THE STRANGER’S POLITICAL SCIENCE V. Socrates’ Political Art

In writing dialogues, Plato wrote something like prose dramas. His dialogues have characters, settings, and plots. Among the most important characters are the philosophers—and I begin from the observation that there is more than one. In the *Sophist* and *Statesman* Plato has Socrates exchange a few words with an Eleatic Stranger and then mostly sit and listen. In juxtaposing these two philosophers, Plato not merely pointed to the difference, but invited his readers to compare them.¹

The difference, according to the geometrician Theodorus who introduces the Eleatic at the beginning of the *Sophist* (216a), is that the Stranger is a “manly philosopher” (*andra philosophon*). In the conversation Theodorus and his student Theaetetus had with Socrates the previous day, Socrates had presented himself in the feminine guise of a “midwife,” having no wisdom of his own, but able to test and refute the opinions of others. At the beginning of the *Sophist*, the Eleatic states his willingness to explain his own understanding of sophistry, philosophy and statesmanship straightforwardly in one long speech. But, not wanting to appear to be lecturing Socrates, he decides to proceed by question and answer. He still puts forth his own views, however; he does not seek, in a backhanded, cowardly manner, merely to refute his interlocutor.²

Is the Eleatic a better philosopher than Socrates? Is that the reason Plato has the Eleatic lead discussions of sophistry and statesmanship (*politikê*) in dialogues that are said to take place the day after Socrates has been indicted (as the Eleatic could have learned from Theodorus and Theaetetus) right before Socrates’ public trial? To answer that question, we obviously have to compare the understandings of sophistry, philosophy and politics these two Platonic philosophical spokesmen present. At first glance, Socrates and the Stranger have much in common. Both begin from Parmenides’ insight that to be is to be intelligible. Both understand sophistry to be pretended wisdom. Both see dialectics to be the defining feature of philosophy. Both see that political associations arise from the need human beings have to defend themselves, and both point out that these associations will not be able to remain united and so able to defend themselves if they do not foster virtue in their citizens. Upon examination, however, it becomes clear not only that Socrates and the Stranger represent two divergent paths from Parmenides, but also that they have significantly different understandings of sophistry and of dialectics. As a result, they have very different understandings of the relation between philosophy and politics. Whereas in the *Republic* Socrates famously concludes that evils will not cease in cities until philosophers become kings, in the *Statesman* (299b-d) the Stranger tells Socrates that no one who understands the desirability and requirements of the rule of law will seek further knowledge by openly questioning the opinions of his fellow citizens (the way Socrates has).³ If he does, he knows that he can be hauled into court and accused not only of being a sophist but also of corrupting both young and old. In the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, the Eleatic thus appears to be Socrates’ philosophical accuser.
TWO DIFFERENT MODIFICATIONS OF PARMENIDES

At the beginning of the Sophist Plato indicates that both the Eleatic Stranger and Socrates agree with Parmenides to a certain extent, but that neither simply and completely adheres to the argument put forward by the older Eleatic. Theodorus’ introduction of the Stranger leads Socrates to ask whether people in that place (Elea) think that the sophist, statesman and philosopher are one, two or three, in fact (ergon), or merely three different names for something that is really the same. When the Stranger says that he thinks that they are three, even though it is not easy to distinguish them in fact, readers see that he is not simply or unambiguously a follower of Parmenides. Parmenides had argued that everything that is, is one. By recalling the conversation with Parmenides he had when he was young, Socrates reminds Plato’s readers that he, too, agrees with Parmenides, as opposed to all other previous philosophers and poets, that everything is not becoming or in flux. On the contrary, like Parmenides, Socrates argues that the only things that truly are, are the things which do not come into being or fade, but remain always the same, and that these eternally unchanging, purely intelligible things are the only things that can be known. Unlike Parmenides, however, Socrates suggests that there is an irreducible plurality of such eternally unchanging, purely intelligible “eidê.” Socrates cannot say exactly how many or what “ideas” there are, even on his deathbed, but he regularly suggests that there are ideas of the good, the beautiful, and the just. Although particular, sensible beings can be said to “participate” in several different “ideas,” Socrates insists that the ideas in themselves are completely distinct and separate entities that do not intermingle or co-exist with one another.

When the Stranger is led to violate Parmenides’ stricture concerning the impossibility of thinking or saying “what is not” in order to explain how a sophist can present a false appearance of knowledge, readers see that he, too, posits the existence of a plurality of fundamental eidê in contrast to his mentor’s one. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that things could not be described and thus made intelligible in logos, if being itself were not differentiated into the “same” (tauton) and “other” (heteron). In contrast to Socrates, who clearly and emphatically distinguishes the eternally unchanging, purely intelligible ideas from the sensible, changing things that somehow participate in them, the Stranger speaks of eidê and genê (generated things or kinds of things) interchangeably. He clearly indicates that not all eidê, as he understands them, are eternal, when he identifies two kinds (genê) of persuasive speaking, public and private, as eidê (222d). In contrast to “friends of the forms” like Socrates, moreover, the Stranger argues that the eidê do not exist purely and independently of each other. On the contrary, he shows that the “greatest and first principle” (megistou te kai archeou protou) of being (to on) not merely coexists, but mingles with mutually exclusive conceptions or classes (genê, ideai and eidê) like motion and rest, same and other that are said to be among the greatest. Because he includes motion and rest among the greatest of the eidê that combine with being, the Stranger does not encounter the same kinds of difficulties Socrates and other “friends of the forms” do in explaining how sensible, changing things can participate in an unchanging purely intelligible order. Because his ideas include motion, the Stranger’s account of the fundamental categories or kinds of intelligible existence can be combined with cosmology in a way Socrates’ ideas cannot. In the Statesman we thus see...