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The Method of Division in the *Sophist*: Plato's Second *Deuteros Plous*

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1

Plato's theory of forms has two major components. One is that reality is intelligible: the universal concepts of reason and language correspond to something fundamental in the nature of reality. Not that there is a single ontologically correct language, but only that universal concepts have a basis in reality, and are more than arbitrary conflation of unique ever-changing individuals. The other major component is that these stable features of reality are not accidental but are aspects of an intelligible order that exists necessarily because of its intrinsic value – they owe their being and essence (τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν) to the good (*Rep.* 509b). How can we know these forms, and by what ontological process does an individual have a form as its essence? Plato's answers are always metaphorical: we know them by something like a remembering of something like a seeing, and an individual has a form as its essence by participating in it or imitating it or striving after it or some other anthropological metaphor.

In the *Parmenides* Plato shows, against anyone who takes the theory of forms to be a dogma, that the attempt to replace the metaphors with rigorous concepts is problematic. “On the other hand,” Parmenides says afterward, “if anyone ... does not admit the existence of forms of things or mark off a form under which each individual thing is classed, he will not have anything on which to fix his thoughts ... and in this way he will utterly destroy the power of discourse” (135b–c).¹ In introducing the next stage of the dialogue he says, “not only must you examine what follows if what is hypothesized exists, but also if it does not exist” (135e–136a): before abandoning a problematic model we need to know whether abandoning it may not be even more problematic.

1 Translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

I believe this is the task of the trilogy that follows.² The *Theaetetus* shows that if we admit only unique individuals as real we cannot distinguish knowledge from opinion; the *Sophist* resolves this by reintroducing natural kinds, but does not take the next step of recognizing the good. The Eleatic visitor says there that his method takes no interest in the relative goodness or badness of the kinds. “It aims at acquiring an understanding of what is akin and what is not akin in all the arts, and ... honors all of them equally” (227a–b).³ In places the limitations of this method show through. When the visitor’s penultimate attempt to identify the sophist leads instead to a type that resembles the Socratic philosopher, he remarks, “I’m afraid to say [these are] sophists ... lest we accord to them too great an honor” (231a), and he calls it “noble sophistry” but honor and nobility cannot be recognized by his value-free method. This limitation is redressed in the *Statesman*, in which honor and intrinsic value are front and center from the beginning: where the Eleatic visitor had insisted in the *Sophist* that his method honors all types equally, the *Statesman* begins with Socrates’ criticism of Theodorus for placing equal value [ἴσης ἀξίως] on the sophist, statesman, and philosopher, “who are further apart in honor [τίμη] than your art of proportions can express” (257a–b). And at the end the statesman is defined as the one who knows the best thing to do in any situation (304a–305d).⁴

In the *Phaedo* the method of hypothesis is introduced as a *deuteros plous* or secondary way to arrive by degrees at the elusive form of the

2 I have discussed this more fully in Dorter (1994).

3 Cf. Rosen (1983) 308.

4 The first half of the *Statesman* superficially resembles the *Sophist* with its elaborate bifurcations, and at 266d the visitor even repeats his injunction against recognizing differences of value. However the binary method becomes progressively more problematic until in the second half it is simply abandoned. Its final appearance is an attempt to define weaving. But where the divisions in the *Sophist* and at the beginning of the *Statesman* were rigorous and orderly, this one is so confused that it displays the unreliability of the method rather than its virtues, and the visitor himself afterward describes it as “going around in a circle and distinguishing very many things pointlessly” (283b). In step 11, for example, weaving is taken to be a species of clothes-making even though admittedly only “the greatest part of it” deals with making clothing (280a), which means the definition is too narrow. And in step 13 he says: “Of wool-working there are two divisions, and each of them is by nature a part of two arts” (282b). But if a species is part of *two* genera, on either line the definition will be too narrow.

good, and we see how the method conveys Socrates through three levels of understanding on the way to that goal: physical explanations, formal explanations, and explanations that combine the two: physical things that carry forms to whatever they come in contact with (96a–105c). The next step, explanations in accordance with the good, is only implied in the *Phaedo*⁵ and is not explicitly defended until the *Timaeus*. The Eleatic⁶ trilogy passes through corresponding stages: the empirical explanations of the *Theaetetus*, the formal but value-free explanations of the *Sophist*, and the reintroduction of value in the *Statesman*. Unlike the original *deuteros plous*, however, this one does not lead to the metaphysical good, the *form* beheld by the intellect; but to the practical good, the *mean* discerned in action.

