

Eleaticism and Socratic Dialectic: On Ontology, Philosophical Inquiry, and Estimations of Worth in Plato's *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*

Jens Kristian Larsen



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesplatoniciennes/1478>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesplatoniciennes.1478

ISSN: 2275-1785

Publisher

Société d'Études Platoniciennes

Electronic reference

Jens Kristian Larsen, « Eleaticism and Socratic Dialectic: On Ontology, Philosophical Inquiry, and Estimations of Worth in Plato's *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Statesman* », *Études platoniciennes* [Online], 15 | 2019, Online since 01 May 2019, connection on 14 July 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesplatoniciennes/1478> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesplatoniciennes.1478



Études Platoniciennes est mis à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Eleaticism and Socratic Dialectic: On Ontology, Philosophical Inquiry, and Estimations of Worth in Plato's *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*

Jens Kristian Larsen

University of Bergen, Norway

The *Parmenides* poses the question for what entities there are Forms, and the criticism of Forms it contains is commonly supposed to document an ontological reorientation in Plato. According to this reading, Forms no longer express the excellence of a given entity and a Socratic, ethical perspective on life, but come to resemble concepts, or what concepts designate, and are meant to explain nature as a whole. Plato's conception of dialectic, it is further suggested, consequently changes into a value-neutral method directed at tracing the interrelation of such Forms, an outlook supposedly documented in certain passages on method from the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* as well.

The article urges that this reading is untenable. For in the *Parmenides* the question for what entities one should posit Forms is left open, and the passages on method from the *Sophist* and *Statesman* neither encourage a non-normative ontology nor a value-neutral method of inquiry. What the three dialogues encourage us to do is rather to set common opinions about the relative worth and value of things aside when conducting ontological inquiries; and this attitude, the article concludes, demonstrates a close kinship, rather than a significant difference, between Plato's Socrates and his Eleatic philosophers.

Introduction

- 1 In the first part of Plato's *Parmenides*, Parmenides in rapid succession presents six problems facing the young Socrates' assumption that there are forms. This article

undertakes to interpret in detail the first problem as presented by Parmenides in order to address the question how considerations of worth and honor influence philosophical inquiry, a question that has direct bearing on the way we should conceive of Plato's ontology.

- 2 The six problems presented by Parmenides are thematically linked by the fact that they all point to certain difficulties pertaining to the assumption that there are forms that Socrates advances at the beginning of the dialogue (128e6-130a2). Nevertheless, the first problem, presented at 130a8-130e4, stands out from the rest in respect of two features: i) it is not primarily preoccupied with the question whether or not forms can be separate from the things that participate in them, but rather with the question for what things, according to Socrates, there are forms; ii) in the discussion of this problem only does Parmenides emphasize Socrates' youth and in general his philosophical immaturity.
- 3 These two features have led several commentators to assume that the passage discussing the problem documents a radical change in Plato's ontological outlook.¹ This assumption is closely connected to the view that Plato's earlier, more Socratic interest had been directed primarily at political and ethical issues, while his later interest came to be directed at nature as a whole, and that this reorientation led him to a novel understanding of forms according to which they no longer expressed moral or political values but came to resemble concepts. This change, it has also been supposed,² is further documented in some passages discussing philosophical method found in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. For this reason, these passages, together with the passage on the scope of the assumption that there are forms from the *Parmenides*, have been central to modern attempts at tracing the supposed development of Plato's philosophy.
- 4 The overall aim of this article is to demonstrate that the passages in question, from these three dialogues commonly supposed to be later than the *Republic*, do not support such a view of Plato's development. Instead, it will be argued, they point to a feature of an ideal of philosophical inquiry advanced in several of Plato's dialogues, namely the idea that the *quality* of something cannot be determined in isolation from the question *what* that something is. The passages should, accordingly, be regarded as important for understanding this key feature of Plato's ideal of philosophical inquiry, and not as providing support for the supposed change in ontological outlook sketched above.
- 5 More specifically, the article aims at defending two interconnected claims. First, the passage in the *Parmenides* discussing for what things, according to Socrates, there are forms, shows that Plato regarded common opinions concerning the relative worth and honor of things as irrelevant for philosophical inquiries into the essence of things. Second, the passage further suggests, when read in

¹ For details, see section I below.

² For details, see section II below.

connection with the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, that Plato regarded the attitude toward philosophical inquiry argued for in the *Parmenides* as Eleatic in origin, but also that Plato saw this attitude as congruent with, rather than as opposed to, a Socratic attitude. The defense of these two claims proceeds as follows.

6 In part I of the article, the passage from the *Parmenides* (130a8-130e4) concerning the question for what things there are forms is interpreted in detail. The interpretation starts out from a criticism of the developmental reading of the passage sketched above. A careful consideration of the entities considered in the passage and the question they raise about ontology demonstrates, it is argued, that the developmental reading is untenable. It is further argued that the passage, while revolving around the question: 'for what things are there forms?', leaves this question open. The question the passage seeks to settle is rather: 'what role should ordinary estimations of worth and honor be accorded in the attempt to settle the question for what things there are forms?' The text indicates that the answer to this latter question is that such estimations should not be accorded any role.

7 In part II of the article it is shown that an attitude similar to that advocated by Parmenides in the passage analyzed in part I is found in two passages concerning method from the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* (*Soph.* 227a10-b6, *Polit.* 266d7-10). It is argued that these passages neither advocate an un-Socratic ontology nor an un-Socratic ideal of inquiry, as critics defending the developmental approach to the *Parmenides* criticized in part I commonly assume. Instead, it is argued, these passages are in conformity with a basic approach to questions concerning worth and honor characteristic of Plato's Socrates, namely to insist that such questions can be settled only on the basis of an inquiry into the essence or nature of the thing in question.

Part I: Ontology and common opinions concerning worth and honor in the *Parmenides*

8 Parmenides presents the first problem he raises concerning the young Socrates' assumption that there are forms as follows:

Socrates, he said, your impulse toward speeches and argument is admirable. Now tell me: do you yourself thus distinguish, as you say, certain forms in themselves separately by themselves, and separately again the things that have a share of them? And do you think that likeness itself is something separate from the likeness that we have, and again one and many and all the others you just heard Zeno mention?

Yes I do, said Socrates.

And of this sort too? said Parmenides. For example, a certain form of just, alone by itself, and of beautiful and good and again all such as these?

Yes, he said.

Well, is there a form of man separate from us and all such as we are, a certain form of man by itself, or of fire or water too?

I have often been in perplexity, Parmenides, he said, about whether one should speak about them as about the others, or not.

And what about these, Socrates – they could really seem ridiculous: hair and mud and dirt, for example, or anything else that is utterly worthless and trivial. Are you perplexed whether or not one should say that there is a separate form for each of these too, a form that again is other than the sorts of things we handle?

Not at all, said Socrates. Surely these things are just what we see them to be: it would be too absurd to suppose that something is a form for them. Still, I sometimes worry lest what holds in one case may not hold in all; but then, when I take that stand, I retreat, for fear of tumbling undone into depths of nonsense. So I go back to the things we just said had forms, and spend my time dealing with them.

