

Binghamton University

The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB)

The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter

12-27-1955

Plato's Sophist 251-259

John L. Ackrill
University of Chicago

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

Ackrill, John L., "Plato's Sophist 251-259" (1955). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 233.

<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/233>

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.

Plato' *Sophist*, 251-259

J. L. Ackrill, University of Chicago

This paper was presented by J. L. Ackrill to the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy at its meeting in Boston in 1955. It has been copied from a decaying text by A. Preus, February/March 2017.

This section of the *Sophist* is no doubt one of the most important and controversial passages in Plato's dialogues. My purpose is not to attempt a full interpretation of it, but to discuss one question, taking up in particular some remarks made by Professor Cornford (in *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*) and by Mr. R. Robinson (in his paper on Plato's *Parmenides*, *Classical Philology*, 1942).

It may be useful to give first a very brief and unargued analysis of the passage. Plato seeks to prove that concepts¹ are related in certain definite ways, that there is a συμπλοκή εἰδῶν (251d-252e). Next (253) he assigns to philosophy or dialectic the task of discovering what these relations are: the philosopher will have a clear view of the whole range of concepts and of how they are inter-connected, whether in genus-species pyramids or in other ways. Plato now gives a sample of such philosophizing. Choosing some concepts highly relevant to problems already broached in the *Sophist* he first (254-255) establishes that they are all different one from the other (the philosopher must μήτε ταῦτὸν εἶδος ἕτερον ἠγγήσασθαι μήτε ἕτερον ὄν ταῦτὸν 253d1-3); and then (255e-258) elicits the relationships in which they stand to one another. The effort to discover and state these relationships throws light on the puzzling notions ὄν and μὴ ὄν and enables Plato (259) to set aside with contempt certain puzzles and paradoxes propounded by superficial thinkers. He refers finally (259e) to the absolute necessity there is for concepts to be in definite relations to one another if there is to be discourse at all; διὰ γὰρ τὴν ἀλλήλων τῶν εἰδῶν συμπλοκὴν ὁ λόγος γέγονεν ἡμῖν.

The question I wish to raise is this. Is it correct to say that one of Plato's achievements in this passage is the 'discovery of the copula', or the 'recognition of ambiguity of ἔστιν' as used on the one hand in statements of identity and on the other hand in attributive statements? I feel little doubt that it *is* correct to say this, but Cornford and Robinson (to mention no others) deny it. After a remark on the question itself I shall try state briefly a case for answering it affirmatively, and shall then consider some of the counter-arguments that have been put forward.

As for the question itself: clearly we should be concerned with whether Plato made a philosophical advance which we might reasonably describe in such phrases as I have quoted, but no great stress is to be laid on these particular phrases. Thus it is no doubt odd to say that Plato (or anyone else) *discovered* the copula. But did he draw attention to it? Did he expound or expose the various roles of the verb εἶναι? Many of his predecessors and contemporaries reached bizarre conclusions by confusing different uses of the word; did Plato respond by elucidating these different uses? These are the real questions. Again, it would be pedantic to deny that Plato recognized the ambiguity of ἔστιν merely on the ground that he had no word meaning 'ambiguity', or on the ground that he nowhere says 'the word ἔστιν sometimes means and sometimes means'. If he in fact glosses or explains or analyses the meaning of a word in one

¹ The use of this term may seem provocative. But whether or not the εἶδη and γένη of the *Sophist* are something more than 'mere' concepts, a good deal of interpretation of 251-259 can satisfactorily proceed on the assumption that they are *at least* 'concepts'.

way in some contexts and in another in others, and if this is part of a serious exposition of doctrine, then it may very well be right to credit him with ‘recognizing an ambiguity’. The serious objects to attributing to Plato the ‘discovery of the copula’ are not, of course, of this pedantic kind, but involve real problems of interpretation. I have mentioned these trivial points only in order to indicate, by contrast, what the substantial question at issue is.