The ascent in the *Phaedo* is driven by aporiae that arise at each level. The physicalist explanations were vulnerable to elenchus (100c), the purely formal explanations were safe from elenchus but simplistic, artless, foolish, and ignorant (100d, 105c), and were superseded by a synthesis that combined the sophistication and subtlety of the first with the safety of the second – “not safe and ignorant ... but [safe and] subtle” (105b). In the trilogy the empirical explanations of the *Theaetetus* led to aporia, and the purely formal definitions of the *Sophist* lead to an unsatisfactory result as well, a fatally flawed definition of the sophist, although this failing is no longer explicit.

The Eleatic visitor is dissatisfied with the results of the first six attempts to define the sophist since he goes on to give a very different kind of diaeresis in the seventh definition,⁷ but even that final definition is seriously problematic. It tells us that the sophist is someone who 1) makes inaccurate semblances rather than accurate likenesses (266d–e),

5 See Dorter (2001).

6 Although the *Theaetetus* is not explicitly Eleatic – it is conducted by Socrates and its subject matter is Heraclitean – Parmenides is mentioned at an important juncture as someone whose views ought to be considered as an alternative to the philosophy of becoming which Theaetetus unsuccessfully defends (180d–181a). The Eleatic philosopher is not discussed only because he is too important to be considered in the available time (183c–184a).

7 See Appendix. It is sometimes suggested that the final definition does not imply dissatisfaction with the previous ones, but instead identifies what the others have in common and unifies the dialogue by uniting the earlier definitions within itself. But that cannot be correct because the first five definitions all locate the sophist within the art of acquisition which excludes the art of production, while the final definition locates him within the art of production which excludes the art of acquisition.

2) by imitation rather than with tools (267a), 3) from opinion rather than knowledge (267b–e), 4) with self-doubt rather than confidence (268a), and 5) by contradiction in private rather than by speeches in public (268b). But why must we agree in step 3 that sophists necessarily operate from opinion rather than knowledge? When Prodicus makes his verbal distinctions must he always be without knowledge? When Protagoras correctly says that everyone perceives reality somewhat differently, why is that opinion rather than knowledge? Moreover, since the reason the sophist makes semblances rather than likenesses is that he is trying to manipulate his audience, if he is successful he is presumably acting from knowledge of how to influence people's perceptions.

Step 4 is equally problematic in its distinction between people who are self-doubting and people who are overconfident. The former "have a great suspicion and fear that they are ignorant of the things that they give themselves the appearance of knowing in front of others," while the latter believe they have knowledge when they only have opinion. In view of the way that the sophists are portrayed in the dialogues, it is surprising to see them classed here among the self-doubters rather than among the overconfident.⁸

Step 5 is problematic in two ways. First, given the way the sophists are portrayed in the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and book one of the *Republic*, we would expect them to be classed as those who prefer to make speeches rather than those who prefer elenchus, but instead they are identified as practitioners of elenchus rather than makers of speeches.⁹ Second, in violation of the method of division, two steps are combined into one.¹⁰ The visitor makes Theaetetus choose between those who give long speeches in public, and those who practice elenchus in private. There is no provision for those who practice elenchus in public (like Socrates in the *Apology*), or those who make long speeches in private (as sophists do in the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic*). The procedural error of collapsing the distinction between two pairs of differentia – long or short speeches and public or private venues – and thus overlooking two sig-

8 In fact, since the word for their self-doubt is "irony", the only difference between a sophist and Socrates is that Socrates' images are accurate while those of the sophist are inaccurate; for Socrates' self-assessment is that he too has opinion rather than knowledge.

9 Here, as later in the sixth definition, we get someone who resembles Socrates more than the sophists familiar to us from the dialogues.

10 For this point I am indebted to Jenkins (2009). She raises other difficulties about the final definition as well.

nificant species in its final step, adds an exclamation mark to the earlier missteps.