You are still young, Socrates, said Parmenides, and philosophy has not yet taken hold of you as I think it one day will. You will despise none of these things then. But as it is, because of your youth, you still pay attention to the opinions of human beings. (130a8-e4 translation by R. E. Allen, slightly modified)³

- 9 Parmenides here presents Socrates with four distinct categories of features or entities⁴ and asks him whether or not he posits separate forms for each of them. To begin with, we need to discuss in detail what features or entities each category

³ ὦ Σώκρατες, φάναι, ὡς ἄξιός εἰ ἀγασθαι τῆς ὀρυμῆς τῆς ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους. καί μοι εἰπέ, αὐτὸς σὺ οὕτω διήρησαι ὡς λέγεις, χωρὶς μὲν εἶδη αὐτὰ ἅττα, χωρὶς δὲ τὰ τούτων αὐ μετέχοντα; καί τί σοι δοκεῖ εἶναι αὐτῇ ὁμοιότης χωρὶς ἧς ἡμεῖς ὁμοιότητος ἔχομεν, καὶ ἐν δὴ καὶ πολλὰ καὶ πάντα ὅσα νυνδὴ Ζήνωνος ἤκουες; – ἔμοιγε, φάναι τὸν Σωκράτη. – ἢ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, εἰπεῖν τὸν Παρμενίδην, οἷον δικαίου τι εἶδος αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ καὶ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ πάντων αὐ τῶν τοιούτων; – ναί, φάναι. – τί δ', ἀνθρώπου εἶδος χωρὶς ἡμῶν καὶ τῶν οἷοι ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν πάντων, αὐτὸ τι εἶδος ἀνθρώπου ἢ πυρὸς ἢ καὶ ὕδατος; – ἐν ἀπορίᾳ, φάναι, πολλάκις δὴ, ὦ Παρμενίδη, περὶ αὐτῶν γέγονα, πότερα χρὴ φάναι ὡσπερ περὶ ἐκείνων ἢ ἄλλως. – ἢ καὶ περὶ τῶνδε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἃ καὶ γελοῖα δόξειεν ἂν εἶναι, οἷον θρίξ καὶ πηλὸς καὶ ῥύπος ἢ ἄλλο τι ἀτιμωτάτον τε καὶ φαυλότατον, ἀπορεῖς εἴτε χρὴ φάναι καὶ τούτων ἐκάστου εἶδος εἶναι χωρὶς, ὅν ἄλλο αὐ τῶν ὧν ἡμεῖς μεταχειρίζομεθα, εἴτε καὶ μή; – οὐδαμῶς, φάναι τὸν Σωκράτη, ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν γε ἄπερ ὀρώμεν, ταῦτα καὶ εἶναι· εἶδος δὲ τι αὐτῶν οἰηθῆναι εἶναι μὴ λίαν ἤ ἄτοπον. ἤδη μέντοι ποτὲ με καὶ ἔθραξε μὴ τι ἢ περὶ πάντων ταυτῶν. ἔπειτα ὅταν ταύτη σῶ, φεύγων οἴχομαι, δείσας μὴ ποτε εἰς τινα βυθὸν φλυαρίας ἐμπροσθ' ἀποφθάρω· ἐκέισε δ' οὖν ἀφικόμενος, εἰς ἃ νυνδὴ ἐλέγομεν εἶδη ἔχειν, περὶ ἐκεῖνα πραγματευόμενος διατριβῶ. – νέος γὰρ εἶ ἔτι, φάναι τὸν Παρμενίδην, ὦ Σώκρατες, καὶ οὕτω σου ἀντεὶληπται φιλοσοφία ὡς ἔτι ἀντιλήψεται κατ' ἐμὴν δόξαν, ὅτε οὐδὲν αὐτῶν ἀτιμᾶσεις: νῦν δὲ ἔτι πρὸς ἀνθρώπων ἀποβλέπεις δόξας διὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν.

⁴ I prefer to use 'features' or 'entities' rather than the fairly common term 'concepts', since the question is not whether or not there are forms for certain concepts, but rather whether certain features of things and certain entities have a separate form or essence or not.

is meant to single out, both for the purpose of arguing against a widespread developmental account of this passage in particular and of Plato's later thought more generally, and for the purpose of achieving a better understanding of the problem that Parmenides is pointing to in the passage.

- 10 The first category includes certain very general features, such as unity, plurality, and likeness, while the second includes entities such as the just, beauty and the good. In the scholarly literature, the features included in the first category are often claimed to correspond to mathematical or logical forms (see e.g. Ross 1951, 84; Miller 1986, 44), in contrast to the entities contained in the second category that are supposed to correspond to moral forms (see e.g. Cornford 1939, 81-82; Zekl 1972, 131n20; Scolnicov 2003, 54; Scolnicov prefers the term 'axiological concepts'). It is further commonly assumed that the entities of the second category reflect the interests of the Socrates we find in Plato's supposedly early dialogues (Ross 1951, 85), or, alternatively, the historical Socrates, with which the Socrates of these dialogues is often identified, while the features contained in the first are often claimed to have been included as forms, in addition to the moral forms, by Plato from the *Meno* onward (see Friedländer 1960, 178-169; Cornford 1939, 82; Scolnicov 2003, 54). This in turn, it is sometimes suggested, explains why Socrates in the *Parmenides* so readily accepts that there are forms for the features and entities contained in the first two categories – these are the entities and features that Plato's Socrates was preoccupied with in the early and middle period dialogues –, and also why he is reluctant to accept forms for the latter two – these are entities that only came to stand at the center of Plato's later thought where “the doctrine of Forms” was “applied to the explanation of ‘the whole of nature’”; this supposedly constituted an ontological reorientation that turned the “question of their [i.e. the Forms] extent” into “a problem” (Cornford 1939, 83).⁵
- 11 This account of the content of the four categories is, however, misleading on several counts, and the explanation advanced for Socrates' willingness to posit forms for the first two categories but not for the last two is not convincing.
- 12 First, it is misleading to call features such as unity, plurality, and likeness mathematical or logical (see Allen 1997, 119; see also Gill 2012, 28-29). As the

⁵ This view of Plato's development was, as far as I know, originally advanced by Julius Stenzel, who regards the passage 130a8-e4 as “die von Platon selbst gegebenen Darstellung der Genesis der Ideenlehre” (1917, 27). See also Ross 1951, 85 and Hackforth 1972, 134-136. Charles Kahn follows Stenzel's and Cornford's overall interpretative framework and suggests (2013, xii) that most of the dialogues now commonly regarded as late (the *Laws* is not discussed by Kahn) “are best seen as moments in a single project: namely, the coming to terms with natural philosophy on the basis of a system of thought (the Theory of Ideas) that had been worked out in earlier dialogues, with a different set of problems in view”; more precisely, Kahn claims (2013, 7) that Plato “only later, in the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus*” undertook “to apply his theory [of ideas] to the philosophy of nature”.

Theaetetus suggests, Plato rather regarded them as ontological features common to anything that exists (185c4-5).⁶ We may call them ‘categorical’ forms,⁷ as long as we do not imply by this designation that Plato draws a sharp distinction between these types of forms or essences and others, and may regard them as the kind of features that formal ontology would concentrate its efforts on. We should also note that most of the *Parmenides* as well as sections of the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* are devoted to exploring such formal or categorical features.

- 13 Second, while many modern critics have been tempted to think of ‘just’, ‘beauty’, and ‘good’ as moral, normative, or axiological forms or concepts, or simply as values, and to contrast them with the supposedly more neutral or factual forms of the first category, this manner of thinking about the features and entities of the first two categories is unsatisfactory. For while terms such as ‘just’, ‘beauty’ and ‘good’ may be described as in one sense evaluative,⁸ Greek thinkers would hardly have understood them primarily as designating *moral* qualities, to say nothing of values in a modern sense. To Plato and Aristotle at least, ‘good’ designates an objective determination of a being that is no less ontological than ‘unity’ is – if something is good, i.e. has virtue, it is so because it is able to perform its work or job (*ergon*) well, whether it be a knife, a horse, or a human being (see e.g. *Resp.* 335b8-11, 353b2-12; *Gorg.* 506d2-8, *EN* 1098a7-17; for further discussion, see Stenzel 1917, 4-19, and Ross 1951, 43). Likewise ‘beauty’ first and foremost designates an objective quality of something; a beautiful deed is beautiful because of its intrinsic quality, just as a beautiful horse is. Even ‘just’ is first and foremost

⁶ At 185c9-d2, *Theaetetus* lists being (*ousia*) and non-being, similarity and dissimilarity, identity and difference, unity and the other numbers, as examples of such common features. They seem closely related to the great kinds discussed in the *Sophist*. For discussion of the connection between the *Parmenides* and the “common terms” of the *Theaetetus*, see Allen 1997, 119-121 and Gill 2012, 28-29.

