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Lesley Brown’s *Being in the Sophist: A Syntactical Enquiry* Summary

**Introduction**

* *Being in the Sophist: A Syntactical enquiry* is the eighteenth chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato.* It is a philosophical analysis of the Greek dialogue *Sophist* by Plato.
* One of the main disputed questions in the *Sophist* is whether Plato marks off different uses of the verb ‘to be.’
* This article discusses the differences between the ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete’ uses of ‘to be’ and how they can contribute to the reading of the *Sophist*.

**I.**

* The focus of this article is on the claim that the *Sophist* has a clear statement of the difference between the complete and the incomplete uses of ‘to be.’

**II.**

* This section briefly summarizes parts of Owen’s position in the article *Plato on Not Being.*
* There are two versions of the verb ‘to be,’ the complete one in which it determines a one-place predicate and then the incomplete use determining a two-place predicate.
* In its complete use the verb means exist and in its incomplete use it is the copula.
* The *Sophist* is where Plato focuses exclusively on the incomplete use of ‘to be’

**III.**

* The incomplete use is when a subject expression and the appropriate form of the verb requires a complement to form a complete sentence.
* In the incomplete use of ‘to be’ a complement is required
  + An example of this is in the *Sophist* 233c6-8 when a sophist is being defined as an image-maker who teaches false beliefs to their students.
* Two possibilities for the use of ‘to be’:
  + One that doesn’t allow a complement.
  + One that doesn’t have a complement but allows one.
* Transitive verbs need an object in order to complete their meaning and intransitive verbs don’t. So, the complete use of ‘to be’ is an intransitive verb and the incomplete use is transitive since it requires a complement of some sort.
* In *Sophist* 259a6-8, the passage uses ‘to be’ without a complement, which is the
* Plato doesn’t explicitly mark the distinction between the use of ‘to be’ according to Vlastos’s article ‘A Metaphysical Paradox.’
* He never says that *X is F* does not entail *X is* but is consistent with *X is not.*
* Owen has denied that Plato’s main problem in the *Sophist* was existence since he shouldn’t have had any trouble distinguishing between the ‘is’ of existence and the ‘is not’ of non-existence. Brown suggests that the syntactic distinction just isn’t as clear which is why people don’t notice it or acknowledge that it’s there.

**IV.**

* Whenever *‘X is breathing’* is true it is also true that *‘X is breathing something’*  and *‘X is not breathing’*  also means the same as *‘X is not breathing anything.’* There are slight differences in the pairs of phrases, but they don’t have an important shift in the sense of the verb.
  + This can be said for the use of ‘to be.’ Adding a complement is only a slight difference from not adding one but the verb still has the same meaning.
* *X is not F* and *X is not* can be seen as meaning the same thing no matter which use of ‘is’ there is.
  + This similarity is most likely why Owen and others claim that only incomplete uses of ‘to be’ are present in the *Sophist* dialogue since they can’t identify the complete uses.

**V.**

* Majority of the relevant uses of ‘to be’ look like existential and therefore can be translated to ‘exist.’
* The idealist theory doesn’t reduce all things to forms but rather gives forms a special status among things that exist.
* An important section in the *Sophist* to highlight is 255e-256e where Ackrill claims that Plato distinguishes ‘to be’ of identity from that of predication.
* Plato makes the reader of this passage draw a distinction between the to uses of ‘to be.’
  + The incomplete use and the use that does not need a completion.

**Conclusion**

* There is a distinction between the syntactically incomplete and complete use of ‘to be’ in Plato’s *Sophist.*
* These two uses are related as follows:
  + *X is* (complete use)includes *X is something* (incomplete use)
  + *X is not* (complete use)is seen as equivalent to *X is nothing at all* (incomplete use)
* The complete and incomplete uses are similar to each other and entail one another which is why the distinction between the two isn’t seen by everyone.
* Being able to understand the distinction in the uses of ‘to be’ will also help with the understanding of the argument in the *Sophist*.