It is generally agreed (and Cornford does not deny this, p. 296) that Plato marks off the existential use of ἔστιν from at least some other use. He does not of course do this by simply saying ‘sometimes but not always the verb ἔστιν means “exists”’. If Greeks had a familiar word for ‘exists’ as opposed to ‘is...’ there would have been no Parmenidean confusion for Plato and Aristotle to clear up. How Plato does proceed can be seen from his remark about κίνησις at 256a1: ἔστι δέ γε διὰ τὸ μετέχειν τοῦ ὄντος. This διὰ does not introduce a *proof* that κίνησις ἔστιν: this was already agreed before and used to establish a connection between κίνησις and τὸ ὄν (254d10). Nor, obviously, does it introduce the *cause* why κίνησις ἔστιν: it does not refer to some event or state which resulted in the further state described by the sentence κίνησις ἔστιν. The words introduced by διὰ give an expansion or *analysis* of ἔστιν, as this word is used in κίνησις ἔστιν, i.e. as used existentially. Μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος is the philosopher’s equivalent of the existential ἔστιν; but, as will be seen, it is not his equivalent for ἔστιν in its other uses. So the existential meaning is marked off.

The philosopher’s formulation, κίνησις μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος, both elucidates the sense of ἔστιν in κίνησις ἔστιν and also makes clear (what is not clear in the compressed colloquial formulation) the structure of the fact being stated; makes clear, that is, that a certain connection is being asserted between two concepts. The philosopher’s formulation contains not only the names of the two concepts but also a word indicating their coherence (μετέχει), not itself the name of an εἶδος but just a sign of connectedness or synthesis. This point, the role of μετέχειν in the dialectician’s language, will come up again shortly.

There remain two other meanings of ἔστιν, as copula and as identity-sign. The assimilation of these had led to a denial of the possibility of any true non-tautological statements. What is needed, in order to deprive this paradox of its power, is a clear demonstration of how the two uses of ἔστιν differ. By ‘demonstration’ I do not mean ‘proof’, but ‘exhibition’ or ‘display’. Not all absurd philosophical theses can be *proved* false. Often the only way to sterilize a paradox is to expose and lay bare the confusion from which it springs. So what one must do for ἔστιν is to draw attention to these two different uses, indicate how they are related, and if possible provide for each an alternative mode of expression so as to help remove even the slightest temptation to confuse the two.

Consider how Plato deals, in 256a10-b4, with the pair of statements κίνησις ἐστὶ ταῦτόν, κίνησις οὐκ ἐστὶ ταῦτόν. These look like contradictories, yet we want to assert both. However we need not really be worried (οὐ δυσχεραντέον); for we are not in both statements speaking ὁμοίως. Analysis of each statement (introduced again by διὰ) will show us exactly what is being asserted in each and enable us to see that there is no contradiction between them when they are properly understood. The first statement means κίνησις μετέχει ταύτου. We do not intend to be denying this when we assert the second statement; *it* means κίνησις μετέχει θατέρου πρὸς ταῦτόν. There is no contradiction.

The essential points in Plato’s analysis or transformation of the two statements are these:

- (1) where ἔστιν is being used as copula it gets replaced in the philosopher’s version by μετέχει;
- (2) for οὐκ ἐστὶν where ἔστιν occurs not as copula but as identity-sign the philosopher’s version

is (not οὐ μετέχει; but) μετέχει θατέρου (πρός...). What do these substitutions show? They show that ἔστιν serves merely to connect two concepts which are named; that in another use the concept of Identity (or Difference) is expressed, together with the fact that something (viz. the concept named by the subject-word of the sentence) falls under the concept Identity (or Difference).

With Plato's procedure here one may compare a passage in Frege's paper *Über Begriff und Gegenstand* (I quote Mr. Geach's translation, in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, edited by Peter Geach and Max Black). One can just as well assert of a thing that it is Alexander the Great, or is the number four, or is the planet Venus, as that it is green or is a mammal. But, as Frege points out, one must distinguish the usages of the word 'is'. 'In the last two examples it serves as a copula, as a mere verbal sign of predication. (In this sense the German word *ist* can sometimes be replaced by the mere personal suffix: cf. *dies Blatt ist grün* and *dies Blatt grünt*.²) We are here saying that something falls under a concept, and the grammatical predicate stands for this concept. In the first three examples, on the other hand, 'is' is used like the 'equals' sign in arithmetic, to express an equation... . In the sentence 'the morning star is Venus', 'is' is obviously not the mere copula; its content is an essential part of the predicate, so that the word 'Venus' does not constitute the whole of the predicate. One might say instead: 'the morning star is no other than Venus'; what was previously implicit in the single word 'is' is here set forth in four separate words, and in 'is no other than' the word 'is' now really is the mere copula. What is predicated here is thus not *Venus* but *no other than Venus*. These words stand for a concept.' (pp. 43-44)