⁷ Martin Heidegger suggests that Plato, by turning these common features into objects of investigation in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, discovers the categorial determinations of being, and that he thereby both develops a distinction between beings and being already latent in *Parmenides*’ thought and foreshadows the later thought of Kant and, in particular, Husserl; see Heidegger 2004, 123 with 60-61 and 65-70; see also 261-262 and 272-273. Worth noting is that Heidegger at the same time criticizes the Neo-Kantian tendency to assimilate Plato’s concerns in these dialogues too closely with those of Kant; see Myles Burnyeat 1976, 49-50 for a related, but also less careful reliance on Kantian and Neo-Kantian concepts in the interpretation of Plato. Gilbert Ryle instead terms the features of the first category “formal concepts” (1939, 146); while he in my view is wrong in regarding them as concepts, he is right in emphasizing that they are “not peculiar to any special subject matter, but integral to all subject matters” (see also the afterword written in 1963, printed in Allen 1965, 145-47, where Ryle discusses them under the heading of ubiquitous concepts). For an interesting discussion of the place these terms hold in Plato’s thought and how they may be said to approach, but still differ from, Aristotle’s categories, see Campbell 1867, xvi-xix (general introduction).

⁸ By this expression I do not mean to suggest any contrast between facts and values, or an “ontology of values”, but merely that the terms are used by Greek thinkers to evaluate something as good and to contrast it to what is bad.

an objective determination of regimes, souls, and actions, not a moral concept or a value. On the other hand, unity is certainly often used as an evaluative term by both Plato and Aristotle. What motivates many modern critics to interpret the difference between the first two categories as a difference between logical-mathematical and moral concepts or forms is most probably a reliance, conscious or unconscious, on modern distinctions such as those between “facts” and “values”, the “is” and the “ought”. But such distinctions are foreign to Greek thought and they blur, rather than illuminate, Plato’s often subtle ontological investigations.

- 14 In addition to depending on misleading descriptions of the content of the first two categories, the developmental account of the passage just sketched is also open to criticism because it rests on the mistaken, if very common, suggestion that the Socrates we find in Plato’s supposedly early dialogues was preoccupied merely with the entities of the second category, and that Plato later, after having posited forms for such entities, from the *Meno* onward added to them the “mathematical” ones corresponding to the features of the first category. First, while the Socrates we meet in the supposedly early dialogues often asks about virtues, whether and how they can be acquired, and what constitutes human happiness, he never inquires in any rigorous manner into a form of the good – this he only seems to do in the *Republic* and, perhaps, the *Philebus*, or the just – this he only does in the *Republic*. Inquiries into the beautiful, on the other hand, are found in many dialogues, in particular in the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Philebus*, and the *Hippias Major*. Second, it is not true that unity, plurality, and difference are added as forms to the “moral” forms in the *Meno* and supposedly later dialogues. At a general level they may be said to be discussed throughout Plato’s dialogues (e.g. in the *Protagoras* at 329d3-330b3 or the *Hippias Major* at 300e3-302b3), as is only to be expected since such general features are bound to come up for discussion in some way or another in any ontological inquiry. A rigorous inquiry into such features, on the other hand, is found only in dialogues now commonly regarded as among the later of the dialogues of the middle period, especially the *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides*, or in dialogues now commonly regarded as late, especially the *Timaeus*, the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. The contents of the first category, then, can be said to play a role in several dialogues that are regarded as early, even though they are explicit objects of inquiry only in the dialogues now commonly regarded as middle and late, while the contents of the second category may be said to be objects of inquiry in all Plato’s dialogues, with the discussion in the *Republic* and possibly in the *Philebus* standing out from the rest.
- 15 Turning now to the third and fourth categories, we see that they include natural entities such as human beings, water, and fire, on the one hand, and hair, mud, and dirt, on the other. According to the developmental account of the passage, these two categories exemplify the things Plato’s interest gravitated toward in his later period when he turned his attention from the moral questions characteristic

of Socrates to questions concerning nature in general;⁹ but this description of Plato's attitude toward the content of these categories is again highly misleading.

- 16 Concerning the third category we may note that Socrates in the *Phaedo*, for instance, proposes that there is a form for fire (105c2), while he in the *Meno* seems to suggest that there is an essence for bees (72b1-7). There is accordingly nothing to suggest that the Socrates found in dialogues commonly assumed to be earlier than the *Parmenides* could not consider forms for natural things possible (see Allen 1997, 122), even though it is true that such entities are not central to the inquiries found in any of these dialogues. It should at the same time be emphasized that such entities do not take center stage in any of the dialogues now commonly regarded as late either, with the exception of the *Timaeus*, and it is hardly surprising that they are central to the inquiry of this dialogue, devoted as it is to explaining (in mythical terms) the origin of the physical world.¹⁰ In other words, the way in which natural things are discussed in the Platonic corpus as such does not lend support to the view that Plato's later dialogues, in contrast to the earlier ones, document a newly developed interest in nature as a whole. What seems to motivate this claim is the view that the *Timaeus* is the crowning achievement of his later thought and the concomitant view that the supposed change in ontological outlook brings Plato closer to modern natural science and logic and thus demonstrates his growing maturity.¹¹
- 17 With regard to the fourth category, finally, we may note that while mud is briefly discussed in the *Theaetetus* (see 147a1-c6) and hair in the *Timaeus* (76b1-d3), dirt is never discussed elsewhere in Plato. Nor are we told in the *Theaetetus*, the *Timaeus* or anywhere else that there are forms for mud or hair, perhaps for the perfectly good reason that Plato regarded mud as a mixture of water and earth (see

⁹ The oldest systematic defense of this view is, to my knowledge, Stenzel 1917, see in particular 3-18 and 45-54; both Gill 2012 and Kahn 2013 are recent studies that remain within the general outline of this developmental account.

¹⁰ It may be true that also other supposedly late dialogues display a greater interest in the question how one may explain the generation of the natural world and natural things than many of the supposedly earlier dialogues. Nevertheless, the only passages in these dialogues that appear to discuss this question in a rigorous, philosophical manner are passages from the *Philebus* (at 24a6-27c2) and the *Sophist* (at 219a5-b2) and these do not seem to warrant the claim that Plato in the supposedly late dialogues suddenly developed an interest in explaining the whole of nature through his "theory of ideas" in such a manner that this "theory" was radically changed. In the *Phaedo* too, for instance, the assumption that there are forms is meant to explain the generation of natural phenomena (see 103c10-105c7), just as the notion of forms as ordering principles are used to explain generation in the *Gorgias* (see 503d6-504a4).

¹¹ Gadamer 1991, 339-344 thus correctly emphasizes the tacit German idealistic and neo-Kantian assumptions about the close connection between modern (mathematical) natural science and Plato underlying various modern approaches to Plato, including the developmental approach to the later Plato for which especially Julius Stenzel paved the way.

Tht. 147c3-6) and hair as a mixture of skin and water (see *Tim.* 76b1-c1). It is in fact hard to see what philosophical reasons should have prompted him to posit forms for such composites of natural 'stuff'¹² – except the view sometimes ascribed to Plato that all common names must have forms corresponding to them, presumably as a result of the assumption that forms are Plato's "interpretation" of concepts and that all names have concepts corresponding to them.¹³

- 18 As Julius Stenzel has pointed out, however, albeit in order to argue a very different point than the one argued here, the passage we are considering in the *Parmenides* shows beyond doubt that Socrates in this dialogue does not hold the view that forms are concepts or what concepts designate; otherwise his objection to the suggestion that mud or hair should have separate forms would not make any sense (Stenzel 1917, 28). Stenzel, however, regarded the young Socrates as a dramatic character representing Plato's earlier view of forms, a view Plato abandoned from the *Parmenides* onward. But a complex passage in the *Statesman* that discusses the difference between forms and parts and the way common names are related to both (see 262c3-263b12) suggests that Plato when writing that dialogue regarded the view that forms simply correspond to what concepts designate as misguided, or at least saw a point in portraying his Eleatic visitor as regarding it as such; for the Eleatic visitor emphatically stresses that while certain names such as "barbarian" or "brute animal" may be said to correspond to parts of a whole, namely "human beings" and "living beings", they do *not* correspond to forms. Since the *Statesman* according to the traditional developmental view of Plato held by Stenzel is later than the *Parmenides*, this fact speaks strongly against the suggestion advanced by Stenzel and those critics who follow him that Plato in the *Parmenides* meant to criticize the view ascribed to Socrates, and then in the supposedly later dialogues through his Eleatic visitor defended a new understanding of forms according to which they were something closer to concepts.
- 19 We may now conclude that the developmental reading of the passage according to which it signals a change in Plato's ontological orientation is not supported by the content of the categories. We have also argued that this reading is motivated by views of Plato's supposed development that rest on philosophical assumptions about the general nature of universals and concepts and the importance of natural entities wholly foreign to Plato. To this point we may add that, had Plato really wanted to indicate such a change, his choice of depicting Socrates as very young

¹² Harte 2008, 194 observes that "where there is no theoretical work for Forms to do, there is no reason to posit them." See also McCabe 1994, 80.

