Introduction

In the *Sophist* Plato presents his mature views on sentences, falsehood, and not-being. These views have given an important contribution to the birth and growth of the subjects now identified as ontology and philosophy of language. I have two main objectives: to offer a precise reconstruction of the arguments and the theses concerning sentences, falsehood, and not-being presented in the *Sophist* and to gain a philosophical understanding of them. In this introduction I offer an overview of the main problems addressed in the *Sophist* and their solutions and then discuss the methodology whereby I pursue my primary goals.

0.1 THE MAIN PROBLEMS ADDRESSED BY THE *SOPHIST* AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

Purpose and structure. The *Sophist*, whose professed purpose is to define the sophist, has a nested structure, with a frame surrounding a core. The frame (216A1–236D4 and 264B11–268D5) endeavors to define the sophist by the method of division. The core (236D5–264B10) presents and solves some puzzles related to falsehood.

The connection between frame and core is straightforward. A definition of the sophist is attempted whereby he is described as someone who speaks falsely and thereby instils false beliefs. This description clashes with the falsehood paradox, summoned by way of objection. The falsehood paradox is a family of arguments whose conclusion is that it is impossible to speak falsely and to believe falsehoods. I say a 'family of arguments' because there are many subtly different arguments with this counter-intuitive conclusion. Accordingly, I sometimes speak of a 'version of' the falsehood paradox.

The *Sophist*'s core (236D5–264B10) divides into an aporetic part (236D5–251A4) and a constructive one (251A5–264B10). The aporetic part rehearses several puzzles. It divides into two components: the first (236D5–242B5) contains puzzles about not-being, images, and false sentences and beliefs;

the second (242B6–251A4) contends that being is no less problematic than not-being. The constructive part also has two components: the first (251A5–259D8) contains an analysis of negative predication based on the concept of difference, and on its foundation develops an account of not-being that is free from paradox; the second (259D9–264B10) deploys this account of not-being to explain false sentences and beliefs.

The main question addressed by the *Sophist* is that of how it is possible to speak falsely and believe falsehoods. The falsehood paradox provides reasons for claiming that both are impossible.

The main version of the falsehood paradox considered in the *Sophist* is the following argument:

[1] To speak falsely is to say what is not.
[2] It is impossible to say what is not.
[3] Therefore it is impossible to speak falsely.

A subordinate argument supports premiss [2]:

[2.1] Saying what is not implies not saying what is.
[2.2] Not saying what is implies not saying anything.
[2.3] Not saying anything implies not accomplishing an act of saying.
[2] Therefore it is impossible to say what is not.

Parallel steps lead to the result that it is impossible to have false beliefs.

Most philosophers, including Plato, reject the claim that it is impossible to speak falsely or believe falsehoods: they stand by the commonsensical view that speaking falsely and believing falsehoods are not only possible, but real. Of course, philosophers base their rejection of the counter-intuitive claim that it is impossible to speak falsely or believe falsehoods on a refutation of the reasons supporting it. The refutation usually targets premiss [2], the claim that it is impossible to say what is not (I focus on the case of saying – that of believing may be treated analogously).

A modern strategy. Some modern philosophers reject [2]: they claim that it is possible to say what is not. Their rejection of [2] is accompanied by a criticism of the subordinate argument supporting [2], in particular by a denial of this subordinate argument's first step [2.1]: saying what is not, in the sense relevant to falsehood, does not imply not saying what is in a sense that in turn implies not saying anything.

The strategy adopted by these modern philosophers relies on distinguishing an existential use of 'to be' (whereby 'to be' is roughly equivalent to 'to exist') from a veridical use (whereby 'to be' is roughly equivalent to

'to be true'). According to this modern strategy, some things both are (in that they exist) and are not (in that they are not true). Specifically, it is assumed that there is a special ontological category of existent things which are the unitary targets of acts or states of saying or believing (or knowing, supposing, etc.): propositions. All propositions are (in that they exist), but some propositions are (in that they are true) while others are not (in that they are not true).

Plato's strategy. In agreement with the modern philosophers just mentioned, Plato also maintains that it is possible to say what is not, contrary to [2]. He also agrees with these modern philosophers on the reason why it is possible to say what is not: saying what is not, in the sense relevant to falsehood, does not imply not saying what is in a sense that in turn implies not saying anything, contrary to [2.1]. Plato's strategy for implementing this position is, however, radically different from the modern one sketched in the last subsection.