Frege explains the copula by talking of something's *falling under* a concept. Plato uses for this the term μετέχειν. Frege expands the 'is' of identity into 'is no other than', in which phrase the 'is' is simply the copula and 'no other than...' stands for a concept. Plato expands the ἔστιν of identity into μετέχει ταύτου... (and οὐκ ἔστιν into μετέχει θατέρου), where μετέχει does the copula's job ('falls under the concept') and ταύτόν names a concept. It seems to me that in offering the analyses he does Plato, no less clearly than Frege, is engaged in distinguishing different uses of 'is'. In all he distinguishes three, and he provides for each different sense of ἔστιν a new mode of expression (μετέχει..., μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος, μετέχει ταύτου).

The claim that one of the things Plato does in *Sophist* 251-259 is to elucidate the distinction between copula and identity-sign would seem to be supported by the following consideration: that this distinction is just what is required to immunize us against the paradoxes of the ὄψιμαθεῖς (251b), and Plato does suppose that these foolish people have been put in their place by his discussion (259c-d). Robinson however denies that this consideration has any force. He writes (p. 174): 'Plato certainly thought of his Communion as refuting the "Late Learners". But it does not follow that he thought the manner of refutation was to show that they confused attribution with identity. Nor is there anything in the text to show that he thought this.' Robinson is certainly right to say that it does not *follow*. Still we are surely entitled – or rather obliged – to make some reasonable suggestion as to how exactly Plato did suppose himself to have exposed the error of the 'late learners'. If the interpretation of 256a10-b4 outlined above is right that the passage contains what is an effective exposure of 'late learners' who construed every 'is' as a sign of identity. If so, it is natural to infer that Plato himself regarded the distinction drawn in that passage (and elsewhere) as the crucial counter-move against the 'late learners'. Further, if

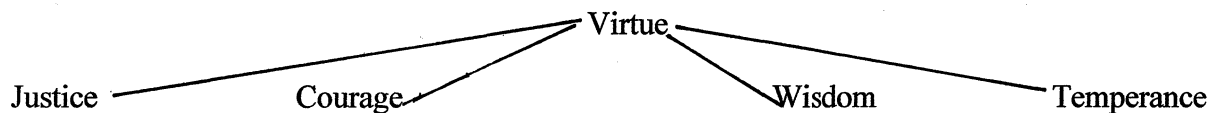
² One is reminded of Aristotle, *Physics* 185b28: οἱ δὲ λέξιν μετερροθμιζον, ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὐ λευκός ἐστιν ἀλλὰ λελευκεται, οὐδὲ βαδιδων ἐστιν ἀλλὰ βαδίξει.

no *other* reasonable suggestion can be made as to how exactly Plato did think had disposed of the ‘late learners’ this fact can be used as an argument in favour of the above interpretation of 256a-b which does find in it an important point directly relevant to, and destructive of, the paradoxical puzzle of the ὀψιμαθείς.