¹³ Ross 1951, 85 and many later critics have ascribed this view to Plato, often based on passages from the *Republic*, in particular 596a6; Neo-Kantians like Paul Natorp have likewise taken for granted that Platonic forms were concepts.

in the dialogue would be almost impossible to understand. If he had wanted to tell his readers that he, from the time he wrote the *Parmenides* and onward, was leaving his Socratic heritage behind, it would have been much more effective simply to leave this Socrates behind and introduce his Eleatic visitor, his Athenian visitor and his Timaeus to take over.¹⁴ By depicting Socrates as young in the *Parmenides*, Plato seems to indicate that whatever may be at fault with Socrates' attitude toward the four categories, it has to do with his youthful understanding of them rather than with a view of forms that Plato also ascribes to a (dramatically speaking) much older Socrates in for instance the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*.¹⁵

- 20 In order to reach a positive understanding of the philosophical point Plato is making in the passage, we now need to analyze in greater detail the dramatic interplay between Socrates and Parmenides. We start by looking at the reasons Socrates advances for positing forms for some of the categories but not for others, and then proceed to the question what Parmenides finds problematic in Socrates' response to his questions.
- 21 We may first note that Socrates does not offer any *explicit* reasons for positing forms for likeness, unity, and plurality, or for the just, the good, or beauty. Nor does he offer any reasons for his being in perplexity (*en aporia[i]*; 130c3) about whether there are forms for human beings, fire, and water. But he does offer a reason for the claim that he is not in perplexity at all about whether there are forms for hair, mud, and dirt – for they are just as we see them (*tauta men ge haper horômen, tauta kai einai*), he claims, and it would be absurd (*atopos*) to assume a separate form for them (130d3-5). The reason he offers for not assuming forms for such things may also suggest to us the reason Socrates is so ready to assume forms for the features and entities of the first and second category – these are *not* as we see them –, and why he is hesitant about the entities of the third category – they are perhaps as we see them, and perhaps not.¹⁶ This line of reasoning is not too hard to follow; it may be regarded as expressing something like a phenomenological observation. In general people do not assume, or at least not on their own, prior to being influenced by philosophical or scientific views, that there exist separate forms for entities such as dirt and the like, since these things seem to be nothing more than what we see them to be. On the other hand, some people at least may be tempted to assume that separate forms in one sense or another must exist for features or entities such as unity or goodness. For upon

¹⁴ See Dorter 1994, 19-20 for a similar observation.

¹⁵ Erler 2007, 17, suggests that the fact that Plato, in choosing to depict Socrates as very young in the *Parmenides* and to defend a view similar to the one he puts forward in the *Parmenides* as an old man in the *Phaedo*, should be regarded as “literarischer Hinweis und Warnung Platons an die Interpreten ..., nicht unbedingt von einem Umdenken Platons auszugehen.” He concludes: “Die Wiederlegung der Ideenlehre ist nicht das letzte Wort Platons und damit endgültig.”

¹⁶ I thank Vasilis Politis for drawing my attention to the importance of this point.

consideration, we may come to realize that things we judge to be unities or to be good never truly express unity or goodness as such, but that we are nevertheless able to evaluate them as more or less unitary, or more or less good, and that this implies that both unity and goodness somehow exist separate from the things we regard as unities or as good (cf. *Phaedo* 74a9-75b9).

- 22 If this interpretation is correct, we see that Socrates' reasons for assuming separate forms for certain entities or features but not for others are philosophically well-motivated and not simply naïve, as some commentators have suggested (Zekl 1972, 131n20),¹⁷ even if they are not spelled out in such detail as they are in for instance the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, and even if they will hardly suffice for convincing someone who denies that forms exists at all that he or she should posit forms for at least certain features or entities.
- 23 Let us now turn to the objection Parmenides levels at Socrates. It contains three connected claims, namely i) that Socrates is still young and has not yet been sufficiently gripped by philosophy, ii) that, should philosophy eventually grip him, he will not dishonor any of the things mentioned in the fourth category, and iii) that he still pays too much attention to human opinions because of his age. The phrasing of this objection, in turn, seems closely connected to the manner in which Parmenides introduced the fourth category of things, where he stated (at 130c5-7) that "they could really seem ridiculous: hair and mud and dirt, for example, or anything else that is utterly worthless and trivial."
- 24 In this passage Parmenides recognizes that the things contained in the fourth category are worthless and trivial (*atimotaton te kai phaulotaton*), and that they for this reason may seem ridiculous (*geloia doxeien an einai*), while he at the same time suggests that it is unphilosophical to dishonor (*atimizein*) them. He also implies that Socrates regards them as ridiculous because of his age and because of a general tendency to pay too much attention to human opinions. What follows from this, however, is only that Socrates, according to Parmenides, will stop dishonoring lowly matters if he becomes truly philosophical, not that he will start regarding them as important (Parmenides regards them as worthless and trivial) or that he will have to "dignify" them "with Ideas" (the expression is taken from Allen 1997, 119).
- 25 As a result of the developmental account of the passage discussed above, however, the notion that Parmenides in fact urges Socrates to posit forms for dirt and the like has become rather common (Stenzel 1917, 28; Zekl 1972, 131n20; Dorter 1994, 26; Allen 1997, 123). A strong reason for rejecting this, apart from the simple observation that Parmenides never states that Socrates will posit forms for these things, is that Parmenides is noncommittal with respect to the question whether there are forms or not for the three previous categories. He simply raises

¹⁷ See also Allen 1997, 123 who states that Socrates' "rejection of separate Ideas of hair, mud, and dirt is philosophically clumsy".

the question concerning each category, but he neither confirms nor dismisses Socrates' answers. Moreover, in the next section of the dialogue Parmenides proceeds to raise a number of critical objections to the assumption that there are separate forms at all. What reasons should he then have for urging Socrates to posit separate forms *in particular* for hair, dirt, and mud?

- 26 On the basis of these considerations it seems more reasonable to assume that Parmenides is simply urging Socrates to consider more carefully what reasons he has for rejecting forms for things that are trivial and lowly and, more generally, what reasons he has for positing forms for *any* of the categories.¹⁸ In fact, the claim that Socrates pays too much attention to human opinions could be taken to suggest that Socrates has given the question what reasons he has for positing forms for features and entities such as unity and goodness too little attention, precisely because they are held in higher regard by most people. The suggestion Parmenides is making in the passage taken as a whole would then amount to the following: Socrates should stop disregarding what is lowly, he should give the question why he posits forms for some entities and not for others much more thought, and, perhaps most importantly, he should realize that common opinions concerning what is high and what is low are not a reliable guide when settling such difficult questions.
- 27 If this interpretation is correct, we may conclude that Parmenides is not recommending a “value-neutral” or “natural” ontology at all, but only a much more careful approach to the task of settling fundamental ontological questions. As we shall see, moreover, the passages concerning philosophic method from the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* that are commonly seen as connected to the passage from the *Parmenides* considered above suggest that Plato regarded this philosophical outlook as characteristic of an Eleatic approach to inquiry; closer considerations of the purpose of these passages in the two dialogues will also demonstrate that it is an outlook strikingly similar to one that Plato portrays his Socrates as being a proponent of.

