"Nothing" as "Not-Being": Some Literary Contexts that Bear on Plato and on Parmenides

Alexander P.D. Mourelatos

University of Texas at Austin, apdm@austin.utexas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, Ancient Philosophy Commons, and the History of Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/230

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.
"Nothing" as "Not-Being":

Some Literary Contexts That Bear

on Plato and on Parmenides

Alexander P. D. Mourelatos

The University of Texas at Austin

(August 1977)

It has often been noticed that Plato, and before him Parmenides, assimilates "what is not" (τὸ μὴ ὄν) to "nothing" (μηδέν or οὐδέν). Given that the central use of "nothing" has important ties with the existential quantifier ("Nothing is here" = "It is not the case that there is anything here"), it has widely been assumed that contexts that document this assimilation also count as evidence that both within them and in cognate ontological contexts the relevant sense of "being" or "to be" is that of existence. That this assumption is not to be granted easily, has been compellingly argued by G. E. L. Owen. His main concern was to show that the assumption is particularly mischievous in the interpretation of the *Sophist*, where he found it totally unwarranted. My own concern is to attack the assumption on a broader plane. "Nothing" in English has uses that do not depend on a tie with the existential quantifier. So too in Greek: meden or ouden can be glossed as "what does not exist," but it can also be glossed as "not a something," or in Owen's formulation, "what is not anything, what not-in-any way is": a subject with all the being knocked out of it and so unidentifiable, no subject. In effect, the assimilation of "what is not" to "nothing" may—in certain contexts—work in the opposite
direction: not from "nothing" to "non-being" in the sense of non-existence; rather from "non-being" as negative specification or negative determination to "nothing" as the extreme of negativity or indeterminacy. To convey the sense involved in this reverse assimilation I borrow Owen's suggestive translation "not-being" for μένον, a rendering which makes use of an incomplete participle, rather than the complete gerund, of the verb "to be."

In the main Section of this paper I examine a certain "characterizing" use of μέναν/ούδεν and μέδεις/οὔδείς in pre-Platonic non-philosophical contexts. The passages discussed and analyzed offer clear and suggestive illustrations of the assimilation of "nothing" or "nobody" to "not-being."

In the concluding Section I explore connections between that use and philosophical concepts, with particular reference to Plato's doctrine of degrees of reality.

I

To make alternatives clear I begin with an exploration of the relevant English uses. The semantic spectrums of "nothing" and of the personal form "nobody" are, of course, wider than logic books might suggest. Only two uses concern us, and these can be quickly formulated if we take the expressions "nobody" and "nothing" as answers to two types of questions.

(a) 1. Who is in the house now?—Nobody.
   2. What is in the box?—Nothing.

(b) 1. Who is the gentleman over there?—Nobody.
   2. What is that shape over there?—Nothing.

The one-word answers in exchanges (a) are clearly equivalent to more perspicuous expanded paraphrases of the form "There is no K in L," where K can
be replaced by an appropriate classifier or natural-kind expression and \( L \) can be replaced by a locative word or phrase. This is the use of "nobody" or "nothing" that is closest to the negative existential quantified expressions in formal logic, \( \neg(\exists x)Fx \). For suggestive convenience, in spite of some infelicity—since (a)-type sentences are tensed, whereas the existential quantifier imports no time implications—I shall call (a) the "existential" use of "nobody" and "nothing."

It is not as easy to give a single perspicuous paraphrase of the one-word answers in type (b). The respondent may intend to dispute the interrogator's presupposition that there actually is something, let alone a gentleman or a shape, in the region referred to. In that case, the question receives in effect a type (a) answer. A distinct type (b) is defined in the case in which the respondent does not dispute the interrogator's existential presupposition. He says, roughly: "I notice who you are referring to, but he's nobody," or "I notice what you're referring to, but it's nothing." In that sort of case the respondent intends to convey one of two possible messages:

(i) The object (person or thing) referred to is "of no account": it (he or she) lies outside the interlocutors' scope of interests, in whatever way and however broadly these interests are defined by the interlocutors' current endeavor.

Thus the snobbish respondent might say "He's nobody" with reference to someone of inferior status; or "It's nothing" may be the reassuring response of a doctor to a patient concerning certain physical changes in the patient's body they have both observed; or it might be the response of a laboratory assistant to a student with reference to a speck they can both see through
the microscope; or of one listener at a lecture to another, who inquired about a point made by the speaker and which the first listener missed.

