Does Plato Think False Speech is Speech?

GEORGE RUDEBUSCH
NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Before Plato came along, there was no satisfactory account of the nature of false speech. This is not to say that no one had yet figured out how to tell a lie; the Greeks were notorious, even in their own literature, as skillful liars. What I mean is that there was a pair of puzzles floating around unanswered. These puzzles were expressed as arguments that false speech was impossible.

One puzzle went like this: to say what is false is to say what does not exist, but to say what does not exist is to say nothing at all, and to say nothing at all is not to speak. Thus there can be no such thing as false speech. The other puzzle went like this: to say what is false is to say what is other than the things that are. Nonetheless (in view of the first puzzle), to say what is other is to say something that is. But to say what is is to speak the truth. Thus there can be no such thing as false speech.[1]

It is a commonplace that Plato struggles with these puzzles and finally resolves them in the *Sophist*, where he gives the first well-accepted account of false speech. It is this commonplace that I wish to question: does Plato himself accept the account of false speech which is given in the *Sophist*? The standard answer is, "Yes, of course, obviously Plato takes himself thereby to have solved the problem of false speech."

To raise the doubts I have about this answer—even in a sketchy, incomplete way, as is the purpose of this paper—I am in the poor position of having no startling new evidence to offer. The crucial evidence on which I rest my case is already well known: it is that Plato offers an analogous account of false belief in the neighboring dialogue, the *Theaetetus*. The account in the *Theaetetus* is given in language which is strikingly similar to the account in the *Sophist*. Yet the *Theaetetus* unmistakably rejects this account. Moreover, these

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two dialogues (along with a third, the *Statesman*) are part of a trilogy. The dramatic frame for all three is given in the opening lines of the *Theaetetus*: Eucleides has one of his slave boys read a story, a transcribed conversation, to Terpsion. That story is the dialogue which makes up the rest of the *Theaetetus* (which is set on one day and in which the discussion is led by Socrates) and the whole of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (which are set on the following day and led by the Stranger). The *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, therefore, were constructed in view of each other. Finally, in both the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, thinking, whether true or false, is taken to be nothing but speaking (silently to oneself: *Tht.* 189e-190a, cf. 190c; *Soph.* 263e). Thus within these two dialogues, to which Plato gave a dramatic unity and in which thought is identified with speech, there is a contradiction: the same account is both rejected and accepted.

None of this evidence is a surprise for the standard view. There is a standard strategy for reconciling this contradiction. That strategy is to have the *Sophist* overrule the *Theaetetus*. That is, we take Plato in the *Theaetetus* to be saying, "I have not yet found a solution to the problem of false thought or speech." (A minor variation is to take Plato in the *Theaetetus* to be saying, "I already have a solution to these puzzles—read the *Sophist*!—but here I am holding it back [for some reason or other].") According to this strategy, the account which failed in the *Theaetetus* somehow succeeds in the *Sophist*. The standard picture ends here, for there is little or no agreement on just how the *Sophist* succeeds where the *Theaetetus* failed. It is this standard reconciliation—the device of having the *Sophist* overrule the *Theaetetus*—which I doubt.

In what follows, I shall look at (I) the problem of false speech which Plato faces, (II) the solution he gives in the *Sophist*, and (III) how that very solution is undermined by the argument of the *Theaetetus*. It will then be clear (IV) what sort of reconciliation is ruled out and what sort remains to be investigated, if we are to avoid paradox.

I

Plato's account of false speech is given to solve a problem. A large part of that problem is the problem of non-being: what does not exist is predicatively nothing (i.e. something of which no statement of the form 'It is . . .' is true), which is something unmentionable; thus it is impossible to talk about what does not exist.

The problem was concisely put by Parmenides: "What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not" (fr. 6.1-2, tr. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield). That

is, if it is there to be spoken or thought of, then it exists; and (the contrapositive) if it does not exist, it is not there to be spoken or thought of. In the *Sophist*, the Stranger gives a slightly expanded version: if *x* is predicatively something, then there exists some term which refers to or is true of it; call any such term a *something-term*.[2] Any something-term is a sign of *one*, as any *some-things-term* is a sign of many (237d9-10). Thus to say a something-term is to refer to some *one* thing (237d6-8). But if a thing is one then it exists. In both Parmenides' and Plato's arguments there is the move from non-existence to predicative nothingness. This is a controversial, though defensible, move.[3]

Given the problem of non-being, there is a problem about false speech which is just as simple to state: to say what is false is (a) to say what is not the case, which is (b) to say what does not exist. But, as we now see, one cannot say what does not exist; it is unmentionable. In this problem the suspicious move is from (a) to (b), and the solution set out by the Stranger in the *Sophist* questions that very move.

