and the Stranger represent two different, although related types.

I. The Initial Contrast
In the very first line of the *Sophist* Theodorus expresses his belief in the Stranger’s superiority when the geometer informs Socrates that he and his associates have returned as they agreed yesterday morning (at the conclusion of the *Theaetetus* [210d]), bringing with them a stranger from Elea who is (in implicit contrast to Socrates) “very much a philosopher.” However, we know from the *Theaetetus* that Theodorus is not a competent judge. Socrates raised questions about the geometer’s ability to judge human beauty or nobility at the very beginning of that conversation; and in the course of the dialogue Socrates showed that Theodorus perceives and becomes willing to admit the conflict between the intellectual presuppositions of his own science and the claims made by his friend Protagoras only under pressure. Although Theodorus considers himself to be a man of “theory” in contrast to those who engage themselves actively in political affairs, he does not want to investigate the basis or presuppositions of the search for knowledge. On the contrary, he openly expresses his dislike of Socrates’ insistence on argument, which the geometer regards as a kind of eristic contest.

Socrates responds to Theodorus’ announcement by wondering, paraphrasing Homer, whether the anonymous Stranger is not a god in disguise who has come to refute those who are poor in speeches. Echoing Socrates’ description of the geometer himself the previous day (*Theaetetus* 145c), Theodorus assures the group that is not the Stranger’s way. The Eleatic is more measured (*metrioteros*) than those (again implicitly like Socrates, cf. *Theaetetus* 169b-c) who are zealous in contention. Although Theodorus does not believe the Stranger is a god, the geometer thinks that, like all philosophers, the Stranger is divine. Indirectly questioning Theodorus’ ability to judge again, Socrates observes that philosophers are not much easier to discern than gods. Philosophers also appear in many guises, traveling from city to city, looking down from on high on the life of those below.
Perhaps because they have to look up—and hence into the sun—people below do not agree on the value or the character of the philosophers’ activity. Some think philosophers are worthless; others that they are worth everything. Sometimes philosophers appear to be sophists, at other times statesmen, or even, at times, mad.

Socrates quickly proceeds to find out what kind of philosophy the Stranger professes by asking him whether people from Elea believe that these—the sophist, statesman, and philosopher—are one, two, or, like their names, three. When the Stranger responds, three, Socrates knows the Stranger is not simply a follower of Parmenides; if he were, he would have responded that these activities are erroneously thought to be three by mere mortals, but that like all being these three are truly one. Nevertheless, the Stranger emphasizes, it would be no small or easy work to distinguish the three with clarity. Socrates urges him to do so. Asking whether the Stranger would prefer to go through the argument by himself in a long speech or through questions, as he had once heard Parmenides do, Socrates lets the Stranger know that he is familiar with Eleatic teachings. Like Parmenides in that earlier conversation, the Stranger observes that it is easier to proceed through question and answer, if the interlocutor is tractable; he also expresses some shame at the prospect of lecturing Socrates. (What Theodorus and his students told the Stranger about their conversation the day before does not seem to have given the Eleatic an entirely negative impression of Socrates. Nor, having been reminded by Socrates at the very beginning of the conversation of both the awe and the suspicion in which strangers tend to be held, does the Stranger wish to be impolite [literally ‘savage’] to his Athenians hosts.)

From this introductory exchange, we might conclude that the question of the dialogue will be, what—or who—is a philosopher? That remains the question, in action, as it were, insofar as Plato’s
presentation of the Eleatic Stranger contrasts with his presentation of Socrates in many notable respects.

Explicitly the Stranger first asks, in this dialogue, who or what is a sophist? and in the following conversation, who or what is a statesman?

The Stranger does not explain or defend his decision to begin with the sophist. As we see in the course of the two succeeding conversations, the Stranger first has to establish the possibility of the existence of false images in order to define a sophist. He then uses that definition or phenomenon to distinguish those who pretend to be statesmen, i.e., those who actually rule various regimes, whom he describes as the “the greatest imitators and enchanters” or “sophists of sophists” (Statesman 303c), from the true possessor of the “royal art.” The Stranger does not go on to give an equally full definition of the philosopher, nor does his description of the statesman constitute a substitute. Although the Stranger describes the “science of the rule of human beings” as “pretty nearly the greatest and most difficult to acquire” (292d), it is not simply the greatest and most difficult. Reflecting on their search for a definition of the statesman at the middle of the dialogue, the Stranger suggests that it has not been “set as a problem for its own sake but rather for the sake of their becoming more skilled in dialectics” (285d), the “science of the free” or “philosophy,” as he defines it in the course of his investigation of the sophist. If it takes such skill to separate out the philosopher, it seems, only one who possesses the requisite science, i.e., a philosopher, can identify another. If there is a definition of the philosopher to be found in these dialogues, we have to look for it, implicitly rather than explicitly, in the similarities and differences Plato shows between the Stranger and Socrates.

In asking, what is a sophist? the Stranger might appear to be posing the kind of question Socrates is famous for. But the Stranger describes the problem or question in terms quite different from
those Socrates usually employs. Rather than inquire what sophists claim to teach (as Socrates does in the *Protagoras*) or whether sophistry is an art (*techne*) as Socrates explicitly asks in the *Gorgias*, the Stranger observes that he and Theaetetus may have only the name (*onoma*) of the sophist in common. In private (*idios*) they may have different notions of the fact or work (*ergon*) they address by that name.

The aim of the argument is to come to an agreement about the matter (*pragma*), i.e., what is named or referred to by the name ‘sophist.’ In other words, the Stranger asks a very different version of the question, ‘what is . . . ?’ The reason, we shall see, is that the Stranger does not think that anything is or can be known in itself; on the contrary, he argues, all things are and are known only in relation to others.

He thus asks what we mean by ‘sophist’ rather than what a sophist in itself is. Because sophistry constitutes a certain kind of imitation, the Stranger will show, it is not and cannot be accurately described in itself. Nevertheless, the term ‘sophist’ does not constitute merely a conventional mark or evaluative label; it denotes a determinate or definable form of human activity and power (*pragma* and *dunamis*).

Just as the Stranger’s question differs from Socrates’, although it resembles Socrates’ typical question in form or “name,” so his method of seeking an answer differs from Socrates’ typical mode of proceeding, even though there is a certain amount or degree of resemblance here as well. As a matter of courtesy as well as convenience, the Stranger agrees to proceed through question and answer rather than give a long speech. The content of his showing that the sophist, statesman, and philosopher are three does not seem to depend upon the character of his interlocutor; he could have given the same account speaking by himself. Unlike Socrates, the Stranger does not try to draw out Theaetetus’ opinions or to examine them. Nor does the Stranger reconsider conclusions or opinions he himself has
come to hold. He will admit having come to a state of great deal of perplexity (aporia) about ‘being’ as well as ‘not-being’, but in explicit contrast to Socrates in his conversation with Theaetetus the Stranger proceeds to resolve the perplexity with arguments he told Theodorus he remembers from having heard them before (217b).

Like Socrates (and all other philosophers, according to the Stranger’s own characterization of the “science of the free” or “dialectics” [253c-e]), the Stranger attempts to sort things into different kinds, according to which ideas they share or do not share in. Also like Socrates, the Stranger begins with a rather lowly, every-day example--an angler rather than a cobbler. But the Stranger’s method of “sorting” is clearly different. Whereas Socrates tends to characterize “arts” like shoe-making and medicine in terms of the goods they claim to be able to produce (their ends or purposes), the Stranger begins by asking Theaetetus whether angling and sophistry are not kinds of arts. When Theaetetus agrees that they are, the Stranger then proceeds to determine what kind of art by sorting the different kinds according to the method or mode of externally observable action–making (poiesis) as opposed to acquisition (ktetikes), acquiring by means of exchange or coercion, openly or secretly, of living as opposed to lifeless things, in the water rather than on land, by snaring rather than by spearing. He never characterizes angling–or sophistry–in terms of its purpose, motive, or any other sort of “good.” He describes what the angler or sophist does, where, with what and to what or whom, but not why.

