

Plato's Account of Falsehood: A Study of the Sophist. By Paolo Crivelli. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 309. \$95.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-0521199131.

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From a contemporary perspective, it can seem surprising that Plato devotes as much attention as he does to the apparent paradox embedded in Parmenides' remarks about 'non-being' (τὸ μὴ ὄν), according to which it is apparently impossible to assert or to believe a falsehood. Yet in the several late dialogues in which Plato discusses some version of the 'falsehood paradox', and especially in the *Sophist*, his response to the problem posed by Parmenides' remarks leads to the development of a wealth of innovations, decisive for the entire subsequent tradition, in ontology, semantics, and the theory of truth. Plato's arguments and the innovations they represent have been widely discussed by contemporary philosophers, but there is still little consensus about their exact relationship to twentieth-century and contemporary views in the philosophy of language and 'analytic' epistemology and metaphysics more broadly. Paolo Crivelli's admirably lucid and very comprehensive book rigorously analyzes both Plato's dialogue and this contemporary discussion, arguing that while Plato shares the ambition of modern philosophers to demonstrate how it is possible to say (or think) 'what is not', his way of arguing for this conclusion differs 'radically' (3) from the typical strategy employed by contemporary philosophers. With its wealth of detail and adept handling of Plato's own arguments as well as their relationship to contemporary views, Crivelli's book offers to bring the discussion of Plato's theory of truth and falsehood and its contemporary implications to a new level of accuracy and clarity.

As he says at the outset, Crivelli's method is 'almost...commentary' (11) in that he reads the *Sophist* meticulously and almost line-by-line, developing each key point and issue as it arises in the text in close connection with a wide-ranging review of the existing exegetical and interpretive literature. Although he does not shy away from textual and philological concerns, Crivelli's main focus throughout is on the careful interpretation and critical evaluation of Plato's arguments in response to questions of the kinds posed by twentieth-century and contemporary analytic philosophers on such issues as the nature of predication, the relationship of universals and kinds to particulars, and the nature of truthmakers and truthbearers. His approach to Plato's views on these topics is generally charitable, though often critical; through careful consideration of possible arguments and counter-arguments, both interpretive and substantive, Crivelli offers a 'best case' reading of 'Plato's answers' to those 'modern questions' that might be posed by a contemporary 'philosopher of language' in the analytic tradition, or one influenced by that tradition's investigations into the nature and structure of language.

Crivelli argues that whereas such contemporary philosophers are likely to draw

a fundamental distinction between an existential sense of ‘to be’ (according to which it roughly means ‘to exist’) and a ‘veridical’ sense (according to which it means, roughly ‘to be true’), Plato draws no such distinction and thus cannot avail himself of the typical appeal made by contemporary philosophers to ‘propositions’ (which may fail to be true but may nevertheless still, in some sense exist) (2-3). Accordingly, Plato cannot countenance propositions as the unitary objects of (true or false) belief and assertion and is thus committed to a very different conception of what is said in a true or false sentence, one on which there is no *single* object that is the unitary target of an act of saying (3). Instead, according to Crivelli, ‘Plato’s solution assumes that a person who speaks falsely *says what is not* in that he or she *says* about something *what is not* about it to be’ (3). This wording is awkward in English, but the difference from more familiar contemporary approaches may readily be grasped from simple examples such as the maximally simple falsehood Plato himself considers: ‘Theaetetus flies’. For Plato, according to Crivelli, the falsehood of this sentence and the possibility of false belief that it implies are not to be understood as its being directed toward some unitary propositional object or ideal content of thought (as, for instance, it is in the Fregean conception of ideal contents of thought, which is so foundational for the analytic tradition). Rather, the act of the speaker who asserts this falsehood is to be understood as involving relations to at least *two* objects, the particular Theaetetus and the action (or action-kind) *flying*. To speak the false sentence is then to *say about* Theaetetus something that ‘is not about’ him, namely, *flying*. More generally, in accordance with the argument that Plato places in the mouth of the Eleatic stranger, we can say that to affirm this falsehood of Theaetetus is to affirm about him something that is *not* about him in that it is something that is *different* from everything that *is* about him; or, as we might say today, everything that ‘holds’ of him (238, 249-252). The possibility of this solution depends crucially on the essential distinction, which Plato may be the first to draw, between the roles of the noun and the verb in a simple sentence, and on the far-reaching claim that every sentence must involve something bearing (at least) each of these two roles. Thus, for Plato as Crivelli interprets him, in a simple predicative sentence the noun designates an individual and the verb designates an action; in a false simple sentence the action designated is different from all those that (in fact) hold of the individual (238-240). It is in this way that the kind *difference*, and its capacity to mix or combine with such other ‘great kinds’ as *being*, *change*, and *rest*, ultimately accounts for, *pace* Parmenides, the possibility of saying ‘what is not’.