The other possible message is:

(ii) The object referred to is an extremely poor, worn out, or reduced specimen of the kind it prima facie appears to be. It is extensively deprived of the normal characteristics of that kind, so it can "barely" or "hardly" be called, as for example in exchanges (a) and (b), a "gentleman" or a "shape." One can more aptly speak of what it "is not" rather than of what "it is." In the limiting case, to borrow one of the definitions in Webster's Third New International Dictionary, it is "something that is characterized by utter absence of determination; perfect indistinguishableness." Let me refer to (b) in either of its two sub-types as the "characterizing" use of "nobody" or "nothing."

What underlies type (a), the existential use, is a conception of non-being as emptiness: I search the house and find that it is vacant; or I open the box and find that it is empty. What underlies type (b), the characterizing use, is a conception of non-being, or properly not-being, as (i) lack of standing (almost in that juridical sense in which someone may have "no standing" in a particular court and case) or (ii) privation or attenuation. Just as the existential use of "nobody" or "nothing" corresponds to the existential use of "to be," the characterizing uses correspond to copulative "to be." The person who is "nobody" in the sense that he "does not count" is certainly no fictive or non-existent entity; likewise for the thing that is deprecated as a "nothing."

One might object at this point that there is no need to import a copulative construction in the analysis of the characterizing use. For may we not explain the use by leaning on the possible paraphrase, "he is treated
as though he did not exist"? The answer is that the paraphrase just given
is really an elaboration, not an analysis, of the characterizing use. For
it suppresses an important implication the characterizing use proclaims:
the reason why the disparaged person is treated as though he did not exist
is that he is a "no-body," in other words he is not identical with any par-
ticular person, or classifiable under any of the kinds of person, who might
be of concern to us: he is "not A," "not B," "not C," and so on, where the
letters stand for particular persons or types of person with whom we are
familiar or with whom we are prepared to deal. Similarly to say of a thing
that it is "nothing," in the sense that it is a very impoverished, enfeebled,
or attenuated specimen of its kind, admittedly could be paraphrased by, "it
might just as well not exist." But the paraphrase will not do as an analysis
of the locution in the characterizing use. For the latter alludes to the
rationale of the "just as well" version: it is no-thing, not-being in that
it is "not-F," "not-G," "not-H," and so on, where the letters stand for
characteristics familiar to us, and which the sort of thing referred to
normally ought to have.

II

The characterizing use of meden and cognate negative terms, such as
ouden and the personal forms medeis, oudeis, has been studied in detail by
A. C. Moorhouse. Let me review some of his major points and expand with my
own comments on just a few—the most suggestive—of his examples.

In Homer the characterizing sense is served by the adjective of dis-
paragement outidanos, "a no-somebody-fellow," a person "of no account, worth-
less, sorry, good for nothing." The Homeric indefinite pronoun outhis, from
which outidanos is derived, has only the existential sense of "nobody," never
the characterizing sense. The usual forms ὦδεις and μεθαίς are also restricted to existential uses in Homer. But beginning in the Archaic period first ὦδεις, οὐδέν, and then also μεθαίς, μοῖον, expand their use by taking over the characterizing sense of Homer's ὄτιδανος, now in reference both to persons and to things.

A remarkable early example of the developing new use of ὦδεις is in the opening of Pindar's Sixth Nemean Ode:

There is one race of men, one race (genos) of gods; both have breath of life from a single mother. But a power that has sundered itself through and through holds us divided (ἵλεεργε τι πάσα κεφαλῆς δύναμις), so that the one (scil. genos, "race") is nothing (οὐδέν), while for the other the brazen sky is established their sure citadel forever. Yet we have some likeness (prospererer), either in great intelligence (μεγαν νου) or in strength (φυσιν), to the immortals, though we know not (οὐκ εἰδότες) what the day will bring, what course after nightfall destiny has written that we must run to the end. The race of men is certainly not a "nothing" in the sense of non-existence. It is a "nothing" in the sense of lacking many of the attributes the gods have, and exemplifying poorly or marginally those attributes that the two races possess in common. Pindar illustrates with reference to one such attribute: "Like the gods we have intelligence, and yet we do not know. . . ."