Part II: The ideal of inquiry of the Eleatic visitor and its ontological implications

- 28 Parmenides' remarks concerning the attitude Socrates should adopt when he considers the scope of the assumption that there are forms seem related to some remarks on method made by the Eleatic Visitor in the *Sophist* (at 227a10-b6) and the *Statesman* (at 266d7-10).¹⁹ This part of the article analyzes these remarks with a view to their relation to the *Parmenides* and to the overall aim of the inquiry of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. Prior to this analysis, a few observations concerning

¹⁸ See Scolnicov 2003, 55 for a related reading.

¹⁹ See the discussion below.

the connection between the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* and *Statesman* are called for.

- 29 Within 20th century Plato scholarship it has been common to read the *Parmenides* as closely connected to the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* (see Cornford 1935, 1; Gill 2012, 1-3).²⁰ On the one hand the four dialogues are clearly connected through inter-textual references (for details, see Cornford 1935, 1), on the other *Parmenides* and the Eleatic tradition stand at the center in these dialogues, so much so that some or all have been referred to as Plato's 'Eleatic dialogues' (see Stenzel 1917, 29; Gadamer 1991, 338-340; Dorter 1994, ix), and they have been thought of as bearing witness to an interest in Eleatic thought developed only in Plato's later years (Ross 1951, 6-9, 83; see also Ryle 1939, 130). A common assumption has been that the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* are meant to be responses to the criticism of forms found in the *Parmenides* and that the three dialogues seek to address various problems inherent in the conception of forms found in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* that are pointed out in the *Parmenides* (this view is argued for in detail in Stenzel 1917), although critics have not agreed on the question how they address them.
- 30 Analytically oriented critics influenced by the work of G. E. L. Owen, Richard Robinson, and Gilbert Ryle tend to regard the four dialogues as belonging to a series of late, critical dialogues. The *Parmenides* opens this series, they claim, by rejecting transcendent forms, a rejection that leads Plato to develop his ontology, his epistemology, and his practical-political thought in new directions as documented by the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*, and the *Philebus*.²¹

²⁰ The idea of reading these dialogues systematically in the light of one another, as well as the notion that they announce a new "theory of ideas" that stands in contrast to an older theory culminating in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, probably goes back to six articles published by Henry Jackson from 1882 to 1886, but see also some remarks in Campbell 1867, ii-iv (general introduction), lx (introduction to the *Sophist*) and lvi-lvii (introduction to the *Statesman*). Jackson's articles have had some impact on later accounts of Plato's supposed development, as can be seen from e.g. Ross 1951, 101. See Jackson 1885, 242-243 for a general overview of Jackson's account of this development. Unlike analytical philosophers of the 20th century, who would come to view Plato's later dialogues as departing from a metaphysical strain in his earlier dialogues and as introducing a more linguistically and logically oriented conception of philosophy (see e.g. Ryle 1939 and Owen 1953), Jackson saw Plato's development as culminating in a "theory of natural kinds having for its basis a thoroughgoing idealism" (Jackson 1885, 243). For a discussion of Jackson's position, see Sweeney 1975, especially 193-195. For a more recent discussion of Plato's supposed development, see Thesleff 2014.

²¹ A restatement of this older view that became classical for the analytic school is found in Owen 1953, in which the aim is to argue that the *Timaeus* does not number among Plato's later dialogues; McCabe 1994, Lane 1998, Gill 2012, and Hestir 2016 all depend in various ways on Owen's general understanding of the remaining "critical", supposedly later dialogues. The main elements of this view of Plato's development can be traced back to Campbell 1867, see ii-iv (general introduction) for the overall connection between the dialogues Owen calls "critical" and xix-xxiii

Many critics in this tradition have further assumed that the arguments of these dialogues demonstrate that the later Plato at least in part outgrew his Socratic heritage and that this is why Plato introduced new leading interlocutors in his supposedly late dialogues, with the *Philebus* being the exception that proves the rule – when the subject matter to be discussed is ethical, Socrates can still be used as main interlocutor.²² In the words of Gilbert Ryle, Socrates plays “so slight a part in the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Politicus*, and so slight also is the positive role given to any known Socratic theories in those dialogues or in the *Theaetetus*, that the natural inference would surely be that Plato had discovered that certain important philosophic truths or methods were to be credited not to Socrates but to the Eleatics” (1939, 130).²³

- 31 This approach to the ‘Eleatic dialogues’ is anticipated in the work of Julius Stenzel, especially in his early work *Studien zur Entwicklung der Platonischen Dialektik*. This study has had a strong influence on German scholarship and also a certain impact on anglophone scholarship,²⁴ becoming a major force behind the developmental reading of the passages in the *Parmenides* discussed above. In this study Stenzel urged that Plato’s dialogues may roughly be divided into two main periods; a first period culminates in the *Republic* and is characterized by the fact that forms are closely associated with the virtue that expresses the perfection of something and hence with absolute values (Stenzel 1917, 3-19), a result of Plato’s Socratic orientation in this period; by contrast, the second is initiated by the critique found in the *Parmenides* of such forms, and is characterized by the fact that forms now come to serve the wholly new purpose of explaining everything

(general introduction) for some brief remarks on stylistic similarities that according to Campbell support the idea that they embody a separate, late period in Plato’s thought. Owen’s view of the place of the *Timaeus* remains idiosyncratic, standing in contrast with the tradition going back to Lewis Campbell. The fullest criticism of Owen’s argument is found in Cherniss 1957, which also opposes more generally the notion that Plato rejected transcendent forms in the so-called critical dialogues.

²² This view of Plato’s use of dramatic characters was, as far as I know, first introduced by Julius Stenzel in his ‘Literarische Form und philosophischer Gehalt des Platonischen Dialoges’ from 1916, see Stenzel 1917, 123-141 and also Stenzel 1917, 5; Stenzel was partly anticipated by Campbell, see Campbell 1867 xx-xxii (general introduction). A view similar to that of Stenzel was advanced in Taylor 1961, 5 and has also recently been advanced in Kahn 2013.

²³ For a recent discussion of Plato’s relation to Parmenides that emphasizes the importance of Parmenides more generally for Plato’s metaphysics, see Palmer 1999. See also Berti 1987, especially 67-101.

²⁴ Both F. M. Cornford and Richard Robinson take cues from the work of Julius Stenzel as do Alexander Nehamas; see Cornford 1935, 266n1, and 268n1; Robinson 1941a, 6; Robinson 1941b, 542-544; and Nehamas 1999, 222n38, 244n39. Martin Heidegger likewise build part of his early interpretation of Plato on Stenzel, see Heidegger 2004, 113-114.

there is (Stenzel 1917, 28).²⁵ As a result of this new purpose, forms are no longer associated with virtues or regarded as values, but come more closely to resemble concepts (Stenzel 1917, 25-31). Stenzel finds this shift in Plato's ontological outlook indicated in two ways; first in Plato's introduction of new main interlocutors (Stenzel 1917, 5), and second in the passages regarding method from the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist*, and the *Statesman* we are concerned with in this article. These passages, according to Stenzel, express Plato's new aim of "comprehend[ing] everything without concern for value" (1917, 28).²⁶ According to Stenzel, this aim also resulted in a change in Plato's conception of dialectic: whereas dialectic up until and including the *Republic* was essentially connected to the form of the good, it is now turned into a kind of "logic" that is free from any connection to the good and is concerned with a concept of being that is "liberated" from all teleological overtones (Stenzel 1917, 38-39).

- 32 Both of the approaches just sketched seem unable to account for some basic dramatic features of the so-called Eleatic dialogues, however, and this gives us reasons *prima facie* for doubting the validity of their differing accounts of Plato's development. First, that Plato portrays Socrates as quite young in the *Parmenides* and as being taught how to conduct philosophical inquiry by the old Parmenides, and that he has Socrates recall this (probably fictive) meeting with pleasure as an old man in both the *Theaetetus* (183e5-184a2) and the *Sophist* (217c3-7), suggest that Plato wanted to indicate a close connection between Parmenides and Socrates, whether that connection existed in fact or not. In the second place, both the fact that Socrates expresses gratitude toward Theodorus for introducing him to Theaetetus and the Eleatic visitor at the beginning of the *Statesman* (257a1-2), and the fact that Theodorus, at the beginning of the *Sophist*, assures Socrates that the visitor, while being a friend of those who associate with Parmenides and Zeno, is no eristic but rather a very philosophical man (216a2-4, b7-c1) suggest that Plato wanted his readers to regard the visitor's conception of philosophy as closely related to that of Socrates (see Cornford 1935, 169-170). Through these dramatic devices, it seems, Plato wanted to indicate that an intimate connection existed between Eleatic and Socratic ideals of inquiry, and further that the Eleatic ideal somehow served as a basis for those of his Socrates, rather than that the former ideal superseded or stood in contrast to the latter.²⁷

²⁵ A similar view was, as mentioned above, later advanced in Cornford 1939, 83, and was recently restated in Kahn 2013.