This interpretation of Plato’s solution is not fundamentally new, for it is essentially the line of interpretation of Plato’s views on falsehood that Crivelli calls the ‘Oxford interpretation’ and that has been advanced, in one version or another, by commentators including Ross, Frede, Owen, Wiggins, Findlay, N.P. White, and (many) others (238).¹ Nevertheless, Crivelli’s interpretation excels both in its

¹ It should be noted, though, that Crivelli rejects the analogous ‘Oxford interpretation’ with

careful defense of this interpretation against others that have been offered and in its introduction of subsidiary distinctions and considerations that contribute to its plausibility both as a reading of Plato's text and as a view about truth and falsity in its own right.

For instance, at several points in the dialogue there is *prima facie* a question about how Plato is moving from claims about the relationships between kinds to claims about the structure of predicative sentences involving individuals that are not kinds.² The answer to this question is important for evaluating the status of Plato's argument overall, for it affects (for instance) the crucial move that the Visitor appears to make between 256d, where the *kind change* is seen as among 'what is not' in that it is different from (the kind) *being*, and 257c, where 'not' and 'non-' are said to indicate, of what follows them in an ordinary (negative) predicative sentence, something (i.e., some property or characteristic) different from what is named by the term(s) following them. Again, at 250c-d, summarizing the result of the 'gigantomachia' that is the centerpiece of the dialogue's critical examination of earlier views about being, the visitor appears to move from the claim that being is *different* from both change and rest to the claim that *what is* does not either change or rest, an inference that, Crivelli holds, Plato must know to be invalid, since it is declared by Theaetetus to be absolutely impossible (250d) and because, Crivelli suggests, Plato takes *all* kinds to be at rest, provided we stick to the 'ordinary', predicative sense of 'to be' (93). Crivelli holds that both moves—the valid one at 256d-257c and the invalid one at 250c-d—turn on the distinction between two senses of predication, what he calls the 'ordinary' and the 'definitional' senses; the distinction is explicitly recognized in the first case and passed over in the second, leading to the invalidity of the inference there (98-99, 177-179). Whereas in the 'ordinary' sense of predication, a kind is typically predicated of an individual, the 'definitional' sense of predication applies only to sentences of the form 'x is (a) y' where 'x' and 'y' *both* stand for kinds, and such a sentence is true (on this reading) only if both terms stand for the *same* kind (8-9). Additionally, for such a sentence to be true in the 'definitional' sense, it must give 'a complete description of the nature or essence of the entity signified by its subject-expression' (9) of the sort that might be given in a successful definition attained through the method of division that Plato practices in the *Sophist*; thus the sentence 'Goodness is the kind most highly praised in the *Republic*' does *not* count as a true sentence in the 'definitional' sense, for though it identifies a kind with itself, it does not do so in terms of its *nature* or *essence*

respect to negative predication or denial, on the ground (186) that it does not fit with the Visitor's account at 257b9-257c3, where negative predication (rather than falsehood) is at issue. With respect to negative predication, Crivelli defends the (slightly different) 'extensional interpretation', according to which a (possibly true) negative sentence of the form 'A is not (a) B' says that A is different from every object of which B is true. Thus, on this account, 'Theaetetus is not flying' says that Theaetetus is different from everything that is flying.