It is relevant to note here that in another ode Pindar conveys this not-being of humanity using the very image and turn of phrase that Plato was to use in formulating a metaphysics of degrees of reality:

ἐπάμερον· τί δὲ τις; τί δ' ὄβ τις; σκίας δναρ ἄνθρωπος.

We are things of a day. What are we? What are we not? Man is the
shadow of a dream. (Pyth. viii.95-96)

The characterizing use, amply attested in other fifth-century authors, including Aeschylus and Aristophanes, becomes especially prominent in Sophocles and Euripides. But before we examine illustrative passages from the second of the three great tragedians, let me quote Moorhouse’s comment on a passage from a later source:

[Dem.] 47.67 ἀχοδος δὲ τοῦ λατροῦ διὸ οὐδὲν ἐτι εἶν ἦ
ἀνθρώπος .... This is a striking and valuable example, because in the context (describing a servant who had been brutally assaulted, and was soon to die) the meaning "die" would readily have been accepted if that had been a normal sense of the phrase. But the woman was not yet dead, only in a very bad condition (that is the meaning of οὐδὲν ἐτι εὶν) she was put in someone’s charge for treatment, and died later. This passage completely proves the point which also emerges from the general body of the examples, that the meaning “dead, non-existent” was altogether exceptional for οὐδὲν εἶναί. 8

In the light of this comment we can now focus on two remarkably expressive passages in Sophocles. At the end of Antigone, Creon returns to the stage having witnessed the suicide of his son, Aemon, in the tomb where Antigone had been interred, by Creon’s decree, and had there killed herself. Knowing of these two deaths, Creon now hears that his wife, in turn, committed suicide upon learning of Aemon’s death. Losing all kingly composure, totally despondent, he speaks to his attendants:

Quickly, lead me away, carry me out, τῶν οὐκ ἔντα μᾶλλον ἢ μηδένα.

(Antig. 1324-25)

On the phrase that I have reproduced here without translation, Moorhouse
comments: "I believe the meaning is, that Creon calls himself 'the one who is dead (ouk esti) rather than at the final extremity'. That is, by exaggeration he goes beyond calling himself ho mēdeis, and anticipates the next and last stage, death."9 This is almost certainly right. Creon had not spoken of himself as "dead already" until after he heard of his wife's death. He then did so twice, in 1285 and 1288; and briefly before speaking the lines quoted above he asked his attendants to strike him dead with a sword (1309). The other pole of the comparison, the μηδένα, was prepared and introduced by Sophocles in the speech of the first messenger, the one who brought word to the Chorus of the death of Antigone and Aemon. Creon's predicament of "a nobody" is implicitly defined in that speech: νῦν δέβεται πάντα, "now gone is everything" (1165), says the messenger. "Such a man I do not consider as living but as an animate corpse (empsychon nekron) (1167)," he continues; his material substance and his kingly attributes are not worth "the shadow of a smoke puff" (1168-70). But that first messenger could not yet know the ultimate extent of Creon's desolation. So Creon's remark at the end, after the second messenger has spoken, endorses and updates, in effect, what the first messenger had told the Chorus: "Before this latest calamity I thought of myself as mēdeis; now I do not even say I am a living corpse, I'm simply dead."10

The most fascinating and instructive of the passages from Sophocles is _Electra_ 1163-67:

Dearest one, how you have destroyed (apōlesas) me! Surely (dēta) you have destroyed me, beloved brother! So then receive me into this your shelter (ἐς τὸ σῶμ μονήσας), me who is nothing into that which is nothing (τὴν μὴδέν ἐς τὸ μὴδέν), that I may dwell
with you below from now on.

Electra is here addressing the urn she thinks contains the ashes of her dead brother Orestes. A recent critic confesses bewilderment (I append translations of the lines he cites):

Electra seems to assert in 969 that the dead are living ["you'll win the praise of piety from your dead father below"], then she seems to deny it in 1166 ["nothing to nothing," quoted above] and 1170 ["dead men do not suffer pain"] . . . . [t]he problem of the ontological status of ghosts in this play seems to me very obscure. 11

I believe there is no such problem; the supposed obscurity and the critic's bewilderment arise simply from a failure to appreciate a certain natural or inevitable, but logically transparent, semantic complication, one that is inherent in discourse about the dead—in Greek or in English. The point is worth a digression, for it has implications for an understanding of the concepts of "nothing" and "non-being" that go beyond the Electra passage.

