

The *dunamis* criterion: A Note on *Sophist* 247e

Tim Crowley
Department of Philosophy

The quest for the meaning of Being in Plato's *Sophist* includes in its itinerary an excursion into the history of philosophy. The Eleatic Stranger, suddenly perplexed just as much by 'being' as by 'not being', embarks on this brief history in a bid to find out precisely "what those who use it [*viz.*, the term 'being'] think it signifies" (243d).¹ His investigation proceeds by interrogating the 'famous men of old', who may be identified as the early Ionians, the Eleatics, Empedocles and possibly Anaximander, and is guided by the question: "What are we to understand by this 'being' of yours?" (243e). The Stranger rounds off this survey of the views of his predecessors with the famous 'battle of the giants'. This section takes a look at the theories of some more recent, indeed, contemporary, philosophers. The protagonists in this battle are often dubbed 'materialists' and 'idealists'; these appellations are not quite accurate, but we can let that pass.² The probability of finding in either camp a successful theory of being is somewhat prejudged in advance: the Stranger introduces the section like this: "we must now turn our eyes to those whose doctrines are less precise, that we may know from all sources that it is no easier to define the nature of being than that of not being" (245e). And if we skip to the end of the discussion, we find the Stranger wondering whether they have emerged "in any less perplexity [*aporia*] about being"; to which Theaetetus responds: "It seems to me, Stranger, that we are, if possible, in even greater" (250d). Thus the quest for the meaning of Being must continue.

Yet a significant number of important commentators and philosophers have claimed that Plato does in fact discover the meaning of Being in this section. They point to 247e as the decisive passage in which Being is defined: if we turn to this passage, we find the Stranger making the following remark:

I suggest that everything which possesses any power [*dunamin*] of any kind, either to produce a change in anything of any nature or to be affected even in the least degree by the slightest cause, though it be only on one occasion, has real being. For I set up as a definition [*horon*] which defines the things that are [*ta onta*], that it is nothing else than power (247d-e).

Among those who hold this formulation to be Plato's own definition of being is A. N. Whitehead, who also celebrated it as a move by Plato towards something approaching Whitehead's own conception of philosophy as process: "It was Plato in his later mood who put forward the suggestion 'and I hold that the definition of being is simply power'. This suggestion is the character of the doctrine of Immanent Law".³ On the other hand,

other commentators, such as W. K. C. Guthrie, feel it is “nothing more than a dialectical device to help on the argument, [Plato’s] purpose being to bring materialists and idealists closer together”.⁴ This view Guthrie shares with Taylor, Apelt, Dies, Campbell, and Cornford.⁵ Guthrie adds that the “view that it is Plato’s own is mainly that of an older generation, Grote, Zeller, Lutoslawski, Ritter”.⁶ Recently, however, this view seems to have been to some extent revived. Indeed Dorothea Frede goes so far as to claim that the question whether this definition is Plato’s final view on the matter “remains an open one”, and refers to the “continuing academic debate” on this point.⁷

In what follows I present a series of arguments which hopefully will persuade the reader that the definition offered at 247d-e *cannot* be taken as Plato’s considered view of the nature of Being. The defenders of what Guthrie called the ‘older view’ usually point to the following three reasons for believing that Being, according to Plato, is power:

- (i) Plato explicitly says so, at 247d-e. As one proponent put it: “Being, Plato says, is power or potency”.⁸
- (ii) The definition is convincing, since the power to act and to be acted upon is indeed common to all things.
- (iii) Participation, or the communion of beings, is explained by, and indeed depends upon, the capacity of a thing to act or be acted upon. Indeed, for Charles Bigger, the ‘battle of the giants’ “must surely be the most important passage for an understanding of participation in the dialogues”.⁹

Below I investigate each of these claims in turn. But before I do so I wish to take issue with the form of the supposed definition. It does not seem to have been noticed, by those who claim that Plato truly holds ‘being’ to be ‘power’, how vulnerable their position is. The strongest argument against the definition is perhaps the one I will repeat in the following paragraph. In the succeeding sections of this paper, however, I will ignore the ‘formal’ objection, so that the definition’s content may be judged solely on the basis of its performance in the *Sophist*.