II

The Stranger's solution to the problem of false speech is a corollary to his account of speech in general, so it is necessary to start with that general account. The Stranger's account can easily be cast in modern terms. He says that there are two kinds of "meaningful units of speech" (*tôn tê phônê dêlômatôn*, 261e5): "grammatical subjects" and "grammatical predicates" (*onomata, rhêmata*, 262a1). The grammatical predicate is a unit of meaning "for actions" (*epi tais praxesin*, 262a3). And the grammatical subject is a unit of meaning "for those performing these actions" (262a6). As the Stranger shows by considering the example, "Walks runs sleeps," no string of predicates is sufficient to constitute a statement. Nor is any string of subjects sufficient, as he shows with the example, "A lion a stag a horse" (262a9-c2).

Imagine that someone now says, "I see *that* these two examples are not statements, but I do not see *why* they are not." The Stranger provides this answer: "Because in neither example do the voiced sounds mean [or point out] an action or even an inaction, or a being of what is or even of what is not" (262c2-4). To explain this answer, the Stranger gives another example: "A man learns." He says this example "has meaning about what is . . . i.e., it does not merely name but delimits [or connects] something" (262d2-5). Thus his answer to the question "*why* do only combinations of subjects and predicates make up sentences?" is that subject-plus-predicate

becomes a sentence while subject-plus-subject or predicate-plus-predicate remains a list because when we put together subject and predicate we limit the meaning of each. It is in that case not just *learning* being named, as in a list of actions (such as "Learns, discovers, knows"), but the learning *of someone*; and not just a man being named, as in a list of agents ("A man, a monkey, a machine"), but a man *learning* which is meant.

Having thus shown that in order to have a statement it is *necessary* to put together a grammatical subject and predicate, the Stranger next states it is *sufficient*: "As soon as once concatenates [*kerasê*] the predicates with the subjects, *then* [the meaningful units of speech] harmonize and at once a statement comes into being" (262c4-5).

With this account of what a statement is, which is so easily cast into modern terms and which feels so familiar, the Stranger then elicits a resolution to the paradox of false speech. He begins by reiterating his acceptance of the problem of non-being as a Parmenidean requirement that language must be about something: "It is necessary that whatever is a statement be a statement about something; not to be about something would be impossible" (262e5). His next point: it is because a statement is about something that it gets what we call its "truth value," what the Stranger somewhat vaguely calls its "character" (*poion tina*, 262e8). Notice, then, that the Stranger does not define false speech by giving up a referential view of language; he rightly points out that it is because of its aboutness that language takes on its most distinctive characteristic: truth value.

The Stranger next discusses a statement which he calls "a combination of an action-performer and action through grammatical subject and predicate" (262e12):

(T) Theaetetus sits.

Exhibit (T) meets the Parmenidean aboutness requirement; for, as Theaetetus says, it is about Theaetetus. Next they consider:

(F) Theaetetus flies.

"Who is it about?" asks the Stranger. Theaetetus says: "No one could say it is about anyone but Theaetetus" (263a9-10). They go on to agree that the "character" (i.e. truth value) of exhibit (T) is true (263b2-3), and that this truth consists in the fact that it "states *things as they are* about Theaetetus." Presumably it "states" one of the actions—here, sitting—which Theaetetus is performing. The value of exhibit (F) is false; this falsity consists in the fact that it states "things *other than* the things that are" about Theaetetus (263b7).