What, in the event of a person's death, makes semantically possible the locutions "he is no more," "he does not exist," "he is nothing (existential sense)," and their respective counterparts in Greek, is the absence of that person from the world of the living. 12 But if we should picture a world of the dead, to which persons who are no longer alive recede, and where they take permanent abode, denizens of that world can be said "not to exist" only by a sort of semantic legerdemain: a linguistic transposition, a metonymy. For that world is one of (existential) non-being not on that world's own terms and from the perspective of its denizens, but on the terms of the living, and in the perspective of the living. So the Under-
world is the domain of "nothing" (existential) even though it has quite a large population, the members of which, however shadowy in their texture and however reduced they be in their powers, are involved in trials, in acts of expiation or purification, and who relish or loathe, praise or censure, the acts of their survivors in the world above.

This metonymy holds only with respect to the existential use of "non-being" and "nothing." In the characterizing use there is uninterrupted continuity between the two worlds. Indeed it is the characterizing use that permits us and even encourages us to picture the world of the dead as an extension of the world of the living. The characterizing use mediates, in effect, the metonymous use of "non-being" and "nothing." For while there is no sense to the idea of degrees of existence or degrees of nothingness (in the existential sense), there is no conceptual bar to thinking of degrees of "not-being" (not of "non-being") or of "nothing" in the characterizing sense. Thus it is possible for a living person—like Creon—to employ an effect of hyperbole by saying "I am dead already," "I do not exist," "I am nothing" (existential) because without hyperbole and with no recourse to metonymy he perceives himself as privatively or negatively characterized to a degree that verges on what is appropriate for someone in the realm of the dead. In a nutshell: the dead can call themselves "nothing" (existential) by metonymy; the living can call themselves "nothing" (existential) by hyperbole. But both the dead and the living can quite properly call themselves "nothing" in the characterizing sense; for in that sense it is simply a matter of more and less.

So now let us go back to the Electra passage. Critics, including Moorhouse, have failed to notice an important syntactic ambiguity. The expression to meden might conceivably be understood as "the nothing" or
"nothingness," in effect, as an abstract name of the Underworld pictured as the domain of non-existence. Preserving parallelism of sense, the meaning of 1165-66 would then have to be: "receive me, the one who (already) does not exist (τὸν μὲν μεδέν) into (the realm of) non-existence (τοῦ μὲν μεδέν)." One might fault the logic of this statement, especially in view of the toigar, "therefore," with which it is introduced; for if Electra already does not exist, she has already been admitted into the realm of non-existence, so the request for entry is pointless. Also, in the light of our interpretation of the Antigone passage, the existential sense for τὸν μὲν μεδέν required by the parallelism would seem surprising. But it is perhaps wrong to expect that Electra's utterances would be logical, in spite of τοigar, at this moment of heightened distress; and it is arguable that the ἀπολέσας, "you killed me," of line 1164 encourages us to understand τὸν μὲν μεδέν as though it were equivalent to τὸν οὐκ οὐσαν, "the one who does not exist," in spite of the emphatic distinction of Antig. 1324-25. So we must not rule out the sense "accept the non-existent one into non-existence."

But there is another way of understanding τοῦ μὲν μεδέν, by construing the neuter article τοῦ as not as introducing an abstract noun but simply as referring to the neuter noun that occurs in the preceding line, τὸ στέγος, "the shelter," Electra's metaphor for the funerary urn. Indeed that construction is by far the more likely and ready to hand, as is clear from the parallelism "... me ... to this shelter here; ... the one who is nothing to this (urn) that is nothing." On this translation there is no strain in the logic, and the use of μὲν μεδέν conforms perfectly to that in Creon's speech of distress. Both Electra and Orestes, the latter as embodied by the ashes contained within the urn, as well as by the urn itself as container, are a "nothing" in the char-
acterizing sense. The supposed nothingness of Orestes is obvious: he does
not speak, he does not move, he cannot come to Electra's help—and so on and
so forth with the many "not-\(F\)'s implied in Orestes' utterly deprived state.
It is precisely in that sense that Electra, at the beginning of this scene
(1129), calls Orestes—again identified with the ashes in the urn—a "nothing":
"Now I hold you in my hands as a nothing (\textit{ouden onta})."\(^{14}\) In fact, Sophocles
does not leave us to imagine Orestes' "not-\(F\)''s; as though to confirm the
sense of "nothing" in line 1129 and prepare us for the second half of the
"nothing to nothing" of line 1166, he has Electra recite a whole string of
Orestes' deprivations beginning at line 1136:

Out of (\textit{ektos}) your home, an exile on alien (\textit{alles}) soil, you died
wretchedly (\textit{kakōs apolou}), without your sister near (\textit{dicha}); nor (\textit{koute})
did I wash you . . . nor (\textit{oute}) did I get to pick you up off the
blazing pyre . . . but tended by the hands of strangers you have
come back a diminutive mass (\textit{smikros onkos}) in a diminutive
receptacle (\textit{smikrōi en kytei}) . . . [your] nurture unavailing
(\textit{anophelētou}) . . . instead of the dearest figure of your
person (\textit{morphēs}) ashes and a useless (\textit{anophelē}) shadow. (1136–59)
The nothingness of the urn itself is not simply its diminutive size; the urn
is hardly a "shelter" (as it is called at 1165); the oxymoron figure, "a
shelter that is not a shelter," is here very close to the surface.\(^{15}\)

In this same speech Electra gradually identifies her own fate with
that of Orestes. At one point the rhetoric goes even beyond identification,
picturing the dead Orestes not merely as the one totally deprived but as one
who is actively depriving Electra "of everything," "like a storm" (1150–51).
So we are already inclined to think of Electra as a "nothing" in the charac-
terizing sense before we finally hear her climactic hyperbole, "I am dead" (1152, cf. 1164). Even before this scene Sophocles has spelled out Electra's privative nothingness: from the first scenes the play has been studded with Electra's remarks of self-pity, in which she characterizes her predicament by using negative phrases and privative a- or apo- compounds.¹⁶

Let me reiterate that even though the characterizing sense for Electra's "me who is nothing to this that is nothing" is the most immediate and logically the most straightforward, the existential sense, "me the non-existent into non-existence" must be allowed as a secondary semantic layer. The context is quite different from that in Moorhouse's passage about the dying woman, where the existential sense was precisely the one not intended. In Electra's speech a line that packs together the characterizing, the hyperbolic (with respect to Electra), and the metonymous (with respect to the Underworld) use of "nothing" is just what we would expect from the pen of a tragic poet.

III

The evidence discussed in the preceding Section is certainly adequate to establish that the characterizing use of μέδεν/ouden and μέδεις/oudeis is at least as viable and familiar in classical Greek as the corresponding uses of "nothing" and "nobody" in English. But an even stronger conclusion is warranted. Doubtless, in terms of frequency, this use cannot fail but appear minor compared to the existential use.¹⁷ But this comparison belies the importance of the characterizing use in the development of Greek concepts. In non-philosophical sources the use is documented in contexts of major dramatic or rhetorical impact. So its literary conspicuousness is high. It would seem, moreover, that to the extent that authors such as Pindar and the
tragedians treat the concepts "non-being" and "nothing" thematically--i.e. to the extent they dwell on or exploit semantic implications of the corresponding words--it is the characterizing, not the existential, sense that serves as focus. So given the literary background, we should hardly presume—as has generally been the case—that when "nothing" becomes thematic for a philosophical author focus will be on the existential sense. It might well be that presumption should be in favor of the characterizing sense. A good case can be made, I believe, for the thesis that even in Parmenides meden, where it appears in significant contrast to eon, has characterizing sense. 18

With reference to Plato the characterizing use of ἰδέα/οὐδέν must have played a significant role in the development of the doctrine of degrees of reality. The latter, as Vlastos has shown, cannot be coherently understood as a doctrine of degrees of existence, but as one that involves the characterizing F-ness and non-F-ness of sensible particulars. 19 The connection with our theme ought to be obvious: the negative pole in a doctrine of degrees of reality corresponds to the characterizing sense of "nothing," not-\( F_1 \) and not-\( F_2 \) and not . . . not-\( F_n \). If there are to be degrees of reality, there must be degrees of unreality; the characterizing use both allows this and projects the relevant extreme.