1. In Plato’s *Hippias Major* Socrates attempts to define the beautiful as “that which is pleasing to the hearing and to the sight” (298a).¹⁰ He soon dismisses this apparently plausible definition, however, after demonstrating that since a pleasure gained through sight is not, obviously, identical to a pleasure gained through hearing, then it follows that what is pleasing to the sight cannot in fact be beautiful (299e). Similarly, he shows that the reverse also holds. The same thing, by this definition, would be both beautiful and not-beautiful, which is of course a contradiction. There is obviously a flaw in the form of the definition. In the *Topica* Aristotle explains this flaw in a passage which clearly refers not only to the definition of Beauty in the *Hippias Major* but also to the definition of Being as ‘power’ at *Sophist* 247e. In judging a definition, Aristotle writes:

you must see if [the definer] renders the definition in relation to two separate things, for example when he defines ‘the beautiful’ as ‘what is pleasant to the sight and the hearing’, or ‘being’ [to on]

as ‘whatever has the capacity [*dunaton*] of being acted upon or of acting on something else’; for then the same thing will be both beautiful and not-beautiful, and likewise also *both being and not-being* [*kai on te kai ouk on*]. For ‘pleasant to the hearing’ will be the same as ‘beautiful’, and so ‘not pleasant to the hearing’ will be the same as ‘not beautiful’; for the opposites of identical things too are identical, and ‘not beautiful’ is the opposite of ‘beautiful’, while ‘not pleasant to the hearing’ is the opposite of ‘pleasant to the hearing’. Obviously, therefore, ‘not pleasant to the hearing’ is the same as ‘not beautiful’. If therefore a thing is pleasant to the sight but not to the hearing, it will be both beautiful and not-beautiful. And similarly, we shall also show that the same thing is both being and not being (*Topica* 146a21-33, italics added).¹¹

This passage is fairly explicit: the definition of Being as power is self-contradictory and thus invalid. Is it possible that Plato, despite the evidence of the *Hippias Major*, really believed he had proffered a good definition of Being at *Sophist* 247e? Or indeed, isn’t it possible that the *Hippias Major* is not Plato’s work and that, in the *Topica* passage, Aristotle is in fact criticising what he takes to be Plato’s true understanding of Being? Defenders of the power definition would like to impose upon us either one or the other of these unattractive proposals.¹² However, as we shall see, at *Sophist* 250a-d Plato once again makes use of the criticism from the *Hippias Major*. Clearly, then, the case against those who claim that Plato successfully defined being at 247d-e is already quite impressive.

Having set out the formal objections, I will now begin a close reading of the dialogue in question, taking on board, and summarily rejecting, as I do so, the three reasons given above for taking the *dunamis* definition to be Plato’s considered view of the nature of being.

2. If we look at the context, the case against the power definition being Plato’s own seems incontrovertible: it is introduced at 247e, in the hope that it may appease the materialists, who promptly disappear from the dialogue; it is qualified at 248a, with the words “perhaps later something else may occur between them and us”: and it is apparently dropped forever at 249e, when the Stranger turns to Theaetetus and declares: “My dear fellow, don’t you see that we are now densely ignorant about it [*viz.*, about being], but think that we are saying something worthwhile?”. Even those, like John Wild, who claim that the definition should be taken as Plato’s mature view, acknowledge that such a view is never repeated, either in the *Sophist* or in the other dialogues. Wild’s attempted explanation for the definition’s brief life is a little flat. He writes: “Plato has a way of expressing his most fundamental insights as casual suggestions”.¹³ As a matter of fact the definition is stated in what one commentator has described as a “very careful and strikingly precise formulation”.¹⁴ Even if Wild’s dubious explanation is granted, however, it still faces a formidable difficulty, for, as we shall see, the Stranger soon realises that the definition is inadequate. We can find out what his objections are if we pick up the thread of the dialogue, just before the introduction of the definition, and follow the argument where it leads us.