These issues are peripheral to what happens in what I called step 1 (step 4 of the diaeresis as a whole), where the sophist is said to make inaccurate rather than accurate images. Why does he make inaccurate images? According to the order of the diaeresis it cannot be because he lacks knowledge, since the distinction between knowledge and opinion is not established until two steps later and is thus subordinate to the accurate/inaccurate distinction. Moreover if lack of knowledge were the reason, the sophist would be no different from an unsuccessful philosopher: both would produce distorted images when they are ignorant. The reason sophists make distorted images is not because of ignorance but because they want to manipulate their audience. What they value is not truth but wealth and political influence. Since that is how they are portrayed throughout the dialogues, why does this feature not appear in the visitor's definition? Why is nothing said about their motivation?

We saw that one of the intrinsic features of the method of division in the *Sophist* is that it abstracts from differences of value. The visitor's method takes no interest in the relative goodness or badness of the kinds: "It aims at acquiring an understanding of what is akin and what is not akin in all the arts, and ... honors all of them equally" (227a–b). It is not surprising then that he does not use "what sophists value" as one of his criteria. But the visitor did not make that stipulation until the sixth definition. All definitions but the sixth begin with the Angler definition's division of power into art and non-art, and art into production and acquisition (219a–d). The first five definitions all locate the sophist within the genus of acquisition rather than production, either as spirited hunters (definition 1), appetitive salesmen (definition 2), or a combination of the two as aggressive money-makers (definitions 3–5). In these definitions their motivation is the starting point. But after the visitor introduces his value-free stipulation in the sixth definition, all question of motivation disappears and we are left with the sterile result of definition 7 which, significantly, begins not from the art of acquisition like the others, but from the art of production. Since acquisition is intended to fill a specific need, it reflects what we value. In the case of production, however, there is no explicit reference to the producer's motivation.

The reason there is no satisfying definition in the *Sophist* is that the visitor's initial dichotomy between acquisition and production allows us

to see only half the picture at a time. According to that dichotomy productive arts and acquisitive arts are mutually exclusive, so the sophist will be seen either as someone who is acquisitive but without producing anything, or someone who produces something but is not acquisitive. Neither alternative reveals the sophist as he is portrayed throughout the dialogues, as someone who *produces* speeches with the aim of *acquiring* pleasures or power. On one hand if we investigate the sophist in terms of his products without reference to his acquisitive motivation, his decision to make distorted rather than accurate images is incomprehensible, which is why the seventh definition is unsatisfying. But if on the other hand we portray him as an acquisitive hunter who does not produce anything, as in the first definition (219e–223a), sophistry will be no different in principle than any other predatory behavior. When we turn to the second definition and its variants, this defect appears to be averted: it too locates the art of sophistry within the acquisitive rather than productive arts (223c) but then proceeds to grant that the sophist may make products in order to attain his ends (223d, 224d).¹¹ However, this apparent synthesis of acquisition and production is achieved at the price of incoherence in the definition as a whole, which began with the premise that the art of making products and the art of acquisition are mutually exclusive (219a–d). Thus, given the opposition between productive and acquisitive arts, either we are limited to seeing the sophist in two incompatible half pictures, or the definition becomes incoherent.

The one division that did not presuppose an incompatibility between acquisition and production was the sixth definition, which is also where the value-free stipulation was introduced:

11 At 219b the term for making is ποιεῖν, while at 224d the visitor uses τεκταινόμενος, but the definition of ποιεῖν at 219b applies to both.

ART OF DISCRIMINATION

1 (226c–d)

/ \

like from like better from worse (purification)

2 (226e–227c)

/ \

of the body of the soul

3 (227d–229a)

/ \

chastisement (of vice) teaching (of ignorance)

4 (229b–d)

/ \

instruction (of ignorance) education (of stupidity)

5 (229e–231b)

/ \

by admonition BY REFUTATION

This definition fails, the visitor says, because “I’m afraid to say [these are] sophists ... lest we accord to them too great an honor” (231a), and he calls it “noble sophistry.” The art identified here, that of purifying the soul through instruction by means of refutation, is generally recognized to be the art of Socratic philosophy. The crucial step is the first, which opposes discrimination of like from like, to discrimination of better from worse. It is immediately after this that the visitor says that his own method “does not care ... whether one provides us with greater or smaller benefits than the other. It aims at acquiring an understanding of what is akin and what is not akin in all the arts, and, with this intention, it honors all of them equally” (227a–b). In other words, his method is the first kind of discrimination, that of like from like, rather than the Socratic discrimination of better from worse. And yet the visitor repeatedly shows that differences of value matter to him. Not only does he distinguish Socratic philosophy from sophistry because of its nobility, he later distinguishes what is beautiful and harmonious as better than its privations (259c–260a).