Plato does not rely on a distinction between an existential and a veridical use of 'to be', nor does he appeal to propositions. Rather, 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. In general, there are no proposition-like unitary targets of acts of saying. If one carries out an act of saying, there is no single *x* such that one says *x*. It is not the case that if one utters the (true) sentence 'Theaetetus is sitting', then there is a single thing, that-Theaetetus-is-sitting or sitting-Theaetetus, which is the target of one's act of saying. Similarly, it is not the case that if one utters the (false) sentence 'Theaetetus is flying', then there is a single thing, that-Theaetetus-is-flying or flying-Theaetetus, which is the target of one's act of saying. When one carries out an act of saying by means of an affirmative sentence, there are an *x* and a *y* such that one says *x* to be about *y*. If one utters the (true) sentence 'Theaetetus is sitting', then one says the kind sitting to be about Theaetetus; similarly, if one utters the (false) sentence 'Theaetetus is flying', then one says the kind flying to be about Theaetetus. In both cases, the act of saying targets two distinct things.

Why does Plato not adopt something like the modern strategy involving propositions? Since he does not say, one can only guess. Perhaps he shuns entities that exist independently of thinkers or speakers but are false because there could be no falsehood if there were no minds to make mistakes.

Avoiding propositions as unitary targets of acts or states of saying or believing has its costs. For instance, whoever accepts propositions has a straightforward explanation of what it is to say that if it is day it is light:

it amounts to exercising the act of saying on the proposition that-if-it-is-day-it-is-light. It remains unclear how Plato's approach can deal with such cases (because it is hard to see how someone saying that if it is day it is light could be described as saying something to be about something).

Not being so-and-so and inexistence. To be successful, Plato's solution must avoid a difficulty analogous to the one that motivates the claim that it is impossible to say (or believe) falsehoods. Specifically: since Plato's solution relies on the assumption 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, the solution's viability requires that if *x* is not about *y*, it does not follow that *x* does not exist. Otherwise, whoever speaks falsely would be deprived of one of the targets of his or her speech act: speaking falsely would again be impossible.

So, Plato must show that if *x* is not about *y*, it does not follow that *x* does not exist. To achieve this, he offers an analysis of negation, i.e. an explanation of what it is for *x* not to be so-and-so. The purpose of the analysis is to establish that if *x* is not so-and-so, it does not follow that *x* does not exist. By substituting 'about *y*' for 'so-and-so', Plato obtains as a corollary the desired result: if *x* is not about *y*, it does not follow that *x* does not exist.

Plato's analysis of negation appeals to the concept of difference: for *x* not to be so-and-so is for *x* to be different from everything that is so-and-so. For instance, for Socrates not to be a poet is for him to be different from everything that is a poet. Clearly, if *x* is different from everything that is so-and-so, it does not follow that *x* does not exist. For instance, if Socrates is different from everything that is a poet, it does not follow that he does not exist.

Apply this analysis of negation to the special case that is relevant to falsehood, i.e. the not being about something that plays a role in falsehood. Since for *x* not to be so-and-so is for *x* to be different from everything that is so-and-so, the result is that for *x* not to be about *y* is for *x* to be different from everything that is about *y* (simply substitute 'about *y*' for 'so-and-so'). Consider Plato's example of a false sentence: 'Theaetetus is flying'. The sentence 'Theaetetus is flying' is false because it says flying to be about Theaetetus while flying is not about Theaetetus in that it is different from everything that is about Theaetetus. But the fact that flying is different from everything that is about Theaetetus does not render flying non-existent. Such an account eradicates any temptation to claim that 'Theaetetus is flying' cannot be false because if it were, then what it says to be about Theaetetus would not exist since it would not be about him.

An objection based on negative false sentences. As I repeatedly pointed out, Plato's solution to his main question is that someone who speaks falsely *says what is not* in that he or she *says* about something *what is not* about it to be. This solution is open to an objection based on negative false sentences.

It might be objected that Plato's solution works for false speech embodied in *affirmative* sentences, but does not cover false speech that involves *negative* sentences. It is all very well to declare that someone uttering the affirmative sentence 'Theaetetus is flying' speaks falsely because he or she says that flying is about Theaetetus while in fact it is not about him (in that it is different from everything that is about him). But it would be wrong to claim that someone uttering the negative sentence 'Theaetetus is not sitting' speaks falsely because he or she says that sitting is about Theaetetus while in fact it is not about him: for someone uttering that negative sentence says that sitting is not about Theaetetus, and what brings it about that the person speaks falsely is the fact that sitting is about Theaetetus. Plato's account of how someone speaking falsely says what is not applies to only some of the cases of false speech, namely those where affirmative sentences are used. But, since in all cases speaking falsely may be reasonably described as saying what is not, an account covering all cases of false speech would be desirable.

Two replies to this objection are available to Plato. The first is simply to claim that the description of false speech as saying what is not covers only the cases where affirmative sentences are used. Whoever speaks falsely by uttering an affirmative sentence does indeed say what is not in that he or she says about something what is not about it to be. But whoever speaks falsely by uttering a negative sentence does not say what is not; rather, he or she says what is in that he or she says about something what is about it not to be. Once the false speech that says what is not has been restricted to that embodied in affirmative sentences, Plato's original solution to his main question works: whoever speaks falsely in such a way as to say what is not says about something what is not about it to be.

Plato's second reply relies on the assumption that negative sentences are also used to say that something is about something. What someone uttering a negative sentence says to be about something, i.e. what he or she attributes to that thing, is a negative kind. For instance, whoever utters the negative sentence 'Theaetetus is not sitting' says that the negative kind not-sitting is about Theaetetus. Whoever speaks falsely by uttering a negative sentence therefore also says about something what is not about it to be: for instance, someone uttering the negative sentence 'Theaetetus is not

sitting' speaks falsely in that he or she says the negative kind not-sitting to be about Theaetetus while in fact the negative kind not-sitting is not about Theaetetus (because it is different from everything that is about him).

Plato's two replies correspond to different but compatible ways of looking at negative sentences. The second reply is offered as a back-up to the first, for the sake of those diehards who stand by the idea that whoever utters a false sentence says what is not.

Negative kinds. Plato's second reply introduces negative kinds. But one might resist acknowledging such things. In fact, many modern philosophers reject negative kinds. They argue that if there were negative kinds, some of them would hold of completely heterogeneous things which 'have nothing in common'. For instance, not-sitting would have to hold not only of all animals that are not sitting, but also of all plants, rocks, artefacts, mental states, geometrical shapes, numbers, and forms: what traits do so diverse things share?

So, if Plato wants to appeal to negative kinds, he had better justify and explain them. And he does. He has an elegant account of negative kinds as 'parts of difference'. The account is based on an analogy between knowledge and difference. Just as, for every kind, there is a single part of knowledge corresponding to it, namely knowledge of everything that falls under it, so also, for every kind, there is a single part of difference corresponding to it, namely difference from everything that falls under it. For instance, there is a single part of knowledge corresponding to the kind letter: it is knowledge of everything that falls under the kind letter (i.e. knowledge of all letters). Its name is 'literacy'. Similarly, there is a single part of difference corresponding to the kind beauty: it is difference from everything that falls under the kind beauty (i.e. difference from all beautiful things). Its name is 'not-beauty'. Such a part of difference is a negative kind. It can be easily proved that the things falling under the part of difference in question, i.e. under difference from everything that falls under beauty, are all and only those that do not fall under beauty. Those who deny that the parts of difference thus defined are unified kinds must also take on themselves an unpalatable commitment to denying that the parts of knowledge defined by a parallel procedure are unified kinds (for instance, they will have to deny that literacy is a unified kind). Plato's account of negative kinds also accomplishes the remarkable feat of specifying a common trait shared by all and only the things falling under a negative kind.

Plato is therefore in a position to offer his second reply to the objection and uphold the same account of falsehood for both negative and

affirmative sentences: whoever speaks falsely, whatever sentence he or she uses, affirmative or negative, says about something what is not about it to be. However, even after the introduction of negative kinds, Plato's account of false speech is limited to predicative sentences: it remains unclear how the account could be applied to sentences like 'It is raining' or 'If the match takes place then Tim will play Volker'.

Difference and contrariety. Plato indicates why someone could be inclined to maintain that what is not so-and-so does not exist. As I said, whoever maintains this is committed to rejecting Plato's solution of the main question he addresses in the *Sophist*: how it is possible to say or believe falsehoods.

Plato observes that people tend to associate negation with contrariety: they often think that what is not-so-and-so is in the condition that is contrary to that of so-and-so things (where the condition contrary to a given one is the one 'polarly opposed' to it, i.e. as much as possible removed from and incompatible with it). For instance, many would feel offended at hearing that they are not-beautiful because they would regard being not-beautiful as equivalent to being in the condition that is contrary to that of beautiful things, i.e. to being ugly. And if someone is told 'You are not permitted to do so', he or she will normally regard it as a prohibition to do so. If this approach is applied to not-being so-and-so, it turns out that what is-not so-and-so is in the condition that is contrary to that of things which are so-and-so. (I introduce hyphens to distinguish the case where 'not' modifies 'is' from that where it modifies the complement of 'is' in formulations of the form 'is not so-and-so': Greek accomplishes such a distinction by word order.) Now, to exist is part of being so-and-so: to be so-and-so is to exist in a so-and-so way. Hence, if something is in the condition that is contrary to that of things which are so-and-so, then it is in the condition contrary to that of things that exist in a so-and-so way, i.e. in the condition 'polarly opposed' to that of things that exist in a so-and-so way, so that it does not exist. For such a reason someone could be inclined to believe that what is-not so-and-so does not exist.

Plato's solution to this difficulty is to point out that it is wrong to associate negation with contrariety: the partner of negation is not contrariety, but difference. In other words, it is not the case that for *x* to be not-so-and-so is for it to be contrary to so-and-so things; rather, for *x* to be not-so-and-so is for it to be different from all so-and-so things.

The difficulty considered by Plato depends on the view, which Plato shares, that to exist is part of being so-and-so, i.e. that to be so-and-so

is to exist in a so-and-so way. One might describe this as the view that the copula has existential import. It might be objected that the view is mistaken: one does not want to say that 'Pegasus is winged' and 'Homer is a poet' are false because to be winged is to exist in a winged way and to be a poet is to exist in the way poets do. Plato would dismiss such putative counter-examples by stressing that every sentence must be about something existent: he explicitly claims that a form of words that looks like a sentence that fails to refer to something existent is not really a sentence (or at least is not a sentence that may be evaluated as true or false). No counter-examples may be generated with sentences that do not refer to something existent: for there are no such sentences (or at least no such truth-evaluable sentences). This of course leaves Plato with the problem of explaining how forms of words such as those just mentioned are to be treated: after all, they look like sentences (and truth-evaluable ones). It is not clear how Plato would answer this challenge, but it is worth pointing out that his position bears some resemblance to that of Frege and other modern philosophers of language, who have devised ways of facing the challenge I outlined.

Problems about being. The *Sophist*'s main version of the falsehood paradox is an argument that relies on a controversial premiss: that it is impossible to say what is not. Thus, the main puzzle addressed by the *Sophist* depends on a difficulty about not-being.

Plato, however, thinks that being is as troublesome as not-being. He makes this clear by engaging in an imaginary debate with earlier thinkers: pluralists and monists, 'giants' (who maintain that only perceptible bodies are) and 'gods' (who insist that only intelligible forms are) – all are put to the test. They are asked what they mean by the word 'being'. Their interrogation leads to the result that although both change and stability are, being itself is different from both change and stability. From this it is inferred that being 'by its own nature' neither is stable nor changes. And from this it is further inferred that being neither is stable nor changes. The argument starts with a truth, namely that being is different from both change and stability, and ends with a falsehood, namely that being neither is stable nor changes. The argument is therefore invalid. There are textual indications that Plato is well aware of its invalidity.

A distinction between linguistic uses. Given that Plato is conscious of the invalidity of the argument about change, stability, and being, one expects him to take steps towards exposing it. He does so by distinguishing

linguistic uses. His distinction concerns ways in which predicative sentences may be understood.

On the one hand, if 'φ' signifies a kind, then 'σ is (a) φ' has an 'ordinary' reading, whereby it is true just if the entity signified by 'σ' instantiates the kind signified by 'φ' (throughout this subsection, 'σ' and 'φ' are schematic letters to be replaced, respectively, with a name and a general term). The account carries over to negations: if 'φ' signifies a kind, then 'σ is not (a) φ' is true on its 'ordinary' reading just if the entity signified by 'σ' does not instantiate the kind signified by 'φ'.