2.1. In his attempt to loosen the Giants' somewhat draconian criterion of what constitutes being, and thereby to find some common ground between them and the Gods, the Stranger will exact from the Giants an admission that incorporeal, as well as corporeal, things *are*, or have real being. If he can get them to admit this much, then he will press them for their opinion on what it is that is "inherent in the incorporeal and the corporeal alike", or in other words, to state what they must therefore have in common. The Stranger adds: "Perhaps they might be at a loss for an answer; and if they are in that condition, consider whether they might not accept a suggestion if we offered it, and might not agree that the nature of being is as follows" (247d). On Theaetetus' request, the Stranger offers the suggestion; it is the power definition, as quoted in full above. Theaetetus, on behalf of the Giants, accepts this, "since they have nothing better of their own to offer"; to which the Stranger responds: "Good; for perhaps later something else may occur to both them and us [...] let us assume that this is for the present agreed upon and settled" (247d-248a).

Now there are enough warnings in this passage to alert us to the possibility that the definition may be only a contingent one. *For the present* it is agreed upon; but, in its present form, the definition will be refuted in the passage which immediately follows (248d-249d). I will now rehearse the arguments used against it in this passage.

The Giants' agreement to the 'power' definition turns out to be their final act in the dialogue, for they will play no more part. The Stranger now turns to the Gods, or the 'idealists', to see how they take to his "sufficient [*hikanon*] sort of definition [*horon*] of being, the presence of the power to act or be acted upon in even the slightest degree" (248c). However he realises quite quickly that they will not concede this definition. To understand their reasons why, we must return to the Stranger's description of the Gods' philosophical position given at the outset of the battle of the Giants' episode:

[they] defend themselves very cautiously with weapons derived from the invisible world above, maintaining forcibly that real being consists of certain ideas which are only conceived by the mind and have no body. But the bodies of their opponents [*viz.*, the Giants], and that which is called by them truth, they break up into small fragments in their arguments, calling them, not being, but a kind of generation [or 'becoming'] combined with motion (246b-c).¹⁵

While they would apparently accept the definition as a characterisation of the realm of *genesis* or Becoming, it simply will not do as an account of the nature of Being: "they say generation participates in the power of acting and being acted upon, but that neither power is connected with being [*ousian*]" (248c). Their position is that 'real being' is known by the mind, but involves neither activity or passivity; it is knowable precisely because it is *changeless*: "real being is always unchanged and the same" (248a). The Stranger smells a contradiction in this position, and immediately sets off in pursuit of it. The contradiction can be summarised as follows: if the Gods hold that the soul knows, and that being is known, then being, because it is moved, or *affected*, cannot be

changeless. It follows that the *dunamis* criterion must hold also for real being. The Stranger argues: “if to know is to be active, to be known must in turn be passive. Now being, since it is, according to this theory, known by the intelligence, in so far as it is known, it is moved [*kineisthai*], because it is acted upon” (248e).¹⁶ If the Gods maintain that being is above action and affection, then they would have to admit that being is unknowable — “a shocking admission to make” (249a). The Stranger draws the conclusion that “it must be conceded that motion and that which is moved are”, or in other words that being is motion and being moved. Now in fact this conclusion is nothing other than a restatement of the *dunamis* criterion.

Let me explain. If we return to 248e we find that, in so far as something is passive, or ‘is acted upon’, it is *moved*. This is the objection to the Gods’ understanding of Being as immovable. Their denial of motion limns an atrocious picture of Being as something “awful and holy, devoid of soul, fixed and immovable [*akineton*]” (249a). What the Stranger has done in reaction to this picture is to move to the opposite extreme, and thus declare that being is *movable*, that is to say, being is the power to move, or to act, and to be moved, or to be acted upon. He has, in other words, forced the Gods to accept the definition of being as power. But this is not the endorsement of the power definition that it may appear to be,¹⁷ for the Stranger immediately realises that this position is no more tenable than the one he has just refuted:

if we admit that all things are in flux and motion, we shall remove mind itself from among the things that are. — How so? — Do you think that sameness of quality or nature or relations could ever come about without the state of rest? — Not at all. — Without these can you see how mind can be or come to be anywhere? — By no means. (249b-c).