Now it might be suggested that it is by his proof that there is Communion among εἶδη (251d-252e) that Plato refutes the view that only identical statements are possible: that it is here, and not in some later talk about ὄν and μὴ ὄν, that he supposes himself to be refuting the ‘late learners’. But what are the arguments by which he proves there is Communion? The first argument (251e7-252b7) is to the effect that if there were no Communion then philosophers and ‘physicists’ in propounding their various views would in fact have been ‘saying nothing’ (οὐδὲν ἄν λέγοιεν). The argument simply *assumes* that this last is not the case, that Empedocles and the rest *were* talking sense. But this assumption is just what the ‘late learners’, maintaining their paradox, would deny; and an argument based upon it is obviously of no force against them. The second argument (252b8-d1) is that the theory that there is no Communion cannot be stated without implying its own falsity. As applied to the ‘late learners’ the argument would be: you say that only identity-statements can be true; but this statement of yours – ‘only identity-statements can be true’ – is not itself an identity-statement; so it cannot (on your own admission) be true. Now this argument is certainly formidable and might well put a ‘late learner’ to silence: he could hardly be expected to distinguish between first- and second-order statements. Yet as a refutation of the thesis itself it is surely superficial and unsatisfactory. For the thesis was put forward not only by elderly jokers, but also by serious thinkers, who felt themselves obliged to maintain it for what seemed to them decisive theoretical reasons. Robinson writes as follows (p. 175) ‘To such more responsible thinkers it is folly to say: “But you obviously say ‘man is good’; and, if you could not, all discourse whatever would be impossible, including the paradox that you cannot say ‘man is good’”. For these thinkers already know that you can say that “man is good” and that the supposition that you cannot immediately destroys all thought and speech. Their trouble is that, nevertheless, they seem to see a good reason for denying that you can say that “man is good”. What they want is to be shown the fallacy in the argument which troubles them. They know it must be a fallacy; but they want to see what it is. Now for such thinkers Plato’s exposition of his doctrine of Communion is no help whatever. For he merely points to the fact that we *must* be able to say “man is good”, because otherwise no thought or communication would be possible. He does not even notice any argument to the contrary, much less show where they go wrong’. I agree with Robinson that, for the reason he gives, Plato’s proof of Communion cannot be regarded as disposing satisfactorily of the paradoxical thesis (even though the second argument in the proof is valid against the thesis); for nothing is done to expose the error or confusion which led serious persons to embrace the paradox. The philosophical refutation of paradoxes (for instance, Zeno’s paradoxes of motion) consists of undermining the arguments on which the paradoxical conclusions are based, not in reiterating – what everyone knows already – that the conclusions are absurd. While admitting, therefore, that the proof of Communion does contain an argument which can be properly used against the ‘late learners’, I find it hard to believe that this is the whole of what Plato has to say to discredit the thesis that only identity-statements can be true. I should expect to find him, in some other passage, exposing the rotten foundations on which that thesis was built. And this, I suggest, he does (e.g. in the passage previously discussed) by clearly distinguishing the two different uses of ἔστιν, as copula and as identity-sign, and by showing how the two uses are related.

Let us turn now to Cornford. He says that the copula ‘has no place anywhere in Plato’s scheme of the relations of Forms’ (p. 279). The relation between Forms that combine – ‘blending’ – is a symmetrical relation, so it cannot be the same as the relation of subject to predicate in an attributive statement, i.e. the relation indicated by the copula (pp. 256-7, cp. p. 266).

First a very general point. The relation ‘being associated with’ (or ‘being connected with’) is certainly a symmetrical relation. But there are many different ways in which things or people may be associated or connected: as father and son, employer and employee, and so on. One may say of all the members of a family that each is connected with the other. But if one wishes to say how they are connected, one with another, one must employ such expressions as ‘father of’ and ‘niece of’, which do not stand for symmetrical relations. Now it is agreed by Cornford that the philosopher’s task, according to Plato, is to ‘discern clearly the hierarchy of Forms ... and make out its articulate structure’ (pp. 263-4). Every statement the philosopher makes, in performing this task, may be expected to assert some relationship or association between Forms. And ‘association’ is indeed a symmetrical relation. But surely the philosopher could not possibly achieve his purpose without specifying the *kind* of association there is in each case. And he could not do this without bringing in some non-symmetrical relations. Consider the following small extract of a possible ‘map of the Forms’:



The structure exhibited here must be described by the philosopher; and to do this he *must* advert to a non-symmetrical relationship. Justice and virtue are not merely connected; they are connected in a particular way: Justice is *a species of* Virtue. Similarly, in the above diagram, the words ‘Virtue’ and ‘Justice’ are not merely close together; one is *under* the other.

Non-symmetrical relations must then be invoked if a complex structure is to be described; and Plato was fully aware of the complexity of structure of ‘the world of Forms’ (*Sophist* 253d). Nor do his analogies with letters and musical notes (253a-b) support the idea that the dialectician would, according to him, simply assert symmetrical relationships between εἶδη. If we are to say whether ‘f’ and ‘g’ fit together, with the aid of ‘i’ to make an English word, we must obviously specify the *order* in which the letters are to be taken. ‘Gif’ is not a word, ‘fig’ is. The order of notes in music is equally important: a given scale is not just such-and-such notes, but such-and-such notes in a certain order. So whatever terminology one uses to state the facts about spelling or scales or ‘the world of Forms’, some non-symmetrical relation must be brought in.

There seems to be a difficulty here for Cornford’s view. For if every philosopher’s statement tells of a ‘blending’, if the only Communion he can report is symmetrical, how can he ever express irreducibly non-symmetrical truths, such as that Justice is a species of Virtue?

To this it will be objected that *Sophist* 251-9, though it implies that the philosopher will have to investigate and state relations between genera and species, does not itself explore such relations; so in a proper interpretation of the passage we should leave them out of account and concentrate on how Plato actually proceeds in exhibiting the relations which he does in fact consider. Let us then look at some of the statements of Communion which Plato makes.