Although all the steps or specific dichotomies in the diairesis may not appear to be absolutely necessary, the Stranger’s divisions do succeed in isolating the distinctive characteristics of angling as an activity. The case of the sophist proves to be more difficult. Although the sophist first comes to sight as a kind of hunter–of young wealthy men with speeches about virtue for a fee–as a seller of speeches
(logoi) he can also be seen to engage in an activity on the other side of the dichotomy they drew between exchange and hunting in the process of defining the angler. The terms of the exchange in which the sophist engages are also rather unclear. The sophist can be seen merely to retail different kinds of products--speeches composed by others or his own compositions (productions or makings) as well--and in different places, traveling from city to city or remaining at home. Likewise, although the Stranger had distinguished open from secret and competition from capture in his definition of angling as a kind of hunting, he now points out that the sophist can be seen to be a kind of eristic competitor in speeches as well as a hunter and merchant. The attempt to find out what a sophist is through the process of diairesis appears to break down entirely, however, when the Stranger observes that the sophist can also be seen to practice a version of a kind of art--of sorting or sifting--that was not included and does not seem to fit into any of the previous dichotomies.

II. Sorting Like from Like v. Sorting Better from Worse

The purpose of the series of definitions of the sophist the Stranger proposes begins to look, indeed, like an attempt to isolate the characteristic that shows Socrates to be a sophist rather than a philosopher like the Stranger. Especially as a self-admitted “erotic” Socrates appears to be a “hunter” of (and in his Apology admits to some success in attracting) young wealthy (and hence leisured) young men with his speeches about virtue. Socrates does not make them pay to listen to his conversations, however; although he could be said to exchange speeches, both his own and those he has heard from others, Socrates does not appear to profit economically from the exchange. Unlike the Stranger (and Theodorus), moreover, Socrates does not travel from city to city. Because he regularly refutes his interlocutors in short speeches in private, Socrates might appear to be an eristic competitor. His
interlocutors do not get pleasure from the experience (although the audience often does), so he does not receive a fee for his services. He appears rather to be speaking for his own pleasure and so to be merely “garrulous” (as he himself charges in *Theaetetus* 195b-c). Only when the Stranger identifies two versions of the art of discernment (*diakritike*)—the separation of better from worse in contrast to the separation of like from like—does he succeed, therefore, in identifying something peculiarly and incontestably Socratic that clearly distinguishes the Athenian from the Stranger.

There are, of course, several kinds of “purification,” bodily as well as psychic. Observing that some of the names of varieties of bodily purification might appear ridiculous (227a), the Stranger makes the contrast between his own method of argument (*te ton logon methodo*) and that of Socrates explicit. The Stranger’s method of sorting like from like is indifferent to considerations of greatness or baseness; in spelling out the relations among the arts, his method does not distinguish, for example, between the general and the lice-catcher, except to note that the former is a bit more pretentious. The Stranger’s method is thus consistent with the criticism the founder of the Eleatic school made of the young Socrates in their initial conversation when he observed that Socrates paid too much attention to the opinions of human beings, especially about the noble and base.15 In the *Symposium*, Plato indicates, Socrates sought to resolve the difficulties he found in the doctrines of his predecessors, including Parmenides, by inquiring into the meaning of what is *kalos k’agathos*.16 Whereas Socrates subsequently attempted to discover what is truly noble and good by examining the opinions of others, the Stranger emphasizes the importance of ridding oneself of a false concern with precedence.17

*Theaetetus* is not sure that he understands the methodological distinction the Stranger has just drawn, so he returns to the difference in subject matter between body and soul. The Stranger then
proceeds to distinguish two different kinds of psychic vices—wickedness and ignorance—corresponding to two kinds of bodily defects—disease and deformity (or ugliness). Like bodily disease, the Stranger argues, psychic wickedness consists in a kind of discord or disorder among the parts—passions, anger, reason, pleasure and pain. Vices like cowardice, immoderation, and injustice (three of the four traditional cardinal virtues) can be remedied, therefore, only by the restitution of order by means of the art of justice, especially punishment. Ignorance (or the absence of the fourth cardinal virtue, wisdom) is different. No one wants to be ignorant. Lack of knowledge does not result from conflicting desires so much as from an inability to direct one’s efforts in such a way as to achieve the goal. Insofar as ignorance results from a lack of measure (ametron) or proportion, the Stranger suggests, ignorance is ugly (or ignoble). Because it occurs only in the soul (and thus does not appear to harm others), he observes, people do not generally call it a vice. As a lack of knowledge, it is not remedied by correction, but by teaching (didaskalike). Rather than immediately distinguish kinds of teaching, the Stranger first seeks to define the ignorance teaching is intended to cure by characteristically dividing it in two. The division appears to be rather lopsided, because the Stranger argues that there is one kind of ignorance so big that it counterbalances all the other, specific varieties taken together. That huge kind of ignorance is not knowing something but seeming (to oneself or to others) to know it; and this kind of ignorance is not cured by the generally ineffective mode of instruction by admonition fathers tend to employ. It is removed by those individuals who know how to get those who believe they know to examine their opinions and to see that these opinions are, in fact, contradictory. Only when they see they do not know what they thought they did will such people be truly able to learn.

Having experienced such a purgation the day before at the hands of Socrates, Theaetetus
volunteers his opinion that the person who has undergone such an experience is in the “best and most moderate of conditions” (230d), but he shares none of the Stranger’s apprehension about calling such a purifier a “sophist.” Observing that such purifiers resemble sophists the way dogs do wolves, the Stranger nevertheless lets “it be said that in their logos . . . the refutation that deals with seeming-wisdom (doxosophia) . . . has come to light as sophistics noble and grand in descent” (231b). 19

Theaetetus expresses his aporia (or we might say, frustration) in the face of the multitude of definitions of the sophist that have emerged. Using the language of the wrestling contests in which Theaetetus and his young friend Socrates engage (and so like Socrates in the Theaetetus [169a-c] identifying his own procedure by analogy with violent competition), the Stranger suggests that the first step in getting a better hold on their prey might be to calculate just how many the guises are in which he appears. Contrary to Theodorus’ initial claim about the Stranger’s superior “measure,” he does not appear to be any less fond of intellectual wrestling than Socrates. He appears, indeed, intent upon refuting his adversary–as Socrates surmised.

The difference between the enumeration of six definitions that follows and the five indicated in the preceding discussion reminds us as well as the two interlocutors how difficult the sophist is to pin down. Appearing merely to summarize what went before, the enumeration may, however, lead us to ignore three important steps or moves in the Stranger’s argument. First, the difference in the enumeration arises when Theaetetus breaks into the Stranger’s list to add a fourth definition of the sophist–as a seller of his own productions–to the second and third definitions offered by the Stranger of the sophist as a merchant and retailer of soul-learnings. If the Stranger had allowed Theaetetus to continue, the young man might also have introduced a distinction concerning the place as well as the
origin of the speeches traded, that is, the difference between exchanging speeches in one’s own city and traveling abroad. Such a consideration of place would point to one of the major differences Socrates emphasizes in his *Apology* between his own behavior and those who claim to be able to teach human virtue for a fee. It might also implicate the Stranger himself.  

Reflecting on the transition that occurs in the argument at this point, we observe, first, that the Stranger drops the money-making that seemed to characterize the sophist in all the definitions prior to the consideration of “cathartics.” In the discussion that follows he does not note, much less justify, his neglect of one of the qualities Socrates regularly uses to describe sophists.  

Second and most important, we note that the Stranger’s “diairetic” method breaks down at just the point he hits upon a definition that seems to correspond exactly to Socrates’ activity. Neither the homely “sifting” nor the more noble forms of the “cathartic” arts seems to fit into either of the two kinds, poetic or productive and acquisitive, that the Stranger first posited. The cathartic arts seem, rather, to constitute preparations for both. What distinguishes Socrates and his activity, we conclude, cannot be isolated or defined by means of the Stranger’s method of separating like from like. It can only be distinguished by separating better from worse.

Upon completing the enumeration the Stranger appears to proceed in a more Socratic manner by trying to isolate the common element in all the definitions. In all cases, he points out, the sophist appears to be a “contradictor” (*antilogikos*) and to teach others to be able to do the same. The sophist does not appear to have or be master of a specific subject.  