Another definition is thus necessary, and the Stranger duly comes up with one. If Being cannot be immovable, yet on the other hand must not be simply in motion, then perhaps it might be “all things immovable *and* in motion” (249d). From what the Stranger says next, I think there can be no doubt that the ‘being is power’ definition has been superseded: “Do we not seem *by now* [*ede*] to have attained a suitable [or ‘decent’: *epieikaws*] definition of being [*logaw taw on*]?” (249d, italics added).

3. The second reason for thinking that the definition is Plato’s own is because power certainly seems to encompass the range of beings. A true mark [*horon*] of the totality of being is surely the power to act or be acted upon. However in order to understand the definition in this way it must undergo a subtle modification. The Stranger’s objection to the Gods’ notion of being was that it denied motion; his objection to his own suggestion, *viz.*, the ‘power’ definition, was that it denied rest. Thus, the ‘being is power’ definition, at least as understood by the Stranger, is *not* all encompassing. Those commentators who believe that the *dunamis* criterion *does* account for the totality of being are evidently confusing the Stranger’s “sufficient” definition (248c) with the new “suitable” definition quoted at the end of the above section (249d).¹⁸ It should be emphasized that the state of

being at rest is not at all identical to the state of being affected; the latter implies movement (or at least the capacity to be moved), whereas that which is at rest is in this context 'immovable' (or 'unchanging': *akineton*); it neither moves nor has the power to be moved. To think that the same definition is involved at 248c and at 249d is to miss the whole point of the Stranger's criticism of the Gods.

Nevertheless, even if we allow this false identification to stand, the (revised) 'power' definition is still in difficulty. Admittedly, the restatement does appear to encompass the totality of things that are: "For if a thing is not in motion, it must surely be at rest; and again, what is not at rest must surely be in motion" (250d). But, as the Stranger is quick to point out, even this is not enough for it to be an adequate definition of being.

The problem here is in the form of the definition, and it has already been explained in the first section above. To recapitulate, if what is in motion is '*what is*', then whatever is not in motion will be '*what is not*'; it follows therefore that if a thing is in motion and, thus, is not at rest, then it will be both being and not being. This is more or less the Stranger's strategy at 250a-d. He first points out that "motion and rest are both most directly opposed to each other"; then acknowledges that motion and rest both *are*. However, if being is motion, then rest cannot be, and vice-versa. He concludes that Being "is not motion and rest in combination, but something else, different from them... According to its own nature, being is neither at rest nor in motion" (250c). While the new definition may account for being, in the sense of the totality of things that are, it cannot account for the meaning of Being "according to its own nature".¹⁹

4. The Stranger, having discovered that Being is neither rest nor motion, is at a loss to say what it can be. He is left in "complete perplexity" (250e) — an odd condition for one who, if we are to believe Wild, had only a few moments earlier come up with a "brilliant and fertile suggestion, enabling him to reach many sound and important conclusions".²⁰ Unfortunately we must leave the Stranger in his state of perplexity, for at this point our close reading of the dialogue must end, because our last problem requires a more aerial view.

The stranger speaks of the 'power of participation (or of combination)' at a number of places in the *Sophist*. Champions of the power definition have assumed that participation is thus nothing other than the power to act or be acted on. Bigger writes: "Power implies the interaction of things... [The] fact that Being is power to act and to be acted upon is the grounds for the real community of Being".²¹ In a similar vein, Wild writes: "What then is participation?... Participation is an active or a passive condition arising from things coming together in relation to one another ultimately derived from a certain potency".²² Once again there are two different claims being made here which have not been, but must be, kept separate.

4.1. The first is the notion that each thing has, as a property, the power to participate with every other thing; this is, of course, an extension of the claim that ‘power’ is common to all things. As I have shown above, power is only all-encompassing if it is understood as meaning ‘the power to be in *motion* and at *rest*’, rather than ‘the power to act or be acted upon’. Once this is realised, however, it becomes clear that such a power is not at all identical to the power of participation.