²⁶ Stenzel's emphasis of the connection between these passages and Plato's supposedly later ontology was later accepted by, among others, W. K. C. Guthrie; see Guthrie 1978, 40

²⁷ For a very different understanding of the role Plato ascribes to the figure of Parmenides, see Ferrari 2009. Ferrari suggests that Parmenides, as portrayed by Plato, is a philosopher wholly incapable of understanding the theory of forms since he consistently treats them as entities in space and time; related readings are advanced by Zekl 1972 and Miller 1985. For a more general

- 33 One might object, as a number of critics inspired by the work of Stanley Rosen have in recent decades, that Plato meant his readers to see that Socrates' praise of Parmenides and the Eleatic visitor is ironical and that the Socratic approach to philosophy differs radically from the Eleatic approach (see Rosen 1983, e.g. 8-11, and Rosen 1995, e.g. 14-18).²⁸ But for this objection to carry weight it would have to be shown that there are significant methodical and doctrinal differences between Plato's Socrates and the Eleatic philosophers as portrayed in his dialogues, which could then make intelligible an ironical reading of this kind.
- 34 An adequate discussion of this greater question lies beyond the scope of the present article. Here we will limit ourselves to looking at the passages in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* highlighted by both Julius Stenzel and Stanley Rosen as indicating such a difference. It will be argued that Stenzel was right in insisting that they indicate an idea of philosophical inquiry closely related to that expressed by Parmenides in the passage discussed in part I, but wrong in regarding them as indicating any significant change either in Plato's ontological or methodical orientation. Since the same passages are used by most critics who, following Rosen, advocate an ironic reading of Socrates' attitude toward the Eleatic tradition, this argument will also constitute a partial refutation of their approach to the Eleatic dialogues.
- 35 The passage from the *Sophist* runs as follows:

... in our pursuit through accounts, it matters not a bit less, or indeed any more, whether we're dealing with sponging people down or administering medicines, or whether the cleansing in question does us a little good or a lot. Our method aims at acquiring understanding, by attempting for all arts to grasp what is akin and what is not akin, and for this purpose it honors them all equally and supposes some not at all more ridiculous than others in respect of their similarity, and it won't treat someone who illuminates hunting through generalship rather than nit-picking as somehow more impressive, but rather, other things being equal, as empty-headed. (227a7-b6, translation by Christopher Rowe, modified)²⁹

discussion of Plato's use of Parmenides in his (fictional) biography of Socrates, see Erler 2007, especially 16-19. See also Zuckert 2009 on the biography of Socrates.

²⁸ Views building on Stanley Rosen's view of the difference between Socrates and Eleatic thought (or more precisely, between Socrates and the Eleatic visitor) was later elaborated in Hyland 2004 and Ambuel 2007. Dorter 1994 and Gonzalez 2009 likewise take Rosen's understanding of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* as their point of departure, although both modify Rosen's understanding of the Eleatic visitor significantly.

²⁹ ἀλλὰ γὰρ τῇ τῶν λόγων μεθόδῳ σπογγιστικῆς ἢ φαρμακοποσίας οὐδὲν ἦττον οὐδέ τι μᾶλλον τυγχάνει μέλον εἰ τὸ μὲν σμικρὰ, τὸ δὲ μεγάλα ἡμᾶς ὠφελεῖ καθαῖρον. τοῦ κτήσασθαι γὰρ ἔνεκα νοῦν πασῶν τεχνῶν τὸ συγγενὲς καὶ τὸ μὴ συγγενὲς κατανοεῖν πειρωμένη τιμᾷ πρὸς τοῦτο ἐξ ἴσου πάσας, καὶ

36 The passage from the *Statesman*, which comments on the *methodos* used in the *Sophist*, runs as follows:

... in this sort of pursuit through accounts, there was no care for what was dignified any more than for what wasn't, and it didn't dishonor the small in favor of the great, but on its own terms always reaches what is most true. (266d7-10, translation by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem)³⁰

37 A comparison between what Parmenides says when introducing the fourth category of entities in the *Parmenides* with what the visitor says in these passages concerning his *methodos tôn logôn* demonstrates that the two Eleates have a similar attitude toward philosophical inquiry. Parmenides states that there are things that could seem ridiculous (*geloia doxeien an einai*; 130c5-6) that Socrates will nevertheless not dishonor (*ouden autôn atimaseis*) should philosophy grab hold of him (130e3). The visitor states in the *Sophist* that the *methodos* he and his interlocutor pursue does not regard any features of arts it compares as any more ridiculous (*ouden hêgeitai geloiotera*; 227b3-4) than any other, but honors all arts equally (*tima[i] ... ex isou pasas*; 227b2) and in the *Statesman* that it does not dishonor what is small in favor of what is great (*ton te smikroteron ouden êtimake pro tou meizonos*; 266d8-9).

38 In these passages, then, Plato presents us with a philosophical attitude he seems to suggest is Eleatic in origin.³¹ This attitude urges us to i) suspend our ordinary estimations of what things are high and important and what things are ridiculous and ii) honor things, at least in certain contexts, equally, no matter whether they are great or small. It is important to note, however, that in pleading for this attitude Parmenides and the Eleatic visitor are not proponents of a non-teleological, value-neutral ontology, as Stenzel suggested, and further that the *methodos* of the visitor does not urge one, as Stanley Rosen claims, “to disregard the honorable altogether” (1983, 119n1) or generally to “ignore the difference of worse from better” (1983, 11).³²

θάτερα τῶν ἐτέρων κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα οὐδὲν ἡγεῖται γελοιότερα, σεμνότερον δὲ τι τὸν διὰ στρατηγικῆς ἢ φθειριστικῆς δηλοῦντα θηρευτικὴν οὐδὲν νενόμικεν, ἀλλ' ὡς τὸ πολὺ χαυνότερον.

³⁰ ὅτι τῇ τοιαύτῃ μεθόδῳ τῶν λόγων οὔτε σεμνοτέρου μᾶλλον ἐμέλησεν ἢ μή, τὸν τε σμικρότερον οὐδὲν ἡτίμακε πρὸ τοῦ μείζονος, ἀεὶ δὲ καθ' αὐτὴν περαίνει τἀληθέστατον.

³¹ See also *Phaedrus* 261a7-e4, where Socrates introduces an art of rhetoric that he claims is one and the same whether it is concerned “with small things” or “with great, and ... no more to be esteemed in important than in trifling matters” (261a9-b2); this kind of rhetoric is exemplified especially by the “Eleatic Palamedes”, Zeno (compare 261b8 with 261d6-8).