Why would the visitor insist on a value-free method at the same time that he praises Socratic philosophy as noble precisely because it distinguishes the better from the worse? The value-free method of division by bisection that he introduces in the *Sophist* is only the first stage of a method that is not given its complete form until the *Statesman*, at which point it will have much more in common with the Socratic conception

of philosophy. After all, it was Socrates who first introduced the method of division (*Phaedrus* 265d–e) and he employs it again in the *Philebus* (16d).

2

The way the method of division is employed in the *Sophist* is unique. In the *Phaedrus* (265e) and *Philebus* (16d–17a) we are told that the division should be made at the natural joints between species. There is no suggestion that we must always divide each class precisely in half. Moreover the *Sophist's* sequel, the *Statesman*, tells us near the beginning that of the two possible approaches – the longer way of dividing down the middle, and the shorter way of dividing immediately into all the natural species¹²

12 In his demonstration of the shorter way the visitor does indeed “distinguish what is sought from everything else immediately”, though that is not at first obvious. Step 7, the last before the parting of the ways, divides land animals into feathered (πτηνός) and walkers, after which step 8 distinguishes the featherless walkers into four-footed and two-footed. Why then does he proceed in step 9 to divide the two footed species into feather-growing (πτηροφυός) and featherless, when feathers had already been excluded in step 7 (even if we translate πτηνός as “winged” rather than “feathered” in step 7 it would exclude birds from what follows). The redundant step, and its comical definition of human beings as featherless bipeds, may have been appended lest the visitor seem to have cut off a small part the way young Socrates had done, and thus undermine his warning. However, as Socrates points out in the *Philebus* (17a), it is possible to go from the one to the many too slowly as well as too quickly. Once we set aside the redundant step 9 we can see that the shorter way is preferable: since the genus from which both ways began was “walking”, it is more natural to use “number of feet” as the differentia, rather than “presence of horns”. “Horns” and “interbreeding” are peripheral features. The definition of the shorter way was the model for Aristotle who commonly defines us as the “two footed animal” (*N.E.* I.7.1097b12). He also describes us as “by nature a political [i.e. herd] animal” (*Politics* I.1.1253a3). Skemp (1952) 70 points out that “Aristotle argues very thoroughly against any attempt to reach any of the *infimae species* of the animal world by a process of division by dichotomy [*De Partibus animalium*, I, 2–4; 642b5–644b20]”.

The main problem with young Socrates’ immediate division of animals into human and non-human was not its asymmetry – nor even that by identifying one species simply as “humans” it fails to specify the differentia – but rather that “beasts” is no more a natural kind than is “barbarian” (262d). That is why the visitor says that although the shorter way of immediately identifying the essential difference is finer (κάλλιστον) than the longer way, the longer way is safer. It teaches us to think in terms of natural kinds by insisting on

– the second way is better (262b). Accordingly, the two diaereses in the second half of that dialogue both employ the second way, immediately identifying all the species instead of proceeding by bisection.¹³ Since every dialogue before and after the *Sophist* recommends dividing at the natural joints, rather than into arbitrary symmetrical halves, why does the *Sophist* pursue the inferior way?

In distinguishing the two ways, the visitor had said: “It’s finest to distinguish what is sought from everything else immediately, if that correctly reflects how the things really are, ... [but] safer (ἄσφαλέστερον) to make one’s cuts by going down the middle, and one would more likely hit upon the boundaries between the forms” (262b). As in the *Phaedo*

the simplest model of genus-species relationship, that of symmetrical bisection. Once this disciplined way of thinking has become familiar from the *Sophist*, the visitor cautiously introduces the finer but riskier shorter way in the first half of the *Statesman*. And in the first diaeresis of the second half, when he divides the genus of possessions that are contributory causes of statesmanship, he dispenses with bisection altogether and immediately divides it into its seven species: tools, receptacles, supports, defenses, playthings, raw materials, and nourishment (287c–289c). He is now employing the shorter way – division without bisection – and continues to do so for the duration of the dialogue, now that the demonstrations of the longer way served their purpose of training us to think in terms of natural kinds. The search for the statesman was not “for the sake of this subject itself ... [but] for the sake of becoming better dialecticians about all subjects” (285d).