² Cf. John McDowell, 'Falsehood and not-Being in Plato's *Sophist*', in Malcolm Schofield and Martha Craven Nussbaum edd. *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy Presented to G.E.L. Owen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 115-117.

(9-10). (Crivelli finds specific evidence that Plato is indeed drawing precisely this distinction at, for instance, 250c6-7, where being is said to be neither stable nor changing *by its own nature*; other passages that he sees as providing direct textual evidence are: 255e3-6 and 257d14-258c6, 127-130.)

The distinction between senses of predication, which he takes Plato to be drawing, may also, Crivelli suggests, be taken to suggest an ontological distinction between ‘ways of being’: the use of the ‘ordinary’ reading for predicative sentences attributing a kind to an individual implies that such a sentence always introduces ‘something different’, i.e., a kind, which it places in relation to that individual, whereas the availability of the ‘definitional’ reading for sentences involving two terms for kinds demonstrates that such an assertion does not introduce anything new, but merely mentions once more the same kind. Thus, the semantic difference verifies that for Plato ‘perceptible particulars rank as beings only thanks to their bearing a relation to something different’, whereas ‘kinds rank as beings thanks to their bearing a relation to themselves’ (11).

Throughout the book, Crivelli’s review of recognizably ‘analytic’ commentary on the *Sophist* is extremely comprehensive; within this literature, the interpretive and argumentative positions staked out are very clearly mapped and their relative merits considered and closely evaluated. Nevertheless, his almost exclusive focus on analytic texts and authors means that (for instance) as comprehensive and relevant an interpretation as Heidegger’s 1924-25 Marburg lecture course on the *Sophist* receives only a single, passing citation in the book (241).³ Since Heidegger’s detailed reading develops a phenomenological understanding of the interlinked issues of intentionality, linguistic meaning, and the nature of being that is very much relevant to contemporary discussions (though it is indeed somewhat at variance with the kind of conception dominant in the ‘analytic’ treatments Crivelli focuses on) one may feel that this kind of omission vitiates somewhat the book’s claim to treat the *Sophist* in the context of ‘contemporary’ philosophy *tout court*.

Perhaps more importantly, though, there are some ways in which the exclusiveness of Crivelli’s focus on exegeses and interpretations of the *Sophist* itself may be thought to cause him to miss opportunities to discuss in more detail the relationships between Plato’s theory and the *various* conceptions of truth and language that have developed within the analytic tradition itself. For example, as we have seen, Crivelli draws a sharp contrast between Plato’s strategy for dealing with the problem of falsehood and the kind of solution represented by those who countenance the existence of propositions, conceived as unitary objects of thought or belief; Crivelli sees the propositional theory as helpful in some respects but nevertheless problematic, in a way that Plato’s account is not, in that it demands ‘mind-independent falsehoods, contrary to the intuition that there could be no falsehood if there were no minds to make mistakes’ (250). But Criv-

³ Heidegger, *Plato’s Sophist*. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer trans. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

elli never considers the relationship between Plato's view and one that may seem more attractive in light of the work of philosophers such as Quine and Davidson who are skeptical of mind- or language-independent propositions as bearers of truth: this is the view that (not propositions but) *sentences* are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood. On this sort of view, the primary truth-bearers are either sentence tokens as uttered on a particular occasion, or sentence types within a specific language; either way, the capacity of a sentence to bear truth or falsity is understood in part as a matter of the role it occupies within the language itself (thus avoiding any temptation to think of truth-bearers as mind-independent, unless languages themselves are) and the contrastive possibilities of truth and falsehood themselves are understood as inherent to the structure of the language (perhaps built up recursively from simple elements in the way that is familiar from Tarski's schema for truth-definitions).⁴

In fact, because of the great significance it places on considerations of the logical structure of sentences, this kind of view might reasonably be taken to represent, in many respects, the closest modern descendant of Plato's inaugural identification of the first distinction of logical form within a sentence (that between noun and verb), and so it would be interesting and useful to see the concepts compared and contrasted in terms of their semantic and ontological presuppositions and implications. This is not to say, of course, that Plato had or could have had anything like the modern logically based conception of the recursive structure of a language or what has been called a truth theory for one; only that it would be worth evaluating what we might take as Plato's own nascent conception of 'logical form' in light of it.