³² This and similar claims lead Rosen and several other critics inspired by his work to claim that the method of the Eleatic visitor is fundamentally flawed; by leaving questions of value out of his philosophical inquiry, he becomes unable to distinguish philosopher from sophist. See Rosen

- 39 First of all, it is not at all clear that what the visitor is stating in the two passages under consideration has a direct bearing on ontology. There is certainly no clear connection between his remarks and an “ontology of nature”, as Stenzel and others have suggested, for the context makes it perfectly clear that the remarks concerning method are primarily meant to have a bearing on the question how we are to regard arts or types of expertise. Moreover, it is a real question whether or not Plato held the view that there are forms, in the sense of essences, corresponding to the various arts;³³ at the very least, we may note that arts are not mentioned in the four categories considered in the *Parmenides* where the question concerning the scope of forms is raised. The mere fact that Socrates and the visitor talk about *eidê* and *genê* of arts, and that the visitor is willing to consider what (*ti pot' esti*) each is (see e.g. *Sophist* 217a7-9, 217b1-4, 219c2), in itself fails to prove that either holds the view that there are essences for arts, and shows only that they distinguish between types or kinds of art and find it meaningful to discuss what each art is.
- 40 Second, it is not correct to claim that Parmenides and the visitor disregard honor or “value”; what each urges us to do is rather *not to dishonor* certain things commonly found low and ridiculous, an attitude parallel to the one advocated by Aristotle at the beginning of the *Parts of Animals* (645a15-23);³⁴ the two Eleates need not thereby diminish what is high, on the contrary, their main concern seems to be to elevate certain things commonly regarded as low.
- 41 Third, the visitor’s remarks concerning his *methodos* in the *Sophist* are qualified in two ways we need to bear in mind in order to understand the aim of this *methodos*. i) It does not simply put everything on a par as Stenzel and Rosen infer, but instead honors all arts equally *in relation to (pros; 227b2) a specific task*, discerning what is akin and what is not akin in the arts, and this task in turn is undertaken with a view to acquiring understanding. ii) The *methodos* does not require that we assume that no arts are ridiculous, urging us only to regard no art as more ridiculous than others kindred with it *in respect of their similarity (kata tèn homoiotêta; 227b3)*.

1983, 120-121, Hyland 2004, 29, and Gonzalez 2009, 50-51. For a critical assessment of these interpretations, see Larsen 2016, 29-43.

³³ It is a notoriously difficult question what ontological status we should ascribe to “the objects” divided by the Eleatic visitor in the outer part of the *Sophist* and in the *Statesman*, that is, the various types of expertise. Are they Platonic forms, essences, or mere concepts or classes? No matter how we decide this question, however, it seems clear that types of expertise are not included in the ontological discussion found in the *Parmenides* and that the resolution of this question therefore has no immediate bearing on the way we should read the *Parmenides* passage discussed above in part I. For an overview as well as an informative discussion of the question what ontological status types of expertise have, see Rowe 1995, 4-8.

³⁴ The parallel is noted by Zekl 1972, 132n21

- 42 What the two qualifications imply is explained by the example concerning hunting that the visitor provides in the *Sophist* at 227b4-5. A nitpicker, we may think, is manifestly less important than a general, and from a certain perspective ridiculous (even the notion that there is an *art* of nitpicking may seem ridiculous, as Plato probably recognized; see Campbell 1867, v-vi [general introduction]); but the visitor's point is that, if our purpose is to understand what is akin and what is not akin in the arts, i.e. which generic features various arts share and which they do not share, we are justified in saying a) that the arts of the general and the nitpicker are akin or share a common feature in so far as both perform the same activity, hunting, and b) that we may understand equally well what that activity of hunting is by looking at a "low" or a "high" practitioner of the activity.
- 43 Since the visitor is so careful to make explicit why and to what extent his *methodos* honors all arts equally and regards no feature that arts may share as more ridiculous than any other, it seems clear that he does not mean to suggest that the *methodos* precludes that, from another, more everyday³⁵ perspective, some arts may be considered ridiculous, others important. What the visitor points out is that we should not conduct our ontological or dialectical investigations on the basis of this perspective because such a procedure may preclude us from seeing real likenesses between arts relevant for understanding their true nature, which is probably the situation the vain or empty-headed dialectician mentioned at 227b4-6 risks being in. On the other hand, the *methodos* could seem to entail that we cannot decide whether an art is important and hence worthy of honor before we have decided what type of activity is characteristic of that art and how this activity is related to the activities of other arts.
- 44 If the last suggestion is along the right lines, we may conclude that there is a further resemblance between the philosophical stance of the visitor and that exhibited by Parmenides in the passage from the *Parmenides* analyzed above. In this passage, it was argued, Parmenides does not urge Socrates to posit forms for things such as mud, dirt, and hair, but rather recommends that, in order to decide whether a form should be posited for them or not, Socrates has to consider more carefully what reasons he has – apart from common prejudice – for accepting and rejecting forms for them. In a similar spirit, what the visitor is suggesting in the *Sophist* is that we should not attempt to decide the question how we are to accord honor to various kinds of expertise before having decided the question what similarities and differences exist between the kinds.
- 45 The suggestion that a consideration of this kind is what motivates the visitor to make the remarks on method considered above gains further support if we turn to consider the basic problem or *aporia* the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* are meant to solve. The overall goal of the two dialogues is to decide a question concerning the sophist, the statesman, and the philosopher raised by Socrates and elaborated

³⁵ Or from an "ontic" perspective, as we could say with Heideggerian terms.

on by the visitor at the beginning of the *Sophist*. Asked by Socrates whether people in Elea think that these men are one, two, or three *genê* or kinds (217a7-9), the visitor states that this question is easy to answer – they think they are three – but that it is no small or easy task to distinguish clearly what each is individually (*kath' hekaston mên diorisasthai saphôs ti pot' estin, ou smikron oude rha[i]dion ergon*; 217b2-3). This corollary claim seems to be anticipated by a statement made by Socrates a few lines earlier. The philosophical kind (*genê*), he there states, may be as difficult to distinguish (*diakrinein*) as that of the gods, since philosophers appear in all sorts of shapes, not least as a result of the ignorance of others; to some they appear to be of no worth (*dokousin einai tou mêdenos timioi*), to others to be worth more than anything (*axioi tou pantos*), and they appear sometimes as statesmen, sometimes as sophists, and sometimes as completely mad (216c2-d2).

46 The basic problem the discussion in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* is explicitly intended to solve, then, is to *distinguish clearly from each other* sophist, statesman, and philosopher, i.e. what each is, a problem that apparently arises from the fact that philosophers, according to Socrates, commonly appear as what they are not. The task imposed upon the visitor is therefore not simply that of looking toward three isolated “entities” and defining them in turn, as some of the statements made by the visitor and Theodorus could be taken to suggest (see especially *Sophist* 218b6-c1 and *Statesman* 257b7-c2). It is rather that of looking toward a complex interconnection between three types of human beings and their proclaimed types of expertise³⁶ in order to decide whether they are three entities with three types of expertise standing on a par or whether some other connection exists between them, such as the one hinted at by Socrates, according to which sophist, statesman, and madman are somehow appearances of an underlying original, the philosopher.³⁷ Moreover, since Socrates makes clear from the start of the *Sophist* that these appearances result at least in part from the ignorance of others (216c4-5), and further that others for this reason estimate the relative worth of philosophers in radically different ways (216c7-d2), it seems clear that an appeal to common opinions about the nature of each type and the relative worth of their several activities will not distinguish each clearly or sufficiently from the rest.

47 We may suggest that, in order for the visitor to complete this task, or to solve this *aporia*, in a satisfactory manner, he needs to make clear what each of the three types do, i.e. to what *technê* or *epistêmê* they may lay claim *and* how each kind of expertise is related to and differs from the others. This, we may further suggest, is why the visitor begins the investigation in both the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* by dividing art and knowledge into their various kinds, and is also the reason he insists

³⁶ That it is the *activity* performed by the sophist, contrasted with the activity of the philosopher, rather than the sophist and the philosopher themselves that the interlocutors undertake to define in the *Sophist*, is correctly emphasized in Oberhammer 2016, 125-126.

³⁷ On this point, see also Rosen 1983, 64-66; Benardete 1984 II, 73-75; and Oberhammer 2016, 99-103, 108-109.

that his *methodos* honors all arts equally with a view to understanding what is alike and what is not alike in them. For it is only to the extent that he can show that the expertise of sophist, statesman, and philosopher differ significantly from each other that he will be able to vindicate the opinion concerning them, namely that they are three kinds, held by people in Elea. The existential importance of this task is at the same time underscored on the dramatic level by the upcoming trial against Socrates, hinted at toward the end of the *Theaetetus* (210d2-4), which constitutes an important background to the entire investigation: as Plato's Socrates suggests in his defense speech, this trial is at least in part the result of a confusion of him with certain sophists that goes back at least to Aristophanes (see *Apo.* 18b4-c1).