The connection can be rendered more faithfully and its significance better appreciated if we remind ourselves of other respects in which Plato's doctrine draws on the resources of ordinary speech and on the literary tradition. Plato himself called our attention to one such respect. In Republic 479B the notion that there are "ambivalent" or "equivocal" (cf. ἐπαμφωτερίζουσιν) entities is introduced through humorous allusion to the folk riddle:

A man who was not a man (a eunuch), saw (looked at) but did not see...
(recognize) a bird that was not a bird (a bat) perched on a tree
that was not a tree (a rafter or beam), hit it (hit at it)
and did not hit it (actually hit it) with a stone that was not a
stone (a draughtboard piece). 20

Obviously related to this type of folk riddle is one of the most striking
forms of the oxymoron figure in Greek literature: "an F-person (or thing)
that is not an F-person (or thing). A good example can be drawn from that
same scene of Sophocles' Electra that was discussed in the preceding Section:
metēr ametōr, "unmotherly mother," or "mother hardly a mother" (1154). 21

As in the example cited, this type of oxymoron involves juxtaposition of a
noun against a compound consisting of the same noun prefixed by α-negative.
A quite distinct, yet significantly related figure, is that of alliteration
through α-negative compounds. Here too we have a good example from Sophocles' 
Electra, though not from the same scene discussed earlier: Δεκπνος . . .
Δυσμενος . . . Δυδύνατον οίτων ξενοπα κακῶν,"childless . . . unmarried . . .
suffering an unending doom of ills" (164-67). 22 An impure variant of this
device produces the same effect of pathos through accumulation of α-negative
compounds, negative predications, apo- compounds and similar expressions.
We saw such a figure in the description of the supposed ashes of Orestes. 23

Both α-negative alliteration and its impure variant of accumulating negatives
are among the most favored devices of Greek authors, from Homer through the
dramatists, the orators, and beyond. What is more, predilection for these
devices reflects tendencies characteristic of the Greek language itself. For
Greek not only has a richer variety of morphological variants of the negative
prefix than any other Indo-European language, 24 it also is by far more pro-
ductive of negative compounds than the two other ancient languages for which
we have a comparable body of literature, Sanskrit and Latin. The conception of a person, thing, action, or event that is characterized in negative terms through and through is no invention of philosophical ontologists; it is one of the commonplaces of Greek literature.

It is thus no idle historical exercise to point out antecedents or prototypes in literature and in forms of speech for Plato's doctrine of degrees of reality. Sources for the intermediate degree lie not only in the type of folk riddle Plato alluded to; they also lie in the oxymoron of the type metòr ametòr. Correspondingly, the Platonic medamei on, "in no way being," or pantos me on, "altogether not being," that is equated to meden, "nothing," is prefigured and made familiar in the characterizing use of meden/medeid etc., especially by the great tragedians, in the figure of negative alliteration, and in the figure of accumulating negatives. All of these devices facilitate, reinforce, and promote one another. So it is properly the whole complex that constitutes an important pre-philosophical background for the Platonic doctrine of degrees of reality.

Observations made in this paper can be read as providing support, in yet a different way, for a thesis advanced by Charles H. Kahn and others. In a formulation I prefer, the thesis is that the dialectic of Being in classical Greek speculation focuses not on "What there is" but on "What it is" or "How it is"; not on existence but on physis, constitution, or form.

Footnotes


3. Ibid., p. 247.


5. This is my terminology, not Moorhouse's.

6. It is fascinating to notice how deftly Homer exploits the semantic distinctness of ὀὔτε and ἐκτίθεμαι in the episode of the blinding of Polyphemus, the Cyclops, in Od. 9.364 ff. The Cyclops naively believes that Odysseus' name is ὀὔτε. So his screams, when Odysseus is blinding him, bring no help from the other Cyclopes. For they assume he is complaining of a natural illness, hearing him, as they do, cry: "No one (ὄὔτε) is killing me" (9.403-414). Homer's finishing touch to this dramatic pun is at 460. The powerful monster, now reduced to ineffectual groping, yet still confident he will capture Odysseus and take revenge, speaks to his favorite sheep about the ills wrought on him by that ἐκτίθεμαι ὀὔτε. In putting the two words together has he now finally understood the fateful ambiguity of the sound "ὀὔτε"? Or does he now understand ὀὔτε—wrongly—merely as a variant of ἐκτίθεμαι? Or had he foolishly lulled himself from the start with the belief that Odysseus had called himself ὀὔτε (ἑκτίθεμαι) in abject humility and self-deprecation? Homer leaves us to wonder. In the end, Polyphemus' favorite animal carries Odysseus safely out of the cave and beyond the Cyclopes' reach. The crucial point, however, is clear: Odysseus not only is not, as Polyphemus' fellow Cyclopes thought, "no one," he also is
not, as Polyphemus himself—at one time or another—thought, "a man of no account."