Presumably, it "states" one of the actions—here, flying—which is other than those being performed by Theaetetus. Thus we may say that exhibit (F) "states what is not [i.e. flying, an action not performed by Theaetetus] as if it were [an action performed by Theaetetus]" (263b9). The details of this solution are hard to determine.[4] But the general strategy is clear: this solution provides a way to reject the move from (a) a false statement says what is not the case to (b) a false statement says what does not exist. With a false sentence, as well as a true, Theaetetus can now answer the questions: What is it about?—some action-performer. What does it assert about that action-performer?—some action: if true, then the action which is being performed by the action-performer; if false, then an action which is *other than* those. 'Stating what does not exist' is dropped from the explanation and replaced with 'stating what is other'. This replacement of a "non-being" explanation with an "other than" explanation is the *Sophist*'s solution to the problem of false belief.[5]

III

The solution which we have just seen is apt to strike us as eminently reasonable. The curious thing about it is that this same solution is rejected in the *Theaetetus*. The standard view, as I said, is that the *Sophist* adds something or other to its solution to overcome the problem of the *Theaetetus*. But a look at the argument of the *Theaetetus* will show that in it every move the *Sophist* makes is anticipated.

Near the end of the *Theaetetus* Socrates asks how the experience of false belief can take place (187d1-e4). One explanation he considers is in terms of "being and not being" (188d1): "May it not simply be that one who thinks what *is not* about anything cannot but be thinking what is false?" (188d3-4). This case is ruled out by the problem of non-being, just as in the *Sophist*: to think of what is not is to think of what is predicatively nothing, which is impossible. Socrates concludes: "Therefore thinking falsely must be something different from thinking what is not" (189b4-5).

Every other explanation Socrates considers is a variation on the theme that to think what is false is to "think that one thing is another" (188b3-4, b7). For all of these, Socrates raises the same problem. When someone makes a judgement, they must judge either about a thing they know or do not know. "And of course," Socrates says, "both to know and not know the same thing is impossible" (188a10-b1). So three cases must be considered: either the person who mistakes one thing for another knows both things, or neither,

or only one of the two. Socrates then goes on to rule out all three possibilities.

He gets Theaetetus to admit that (a) it is impossible for someone to think that one thing which he knows is not itself but another thing which he also knows. The impossibility is that "he would know both and not know both" (188b4-6).

And, he goes on, (b) it is impossible for him to think that one thing which he does not know is another thing which he does not know. The impossibility in this case is that someone who knows neither, say, the man Socrates nor the man Theaetetus could "take it into his head" (188b9) that the man Socrates is the man Theaetetus or that the man Theaetetus is the man Socrates.

Again, he goes on, (c) it is impossible for him to think that one thing he knows is another thing he does not know, or that one thing he does not know is another thing he knows (188c2-4). It seems that both of the above impossibilities apply here: it is impossible that the man would know and not know one of the things, like the impossibility of case (a), and it is impossible that he would take into his head the thing he did not know, like the impossibility of case (b). In any case, it is impossible to find a way to think falsely that one thing is another.

This Socratic argument has been charged with error on two counts. First, it is said to be insufficiently general, for it does not deal with all sorts of false belief, but only with false identifications. Second, it is thought to be obviously fallacious (see, e.g., Francis Cornford, p. 113; McDowell, 1973, p. 195).

In fact both accusations are false. Consider first the charge that it is insufficiently general. According to this charge, the argument leaves untouched all cases of false predication. For the falsity of 'Theaetetus is flying' does not consist in the wrong identification of *flying* and Theaetetus; rather, it is a case where *flying* is falsely predicated of Theaetetus.

Nonetheless, as Socrates repeatedly points out (with other examples), if flying is mistakenly predicated of Theaetetus, then either flying has been mistaken for some other action (perhaps we saw Theaetetus falling, not flying) or Theaetetus has been mistaken for someone else (perhaps we saw Icarus, not Theaetetus, flying). The point is that a false predication does require the mistake of one thing for another (either the act of flying or the performer Theaetetus for, perhaps, the act of falling or Icarus). Thus there is a mistake, that is, a false identification, even in a case of false predication. It is that mistake which Socrates finds impossible, whether we know both Theaetetus and Icarus (or both *falling* and *flying*) or neither,

or only one. And if that sort of mistake is impossible, any false belief—including false predications—will be ruled out.

The other accusation is that Socrates' argument is obviously fallacious. The reason why most people think it is fallacious goes something like this: perhaps if I knew everything about an object (it would have to be a very simple object), then I could never think falsely about it. And perhaps if I knew nothing about an object, not even a way to refer to it, I could not think falsely about it, either. But Socrates' argument that false belief is impossible appears to have a giant hole in it. It seems obvious that we never do know everything about an object (for instance, how many times it was discussed in the fifth century BC), and it also seems that we always know something about an object (at least, that it exists—or, to be really sure, that it either exists or does not exist). For Socrates to succeed in puzzling us, he needs to show that we either know something completely or not at all; but, as it seems, we can "partially" know an object. There is a sense in which I do know Theaetetus, and a sense in which I do not know the same man, for we can have a bit of knowledge about something without knowing everything about it.