This lack of specialization may, the Stranger suggests, be what distinguishes the sophist. Although no human being can actually know everything, the sophist’s ability to refute anyone, even a person who actually knows about the particular matter in question, makes the sophist appear to know all—especially to the young. (In his *Apology* [23a]
Socrates admits that his examinations of others had this effect upon observers.) So, the Stranger concludes, the sophist now comes to light as one who possesses a certain opinionative art (doxastike) or science (episteme) about everything, but not the truth.

As an example, the Stranger now (234a) suggests not an acquisitive form of art like angling but a kind of imitation that Theaetetus characterizes as “child’s play.” As one able to “make” not only plants, animals and human beings, but also sea, earth, sky, gods and all the rest” (233e-234a), and to teach others to do the same, the sophist would appear to be a superior kind of poet, like those Socrates describes in Book X of the Republic (296c). But neither here nor at any other point in the dialogue does the Stranger compare poets to sophists or philosophers (as Socrates does in the Theaetetus [152e] when he says that all the poets and philosophers, except Parmenides, have taught the same “flux” understanding, or as Protagoras does in the Protagoras 316d-317b when he claims that all previous poets, philosophers and other practitioners of arts have been sophists, but tried to hide it. As both Socrates and the Stranger emphasized at the beginning of the dialogue, it is difficult to distinguish the different kinds and claims to wisdom). Rather than simply making imaginary “copies,” as Socrates first accuses in Book X of the Republic, poets use speeches to express and/or image the inner states and feelings of human beings. The Stranger’s utter neglect of poetry should make us wonder, therefore, whether he or his characteristic approach to things is able to account for everything and hence for the whole any more than Socrates and his dialectical examinations of his interlocutors’ opinions.24 In his diaireses the Stranger uses the externally visible “looks” (the literal meaning of eide and ideai) of things to define them; he does not even try to discover the purposes of the objects or activities he considers or the motives of the people who undertake them. The Stranger is not concerned with the imitations or
knowledge of feelings but with the “imaging” of the eide in speeches.

For an Eleatic philosopher the poets do not represent competition or even an “imitation” of true wisdom, because poets present images only of the beings; unlike the philosophers the Stranger later criticizes for merely telling “myths,” poets do not relate stories about the character of being per se. Whereas Socrates debunks merely imitative art by comparing it to the reflections of things a person could make if he or she carried around a mirror, the Stranger observes that the pictures a sophist draws with words fool only the young; with more experience of things, they become less easily bewitched by mere words, if not simply wiser. The sophist does not image the philosopher insofar as he is a teacher. But by describing the sophist not merely once but three times as a “bewitcher” (goes), the Stranger does, once again, point to the similarity between the sophist and Socrates. In the Symposium (203d-e) Diotima describes the daimon Eros who resembles Socrates not only as a philosopher and pharmakeus, but also as a bewitcher (goes) and sophist. As Socrates himself admits in his Apology, his speeches were particularly attractive to the young.

The problem the sophist represents for the Stranger is not that the sophist deceives others with flattering speeches. (The greatest flattery is, after all, to suggest that one’s listeners are judges or wise.) The problem is, rather, that as a result of his ability to contradict everyone else the sophist himself appears to have knowledge of everything, even though that is impossible for a human being. That is, the sophist appears to be what he is not. The problem is not that the speeches the sophist delivers do not represent things as they are entirely accurately. The Stranger admits that he is not sure whether the images the sophist draws are “eikons,” exact copies in proportion to the originals (like geometric constructions), or artistic “phantasms” (perspectival images), in which the proportions or measurements
of the original are changed to correct for the effects of viewing them at a distance. In other words, the
difficulty is not, as Socrates initially suggested when he said that people observing philosophers who
look down at them from on high often mistake them for sophists or statesmen, a matter of inaccurate
perception or perspective. The problem is rather how one thing can be an “image” of or “like” another,
and yet not be the same as that other.

This problem of “likeness” had a history in Eleatic philosophy. In the first and only conversation
Socrates had with Parmenides, mentioned at the beginning of this dialogue, Socrates disputed Zeno’s
negative proof that there could not be many (things): for a plurality of things to exist, each would have to
be both like and unlike the others, i.e., to exist in contradiction. If there was a form of “likeness” in itself
and another of “unlikeness,” Socrates objected, any particular thing could participate in both these
eternal forms without contradiction.

If, then, someone tries to show that for things such as stones and wood and the like, the
same things are many and one, we shall say that he’s demonstrated that some thing is
many and one, not that the One is many or the Many’s one. . . . But if someone . . .
shall first distinguish the forms as separate in themselves, such as Likeness and
Unlikeness . . . . and Rest and Motion and all the like, and then will show that in
themselves these things can be mixed together and separated, I’d admire that!
In the argument that follows, the Stranger will make such a “wonderful” argument and thus apparently
save the Eleatic position from Socrates’ initial criticism. 26

Recalling Socrates’ first encounter with Parmenides and his leading student, we are also
reminded that the first thinker to establish a position (or his own seeming wisdom) by refuting others was
not Socrates, but Parmenides’ prize student. In the *Phaedrus* (261d) Socrates describes Zeno as an “antilogikos.” He fits the Stranger’s description of a “sophist” as one who is able to refute all others and teach his students to do the same better than Socrates fits it. Ironically, Plato seems to suggest, Parmenides’ argument showing that being and thinking are the same by means of the opposition between the “is” and the “is not” gave rise to sophistry! By means of this fundamental opposition, anything and everything—e.g., motion, plurality, differentiation—could be shown not to be what it seemed.

When Socrates accused Zeno of claiming to say something new and different when he was actually just repeating Parmenides’ argument in different terms, Zeno protested that he was merely trying to defend his teacher from his critics. Later teachers of “eristic” argument, like the brothers Socrates encounters in the *Euthydemus*, were not so modest. They simply claimed the ability to refute anyone.

In his encounters with self-declared sophists like Protagoras and Hippias, Socrates showed that they did not know what human excellence or the good life was, even though they claimed to be able to teach it. The Stranger also criticizes sophists for seeming to know what they do not—about everything, however, not specifically about the good and noble. The problem, as the Stranger sees it, is that the sophist will turn his teacher Parmenides’ argument against him by contending that it is impossible to think or to speak about what is not. (Rather than maintain a strict division between the world of appearance or opinion and the way of “being,” Parmenides’ argument becomes a means in the hands of the sophist of denying there can be any difference. If to think and to be are the same, anything that can be said or thought must be true.)

III. The Stranger’s Accusation of Socrates

The Stranger introduces Theaetetus to the grounds of his own, long-standing perplexity by
reviewing the argument. “To what sort of thing,” he asks, “can he apply the words, ‘what is not’?” (237c). Not to anything that is, they agree. But, the Stranger asks, isn’t it necessary for someone who is speaking to speak about at least one thing? If that “which is not” cannot apply to any one thing, it cannot be one. Nor can it be many, since it is not possible to increase something by adding nothing to it. Neither one nor many, that which is not cannot be a number. Nor can it be an expression uttered through the mouth or silently thought, since 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 in deed just now by talking about that which is not!

If they call the sophist an imagermaker, he will ask them what they mean by an ‘image’? When Theaetetus suggests examples Socrates had used in his description of the lowest part of the divided line in the Republic, reflections in water and the like, the sophist objects that he does not reproduce the visual shapes of things; he only gives speeches (or arguments). When Theaetetus then suggests that an image is like, but not the same as the simply true, the Stranger points out that, if the true is what is, the image has something that is not mixed up in it. By mixing speech about what is not with what is, the sophist deceives them. He gives them a false opinion by leading them to believe that things are which are not are.