- 13 The genus of possessions is immediately divided into its seven species: tools, receptacles, supports, defenses, playthings, raw materials, and nourishment (287c–289c). And that of servants is immediately divided into fourteen species: slave, merchant, civil servant, diviner, priest, aristocrat, oligarch, monarch, tyrant, democrat, general, rhetorician, judge, and statesman (289d–305e). The ostensible reason for abandoning bifurcation here is that “we cannot [ἄδυνατοῦμεν] cut them into two” (287c). But in fact they could easily have done so both in this case and in the final division of “servants” into fourteen immediate species (see Dorter [1994] 212, 222). The visitor’s reason for avoiding bisection cannot be that these subjects in particular lend themselves more naturally to division into seven or fourteen, for even without the constraint of bifurcation the visitor mentions that certain classes have been left out and can only be included by force: Whatever we have left out, if we have forgotten anything not very important, can be fit into one of these. Thus with the class of coins, seals, and every other kind of engraved dies. These do not constitute among themselves a large genus with a common name, but some can be made to fit under ‘playthings’, and others under ‘instruments’, although the amalgamation is very forced. With regard to the possession of tame animals, except slaves, the previously partitioned art of herd-nurturing will show itself to include them all’. [289b–c]

(100d, 105b) safety is a feature of the *deuteros plous*. The safer way of bisection is employed in the *Sophist* as a stepping stone to the finer way of dividing at the natural joints. It achieves this not only by training us to think in terms of kinds rather than unique individuals, but also by training us to find the mean.¹⁴ The concept of the mean was first introduced in the *Republic*, where Socrates said that the person who can “distinguish the good from the bad life ... would know how to always choose the mean among such lives, and avoid each of the extremes” (618b–619b).¹⁵ But the mean is not introduced into the Eleatic visitor’s method until the *Statesman*, where the connection with goodness is again explicit: when the arts preserve the mean all of their works are good and fine (ἀγαθὰ καὶ καλὰ) (283d–284a).¹⁶ To divide a genus into exactly two species, as the visitor does in the *Sophist*, we must look for the point of equilibrium that results in a balanced dichotomy of species. As the visitor put it, the longer way means going down the middle (διὰ μέσων: *Statesman* 262b – cf. the *Republic’s* τὸ μέσον).

The ability to recognize the mean in dichotomous species differentiation is not the same as the ability to recognize the mean of excellence, but it can help develop that ability. Unlike mathematics where we recognize the mean by calculating the midpoint between the extremes,¹⁷ in morality the order is reversed and we know the extremes only by recognizing that they exceed or fall short of the mean. When it comes to finding the mean that divides a genus into polarized species, rather than

14 Training us to see the world in terms of a limited number of kinds rather than an unlimited number of individuals could have been accomplished by the method of collection alone. What the method of division offers, besides further practice in classification, is practice in seeking the mean.

15 The term used is τὸ μέσον (cf. Aristotle’s μεσότης) whereas the *Statesman* and *Laws* use τὸ μέτριον.

16 Cf. *Laws* 691c: ‘If one gives a greater degree of power to what is lesser, neglecting the mean ... then everything is upset... There does not exist, my friends, a mortal soul whose nature will ever be able to wield the greatest human ruling power when young and irresponsible, without becoming filled in its mind with the greatest disease, unreason, which makes it become hated by its closest friends. When this comes about it quickly destroys it and obliterates all its power. Guarding against this, then, by knowing the mean, is the task of great lawgivers’.

17 The mathematical mean appears in the *Timaeus*, for example, when we are told that plane and solid geometry are concerned in an essential way with the single and double mean respectively (32a–b, 36a). Robins ([1995] 359–91) argues that the mathematical mean is central to all the mathematical studies of *Republic* 7 (525a–531c).

knowing the extremes first as in mathematics, or knowing the mean first as in morality, we perceive the extremes of the contradictory species and differentia between them at the same time. When the visitor divided “art” into “productive” and “acquisitive” he could not have recognized the midpoint between them before recognizing each individually, nor recognize them individually before recognizing the contrast between them, since meaning is grasped by contrast. To understand what each of them is, is to understand the distinction between them and vice versa.