Somewhat in the same vein, in fact, there are reasons to think that some of the distinctive problems about truth and the unity of the sentence that are developed (and the way they are developed) in the analytic tradition bear negatively on the prospects for the success of the theory that Crivelli presents Plato as holding. For instance, as Crivelli notes and early analytic philosophers such as Russell and Frege emphasized, one of the greatest difficulties for any semantic theory that treats each of the logical parts of a sentence (here exclusively the noun and the verb) as having its own distinct representational significance is to explain how these parts come together to form a whole sentence that retains its significance even when it is false, since in this case there is, apparently, no 'fact' or existent 'state of affairs' for the sentence as a whole to correspond to.⁵

As Crivelli rightly emphasizes, as well, Plato's solution is distinct from that of some analytic philosophers in that it does *not* invoke unitary entities such as 'propositions' that are thought to be the correlates of false as well as true sentences; instead, for Plato, the utterance of a 'primary sentence' (composed of just one noun and one verb) is an event in which *two* things (typically, an 'object' and

⁴ Crivelli does briefly consider a different parallel between Plato's 'definition by cases' of truth and the method of Tarski's truth-definitions on pages 63-64.

⁵ Cf. Bertrand Russell 'On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood', in *Philosophical Essays*, 2nd edn. (London, 1966).

an ‘action’) are irreducibly ‘involved’ (230). The event of utterance, Crivelli suggests, can thus be understood as an action that ‘puts together’ these two things without demanding the formation of a third entity such as a ‘proposition’ to serve as a unified referent or object:

Uttering a sentence can be instructively compared with playing the violin. In playing the violin, a violinist puts together two entities (namely a violin and a bow) by performing a single act in which each of the two entities involved is employed in a distinctive way. The event is precisely described by saying that the violinist *plays* the violin *with* the bow. The violinist could not be properly said to construct or complete a composite entity whose components are a violin and a bow. Similarly, in uttering a sentence, a speaker puts together two entities (namely an action and an object) by performing a single act in which each of the two entities involved is employed in a distinctive way. (230-231)

The explanation points rightly to a key difference between Plato’s theory and certain modern ones, but it leaves the key question of the nature and possibility of the purported ‘involvement’ of object and action in the sentence obscure. For clearly, while Plato may be credited with the groundbreaking recognition that the formation (or utterance) of a *sentence* involves putting together lexical elements of radically different types, this recognition in itself stops short of explaining how the entities referred to by these elements individually may be thought to ‘come together’ (or fail to) in reality.

The problem is sharpened in the case of false sentences. For in the case of the false ‘Theaetetus flies’, for instance, although we may suppose the noun to refer to a specific existent individual, Theaetetus, there is no *specific* action to which the verb can refer (since there is no actual event of Theaetetus flying). As Crivelli recognizes (224) this leaves us with the alternative of understanding verbs to signify (not particular actions but) *action-types*; the utterance of the false ‘Theaetetus flies’ thus combines two elements, the first signifying the individual Theaetetus and the second, the abstract action-type (or -kind) *flying*. It is then apparently obligatory to construe the difference between truth and falsity as turning on this difference: a true sentence combines terms signifying entities (an object and a kind) that are in fact related in a certain way whereas a false sentence combines terms signifying entities that are not (in fact) so related (i.e., given Plato’s argument, everything to which Theaetetus *is* related in the relevant sense is different from *flying*).