Socrates had introduced the same problem in his conversation with Theaetetus the day before. Recognizing the impossibility of thinking about nothing, Socrates told the young geometer, he had long been perplexed by the fact of false opinion. How was it possible? Because we cannot think or speak about what is not, Socrates suggested, false opinion must arise from some kind of confusion or mixing up of different kinds of things that are. First, he surmised, people might acquire false opinions about
things because their sense perceptions were faulty. Like wax that is too rough or soft to accept or retain an accurate impression, their memories might not receive or keep accurate ideas of things. In other words, he suggested that the reason we have erroneous mental images of things is that the images we retain are not purely or solely intelligible, because they are gathered and retained by our bodily sense organs. Unfortunately, Socrates then recalled, the mixture of sensible and intelligible in sense impressions does not suffice to explain all erroneous opinions; people also make mistakes or hold false opinions about purely intelligible things—for example, when they believe that four plus seven equals twelve. To explain how people can take or confuse one purely intelligible concept for another, he then suggested that they imagine (!) the mind as a dovecote in which many different pieces of knowledge the person had acquired over time could be found flying around. As person errs or forms a false opinion about purely intelligible things when he grasps or comprehends the wrong piece. The difficulty with this explanation of false opinion, Socrates then objected, was that it traced our ignorance (agnoiia) to our knowledge. He thus urged Theaetetus to return to the question he had raised at the beginning of their conversation, what is knowledge? We cannot determine whether or how we lack knowledge, he implied, until we know what it is. Nevertheless, the question, how is false opinion possible? was left in abeyance.

In his conversation with Theaetetus, Socrates did not explicitly address what the Stranger has called the greatest kind of ignorance, that which outweighs and thus balances all the other specific forms. Instead Socrates used his art of intellectual “midwifery” to rid the young man of it, that is, of the belief that he knew what he did not know. Theaetetus’ initial belief that knowledge consisted in the sciences he was learning from Theodorus—geometry, astronomy, harmony, etc.—was an example of a man’s
mistaking the possession of a part (a specific kind of knowledge or “science” like geometry) for
knowledge of the whole. If, as the Stranger asserts, it is impossible for any human being to know
everything, then all those who claim to possess knowledge (which to be knowledge properly speaking
and not partial knowledge would have to be knowledge of everything) are sophists. Only a man like
Socrates who “knows that he does not know the most important things” is not a sophist. On the basis
of their conversation the previous day, however, both Theaetetus and Theodorus would be able to
testify that Socrates had admitted his inability to explain the existence of false opinion. He would look
to them, if they thought about it, very much like the sophist who argues that anyone who talks about
false opinion necessarily contradicts himself.28

Rather than apparently give up in perplexity as Socrates had, the Stranger urges Theaetetus to
press forward with him in a manly fashion in their attempt to pin down the sophist.29 To defend
themselves from his countercharge (or “refutation”) they will have to put Parmenides’ argument “to the
torture,” i.e., get it to “confess,” that “‘that which is not’ is in some respect and again, in turn, ‘that
which is’ is not in some point” (241d). In wresting the truth from Parmenides’ argument, the Stranger
asks Theaetetus not to think that he is some kind of parricide. He is not showing that Parmenides’
argument is wrong so much as revising it to meet certain objections. As we shall see, the Stranger does
not think or go down the “way” of “not-being” by maintaining that being is in some sense not or that
being is inseparably mixed with not-being (or negation), as the sophist (and perhaps Hegel later) argued.
On the contrary, the Stranger shows that being is (and is only intelligible as) differentiated (or
heterogeneous).30

Before he revises Parmenides, however, the Stranger has to bring out the difficulties in the
original presentation of the argument concerning the opposition between is and not. Upon inspection, he argues, undifferentiated ‘being’ turns out to be as “perplexing,” as unintelligible, as uncountable or inexpressible in words, as not-being.

The Stranger does not simply address his “father” Parmenides, moreover. No previous philosopher has given an adequate or accurate account of being, he argues, because they have limited themselves to inquiring what kinds of things are, how many and of what sort. They have not asked which kinds mix with one another and which do not—the teaching the young Socrates had said would be truly “wonderful,” because he assumed each of the kinds of being or forms was discrete.

Those who have attempted to specify the character of being have conversed with us too nonchalantly, the Stranger suggests. In telling stories (muthoi) in which some claim that being is one, others that it is two or even three, at war with itself or alternating between strife and marriage, previous philosophers have not cared enough about whether others followed their arguments. In an unusual display of emotion, the Stranger then swears “by the gods” that he thought he understood these “stories” when he was younger; now, however, he sees that he is as perplexed about the character of ‘being’ as he was about ‘not-being.’ His explanation of his “perplexity” nevertheless constitutes a critique of the theories of Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Parmenides. Those like Empedocles who say that ‘being’ consists in a kind of opposition of two elements cannot explain how the two different elements are related to being. Is being some third beyond the opposed pair? If so, these story-tellers have not specified what that third ‘being’ is. Or, if both of the elements in the opposition partake equally in being, as Heraclitus suggests, is it not then some more fundamental one?

Those, like Parmenides, who speak of the all as one face two other problems, however. First,
in claiming that ‘being’ is one they are not able to account for the existence or ‘being’ of the name as something separate from the thing or being itself. They do not, therefore, allow for the existence or intelligibility of *logos*. Second, the Stranger observes that, according to Parmenides’ poem, being is a sphere with parts. But if being is one, it cannot have parts (any more than it can have a name); it cannot, therefore, be a whole (or be counted).

However, the Stranger points out, those who speak in a less “diacritical” way, not about the number of elements or principles in ‘being’ but about its nature or character, also face insuperable problems. First, there are those who identify being with body. Second, there are those who dispute with the “materialists” by insisting that being is constituted by some purely intelligible, bodiless forms (*eide*); these thinkers break bodies up into little pieces and describe them as always becoming. Because Theaetetus observes that he has met many of the dreadful materialists, the Stranger is able to ask Theaetetus to respond on their behalf to his questions. By having them engage in an argument, the Stranger states, he and Theaetetus are improving the materialists, if not in fact, at least in speech. The question thus arises whether the “improved” version of their argument the Stranger and Theaetetus critique actually represents the materialists’ position; they, after all, deny the existence of anything immaterial, including presumably *logos* as something other than sound, i.e., reason or thought (*noesis*). When the Stranger asks the “improved” (more rational and hence “tamer”) materialists whether they would admit the being of soul, Theaetetus suggests that they would declare soul to be a kind of body. However, concerning intelligence (*phronesis*), justice and the other virtues the Stranger asked about, the materialists would be ashamed either to deny that these have being or to insist that they are bodily.
In their original “autochthonous” condition, the Stranger observes, the materialists would shamelessly deny the existence of anything non-bodily. If they were to admit the being of anything bodiless whatsoever, however, they might agree to the following restatement of their thesis: anything with the power to affect or be affected by anything else has being. In this refined version, the materialist thesis proves to be no other than that Socrates attributed to Protagoras, Heraclitus, the poets and all the other “flux” theorists, excluding only Parmenides, in his conversation with Theaetetus the previous morning. Both Socrates and the Stranger thus suggest the thesis that being consists in a kind of opposition arises from reflections on the character of sensation (aisthesis), how and what sorts of things are perceived. The problem the Stranger pointed out with this thesis earlier was that it did not give an independent characterization of being (as opposed to the opposed forces or pair constituting it). Here he suggests such a unitary characterization—power (dunamis). But he does not take up that characterization or criticize it here directly. The difference between the position he attributes to the “improved” giants and his own emerges, however, in the course of the conversation. Although the Stranger suggests that everything exists in relation to everything else, he does not agree that everything is, therefore, constantly in motion. On the contrary, he argues, there are eide of both rest and motion as well as of sameness and difference.

In the Theaetetus (182a-b) Socrates and Theodorus agreed that such a characterization of being meant that nothing is in itself; everything exists only in relation to other things. If, moreover, everything is constantly both affecting and being affected by other things, both things and their relations are always changing. In other words, everything is always in motion or flux. There are, therefore, no purely intelligible units or enduring definitions of things. Neither logismos nor logos has any foundation
in being itself.

Socrates and Theodorus initially agreed to examine Parmenides’ thesis as well, but when Thedorus withdrew, much to Theaetetus’ disappointment, Socrates also refused to proceed. It is not Socrates, but rather the Stranger, therefore, who brings out a similar problem with his mentor’s doctrine—in the process of criticizing the “friends of the forms” who dispute the materialist thesis.