- 48 If this interpretation of the opening scene of the *Sophist* and its connection with the visitor's remarks concerning method is correct, we may conclude that the passages from the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* demonstrate both that the Eleatic visitor does not advocate an ontology in the passages we have considered that is at odds with the outlook of Plato's Socrates,³⁸ and that he at a fundamental level is in agreement with Socrates concerning the question how philosophical inquiry should proceed. The procedure the visitor is pursuing in the two dialogues matches the procedure Socrates recommends in the *Meno*, the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, namely, that one has to decide the question *what* something is before one can decide what *qualities* something has, at least when there appears to be a genuine question whether the thing under consideration possesses the qualities in question or not (*Meno* 71b3-7, *Gorg.* 448d8-448e7, *Resp.* 354b3-6).³⁹ Moreover, in terms of a general approach to philosophical inquiry, this procedure seems closely related to the procedure of bracketing opinions concerning the qualities of things and in particular common opinions of worth when considering what something really is. This is, as we have seen, the implicit recommendation Parmenides gives young Socrates in the dialogue that carries his name. Rather than heralding a new methodology, we may then conclude, the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist*, and the *Statesman* together suggest that this trait of the philosophical method characteristic of Plato's Socrates and central to Plato's conception of dialectic inquiry, is a trait that Plato regarded as being of Eleatic origin⁴⁰.

³⁸ It is possible to demonstrate that he does not advocate such an ontology in any part of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, but this is a complex task presupposing a full-length interpretation of both dialogues.

³⁹ For a thought-provoking argument for the view that it is hard *aporiai* concerning questions of the type "is x y or z" that generates the *ti esti* question in the so-called Socratic dialogues rather than a specifically Platonic or Socratic epistemology, see Politis 2015, especially chapter 1 to 3. My analysis of the connection between the opening puzzle of the *Sophist* and the considerations concerning method offered by the visitor is indebted to this account.

⁴⁰ I wish to thank Hayden Ausland and Vivil Valvik Haraldsen who both read the article and made many helpful suggestions. Special thanks are due Hallvard Fossheim and Vasilis Politis who

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, R. E., ed. 1965. *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- ALLEN, R. E., trans. 1997. *Plato's Parmenides – Translated with comment, revised edition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- AMBUEL, David. 2007. *Image and Paradigm in Plato's Sophist*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing.
- BENARDETE, Seth, trans. 1984. *The Being of the Beautiful – Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman, Translated and with Commentary*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- BERTI, Enrico. 1987. *Contraddizione e dialettica negli antichi e nei moderni*. Palermo: L'Epos.
- BURNYEAT, Myles. 1976. "Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving." *The Classical Quarterly*, 26 (1): 29-51.
- CAMPBELL, Lewis, ed. 1867. *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato with a Revised Text and English Notes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CHERNISS, Harold. 1957. "The Relation of the *Timaeus* to Plato's Later Dialogues." *The American Journal of Philology*, 78 (3): 225-266 [reprinted in Allen 1965, 339-378 and Cherniss. *Selected Papers*, ed. L. Tarán. Leiden: Brill 1977, 298-339].
- CORNFORD, Francis MacDonald. 1935. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- CORNFORD, Francis MacDonald. 1939. *Plato and Parmenides*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- DORTER, Kenneth. 1994. *Form and Good in Plato's Eleatic Dialogues – The Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist and Statesman*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ERLER, Michael. 2007. "Biographische Elemente bei Plato und hellenistischer Philosophie." In *Griechische Biographie in Hellenistischer Zeit*, edited by Michael Erler and Stefan Schorn. Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter: 11-24.
- FERRARI, Franco. 2009. "Parmenide 'antiplatónico'. Riflessioni sul 'Parmenide' di Platone." *Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale*, 51 (2), 315-330.
- FRIEDLÄNDER, Paul. 1960. *Platon III*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- GADAMER, Hans-Georg. 1991. "Dialektik ist nicht Sophistik - Theätet lernt das im *Sophistes*." In *Gesammelt Werke 7*, 338-369. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

read the article several times and helped improve the overall clarity of the argument. I also wish to thank the participants at a workshop at the Trinity Plato Center, Trinity College Dublin, who commented on an earlier version. The article was written as part of the postdoctoral project DICTUM. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 750263.

- GONZALEZ, Francisco J. 2009. *Plato and Heidegger – A Question of Dialogue*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- GILL, Mary Louise. 2012. *Philosophos*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- GUTHRIE, W. K. C. 1978. *History of Greek Philosophy vol. 5*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HACKFORTH, Reginald, trans. 1972. *Plato's Phaedrus - Translated with an Introduction and Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HARTE, Verity. 2008. "Plato's Metaphysics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, edited by Gail Fine, 191-216. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin. 2004. *Gesamtausgabe, band 22: Die Grundbegriffe der antiken Philosophie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klosterman.
- HESTIR, Blake E. 2016. *Plato on the Metaphysical Foundation of Meaning and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HYLAND, Drew. 2004. *Questioning Platonism – Continental Interpretations of Plato*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- JACKSON, Henry. 1885. "Plato's Later Theory of Ideas – IV The *Theaetetus*." *The Journal of Philology*; 13 (26): 242-272.
- KAHN, Charles H. 2013. *Plato and the Post-Socratic Dialogue – the Return to the Philosophy of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LANE, Melissa. 1998. *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LARSEN, Kristian. 2016. "Plato and Heidegger on Sophistry and Philosophy." In *Sophistes: Plato's Dialogue and Heidegger's Lectures in Marburg (1924-25)*, edited by Diego De Brasi and Marko J. Fuchs, 27-60. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- MILLER, Mitchel. 1986. *Plato's Parmenides – the Conversion of the Soul*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MCCABE, Mary Margaret. 1994. *Plato's Individuals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- NEHAMAS, Alexander. 1999. *Virtues of Authenticity – Essays on Plato and Socrates*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- OBERHAMMER, Arnold Alois. 2016. *Buchstaben als 'paradeigma' in Platons Spätdialogen: Dialektik und Modell im 'Theaitetos', 'Sophistes', 'Politikos' und 'Philebos'. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 353*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- OWEN, G. E. L. 1953. "The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues." *The Classical Quarterly*, 3 (1/2): 79-95 [reprinted in Allen 1965, 313-338].
- PALMER, John. 1999. *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- POLITIS, Vasilis. 2015. *The Structure of Enquiry in Plato's Early Dialogues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ROBINSON, Richard. 1941a. *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*. New York: Cornell University Press.

- ROBINSON, Richard. 1941b. "Review of Julius Stenzel's *Plato's Method of Dialectic*." *The Philosophical Review*, 50: 542-544.
- ROWE, Christopher James. 1995. *Plato – Statesman*. Oxford: Aris & Phillips Classical Texts.
- ROSEN, Stanley. 1983. *Plato's Sophist – The Drama of Original & Image*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- ROSEN, Stanley. 1995. *Plato's Statesman: The Web of Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- ROSS, Davis. 1951. *Plato's Theory of Ideas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- RYLE, Gilbert. 1939. "Plato's *Parmenides*." *Mind* 48 (191): 129-51 and 302-325 [reprinted in Allen 1965, 97-147].
- SCOLNICOV, Samuel, trans. 2003. *Plato's Parmenides*. Translated and with an Introduction and Commentary. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- STENZEL, Julius. 1917. *Studien zur Entwicklung der Platonischen Dialektik von Sokrates zu Aristoteles – Arete und Diairesis*. Breslau: Trewendt & Granier.
- SWEENEY, Leo. 1975. "Henry Jackson's Interpretation of Plato." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13 (2): 189-204.
- TAYLOR, Alfred Edward, trans. 1961. *The Sophist and Statesman*. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons.
- THESLEFF, Holger. 2014. *Platonic Patterns: A Collection of Essays*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing.
- ZEKL, Hans Günther, trans. 1972. *Platon – Parmenides, Translation with Introduction and Notes*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- ZUCKERT, Catherine. 2009. *Plato's Philosophers*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
-