What sense can we make, though, of this relation between an object and a kind that holds in case the sentence predicating the kind of the object is true, and does not, if not? We might well take this relationship to be simply the somewhat obscure relationship of ‘participation’ that is a fixture of the semantic and ontological theory of Plato’s middle-period dialogues; if so, however, it does not seem that Plato’s improved understanding of the structure of the *logos* in the

Sophist has done much, after all, to clarify its obscurities.⁶ But even more problematically, if we suppose (as Crivelli seems to) that the event of the *utterance* of a sentence is sufficient, by itself, to *engender* any distinctive mode of combination, relevant to truth or falsity, of the various objects (including kinds) mentioned by the sentence's terms, we are left not only with the further problem of the difference in the mode of combination effected by true and false sentences but also with the apparently absurd suggestion that what makes a true sentence true—i.e., the distinctive combination of objects it represents as combined—comes into existence only at the time of that sentence's first utterance.

There is another, related set of questions that a proponent of contemporary views might well put to anyone who thinks, as Plato does, that the terms that function as predicates in simple sentences also can function by themselves to refer to distinct objects that stand in various sorts of relations to one another (relations such as 'identity', 'difference', and 'mixing'). The question, in general, is: how do claims about such relations between kinds (or universals or forms) relate to claims about the truth and meaning of ordinary predicative sentences that predicate them of one or more individuals?

The distinction between the two kinds of claims is captured, at least in part, by Crivelli's distinction between a 'definitional' and an 'ordinary' type of predication. The distinction is motivated, as we have seen, by the thought that Plato wishes to draw a distinction between predications that hold in virtue of an individual's relation to something else (ordinarily a kind) and predications that hold in virtue of a kind's relation(s) to itself. But as we have also seen, the 'definitional' kind of predication is not involved in just any true assertion of identity of a kind with itself; rather, it is limited to assertions that 'define' the kind by giving a 'complete' description of its 'essence'. It is reasonable, in general, to suppose that such 'definitional' relations establish abstract possibilities as to what can be predicated of what; for instance we might suppose that two kinds that are 'definitionally' said to be different and not to mix can never be predicated of one and the same individual at the same time (or, perhaps, ever). What is not explicit in Plato's account, though, is how exactly this establishment takes place; what is needed to make full sense of Plato's views is thus not only the distinction Crivelli draws between 'ordinary' and 'definitional' kinds of predication, but some account of the *unity* of these two that clarifies what they have in common, such that (self-)relations of the 'definitional' sort constrain relations of the 'ordinary' sort (and how).

In each of these ways, although Crivelli's text somewhat glosses over the issue, what is still very much left in question is how the kind of combination that the action of uttering a sentence might be thought to embody—a combination of *words* or *terms*—relates to the kind of combination or relation of *objects* that Plato (perhaps incorrectly) takes the truthmaker of a sentence to be. To suggest

⁶ For some related critical considerations about Plato's argument in the *Sophist*, see Donald Davidson, *Truth and Predication* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), esp. pages 84–89.

that this remains a problem for Plato is neither to admonish him nor to cast doubt on the accuracy of Crivelli's interpretation of his views as expressed in the *Sophist*, for the interrelated problems of intentionality, the unity of the sentence, and the relationship of the act of judgment or assertion to the truth or falsity of what is judged or asserted remain, in important respects, unsolved even today. But it is to suggest that there are significant ways in which problems related to those posed by the original falsehood paradox both remain unsolved by Plato and figure positively in some of the motivations for the propositional and truth-theoretic accounts that are the main contemporary rivals to Plato's understanding of these issues. Nevertheless, if Crivelli indeed sometimes passes quickly over the real and persistent difficulty of these problems and is at times too quick to present Plato's own account as an adequate solution to them, this should not be taken to diminish in any way his accomplishment in accurately and rigorously presenting Plato's views on truth and falsity and helpfully re-introducing them into the ongoing contemporary discussion.

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