In our own century, the "partial knowledge" claim is accepted in the form of a Fregean explanation. For Frege, to partially know an object is to think about it in one or another "sense". It is worth emphasizing that for Frege the object, not the sense, is what the thought is about. Frege would explain a mistake of one thing for another as a mismatch of one sense with another.[6] Imagine that, seeing Icarus flying, we mistake Icarus for Theaetetus and say, "Theaetetus is flying." According to the Fregean form of explanation, this *mistake* of one man for another is explained as a *mismatch* of one sense with another: the sense of the object as flying is mismatched with the sense of the object as Theaetetus.

It is precisely this sort of explanation that Socrates considers in his third, fourth, and fifth explanations of false belief (189b-190e; 191b-196c; 196d-199d, with two modified versions considered at 199e1-200b5 and 200b5-c4). In each case, Socrates points out that the *mismatch* of one thought with another can have occurred only if one thought was *mistaken* for another. In our example, the thought of the object as Theaetetus (in being *mismatched* with the thought of the object as flying) was *mistaken* for a thought of the object as Icarus. Thus, Socrates can claim, the explanation makes no progress at all—the problem has simply shifted up one level. How could the mind have mistaken the wrong way of thinking of the man for the right way? We started off trying to explain how one *person* could

be mistaken for another, and now we have to explain how one thought could be mistaken for another. According to Socrates, then, this "explanation" leaves things as mysterious as ever.

Is Socrates' objection to the Fregean explanation sound? That is a difficult question. Since the question is difficult, it follows that Socrates' argument is not obviously fallacious.

Here, then, is where we stand. Both Socrates in the *Theaetetus* and the Stranger in the *Sophist* reject any explanation of falsity which makes reference to non-being. Both Socrates and the Stranger also consider an explanation in terms of *otherness* (actually, Socrates considers four such explanations, plus two variations on the fourth). But while the Stranger accepts that explanation, Socrates rejects it. It is true that the Stranger spends a lot of time explicating and defending the notion of otherness in the *Sophist* (254e-259c) and refers to that explication in justifying his account of false belief in terms of otherness (263b11-12), but it is on other grounds than the problem of non-being that Socrates rejects accounts of false belief in terms of otherness.

Socrates rejects the account of false belief because of his trilemma: a mistake is impossible whether one knows both, neither, or only one of the two objects. And here may seem to lie the key to a reconciliation: the trilemma in terms of knowing and not knowing seems to apply at most to beliefs; perhaps it is irrelevant in the case of statements.[7]

It would be curious if this key argument in Socrates' refutation were to mark a difference between thought and speech, since thought and speech are explicitly identified in the course of this very refutation. (Notice, by the way, how the problem of non-being applies equally to both thought and speech.)

But in fact the trilemma does apply to speech as well as thought, for it, like the problem of non-being, is essentially a problem about reference. The argument's success does not require any feature peculiar to knowledge. In one version (189b-190e) Socrates indifferently uses the verb 'thinking' (*doxazein*) instead of 'knowing' (*eidenai*), and in the final explanations the argument depends merely on having wax blocks or birds in mind somehow or other. The argument merely requires that the thought be *about* the object. What Socrates believes that aboutness requires is made clear in one of the few passages in the *Theaetetus* containing an unrefuted doctrine (209a1-c7). (This unrefuted quality gives it special weight for interpreting Socrates' own view, and, by implication, Plato's.)

There Socrates argues that if I am to be thinking *of* Theaetetus, I must have in mind the way in which Theaetetus is different from

everything else. His proof is by contradiction. Suppose, he says, that I have a belief about Theaetetus, but do not have in mind any way in which Theaetetus is different from everything else. In that case one is not thinking of Theaetetus but "of something common which does not belong to [Theaetetus] more than to anyone else" (209a10-11). So that there can be no mistaking his point, Socrates gives an example: he says that he will not be able to think about Theaetetus until he can tell the difference between Theaetetus's snub nose and his own or any other case of snub nose, and also can tell the difference between the other things about Theaetetus and those things when they are about others (209c5-7).