Socrates is clearly one of these “friends” who argue that being consists in some kinds of intelligible and bodiless forms whereas bodies are characterized by becoming. The problem with this thesis, the Stranger points out, is that it fails to explain cognition. Isn’t that which is known affected—and the soul which knows it? Moreover, “the being that is cognized, to the extent that it is being cognized, to just that extent is in motion.” Thought and calculation (logismos) both involve motion. According to the “friends of the forms,” however, the pure intelligibles that have being are unchanging and hence at rest. If mind and soul both involve motion, there must be some kind of interaction to overcome the fundamental difference between the mind and the being(s) it is supposed to apprehend. The Stranger’s critique of the friends of the forms thus resembles the last critique Parmenides made of Socrates in their early conversation (Parmenides 134d-135b); it would seem that the unchanging intelligibles could not be known by changing mortals. However, the Stranger indicates, the same objection could be raised against Parmenides’ own teaching as well.

The Stranger and Theaetetus agree that they would not want to deny motion, life, soul and intelligence (phronesis at 248e) to that which perfectly is. As a result, they face the following dilemma: “if the things which are, are motionless [as Parmenides maintained in his poem], there never is mind (nous from 249a) in anything about anything [contrary to Parmenides’ saying that ‘to be’ (einaí) and ‘to
think’ (*noein*) are the same].” However, if they “concede that all things are sweeping along and moving [as Heraclitus and his ilk argued, they also] remove [mind] by this speech from the things that are.” The intelligibility of being seems to require that it somehow be both in motion and at rest.

Reviewing his previous critique of the thinkers who maintained that being was characterized by a fundamental opposition, e. g., between rest and motion, the Stranger suggests that they might solve the problem if they agreed that being is something other than rest and motion, in which both rest and motion share, even though they themselves are mutually exclusive. He and Theaetetus might appear to be providing a “feast” for the young and late-learners who would then object that they are contradicting themselves by saying that being is simultaneously both one and many. However, to those who are interested truly in discovering what being is (i.e., potential philosophers), rather than merely in showing up or defeating others in argument (i.e., eristic sophists), they would respond by pointing out that opposed qualities like rest and motion cannot be said to be one, yet people who would maintain that each and every form of being is entirely separate from all others make themselves ridiculous by saying that each “is” separate (and so in effect claiming that it has something, “being,” in common with others). The only “solution” is to show that some of the things which are (like being itself) mix with others (like rest and motion) whereas others (like rest and motion) do not mix.

Just as there are certain letters (vowels) that mix with others (consonants) and others (consonants) that do not mix, so that one must possess a certain kind of knowledge (*grammatike*) to distinguish and hence be able to combine them correctly, the Stranger suggests, we also need to have a science that can determine which of the kinds of being go through all so as to make them capable of mixing and which are unmixable and hence causes of the divisions among them. That “science of the
"free” would appear to be philosophy, that is, the dialectical science of dividing (things or beings) into kinds (genera or genai) according to their ‘ideas (ideai).’ In seeking the sophist, the Stranger exclaims, we seem to have found the philosopher! So long as we do not possess the requisite knowledge of the kinds of beings, however, both remain opaque—but for different reasons. Whereas the philosopher is difficult to see because he lives in such a brilliant place, the sophist hides in the darkness of “that which is not.” To discern either philosopher or sophist, it seems, we have to identify the principle of differentiation more clearly. That is what the Stranger proceeds to do.

He suggests that they review not all the eide (which would include such specific or specialized erga as the angler) but only the greatest to see which combine and which do not. Both rest and motion combine with being, he reiterates, although not with each other. These eide are thus three; “each of them is other than the two, and itself the same as itself” (254d). But what, then, he asks about this “same” and “other.” “Are they themselves a kind of pair of two genera, different from these three, but always of necessity joining them in a mixture?” (254e). Theaetetus is unable to say, so the Stranger proceeds to argue that being and same cannot be one, for if they were, nothing would be different, and the two interlocutors have seen that rest and motion differ. The Stranger and Theaetetus thus agree that ‘same’ (autos) constitutes a fourth of the largest and most basic eide and that ‘other’ (heteron) constitutes a fifth, because things are the same as themselves but differ relative to others. “And we’ll assert besides that it has gone through all of them, for it’s not on account of its own nature that each one is different from all the rest, but on account of its participation in the idea of the other” (255e). In other words, everything that has being is different from everything else; being is, exists, and is intelligible only as differentiated. It differs, however, not because of what it is in itself, but because of its participation in
the idea of otherness, i.e., its relation to others.

The Stranger draws the immediate consequence of his argument when he points out that they have agreed that motion is not (the same as) being, but in saying that it “is not” being they have not denied that it has being; they have maintained rather that it is other than being. In the case of each of the eide when they “say ‘that which is not, [they’re] not saying . . . something contrary to ‘that which is but only other’” (257b). Since the “other” is one of the fundamental eide that are, the Stranger and Theaetetus are thus maintaining that “that which is not” in this sense is among the things “which are.” The Stranger thus points out that they have disobeyed Parmenides’ injunction not to force “whatever are not to be” and to “keep your thought away from this way of searching.” They have not, however, asserted the being of not-being and thereby contradicted themselves. They have not proceeded or thought down the forbidden “way” of “not-being.” On the contrary, proceeding along the way of being, they have shown that it is heterogeneous. Previous thinkers have not perceived the way in which otherness penetrates all being, because otherness has been “chopped up” like knowledge into different kinds with different names. Rather than understand things which are not (differ from the) beautiful as such, for example, we call them ugly and think that is a separate class, idea or kind. Things or beings exist, are known, and defined not simply in themselves but in relation to others. This is the true use of identifying mutually exclusive contraries like rest and motion in being. Those who use contraries merely to contradict or defeat any assertion by showing that the same is other or the big small are not engaged in a true examination; such sophistry (as we would, but the Stranger does not, explicitly call it) “is the fresh offspring of someone who just now is getting his hands on ‘the things which are’” (259d). Those who engage in the “antilogistical” argumentation characteristic of the sophist are new,
but not thorough students of Parmenides. Even worse, however, are those who “try to set apart everything from everything.” They are especially “unmusical” and “unphilosophical, because their denial of any relation, much less similarity or sameness, among things would make harmony, poetry, language, mathematics, or thought—in a word, all the activities that depend upon *logos*—impossible.

One of the major problems with the Parmenidean thesis that being is one was, according to the Stranger, that it did not allow for the existence of a name or word that referred to being, but was obviously different from the thing itself. The purpose of his revision of Parmenides’ argument he now states was to show how speech (*logos*) was possible.\(^\text{34}\) The Stranger’s critique would appear to apply, however, also to Socrates’ teaching about the ideas. Although Socrates taught that things acquire the traits they have by participating in the ideas, he maintained that the ideas themselves were discrete. Socrates does not and apparently cannot say how these *eide* are related to one another or how it is that the *eide* and the things that participate in them can be specified and reasoned about in speech.\(^\text{35}\) He who claims to investigate the *logoi* (*Phaedo* 99e) cannot give an account of the “fact” (*ergon*) or power (*dunamís*) of *logos*! That would require an account of the way in which the *eide* combine as well as exclude their opposites of the kind the Stranger has just given. The accusation the Stranger implicitly directs at Socrates is, therefore, a serious one, indeed. Criticizing Socrates more radically than his own mentor, Parmenides, the Stranger charges that Socrates fails to give an account of his own practice, that is, that he lacks self-knowledge. Socrates cannot explain the possibility or ground either of his own seeking or attaining knowledge of the eternal, unchanging ideas (since the acquisition of that knowledge clearly involves change and motion) or the “being” of the particular subject matter of his study, the *logoi*.\(^\text{36}\)
IV. Who Is the Sophist?

Theaetetus does not understand either the challenge to Socrates or the way in which the Stranger has laid a foundation for a solution to the problem of false opinion. When the Stranger suggests that they now have to determine whether speech and opinion mix with the “is not” so that false images are possible, Theaetetus thus peevishly complains that they will never pin down the sophist, who seems to have infinite defenses. He may well remember the difficulty he and Socrates experienced in their attempt to give an account of the possibility of false opinion in their conversation the day before.