What Bigger, Wild, and the other supporters of the ‘power’ definition fail to realise is that while their claim, that every single thing has the power to act or be affected by anything else, may be accepted as true (but uninformative), this does not mean that everything can thus *combine* with anything else. Such a possibility is considered and explicitly ruled out by the Stranger at 252d. He asks: “But what if we ascribe to all things the power of participation [*dunaton echein epikoinawniai*] in one another?”, to which Theaetetus responds: “Even I can dispose of that suggestion... [it is impossible] because motion itself would be wholly at rest, and rest in turn would itself be in motion, if these two could be joined together”. The Stranger’s point is that each thing can only participate with a *limited* number of other things: “Certainly one of these three must be true; either all things will mingle with one another, or none will do so, or some will and others will not”. He adds: “The first two were found to be impossible”, and therefore concludes: “Then everybody who wishes to answer correctly will adopt the remaining one of the three possibilities... some will mingle and others will not” (252e-253a).

Clearly, then, the first claim must be rejected. The power ‘to move and to rest’ is not identical, nor does it explain, the power of participation. If the two powers *were* identical, then discourse and knowledge would be rendered impossible — to borrow the Stranger’s example, it would be like stringing the letters of the alphabet together haphazardly, in the vain hope of making sense. One needs an art to know what will and what will not combine, and this is the art of dialectic, explained now by the Stranger:

he who has this art has a clear perception of one form or idea extending entirely through many individuals each of which lies apart, and of many forms differing from one another but included in one greater form, and again of one form evolved by the union of many wholes, and of many forms entirely apart and separate. This is the knowledge and ability to distinguish by classes how individual things can or cannot be associated with one another (253d).

4.2. The above quote serves as a neat introduction to the second claim being made when power, as at 247e, is likened to the power of participation. The second claim understands power as the form that pervades all things. The argument goes like this: ‘power’ has the status of a form ‘extending entirely through many individuals’; and because this power is common to all, then it is right and proper to call it ‘Being’. Thus being is nothing other than power.

Again we must first distinguish the two definitions of ‘power’ that the champions of the definition like to move between. If we take the Stranger’s understanding of

‘power’, or the capacity to act and be acted upon, then we must answer that, yes, power is like a form; indeed, it is none other than the form of Motion, one of Plato’s highest genera or greatest kinds. Now while something could be said *to be* if it moves or has the power to do so, and thus Motion is being, this obviously does not mean that Being is motion. Being is predicable of the power to move, but the power to move is not predicable of being; *i.e.*, being is not, or is not exhausted by, ‘power’. As in the case of each of the other classes of being, because Being participates in the class of the ‘Other’, it is therefore other than all of them; “and since it is other than all of them, it is not each one of them or all the rest, but only ‘itself’” (259b).

The second understanding of the ‘power’ definition, that being is the ‘power to move or rest’, can now be recognised for what it is, *viz.*, a conflation of two of the greatest kinds, motion and rest respectively. To say that these two kinds exhaust the meaning of Being is to leave out the class of the ‘Other’ and the class of the ‘Same’, and thus to present a very one-sided and contradictory conception of Being. Upon such a conception dialectic and knowledge could certainly not be founded, and furthermore, the main goal of the *Sophist*, to establish the being of what is not, or the meaning of ‘not-being’, could never be attained. Without the form of the Other, that is to say, if Being is simply power, then ‘not being’ becomes — or perhaps we should say *remains* — the contrary of being, *i.e.*, ‘absolute not-being’, which is precisely the concept of ‘not-being’ that Plato will have nothing to do with: “For long ago we gave up speaking of any opposite of being, whether it is or not, and is capable or totally incapable of definition” (258c).