For Socrates it is too obvious to need stating that if a given thought is not about Theaetetus, then neither will the same thought, expressed out loud. We may compare here the view of Hilary Putnam, who argues that a line I might draw with the shape 'Winston Churchill' [likewise a noise I might utter] does not represent Winston Churchill unless I so intend it, and I cannot so intend it unless I am "able to *think about* Winston Churchill in the first place" (his emphasis, p. 2). To sum up, the Socratic argument has this force: If one is thinking or speaking about X, then no mistake of X for anything else is possible. The contrapositive, of course, is that if one does mistake X for something else, then one is *ipso facto* not thinking or speaking about X.

IV

As I said at the start, the standard strategy for reconciling the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* is to have the *Sophist* overrule the *Theaetetus*, that is, to take Plato in the *Sophist* to have reached a solution he had not grasped in the *Theaetetus*. If that strategy were correct, we should expect the *Sophist* to somehow overcome the problems raised in the *Theaetetus*. But, as we have seen, that is not what happens.

An alternative strategy is to see the account of the *Theaetetus* as overruling the account of the *Sophist*. On this alternative, Plato holds that false speech really is impossible. Such a view, that statements and theories (which are alike *logoi* to Plato) get their being only insofar as they approach the truth would harmonize well with a general understanding of Plato. The interpretations of Jon Moline (pp. 134-140) and Nicholas White, though they do not draw my conclusion, seem almost to compel it. White, for instance, summarizes a result of his interpretation this way: "[Plato] does not accord full meaningfulness to languages that are not perfect and final representations of reality. . . . Strictly speaking, [the true theory] is *the only* theory" (p. 228, his emphasis).

But there is a difficulty, perhaps overwhelming, with an interpretation which has it that Plato wishes us to see, by virtue of the account in the *Theaetetus*, that the account in the *Sophist* must fail: we are forced to give an ironic reading of the *Sophist*. At its crudest, such an interpretation would tell us that when the Sophist says he has shown that there is such a thing as false speech, he really means us to see that there is not. Such an interpretation would be far-fetched, and cannot be examined in this space. We are left, then, in the position Socrates describes to Theaetetus:

> So long as we cannot see our way, I should feel some shame at our being forced into such admissions. . . . Though, if we are completely baffled, then, I suppose, we must be humble and let the argument do with us what it will, like a sailor trampling over seasick passengers.[8]

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NOTES

[1]The distinction between these two puzzles is not always recognized. But the puzzles are two, and Plato presents them as a pair: *Eud.* 283e7-284a8 and 284b1-b7; *Crat* 429d4-6 and 429e3-9; and *Tht.* 167a7-8 and 167a8-b1.

[2]In rendering *to ti*, it appears to give the Stranger's argument greater generality and sense to use 'a something-term' rather than 'the term "something" '. The locution 'something-term' is derived from Nelson Goodman's 'unicorn-picture', pp. 21-26.

[3]For a defense of this move in the case of Parmenides, see Montgomery Furth, p. 119; in the case of Plato see Terry Penner. Both discussions recognize a debt to W. V. Quine's account, pp. 1-3.

[4]See Francis Jeffrey Pelletier for an overview. I have not in this paper taken up the problems entirely internal to the *Sophist*. Among these are the Stranger's apparently conflicting claims that (1) concatenation is sufficient for speech to be (262c4-5) while yet aboutness is necessary (262e5-6), and (2) false speech exists while yet speech cannot at all exist without the interweaving of the Forms (259e4-260b2, cf. the perplexing 262a12-13).

[5]*Pace* John McDowell (1982, p. 129), this replacement strategy does "neutralize" the problem of non-being, *if* the "stating what is other" solution can be made to work.

[6]A detailed discussion is found in Rudebusch (1985, 1987) and Michael Beaney. Much of the following statement of Socrates' argument is direct quotation from Beaney, p. 95.

[7]This is the gist of Cornford's objection, p. 113, that the discussion is psychological, not logical.

[8]*Tht.* 191a, trans. Cornford. I thank Jon Moline and Terry Penner, who have shaped and developed my views on the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, though it should not be assumed that either is persuaded by my account of these dialogues. I also thank the editor and anonymous referees of this journal for beneficial comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, I thank the audiences at a 1988 University of Hawaii Philosophy Department Colloquium and a session of the 1989 APA Central Division Meeting for helpful discussion on portions of this paper.