First, 'Motion exists' ('change' would be better; I use Cornford's word). Cornford says (p. 256): "Motion exists" means that the Form Motion blends with the Form Existence'; and (p. 279); "Motion blends with Existence" is taken as equivalent to "Motion exists". He also says (p. 278): 'The relation intended (sc. by "blending") is not the meaning of the "copula"...; for we can equally say "Existence blends with Motion"'. Taken together these remarks lead to absurdity. For if 'Motion blends with Existence' means 'Motion exists', then 'Existence blends with Motion' must mean 'Existence moves'. Plato certainly did not intend this, and the trouble clearly lies in Cornford's insistence on the 'blending' metaphor (which suggests a symmetrical relation) to the exclusion of other metaphors (which do not). What 'Motion exists' is equivalent to is not 'Motion blends with Existence' ('blending' being symmetrical) but 'Motion shares in or partakes of Existence' ('partaking of' being non-symmetrical). If A partakes of B then it is true to say, less determinately, that A blends with B, and this is equivalent to saying that B blends with A; but 'A partakes of B' is not equivalent to saying that 'B partakes of A'. Cornford's remarks quoted above lead to absurdity because he will not let into his exposition any non-symmetrical expression like 'partakes of', – even though Plato's exposition bristles with this metaphor.

Next, 'Motion is different from Rest'. Now this is indeed equivalent to 'Rest is different from Motion'. But before drawing any inference concerning 'Communion' we must put the statement into its analysed form, into dialectician's terminology. We get: 'Motion communicates with Difference from Rest'. The question is whether 'communicates with' in this formulation can be taken to stand for a symmetrical relation. But if it is so taken we must be prepared to say that 'Motion communicates with Difference from Rest' is equivalent to 'Difference from Rest communicates with Motion'; for the Communion asserted in the first place is evidently between Motion on the one hand and Difference from Rest on the other. But then, since 'Motion communicates with Difference from Rest' is the technical way of saying that Motion is different from Rest we must suppose that 'Difference from Rest communicates with Motion' is the technical way of saying that Difference from Rest moves. And we shall find ourselves claiming that 'Motion is different from Rest' means the same as 'Difference from Rest moves'. As before, this absurd conclusion follows from taking 'communicates with' as standing for a symmetrical relation. If 'Motion communicates with Difference from Rest' means that Motion is different from Rest (as it clearly does), then 'communicates with' must here stand not for 'blending' but for a non-symmetrical relation ('partaking of'). It is true that if A partakes of Difference from B, then B partakes of Difference from A. But this is because of the symmetrical nature of difference; 'partaking of' is itself not symmetrical.

But these considerations, it may be said, are still too general and involve too much extrapolation and 'interpretation'. This objection is reasonable but hardly decisive. One must suppose that Plato had something intelligible and consistent in his mind when writing the very taut piece of exposition in *Sophist* 251-9. If Cornford's account leads, on reflection, to grave difficulties or absurdities this is a *prima facie* argument against it.

Still it is certainly necessary to look closely at the details of Plato's terminology. Considering the various terms he uses in speaking of relations among εἶδη, one would expect some (e.g. συμμειγνυσθαι) to stand for the rather indeterminate symmetrical notion 'association', and others (e.g. μετέχειν) to stand for some more determinate non-symmetrical relation. Cornford denies that this expectation is fulfilled. Speaking of statements about genus and species he writes (pp. 296-7): 'The appropriate word would be "partake of" (μετέχειν), indicating that genus and species are blended but do not coincide. But he (sc. Plato) does not use "partake of"

with precision or distinguish “partaking” from the mutual relation called “blending” or “combining” (συμμειξίς, κοινωνία). Cornford supports his assertion that ‘participation’ between Forms is a symmetrical relation by reference to 255d4 (p. 256): ‘At 255c,d Existents (ὄντα) are divided into two Forms or Kinds (τὸ καθ’ αὐτό and τὸ πρὸς ἄλλο) and then Existence is described as “partaking of” both these subordinate Forms. So the generic Form partakes of (blends with) the specific form no less than the specific Form partakes of the generic’. And in his footnote on 255d4, he says: ‘Note that Existence, which *includes* both these Forms (sc. τὸ καθ’ αὐτό and τὸ πρὸς ἄλλο), is said to *partake of* both. This is one of the places which show that “partaking of” is symmetrical in the case of the Forms.’ I do not know which are the other places Cornford alludes to: his explicit argument that μέθεξις is symmetrical (hence nothing to do with the copula) rests on the one passage 255d. He does not pay special attention to all the other occurrences of the μέθεξις metaphor. Nor does he consider the possibility that μέθεξις does not always stand for a reciprocal relation; one would be prepared to find that it sometimes did (‘being associated with’) and sometimes did not (‘sharing in’).