5. The very form of Plato’s dialogues, as conversations conducted with truth as the goal, allows for the exchange of suggestions and ideas some of which can be quickly dismissed, while others admit of development and may lead to fruitful insights, or even fruitful errors. It is thus with the suggestion that being is power. As presented at 247d-e, the definition is flawed and one-sided. In demonstrating its deficiency, the Stranger and Theaetetus discover that, if Being is to be intelligible, there must be things which are immovable. The new definition of Being arising from this insight is also flawed, but fruitfully so, in that it leads to the development of Plato’s greatest kinds. Viewed in this way, the ‘Being is power’ statement clearly plays a major role in the structure and movement of the dialogue. But 247e is not the locus of a “major revolution in Platonism”.²³ At 249a, when the Stranger rejects the Gods’ conception of Being as absolutely immovable, Plato may very well be *beginning* to modify his own notion of Being, but he is *not* putting forward a ‘revolutionary’ thesis that Being ‘moves’ or is a purely active agency and source of all being.²⁴ To repeat, Motion is *in* Being, and so is Rest, and so, likewise, is the Other and the Same; because it participates in the Other, Being is *other than* Motion or action. The power to act is no more *and no less* being than motion is: but Being is not power.²⁵

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Forster, E. S. (1960), *Aristotle, Topica* Greek text with a translation, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.
- Fowler, H. N. (1921), *Plato, Sophist* Greek text with a translation, Loeb Classical Library, London, William Heinemann.
- Woodruff, Paul (1982), *Plato, Hippias Major* Translation and Commentary, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Bigger, Charles (1968), *Participation: A Platonic Enquiry*, Louisiana State University Press.
- Cornford, F. M. (1935), *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, London, Kegan Paul.
- Frede, Dorothea (1993), 'The Question of Being: Heidegger's Project' in *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, edited by Charles B. Guignon, Cambridge University Press, pp. 42-69.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. (1978), *History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. V, Cambridge University Press.
- Seligman, Paul (1974), *Being and Not-Being: An Introduction to Plato's Sophist*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1933), *Adventures of Ideas*, New York, MacMillan.
- Wild, John (1946), *Plato's Theory of Man*, New York, Octagon.²⁶

¹ Translation based on H. N. Fowler's for the Loeb Classical Library (Fowler 1921).

² Cf. Paul Seligman, 1974, p. 31. In this paper I refer to them as Giants and Gods respectively.

³ A. N. Whitehead, 1933, p. 165.

⁴ W. K. C. Guthrie, 1978, p. 140.

⁵ Cornford claims that the Stranger does not intend to offer a proper definition, on the basis that 'horon' is properly translated as 'a mark'; thus power is merely a 'mark' of all things. Cf. F. M. Cornford, 1935, p. vii.

⁶ Guthrie, 1978, p. 140, n. 3. See Guthrie, *ibid.*, for the individual references.

⁷ Dorothea Frede, 1993, p. 44.

⁸ John Wild, 1946, p. 291.

⁹ Charles Bigger, 1968, p. 124.

¹⁰ Taken from Paul Woodruff's translation of Plato's *Hippias Major* (Woodruff, 1982).

¹¹ Translation based on E. S. Forster's for the Loeb Classical Library (Forster, 1960).

¹² The evidence points strongly in favour of the dialogue's authenticity; for further discussion, see Woodruff, 1982, pp. 93-104.

¹³ Wild, 1946, p. 291.

-
- ¹⁴ Seligman, 1974, p. 32.
- ¹⁵ Whether Plato identified his own early philosophy, *e.g.*, the *Phaedo*, with this position is a question which is irrelevant to my purpose in the present paper.
- ¹⁶ ‘Changed’ would perhaps be a better translation of *kineisthai* than ‘moved’.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Bigger, 1968, p. 126
- ¹⁸ Cf. Bigger (1968, p. 127), who believes the two definitions are identical. A good indication of their non-identity is that the first definition is consistently referred to as a *horos* (mark, standard, or limit) of being (cf. 247d-e; 248c; also note 5 above), whereas the second definition is introduced at 249d as a *logos* of being.
- ¹⁹ Or, as Seligman would put it, the definition accounts for the *extension*, but not the *intension* of being. Cf. Seligman, 1974, pp. 41-43.
- ²⁰ Wild, 1946, p. 292.
- ²¹ Bigger, 1968, p. 126.
- ²² Wild, 1946, p. 289.
- ²³ Bigger, 1968, p. 125, n. 11.
- ²⁴ Cf. Wild (1946, p. 291-2), who finds just such a Neoplatonic sense of Being in the *Sophist*.
- ²⁵ I would like to acknowledge the generous support that I have received from the Interim Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences