NOTE - DISCUSSION

"INCOMPATIBILITY" IN PLATO'S SOPHIST

I WANT to consider a much-disputed reading of a certain critical area of Plato's Sophist. It is widely agreed by most commentators that in this text, between 255E and 259E there occurs a refutation of Parmenides' dictum that "one cannot say that which is not", and that this is followed by an application of the foregoing discussion to the problems of sentential falsity. (For the full list of commentators, see bibliography.) It is also generally agreed that Plato uses the Form, The Different, for this purpose. What is not generally agreed upon is how Plato uses The Different.

In one of the earliest of the modern commentaries on this topic, Ackrill (1955) suggested that The Different induced an "incompatibility" reading, so that Form A "blended with the Different from" Form B if and only if it were impossible for some individual to simultaneously partake of both Form A and Form B. Lorenz and Mittelstrauss (1966) also endorse an "incompatibility" reading of 'blending with The Different from'. However, the bulk of recent commentary has gone against the "incompatibility" reading. The preference for an "incompatibility" reading is clear in some of these commentators (see, e.g., Wiggins (1970) p. 301), but the overwhelming opinion follows Frede (1967) p. 79: that The Different can never be replaced by 'incompatible'; that it is neither compatible with the train of thought nor justified by the text.

The reason for the antipathy to an "incompatibility" reading is not hard to find. Before 257B heteron is used clearly in the sense of "non-identical" (in fact immediately before, 256C12 and 257A1). Thus the crucial passage of 257B, where the "incom-

1 There are further aspects of Ackrill's interpretation which set it apart from other commentaries (e.g., Lorenz and Mittelstrauss (1966) and Philip (1968)), but these differences will not be recounted here. I am now interested in only the reading of the Different as "incompatible". For the further problems, see my Parmenides, Plato, and the Semantics of Non-Being (in progress).
2 Keyt (1973) discusses the passage 257B also, as I discovered after finishing this paper. He does not go into the difficulties in the surrounding passages, nor is his conclusion quite the same as mine. He thinks that heteron and enanion are so vague or imprecise as to support any reading. He does, however, give Platonic and Aristotelian analogues for 'polar-contrary', 'contradictories', etc. See Symposium 201E3-202B5, Lysis 216D5-7, Republic 436B9-9, Gorgias 495E, Protagoras 332C, Aristotle Categories 11b38-12a25.

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This interpretation is certainly compatible with the next occurrence of heteron at 257D11.

On each occasion, if we call something not beautiful, this is exactly nothing except what is heteron to the nature of the beautiful.

257E2-4 is a difficult passage on any interpretation, but a sense can be given it on the "incompatibility" reading, namely one wherein antithesis is being further used to help us understand heteron.

...the not beautiful is marked off as a part of a single specific kind [viz. The Different] among beings [Forms], and again, is antithesis to some being [viz. The Beautiful].

(The parenthetical explanations have all been suggested by other writers on grounds independent of whether The Different is to mean "incompatibility".) And now 257E6-7 says:

Therefore the being of the not beautiful is an instance of an antithesis of one being towards another being.

Taken with the preceding statement, this implies that the not-beautiful can be spoken of, since it is merely that part of The Different which is antithetical to The Beautiful. (And so beginning the refutation of Parmenides.) Under the "incompatibility" reading this means: any Form which is heteron to The Beautiful (i.e., any Form on the same range of contraries, but not necessarily the polar-contraries, the enation), could be the not-beautiful. And so Plato’s point in 257E9-258A10 would seem to have it also.

The real test for this reading is 258A11-B3 where heteron, antithesis, and enation are all used together. If the "incompatibility" reading can make sense of this passage, it certainly passes the textual tests required of it, and then the commentators who prefer this reading but do not see how to glean it from the text may feel free to use it. There are various syntactical difficulties with the passage (see Lee (1972) pp. 282-3 for a summary), but one of the possibilities left open is this:

So when a part of the nature of The Different [that part referred to by the negated expression] and a part of Being [the Form indicated by the unnegated expression] are set in antithesis to one another, they exist as much as each other; we do not [i.e., necessarily] assert something enation to what exists [i.e., to the Form] but merely something heteron.

Now, this translation can go with the "incompatibility" reading; indeed, it is simply a restatement of the "incompatibility" thesis, when enation is taken to mean "polar-contrary" and heteron taken to mean "incompatible".

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patibility reading must assign its meaning to heteron, would involve a change of sense. Further complications arise with the use in 257B and later of enation (usually meaning "contrary"), and with the use of antithesis (usually meaning "opposite" or "contrast") immediately following (257D7). The problems are that if he has enation, why re-define heteron; if he has re-defined heteron, why does he use antithesis? To attribute unexplained shifts in meaning on such an important point is poor interpretive practice. Lorenz and Mittelstrauss (1966) claim merely that this is the only way to make sense of the pronouncements and the examples. But surely this is not enough, for both Owen (1970) and Frede (1967) claim that they too have made sense of it all, and neither of them agree with the "incompatibility" reading.

I wish to give the necessary explanation of the shifts in meaning. Let’s introduce the notion of polar-contraries along a range of predicates no two of which can modify the same thing at the same time in the same respect. Typical polar-contraries might be white/black along a range of colour predicates, large/small on a size-range, just/evil on a moral-range, and beautiful/ugly on an aesthetic-range.

Now let’s look at some of the text.

257B: Whenever we speak of not-being, we don’t, it seems, mean some enation of being; merely some heteron. — How?— Just as whenever we call something not large: do you think we mean small by our words any more than we mean middling-sized?—Surely not.

Owen (1970, p. 232 fn) says of this passage: “need it be pointed out that this passage does not say that ‘not-large’ means ‘either middling or small’, and hence does not introduce a new account of ‘not’, and of ‘different’, in terms of incompatibility? It says that ‘small’ has no more claim to be what ‘not large’ means than ‘middling’ has”. True enough, but a defender of the incompatibility reading can also say something here: Read enation as “polar-contrary”, not simply “contrary” (a perfectly natural move), continue to read heteron as “different”. Under this account, Plato is saying that we don’t necessarily mean a polar-contrary, but that we do mean something other than the predicate. But just what kind of “something other”? The discussion of 257C5-E7 tells us that we mean something which is in antithesis, and from there on we are to understand heteron as meaning “something antithetical” — i.e., another predicate along the same range. (As in 257D7 we are told that not-beautiful picks out a part of The Different which is antithetical to the Form Beauty)
I believe this is the proper way to account for the "incompatibility" reading; and if, as many writers think, an "incompatibility" reading is philosophically superior to other readings, that would give us further reason to adopt it. So, those who believe that an "incompatibility" reading is impossible to derive from the text are wrong (Frede, Lee, Owen, Wiggins).²

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