“Plato on Not Being” - Ally Liles

**INTRODUCTION**

1. Greek 'to be' means 2 things: "X is" (complete, existential use) and "X is *(some Y)\_\_*" ('incomplete', predicate use)
2. Owen claims that the *Sophist* deals in the incomplete use of ‘to be’.

**THE ARGUMENT FROM NOTHING/THE STANDARD VIEW**

1. The *Theaetetus, Sophist, and Parmenides* are often interpreted to make it seem like ‘what is not’ is used to deny existence using the equation that ‘what is not’=nothing. . Owen challenges this by saying that whatever is thought of must in some way be.

**THE PROSPECT OF JOINT ILLUMINATION**

1. The Parity Assumption (PA): Plato uses ‘not-being’ as if it has meaning. Plato speaks so often of “being and not-being” in the Sophist that he cannot be suggesting that only being (existing) represents successful thought, while not being simply fails to be anything at all. In 250e5-251a1, Plato states that being and not-being are equally puzzling and ‘if one of them can be made out to a greater or less degree of clarity the other can be made out to the same degree’.

**NEGATION AND CONTRARY**

1. Plato’s problem with ‘not being’ arises from the negation not the ‘being’. Plato states ‘what is not is contrary to what is’ (240b5,d6-8). However, not large does not mean small or middling. Therefore, negating ‘being’ is not the contrary to existence. Plato often uses ‘x is not’ as ‘x is not y’.This leads to the incomplete use of ‘to be’ at the most important times in the *Sophist*.

**THE SUBJECT NOTHING**

1. Owen wants to reject both (a) Plato equates ‘what is not’ with ‘nothing’ and (b) Nothing is what does not exist. ‘What is not’ is used to describe one specific attribute. (i) is the paradox that what is not is speaking of nothing which is not speaking at all. (ii) claims what is not has no attributes so it cannot be one nor many.
   1. The first stage of the arguments claims: if speaking what is not is speaking of nothing, it is not speaking at all: why? (i) answers this question. If ‘what is not’ equals ‘nothing’ and (ii) says what is not is unmentionable then (i) is incoherent.
   2. ‘Theatetus flies’: Theatetus cannot fly, that does not mean Theatetus is nothing.
2. The Platonic argument shows that non-existence is not the same as nothing. When using the verb as a two-place predicate, there cannot be non-existence. It is likely Plato uses ‘what is not’ to suggest ‘different than’. The general interpretation of the *Sophist* associates nothing and what-is-not with non-existence. However, using the incomplete use of the verb, what-is-not must be some thing.

**EXISTENCE REIMPORTED**

1. Owen rejects that the central problem of the *Sophist* can be solved by isolating the existential use of ‘to be’ verb. ‘What is not’ equals ‘nothing’ does not work because then ‘what is not’ cannot have attributes of existence.
2. In Greek, there is already a verb ‘to be real’ that Plato could have used if that was really what he meant. Plato strengthens the confusion about unreality and falsehood. Therefore, Plato divides reality from existence. The one-place predicate signifies existence while the incomplete ‘is’ does not carry this sense. Problems do not hinge on connective ‘is’.
3. If claims are about anything, they must be about anything that exists. Speaking falsely then is to mention something that exists but ascribe to it attributes that do not accurately describe the subject (e.x. Theatetus flies).
4. Plato distinguishes between what-is-not as what doesn’t exist and what-is-not as what is different than something. Difference is incomplete whereas existence does not need completion.
5. However, these four examples are misleading. I and II profess Plato noticed the importance of the existential use of ‘to be’ verb.

**THE EXPLICIT DISTINCTION**

1. ‘Partaking in not-being’ is not the same as non-existence or the one-place predicate. Marking differences must be filled out in reference to X; to call ‘X different’ gives an incomplete description. ‘Being’ is still a unitary concept for Plato.

**THE PARADOXES**

1. Being can have no connection to not-being. (i) ‘What is’ and ‘what is not’ are able to have the same subject. (ii) ‘Is’ can not be used for a subject which is not. (iv) This is paradoxical. (v) Believing what is not should have being since it is believed. These are all gathered from Plato’s works.
   1. Between (i) and (ii) it is assumed that the existential use is dropped. Then the Parity Assumption is reintroduced and the two-place predicate is understood. The existential use can only work for (i).
2. Some forms can be attributed to anything which make them identity statements, however cannot be identical to being. Therefore, ‘not to be’ is understood as a denial of identity. (v) makes contradictions of falsehood. To think falsely is to ascribe being to ‘what is not’, overcoming the paradox. Among attributes, the ‘one not with respect to X’ is counted. This distinction is between positive and negative falsehoods. The sophist makes no suggestion that the key verb cannot withstand negation.
3. The new proposal suggests: (a) is the predicative use and (b) is the identity use; neither is the use of existence.

**THE APPROACH TO FALSEHOOD**

1. The ‘being’ of an attribute must be identifiable and describable in its predicative use.
2. There is no longer a requirement that the subject must exist. This was contradicted to show it is not existential. For the correct interpretation, the existential use of the verb is used as opposed to the connective ‘is’ and negation left.
3. A-relation is between the statement and what it is about. ‘Theaetetus flies’ says something about Theaetetus which is predicatively not. The subject has been referred to successfully, and the falsity comes from the predicate.

**CONCLUSION**

1. The new requirements are that the subject should be about something that exists and not nothing. ‘To be’ is ‘to be’ something which uses the verb in an existential way. There must be a characterization between ‘nothing’ and ‘something’. Plato recognizes no use of the verb that cannot be negated.
2. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato uses the incomplete form of the verb ‘to be’ to solve his paradox. The *Sophist’s* solution does not seem to distinguish between the existential use and the incomplete use.