9. Ibid., p. 36.

10. Moorhouse interprets the idiom _ouden eimi_ as "I am undone, brought to ruin." So in passages of the form, "I am dead (apōlomenē). ... I no longer am anything (oδίν eιμ’ ἢττ)," for example El. 677 and Phil. 951, we do not have a mere variant of the stock rhetorical figure "I'm dead, I am no more" (on which see below, n. 12). Rather what we have is significant juxtaposition of the two states that are explicitly distinguished by Creon at the end of _Antigone_.

With reference to the much discussed passage in _Ajax_ ὅτ’ ὀδὶν δὲν τοῦ μηδὲν ἀντίστης ὑπὲρ (1231), Moorhouse concludes that both _ouden_ ὃν and _meden_ here mean "of no account" (p. 37)—in the terms used in this paper, that they are both characterizing uses.


12. There is, of course, a "vital" use or nuance of "to be," "to exist," and _einaī_. But the fact that the paraphrases or translations "to live" or "to be alive" and "to die" or "to be dead" are available for positive and negative predications, respectively, in this type of use does not warrant saying that "to be," "to exist" or _einaī_ in such cases simply _means_ "to live" or "to be alive." At the very least, the vital use of these verbs carries greater rhetorical force, greater pathos, than corresponding use of the
predicates "lives" or "dies." This is especially clear in literary examples
that might otherwise be taken as pleonastic: ἐκτὸς τὰ καὶ ἔστιν
(Homer Od. 24.262); ἔννοιαν καὶ δύναμιν 'Ἀθηναίων (Demosthenes 18.72); ὡς ὁ ὁδὸς
ἐν θείᾳ Τρῳά (Euripides Troad. 1292). See Joachim Klowski, "Zum
Entstehen der Begriffe Sein und Nichts und der Weltentstehungs-
und Welt-
schöpfungstheorien im strengen Sinne (I. Teil)," Archiv für Geschichte der
Philosophie, 49 (1967), 139; Charles H. Kahn, The Verb 'Be' in Ancient Greek,
240-45, 378-79.


14. The characterizing sense for ouden here is guaranteed by the
immediate context: "I did not receive you back in the form in which (hosper)
I sent you off" (1128); "I sent you off resplendent (lampron exepempsa)" (1130).

15. See below, p. 00 and n. 21.

16. See 164-67 ἀτέχνος . . . ἀνύμφευτος . . . ἀγνήνυτον οἴτων ἔχουσα
κακῶν. 186-92 βίοτος (scil. Electra's) ἀνέπλωτος, ὡς ἐν ἀρκῶν ἀχίς
ἀνευ τεκέων . . . ἀδικὸς ὑπὲρ ἀνήρ ἐπεμικταὶ . . . ἀναξία . . . ἀείκει
σύν στόλῳ, κενὰς (cf. "not full") δ' ἀμφίσταται τραπέζας.

230-32 τόδε γὰρ [Electra's woes] ἀλητὰ κεκληρεῖται ὡς ὡτε ἐκ καμάτων ἀπο-
παρχομαὶ ἀνάριμος ἄδει θρήνων. 813-22 ἀπεστερμένη . . . ἄφιλος . . . (in
Electra's life) ὡδείς πόδος. Cf. Orestes' remarks: ὡμ' ἀτίμως καθέως
ἐθαρμένον (1181); φεῖ τῆς ἀράμου δυσμόρου τε σῆς τροφῆς (1183).

17. The absolute count for the characterizing use is, in any event,
remarkably high. For Sophocles, for whom Moorhouse collected all the relevant
passages, the count is 18. For Euripides the total is nearly double that of
the 24 "typical examples" discussed by Moorhouse, pp. 38-40.


23. Above, p. 00, Cf. description of Electra's predicament, n. 16.