Perceiving Theaetetus’ failure to understand either the peak or the point of the argument, the Stranger rapidly brings his exchange with Theaetetus to a conclusion. First he suggests they do with names or words what they did with letters and ideas before—namely, that they observe that some fit together whereas others do not. As consonants must be combined with vowels in order to create words, the Stranger now points out, so nouns must be combined with verbs in order to constitute a speech. The possibility of error or deceit arises from the need to combine two distinct elements. If subject and verb do not in fact belong together, the statement will be false.37

Having shown how false opinion is possible much more quickly and easily than Theaetetus believed possible, the Stranger concludes, they can now define the sophist using diairesis. Beginning with a distinction between the productive and acquisitive arts, they had initially attempted to define sophistry as a form of the latter. Upon examination, however, it appeared that sophistry constituted a form of imitation. Now that they have shown how it is possible for things to appear other than they are, they can isolate the kind of imitative art practiced by the sophist by dividing the productive arts into two—divine and human—and each of these into the making of things and their images.38 Man-made
images can then be divided into those produced with tools and those made through the use of one’s own body (as in acting). Those who engage in the latter kind of imitation can do so, moreover, with or without knowledge of that which they imitate. Some simply imitate what they believe is virtuous activity, whereas others, aware of their own lack of knowledge, are ironic. One who is capable of being ironical before multitudes in public in long speeches, the Stranger and Theaetetus agree, should be called a “public speaker” (demologikon) rather than a “statesman” (who is defined in the next dialogue as a knower). Likewise, the Stranger and Theaetetus concur, the man who ironically compels his interlocutor to contradict himself in brief speeches in private cannot be called wise, because he lacks knowledge. Such a man, they conclude, should be identified as a sophist.

Is Socrates a sophist so defined? Like his teacher Theodorus, Theaetetus seems to think so. He readily named the purifier who showed another that he did not know what he thought he knew a sophist. It is not clear, however, that Plato intends his readers to agree. Socrates may be famous for his irony, but he is just as famous for his open declaration in his Apology that he knows only that he does not know. Should we believe Socrates’ protestations of his ignorance, however? People do not always tell the truth. Socrates’ ability to refute others made him appear to be wise to his audience. Since we cannot truly know human motives or intentions, the Stranger suggests, we need to classify activities according to their externally observable “looks.”

In his Apology (20a) Socrates admits that people tend to confuse him with the sophists. Because they claim to be able to teach young people how to become virtuous, they charge a fee. He does not. Nor does he do any of the silly things Aristophanes showed a man named Socrates doing in his comedy. He does not inquire into the things in the heavens and under the earth or teach people how
to make the weaker argument the stronger. He does not, in fact, claim to teach anything at all; unlike Gorgias, Prodicus, or Hippias, Socrates does not, therefore, travel from city to city and charge a fee to those who want to hear him converse. By interrogating those who claim to know what is good in human life—the statesmen, poets, and artisans—Socrates tries to show his fellow Athenians that they are foolishly pursuing the goods of the body from a cowardly fear of death rather than pursuing the goods of the soul, truth and prudence. Socrates admits that “those present on each occasion suppose that I myself am wise in the things concerning which I refute someone else” (23a). Nevertheless, he insists, he is not. The “certain” wisdom Socrates possesses is that he knows that he does not know the most important things; he does, in other words, claim to know what is most important for human beings to know, and that he like other human beings should seek such knowledge. He tries to impart such wisdom to his interlocutors and auditors by showing them that they do not, as they believe, actually know what is good. He himself tries to make his fellow citizens better, but he does not teach a skill or convey a certain body of information. He does not refute others in order to show them up or to demonstrate his superiority, although that may well be what the youths who anger their elders by imitating Socrates in conversation enjoy and emulate.

In an earlier conversation with a teacher of rhetoric named Polus (Gorgias 462b-465c), Socrates thus gave a rather different definition of a “sophist” than that with which the Eleatic Stranger concluded his conversation with Theaetetus. There Socrates argued that political arts or kinds of knowledge (technai) like legislation and justice can be distinguished from mere “knacks” or practices (empeiria derived from experience) like sophistry and forensic rhetoric insofar as the former seek to achieve what is good for the soul whereas the latter seek merely to provide pleasure (or at least to
minimize pain). Because famous Athenian statesmen like Miltiades, Cimon, and Pericles tried to satisfy their fellow citizens’ desires for empire, glory and wealth rather than trying to make them better people, Socrates argued, these famous leaders were not truly statesmen. Because he and he alone tried to improve his compatriots by showing them that they did not know what is truly good, Socrates claimed, he himself was the only true *politikos* in Athens. Nevertheless, he admitted, if someone were unjustly to accuse him of corrupting the young before a popular assembly, he would not be able to defend himself any more successfully than a doctor accused by a pastry chef of prescribing bitter drugs rather than sweets before a group of children. The people Socrates was trying to benefit did not understand what he was doing or why.

In the conversation he has with Theaetetus’ friend and associate, the “young Socrates,” about the statesman in contrast to the sophist, the Eleatic Stranger also argues that the leaders of actual regimes are the “greatest imitators” and thus “the sophists of sophists” (303b-d) because they lack the “royal art.” The knowledge (which the Stranger describes both as *episteme* and *techne*) that these great “sophists” lack is not, however, knowledge of what is truly good. According to the Eleatic Stranger, the “royal art” consists not merely in knowing how to coordinate all the other arts that contribute to the preservation or protection of the city and its inhabitants. The art of the statesman consists primarily in his ability to make sure that all lawful educators and nurses do nothing that does not contribute to mixing courage and moderation in the citizen body. He will employ the related, but subsidiary arts of rhetoric, generalship, and judging to see that people who become too insolent or humble are purged through execution, exile, or other dishonors. Neither courage nor moderation is inculcated in itself or for its own sake, moreover. On the contrary, those who tend by nature to become
courageous have to be moderated and thus made gentler lest they engage the polity in so many wars that it destroys itself; likewise, those who would like simply to mind their own business become too weak to defend themselves unless they are made more bold. The statesman needs to know above all how to combine these two virtues, both in the citizen body as a whole and in individual people, first by seeing that they acquire and maintain true opinions about the beautiful, just and good, second by joining those who tend to be bold with those who are more orderly by nature, both within and outside the city, in marriage, through exchanges of children, and in various offices. As the paradigm of weaving the Stranger uses to illuminate the character of the royal art suggests, it is dedicated to protecting or preserving the city.

From Socrates’ point of view, the Stranger’s account of the statesman’s art is thus fundamentally defective. A statesman who does not seek, much less claim to know what is good could not improve his fellow citizens by showing them that they do not know the most important things. From Socrates’ point of view, the Stranger thus looks rather like a sophist. Not only does he claim to know something important—the art of the statesman—that he does not; insofar as he encourages people to learn what is necessary for the city to survive, the Stranger also encourages people to acquire virtue in order to preserve the city rather than to preserve the city as a necessary condition for the acquisition of virtue.

Socrates and the Stranger thus provide the example par excellence, it seems, of the problem with which the Stranger began. They use the same words to denote different activities (erga). Their differences are not, and perhaps cannot be, resolved through a logos, because they seek to explain different aspects of human life and the grounds of their respective explanations turn out to be
incompatible. Sorting like from like, the Stranger seeks to distinguish three different kinds of knowledge—sophistike, politike, and philosophy. His argument concerning the koinonia of the eide makes it easier to account for human knowledge of the whole; because he includes motion among the basic eide he does not confront the insuperable difficulties faced by “friends of the forms” like Socrates who insist that intelligible things must also be unchanging and so suggest that neither the soul nor the cosmos can have a simply intelligible order. Because he abstracts from intention or motive, however, the Stranger cannot give a full account of human action any more than the cosmological thinkers Socrates faults in the Phaedo for trying to explain his decision to remain in jail rather than to flee by sorting out the elements of his bodily constitution. The Stranger may specify what and how people do what they do, but not why. He does not, and perhaps cannot, explain what or why he is doing what he is doing, conversing with Theaetetus in the presence of Socrates or formulating his teaching concerning the koinonia of the eide to show the possibility and grounds of logos. That is, the Stranger cannot give a better account of his own activity than can Socrates, although the reasons for the failure to provide such an account differ in each case. If philosophy consists in knowledge—either of the whole or merely of self—by the end of this dialogue, we see, neither Socrates nor the Stranger is a philosopher. If philosophy consists merely in the search for wisdom, Socrates and the Stranger represent different routes, each able to give an account of some of the relevant phenomena, neither able to give an account of the whole.
Endnotes