On the other hand, if both 'σ' and 'φ' signify kinds, then 'σ is (a) φ' has (not only an 'ordinary' reading, but also) a 'definitional' reading, whereby it is true just if the kind signified by 'σ' is identical to the kind signified by 'φ'. Again, the account carries over to negations: if both 'σ' and 'φ' signify kinds, then 'σ is not (a) φ' is true on its 'definitional' reading just if the kind signified by 'σ' is different from the kind signified by 'φ'.

For instance, 'Change is stable' is true on its 'ordinary' reading because the kind change (signified by 'change') instantiates the kind stability (signified by 'stable') (since all kinds are stable). 'Change is stable' is, however, false on its 'definitional' reading because the kind change is different from the kind stability. The same fact makes 'Change is not stable' true on its 'definitional' reading. For similar reasons, 'Change is identical' and 'Change is not identical' are both true: the first on its 'ordinary' reading, the second on its 'definitional' reading. So also with 'Change is different' and 'Change is not different', and with 'Change is a being' and 'Change is not a being'. Moreover, if 'φ' signifies any kind different from the kind being, then 'Being is not (a) φ' is true on its 'definitional' reading. This enables Plato not only to state that, in a way, being is not (and he says this explicitly, in a polemical though respectful reaction to Parmenides, who regarded such a claim as anathema), but also to explain why the argument presented in the last subsection has a semblance of validity (a task which he 'leaves to the reader'). Since being is different from both stability and change, 'Being neither is stable nor changes' is true on its 'definitional' reading. 'Being neither is stable nor changes' is, however, false on its 'ordinary' reading because being instantiates either stability or change (in fact, it instantiates the first). The argument has a semblance of validity because it trades on a slip from the 'definitional' to the 'ordinary' reading of a sentence.

When an affirmative predicative sentence is understood according to its 'definitional' reading, it is taken to offer a complete description of the nature or essence of the entity signified by its subject-expression (which must be a kind because only kinds have natures or essences). The 'definitional'

reading of sentences is close to that whereby they are understood as making statements of identity. But the two readings do not coincide. The sentence 'Goodness is the kind most highly praised in the *Republic*' is true on the reading whereby it is understood as making a statement of identity, but false on its 'definitional' reading. This is because although the definite description 'the kind most highly praised in the *Republic*' picks out the kind goodness (which makes the sentence true when it is understood as making a statement of identity), 'the kind most highly praised in the *Republic*' signifies (not the kind goodness, but) the characteristic (possibly a kind) of being a kind which in the *Republic* is more highly praised than any other (which makes the sentence false on its 'definitional' reading).

A distinction between ways of being. The distinction between 'ordinary' and 'definitional' readings of sentences explains not only the semblance of validity of certain arguments, but also the validity of others put forward by Plato in the examination of certain particularly important kinds within the core section of the dialogue (it enables one to see that arguments which at first blush could be easily deemed invalid are instead valid). However, its most important contribution lies in its generating a distinction between ways of being. Specifically, it yields a distinction between the ways in which perceptible particulars and kinds are.

Consider any perceptible particular and any true sentence 'σ is (a) φ' where 'σ' signifies that perceptible particular and 'φ' signifies a kind (here and in the rest of this subsection, 'σ' and 'φ' are schematic letters to be replaced, respectively, with a name and a general term). Since no kind is a perceptible particular, the kind signified by 'φ' is different from the given perceptible particular. Thus, any true affirmative predicative sentence involving 'to be' where the predicate-expression signifies a kind and the subject-expression signifies the given perceptible particular introduces something different from that perceptible particular. This warrants the claim that the being of perceptible particulars is always 'in relation to other things'. Consider now any kind and any sentence 'σ is (a) φ' where both 'σ' and 'φ' signify that kind. This sentence is true on its 'definitional' reading. Thus, some true affirmative predicative sentence involving 'to be' where the predicate-expression signifies a kind and the subject-expression signifies the given kind does not introduce anything different from the given kind. This warrants the claim that the being of kinds is 'in its own right'. Roughly: in the case of perceptible particulars, the correct application of the predicative use of 'to be' always involves something different from them; in the case of kinds, the predicative use of 'to be' may be correctly applied