Professor Karl Dürr, in his paper “Moderne Darstellung der platonischen Logik” (*Museum Helveticum* 1945, especially pp. 171-175), assigned precise and distinct meanings to various terms used by Plato in *Sophist* 251-9, but did not attempt a full justification. Sir David Ross has made the following important observation, in *Plato’s Theory of Ideas*, p. 111, n. 6: ‘Plato uses κοινωνία, κοινωνεῖν, ἐπικοινωνία, προσκοινωνεῖν in two different constructions – with the genitive (250b9, 252a2, b9, 254c5, 256b2, 260e2) and with the dative (251d9, e8, 252d3, 253a8, 254b8, c1, 257a9, 260e5). In the former usage the verbs mean “share in”; in the latter they mean “combine with” or “communicate with”.’ I do not know why Ross adds that ‘though Plato uses the two different constructions, he does not seem to attach any importance to the difference between them.’ Plato does not use the two constructions indiscriminately or interchangeably. A comparison between the two groups of passages yields a clear result (I leave out of account 260e2 and e5, which are in the perplexing discussion of false belief, not in the main section on κοινωνία γενῶν; 250b9 is also outside this section). Κοινωνεῖν followed by the genitive (e.g. τοῦ ἑτέρου) is used where the fact being asserted is that some εἶδος is (copula) such-and-such (e.g. different from...), i.e. it is used to express the fact that one concept *falls under* another. The dative construction, on the other hand, is used in highly general remarks about the connectedness of εἶδη, where no definite fact as to any particular pair of εἶδη is being stated. Surely this confirms – what ordinary Greek usage would suggest – that Plato consciously uses the word κοινωνεῖν in two different ways: in one it stands for the general symmetrical notion of ‘connectedness’, in the other it stands for a determinate non-symmetrical notion, ‘sharing in’. The former is appropriate to broad comments on the inter-connection of εἶδη, but the latter is required when the precise relations of particular εἶδη are to be stated.

As for μετέχειν two points are especially important. Firstly, in 251-9 the verb (or its noun) occurs 13 times. One of these occurrences is in the passage used by Cornford in his argument quoted above (255d4). But in all the other twelve cases it is clear that the truth expressed by ‘A-ness μετέχει B-ness’ is that A-ness is (copula) B, and never that B-ness is (copula) A. For instance, τὸ ὄν μετέχει θατέρου... formulates the fact that Existence is different from...; it does *not* serve equally to express the fact that Difference exists – that is expressed by θατέρου μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος. This would surely be a remarkable coincidence if the relation Plato intended by μετέχειν were in fact symmetrical.

Secondly, it is worth attending particularly to the passage officially devoted to the statement of certain relations among the five chosen εἶδη, 255e8-257a11. Here the objective is to state definite truths in careful philosophical terminology; not merely to advert to the fact that there are connections among εἶδη but to say precisely what some of them are. Now in this passage Cornford's favourite metaphor occurs once (256b9), in a purely general reference to the connectedness of concepts (εἴπερ τῶν γενῶν συγχωρησόμεθα τὰ μὲν ἀλλήλοις ἐθέλειν μείγνυσθαι, τὰ δὲ μή). And κοινωνία with the dative occurs once in an equally unspecific context (ἐπεὶπερ ἔχει κοινωνίαν ἀλλήλοις ἢ τῶν γενῶν φύσις, 256a9). The other terms used are as follows: κοινωνία with the genitive occurs once (256a2) and is used to state the definite relationship holding between two named εἶδη (κίνησις and θάτερον); the fact stated is that Motion is different from..., and *not* that Difference moves. Μεταλαμβάνειν occurs once (256b6) in a passage whose interpretation is controversial. But the significance of the verb is clear. If it were true to say 'κίνησις μεταλαμβάνει στάσεως' then one could rightly say 'κίνησις ἐστὶ στάσιμος.' Μετέχειν (or μέθεξις) occurs five times (256a1, a7, b1, d9, e3), in each case expressing the relation between two named εἶδη the first of which falls under the second. Thus all the real work in the section 255e8-257a11, all the exposition of actual connections between particular εἶδη, is done by the terms μετέχειν, μεταλαμβάνειν, and κοινωνεῖν (with genitive),— that is, by the non-symmetrical metaphor 'partaking of' which Cornford is so determined to exclude. And the role of 'partaking of' in Plato's terminology is clear: 'partakes of' followed by an abstract noun, the name of a concept, is equivalent to the ordinary language expression consisting of 'is' (copula) followed by the adjective derived from that abstract noun.