1. E.g., Paul Friedlaender, Plato, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958-69); Kenneth M. Sayre, Plato’s Late Ontology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). J. Skemp also suggests the Statesman represents a later stage of Plato’s political teaching than the Republic. Statesman, trans. (New York, 1957), p. 96, n. 48. The “dating” of the dialogues in terms of the presumed development of Plato’s thought is vexed by the fact that we do not know the time or order in which order he wrote them; all the “dating” in terms of the time of composition is based on interpretations of the dialogues themselves (and inferences from stylometric changes). Divisions of the dialogues into early, middle, and late periods of composition do not agree, moreover, with the internal dramatic dates. For example, many commentators regard the Apology of Socrates as an “early” dialogue, even though the speech it contains obviously occurred late in Socrates’ life, because the Apology contains no “metaphysical” (a non-Platonic term) teaching; likewise, they think the Parmenides is a middle, or even late dialogue, even though the conversation portrayed in it occurs when Socrates is a youth. Plato was known in ancient times to have continued working on his dialogues over the course of his lifetime. If he had wanted to revise the presentation of his position as articulated by Socrates to make it consistent with his own later thought, he could have changed the development of thought he attributed to Socrates in the Phaedo to make it consistent with the Stranger’s argument in the Sophist. I think commentators ought to pay more attention to the fact that Plato attributed different doctrines to different philosophical spokesmen in conversations occurring at different times and places.

2. In his conversation with Hermogenes the day before, Socrates observed that he seemed to have been inspired by his encounter with Euthyphro earlier that morning. “Today we should make use of
[that inspiration] and finish the investigation of names, but tomorrow... we will get ourselves purified when we have found someone who is clever at purifying such things, either one of the priests or one of the sophists” (396d4-397a1). The Stranger appears to be just such a “purifier.”

3. Socrates paraphrases Odysseus first when Homer’s hero describes Zeus as the god of strangers to the cyclops (Odyssey ix, 271) and then when he reminds the worst of Penelope’s suitors that Zeus may come disguised as a stranger to look into the outrages human beings commit (xvii, 485-7).


5. Cf. 254a-b where the Stranger observes that both the philosopher and the sophist are difficult to see, but for different reasons. The sophist is “a fugitive into the darkling of ‘that which is not’... [whereas] the philosopher is not easy to see because of the brilliance of the place he’s in.” Quotations taken from Seth Benardete, trans., Plato’s Sophist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) unless otherwise indicated.

6. The third would appear to be a reference to Socrates’ own description of the philosopher (and himself) as an erotic “madman” in the Phaedrus (253c-257b).

7. Theodorus exhibits his lack of philosophical experience or learning, once again, by failing to understand the question.

8. Cf. Sophist 253 c-e: “By Zeus!” the Stranger exclaims: “Did we fall unawares into the science of the free, and is it probable that in looking for the sophist we’ve first found the philosopher?... We’ll assert, shall we not, that to divide according to genera and not to believe either the same another species or if it is other the same, this is the characteristics of the dialectical science?... But the dialectical capacity—you won’t give it to anyone... except to whoever philosophizes purely and justly.”

9. In the Phaedrus (265c-266c) Socrates also describes the division of things into kinds as diairesis and part of the science of dialectics, which involves collection as well as division. But he never engages in the same kind of dichotomizing; he speaks rather, as the Stranger will eventually in the Statesman (287c), of separating things like a butchered animal at the joints.

10. In the Protagoras (329b-d, 333e-335c), we should recall, Socrates insisted upon the sophist’s giving brief answers to his questions rather than delivering a long speech as was his wont.

11. Perhaps we should say that he resolves his perplexity to his own satisfaction. Commentators as distinguished as Stanley Rosen, Plato’s Sophist (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), G. E. L. Owen, “Plato on Not-Being,” in Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology, ed. G. Vlastos (New York:
Doubleday Anchor, 1971), pp. 223-67, and M. Frede, *Praedikation und Existenzaussage* (Goetting: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967) have not been able to agree on what the Stranger means by ‘being.’

12. There would, indeed, appear to be four possibilities—selling speeches composed by others at home or abroad; selling speeches composed by oneself as well as by others—at home or abroad. To emphasize the lack of clarity, it seems, the definitions of the sophist as merchant are counted differently—as 2 or 3—but never as 4. Cf. Jacob Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 175

13. In his *Apology* (31b, 38 a-b) Socrates emphasizes his poverty. That is the reason his friends have to offer to pay a fine on his behalf. In his *Oeconomicus* and *Memorabilia* Xenophon suggests that Socrates gave his friends prudent advice, and that they provided him with economic support in a kind of exchange. Socrates did not restrict his advice or association to those wealthy enough to contribute to his support, however; nor do these exchanges appear to have been very profitable.

14. This is the reason perhaps the Stranger does not make the four exchange possibilities completely evident. As we have seen, he is explicitly aware of his status as a foreigner in Athens and the implicit dangers of that condition.

15. Cf. *Parmenides* 130e, 135 c-d.

16. One of the definitions of eros Diotima explicitly refutes in her instruction of Socrates is explicitly taken from Parmenides (quoted by Phaedrus in the first speech [178b]); she also raises objections to the doctrine of Empedocles embedded in the speeches of Eryximachus and Aristophanes. Cf. Seth Benardete, *On Plato’s SYMPOSIUM* (Muenchen: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1993), pp. 69-71. In, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), Leo Strauss argues that Xenophon also indicates that the decisive turn took place in Socrates’ thought when he turned to ask, what is noble?

17. In the *Statesman* 266d we see the Stranger use his own method in an attempt to free Young Socrates from false pride in his humanity as opposed to animality. Distinctions in terms of better and worse are suspect in the Stranger’s mind.

18. Socrates appears to make a parallel, but fundamentally different claim in the *Republic* 505d-506a when he observes that human beings will settle for the mere appearance of being just or noble, but that no one wants the merely apparently good. We all want what is really good, but do not know what it is.

19. The contrast between the wolf and the dog reminds us of the question raised in the definition of the angler as to whether there could be a hunting (*thera*) of tame beasts (since in Greek, Benardete, “Commentary,” p. II.84, points out, the verb seems restricted to wild beasts [*theria*]). Only if human beings (the tamers of others) could themselves be considered to be tame. (In that case, Theaetetus and the Stranger could be considered to be engaged in such a hunt in their attempt to “pin down” the
“sophist,” whom the Stranger describes as a complex “beast” at 226a.) As a human activity, it now appears, sophistry can appear to be both wild and tame (like philosophy?). Or is sophistry “wild” philosophy? We do not know what the Stranger thinks philosophy is. It could be the “noble” origin or genesis of sophistry. Insofar as he associates nobility with tameness (domestication), the Stranger suggests that nobility is fundamentally conventional. For that reason, it appears, he considers sorting according to better and worse in a Socratic-style catharsis to be a “noble” form of sophistry. According to the Stranger, ignorance appears to be ugly (and knowledge, correspondingly, beautiful or noble). In fact, ignorance consists in a lack of (the ability to) measure. As we shall see in the Statesman, the Stranger thinks the art(s) of measurement can be taught. So did traveling teachers like Hippias and Prodicus who agree unqualifiedly with Socrates when he suggests that they teach the art of measuring pleasure accurately. Is the Eleatic Stranger such a sophist? He does not talk much, if at all about pleasure.

20. In his poem, Parmenides described the path the goddess showed him as one that bears the knower “over all cities,” G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, The Presocratic Philosophers, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 243. Like Odysseus and in contrast to Socrates’ own behavior, earlier Greek philosophers tends to associate the acquisition and promulgation of wisdom with travel.

21. The Stranger’s last mention of the sophist’s selling his speeches “for a small sum” occurs at 234a. (Nothing had been said previously about low cost.)