Although the ability to find the midpoint within a genus is not the same as the ability to recognize the mean of excellence, unlike the mathematical mean it cannot be arrived at mechanically, and training in recognizing the appropriate place to separate the genus at its center develops our ability to recognize the kind of mean that is no longer value-free.

3

I have suggested that the trilogy, like the *Phaedo*, approaches the good indirectly, by a *deuteros plous*. The reason the good cannot be presented directly is indicated in the final definition. The visitor concedes that it is difficult to know in which of the two species of images – distorted “semblances” or accurate “likenesses” – the sophist’s products belong (*Sophist* 236c–d). He goes on to locate that difficulty in the problem that to say what is false is to attribute existence to “what is not”, and although at first he raises this point with regard to semblances rather than likenesses (236e–239e), he proceeds to broaden the problem: since *any* image (εἶδωλον) differs from the true thing (ἀληθινόν) that it imitates, it must be not true (μὴ ἀληθινόν), which means it *really is not* (οὐκ ὄντως). When Theaetetus points out that it “*really is* a likeness (εἰκόν),” the visitor replies, “Without *really being*, then, it *really is* what we call a likeness (εἰκόνα)?” (239d–240b). Although the passage began as if only semblances were problematic, the problem was eventually extended to images in general, and by the end even likenesses were expressly included.

Leaving aside the razzle-dazzle about “saying what is not”, the visitor’s point follows reasonably enough from the consideration that images can never be completely adequate to what they image. As Socrates says in the *Cratylus*, “do you not perceive how far likenesses are from having the same qualities as those things of which they are likenesses?”

(432b–d). Description can never do the work of acquaintance. In the *Republic*, when Glaucon asked for a clearer account of dialectic, Socrates replied it is not possible to capture it in images:

‘You will no longer be able, my dear Glaucon, to follow me, although for my part I would not willingly omit anything. But you would no longer see an image of what we are saying, but the truth itself... And the power of dialectic alone can reveal it to someone who is experienced in the things we just went through, and it is not possible in any other way’. (533a)

The alternative is explained in the *Phaedrus*:

‘The dialectician selects a soul of the right type, and in it he plants and sows his words founded on knowledge, words which instead of remaining barren contain a seed whence new words grow up’ (276e–277a).

Words about justice can never adequately convey the nature of justice to someone ignorant of it because justice is too contextual to be captured in words (*Statesman* 294b).¹⁸ That is why we are told there that the statesman may rule without laws (294a–c),¹⁹ in accordance with the mean (301a), and all other forms of government are imitations of this that fall short of it in varying degrees (293d–e).

The introduction of the problem of images in the final division of the *Sophist* prepares us for the *Statesman’s* introduction of the kind of mean that can never be imaged, but only cultivated within.

18 Aristotle too acknowledges the difficulty of applying precise concepts to the world of action: ‘Our discussion will be adequate if it achieves as much clarity as the subject matter allows, for precision ought not to be sought for equally in all discussions, any more than in all the products of craftsmanship. Noble and just actions, which political philosophy investigates, contain much discrepancy and irregularity... And good actions too involve a similar irregularity... We must be content, then, when dealing with such subjects, and drawing inferences from such material, to indicate the truth in a general way and in outline ... for it is the mark of an educated person to seek the degree of precision in each class of things which the nature of the subject admits’. [NE I.3.1094b11–25]

Like Plato, he responds to the lack of precision in practical affairs by developing the concept of an imprecise mean that can be known only by a person of good character (II. 6–9.1106a14–1109b26; cf. III. 6–IV.9.1115a4–1128b35). Also like Plato he connects the doctrine of the mean with *techné*: see Welton and Polansky ([1996] 79–102). Their defence of the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean against certain ways that it has been misunderstood would apply as well to Plato’s formulation.

19 Mitchell Miller reminds me that later on the visitor speaks of the statesman as employing laws (309d–310a).

APPENDIX: *Sophist* 265a–268b