This examination of Plato's use of some terms, though obviously far from exhaustive, is, I think, sufficient to discredit Cornford's insistence on 'blending' as the one safe clue to Plato's meaning, and to establish that μετέχειν and its variants μεταλαμβάνειν and κοινωνεῖν (with genitive) are not used by Plato as mere alternatives for συμμείγνυσθαι. I will relegate to a note³

³ 255c12-d7. Plato's purpose here is to establish that τὸ ὄν and τὸ ἕτερον are two different γένη. But it is difficult to interpret the argument in a way that makes it even seem plausible. The obvious interpretation is this: Some ὄντα are called what they are καθ' αὐτό, others πρὸς ἄλλο; but all ἕτερα are called what they are πρὸς ἄλλο; therefore τὸ ὄν is a different concept from τὸ ἕτερον. The difficulty with this is that, as Plato insists, every single εἶδος partakes both of τὸ ὄν and τὸ ἕτερον. So any sub-division of εἶδη that are ὄντα is straightway a sub-division of εἶδη that are ἕτερα. The two concepts cannot be distinguished by contrasting the εἶδη that fall under one with those that fall under the other; for there is no such contrast.

Perhaps the point about Difference is this: that anything that is different is necessarily different *from...* . Then indeed there is a proper contrast with Existence, but it is not the contrast Plato seems to be describing. The contrast is that anything that is existent is (simply) existent,— and not existent to, of, or from ...; i.e. Difference is essentially πρὸς ἄλλο, Existence is essentially καθ' αὐτό. But this is not what Plato is saying.

Leaving the interpretation of the argument undecided, let us try to elucidate the meaning of μετέχειν in 255d4 by noticing the reason Plato advances for asserting that Existence 'partakes of' both τὸ καθ' αὐτό and τὸ πρὸς ἄλλο. The reason is not that both of these 'partake of' Existence. If 'partaking' just meant 'blending' this would in fact be a perfectly adequate reason; by the same token it would be obvious that Difference too 'partook of' both τὸ καθ' αὐτό and τὸ πρὸς ἄλλο, since each of them certainly must 'partake of' Difference. Plato's reason for saying that Existence 'partakes of' both is that some εἶδη that partake of Existence (some ὄντα) also partake of τὸ καθ' αὐτό, while other εἶδη that partake of Existence also partake of τὸ πρὸς ἄλλο. This at least is the plainest meaning of 255c12-13. And if this is Plato's reason we can perhaps make use of it in interpreting the statement that Existence ἀμφοῖν μετέχει τοῖν εἶδοῖν (255d4). Μετέχει here stands neither for 'blending' nor for the simple notion of 'partaking of' found in so many other passages. It stands for a more complex relation which is, however, 'reducible' in a certain way to the ordinary simple 'partaking of'. If, for mere convenience, we call this more complex relation 'sharing in', we can offer the following analysis: 'A shares in both B and C' means the same as 'Some εἶδη that

some remarks about 255d, the passage Cornford exploits; if necessary it must be frankly admitted that in this passage μετέχειν is used in an exceptional way. But one passage cannot be allowed to outweigh a dozen others.

I have tried to argue, first, that the verb μετέχειν (with its variants) has a role in Plato's philosophical language corresponding to the role of the copula in ordinary language; and, second, that by his analysis of various statements Plato brings out (and means to bring out) the difference between the copula (μετέχει...), the sign of identity (μετέχει τὰυτόῃ) and the existential ἔστιν (μετέχει τοῦ ὄντος).

partake of A partake of B, and some εἶδη that partake of A partake of C'. So μετέχειν in 255d4 is indeed used differently from how it is used in other places. But it still stands for a non-symmetrical relation; a relation, moreover, which can be fully explained in terms of the ordinary notion of μέθεξις.