23. In his enumeration of the five kinds of things about which sophists discourse, the central item concerns their ability to refute whatever is said about being or becoming in private conversations. As we shall see, the Stranger will proceed later in this private conversation to refute the claims all his predecessors made about the character of being and becoming. Is he then a sophist? He does not talk about “laws and all the political things.” If sophists did not dispute about these, Theaetetus observes, no one would converse with them. In light of the inability of the Eleatics to attract a following in Athens that Plato dramatizes at the beginning of the Parmenides, we are led to ask, once again, whether their failure to attract many young Athenians was a result of the apolitical character of their doctrines, a characteristic which also prevented them from being prosecuted the way Protagoras and Socrates were.

24. In this dialogue, the only poem from which the Stranger (or anyone else) quotes is that by the philosopher Parmenides. It is Socrates who paraphrases Homer at the beginning. In completely ignoring poetry the Eleatic Stranger goes even further than his teacher, Parmenides, who Plato shows quoting a single line from Ibycus (Parmenides 137a) to express his own feelings.

and the sophist in Diotima’s portrait of Eros.

26. The Stranger may have heard rumors or even a recounting of Socrates’ critique of Zeno from his fellow Eleatics. Knowing that Socrates had refuted Zeno might account for the Stranger’s hesitation to give a long speech in front of Socrates better than what we suspect he heard from Theodorus and his students—especially if the Stranger thinks his argument may provoke wonder on Socrates’ part!

27. In the fragments of his poem that remain, Parmenides asserts not only that *eain* and *noein* are the same but also that “What is there to be said (*legein*) and thought (*noein*) must be. Kirk, Raven, and Scofield, *Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 247.


29. The “imagery” here of not “going soft” is sexual, but sexuality is associated with an aggressive attack, rather than an erotic attraction.


31. In the lectures he gave on the *Sophist* in 1924-25, Martin Heidegger thus argued that Plato had solved the problem of *logos* that Parmenides had raised but had proved unable to deal with satisfactorily.

32. Like Parmenides himself, “friends of the forms” like Socrates argue that being itself must be unchanging in order to be intelligible. In other words, Socrates “revised” Parmenides’ doctrine to avoid the paradoxes brought out by Zeno by making being plural. The Stranger, we shall see, revises Parmenides’ doctrine by including motion in being.

33. To Socrates’ contention in his conversation with Theaetetus () that the combination of vowels and consonants in speech that constitutes first syllables and then words cannot serve as a model of the way in which we come to know things, because an intelligible whole cannot be composed of unintelligible parts, the Stranger responds, in effect, that the parts or *eide* are not intelligible in themselves; they are only intelligible in relation to one another. (Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic and Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith [New Haven: Yale University Press, 19 ], pp.

34. In *Being and Logos*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), John Sallis thus argues that, “The *Sophist* is a *logos* about *logos*” (p. 456). In the lectures he gave in 1924-25 on *Plato’s SOPHIST*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), Martin Heidegger argued that the discovery of the difference between *logos* and being was THE
advance Plato made on Parmenides.

35. In Books VI and VII of the Republic he simply suggests by means of analogy and in an image (!) that they are all somehow caused or encompassed by the “idea of the Good” which is “beyond being.” In his Seventh Letter Plato is famous for observing, moreover, that his own teaching about “the Good” could not be put into words (logos).

36. Mitchell H. Miller, Jr. first pointed out the way in which the conversations depicted in the “trilogy” of the Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman, set as they are in the context of his indictment for a capital crime in Athens, constitute the “philosophical” trial of Socrates in his path-breaking study of The Philosopher in Plato’s STATESMAN (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), p. 2. Howland, Paradox, also characterizes the Sophist (along with the other dialogues set immediately preceding Socrates’ trial) as the “philosophical” trial that parallels the political, but he does not state the Stranger’s accusation (or critique) in terms of logos or self-knowledge.

37. The Stranger indicates here why Socrates’ attempt to show how words could reveal the nature of things in the Cratylus was necessarily fruitless. Such a revelation requires a combination of noun (onoma) with verbs (rhema). A name alone will not suffice; one also needs to know the “work” (ergon or pragma). “Theaetetus sits” is true, but that “Theaetetus flies” is not. In the Theaetetus 201e-210a Socrates argued that logos could not be understood to be composed of elements (like letters) that were unintelligible in themselves, but became intelligible in combination, because nothing intelligible could be composed out of the unintelligible. How could the unintelligible parts make an intelligible whole? Syllables are not more intelligible in themselves than the letters of which they are composed. Like letters, the Stranger argues that words signify certain “elements” or things, some of which but only some of which can be combined. With regard to logos as with regard to the whole, Socrates cannot explain the relation or the intelligibility of the relation of the discrete parts (in the whole, the relation of the eternally, unchanging eide to the changeable things).

38. At this point (265e), the Stranger makes clear, he is directing the argument specifically to Theaetetus. Having thrown down his philosophical gauntlet to Socrates, so to speak, and seeing that Theaetetus missed the point, the Stranger now explicitly adapts his remarks to his perception of the young man’s nature. In contrast to the “many” who believe that things come to be as they are spontaneously, without thought (dianoia) or science (episteme), Theaetetus is not merely following what he takes to be indications of the Stranger’s opinion; in the future, the Stranger predicts, Theaetetus will come to believe that the world is made by a divine art (techne).

39. The extent of Socrates’ irony may have been mistated, moreover. In an article on “Socratic eironeia,” Interpretation, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May 1985), pp. 143-49, that should have a wider readership, Ronna Burger points out that there are five and only five places in the Platonic corpus that Socrates is explicitly said to be ironic—once by Thrasymachus in the Republic, once in the Gorgias by
Callicles, twice in the *Symposium* by Alcibiades, and once by Socrates himself in the *Apology*, when he complains that if he says that he was serving the god, they will think he is being ironic.

40. In this respect the Stranger resembles a modern empirical social scientist.

41. As Hans Georg Gadamer argues in *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, trans. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 19_), pp., people will not seek wisdom or engage in philosophy so long as they believe they know what they need to know. Socrates’ elenctic refutations are necessary first-steps, therefore, in his attempt to engage others in a search for true wisdom.

42. In his *Apology* Socrates thus suggests that it may be impossible to distinguish a philosopher from a sophist simply by observing what he does, i.e., ask other people questions. It is necessary to inquire into the reasons he asks his questions, i.e., his intentions. As Gadamer points out, *The Idea of the Good*, trans. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, Aristotle seems to agree. Cf. *Metaphysics* (Gadamer)

43. *Statesman* 308e-311c.

44. Howland, *Paradox*, p. 189, also suggests that the Stranger looks like a sophist. “The sophist’s disguise . . . is that of the wise man. The method of division, however, hunts the sophist, from which it seems to follow that the method, too, camouflages itself. If so, what disguise does the Stranger employ? . . . [T]he Stranger imitates the sophist in cloaking his method in the appearance of knowledge.” Howland faults the Stranger, ultimately, for employing this quasi-mathematical method in a ridiculously rigid manner and for neglecting Socratic concerns with eros and the human soul. In “The Politics of a Sophistic Rhetorician,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1978): 1-26, and “Plato’s *Politicus*, an Eleatic Sophist on Politics,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1978): 85-86, V. Tejara also identifies the Stranger as a sophist, but for a different reason, for equivocating between the not-being (simply) referred to by Parmenides and not-being as otherness, as well as for fabricating clever arguments in a pseudo-Socratic manner in the *Statesman*.

45. At *Statesman* 297b the Stranger says “intelligent rulers (*emphrosin archousin*) do not err, so long as they . . . use mind and art to distribute [things] to [people] in the city most justly, to keep them safe and make them better from worse as far as possible.” (My translation.) Both Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Statesman: The Web of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and Paul Stern, “The Rule of Wisdom and the Rule of Law in Plato’s *Statesman*,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 1997): 264-76, both argue that the statesman is characterized or defined by his prudence (*phronesis*). If so, his prudence consists in an ability or the art of selecting the correct means in the specific circumstances, including the inculcation of the two virtues, to preserve the city, i.e., preservation is the end and prudence is the means.