

Paolo Crivelli

Plato's Account of Falsehood: a Study of the Sophist.

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Plato's Account of Falsehood by Paolo Crivelli is an impressively rigorous analysis and commentary on Plato's *Sophist*. The work falls squarely in the analytic tradition, aiming to present the reader with a Platonic account that is free from ambiguity, and characterized by argumentative clarity and precision. Crivelli's text takes its structure and order from the dialogue itself, moving, with more or less attention, through each of the main sections of the *Sophist*, offering Greek text and English translation for a large portion of the dialogue.

The book can be divided into three parts, mirroring the parts of the *Sophist* itself. The first part gives a brief analysis of the opening attempts to define the sophist through the method of division (chapter one). The second part focuses on the aporetic section of the dialogue. This section consists of an analysis of the puzzles associated with not-being and false sentences (chapter two), followed by an analysis of the problems associated with giving an account of being (chapter three). The third part focuses on the constructive portion of the dialogue, providing an analysis of negative predication and its connection to difference (chapters four and five), and then employing this analysis in a solution to the problem of false sentences and beliefs (chapter six).

The focus of Crivelli's text, besides a thorough analysis of the arguments, is, as the title suggests, on providing the reader with a coherent Platonic account of falsehood. The book accomplishes this task, though it does so, as far as I can tell, within a rather limited scope. Crivelli presents us the following succinct version of the falsehood paradox:

[1] To speak falsely is to say what is not.

[2] It is impossible to say what is not,[since this is akin to saying nothing].

[3] Therefore it is impossible to speak falsely (p2).

Crivelli addresses Plato's concerns from the perspective of a "modern philosopher of language" (p11), but avoids appealing to what he takes to be the most common method employed by modern philosophy of language for solving the puzzles of false opinion and belief.

The common modern approach to solving the paradox that Crivelli avoids entails distinguishing between an existential and a veridical use of "to be." False propositions, which have an independent existence on this account, *are* in the existential sense and *are not* in the veridical sense. Thus, a false proposition both *is* and *is not*. Thus, the premise in the falsehood paradox, given above, that "it is impossible to say what is not," concerns an impossibility that is veridical and not existential. Crivelli avoids appealing, on behalf of Plato, to an ontology that includes the existence of all possible false propositions, which allows him to avoid burdening Plato with a

limitless and unintelligible ontology, but, having done so, he is left with the task of having to find a different way of accounting for how saying what *is not* is not equivalent to saying nothing. Or, in other words, Crivelli's book provides a different way of being to be able to say how a proposition both *is* and *is not*.

The lead up to Crivelli's positive account is through an investigation into the problems associated with giving accounts of not-being (chapter 2) and being (chapter 3). The philological and exegetical analysis done in these chapters is almost overwhelmingly thorough. Crivelli gives the Greek text for each of the main arguments, followed by a translation, which he justifies with extensive commentary. The interpretation of each of the translated passages then proceeds by examining the leading scholastic positions, comparing the virtues and vices of each, and finally selecting the interpretation Crivelli finds most suitable. The multitude of positions examined has some drawbacks. Specifically, it makes it impractical to give a thorough examination of each, and as a result it seems at times that Crivelli isn't taking some of them seriously. This, however, may be a reasonable price to pay for such an extensive collection of positions.

The beginning of the ontology Crivelli offers, in order to account for how something can be and not be, is found in his distinction between definitional and ordinary readings (Chapter four). Ordinary readings deal with perceptible particulars which exist "always relatively to other things" (p144). Definitional readings deal with a kind, which participates in being "with respect to itself" (p145). This distinction is invoked in order to address the issues that arise in the discussion of the "communion of kinds," which are connected to the puzzles associated with the "late-learners," those who "forbid us to apply many names to the same perceptible particular ... and permit only sentences that fully describe the essence of a kind (p102)." Crivelli uses this distinction between definitional and ordinary readings to good effect in resolving the specific difficulties that arise in the conversation between the interlocutors. He does this by showing how the distinction is able to help us navigate the rough and choppy waters that arise when trying to distinguish between the kinds. Crivelli gives examples of how we can avoid some of the specific problems associated with being and not-being by correctly identifying when Plato is using a definitional reading, and when he is using an ordinary one.

The difficulty I found with this distinction is that it (perhaps necessarily) obfuscates the nature of both true and false sentences, the latter being the very thing Crivelli aims to help us understand. Is there a difference between the truth of a true ordinary sentence and the truth of a true definitional sentence? Is the truth of ordinary sentences contingent upon the truth of definitional sentences? What effect would this contingency have on the ontological status of these sentences? This seems to me to be an important question in the dialogue in general, and the method of division in particular, but one that I found no answers to in Crivelli's text. Nonetheless, the account does offer some very clever ways of handling the problems that the Stranger and Theaetetus uncover, and it does so while presenting us with an impressively thorough investigation of the different exegeses regarding each of the particular puzzles found in the dialogue.

Crivelli links ordinary and definitional sentences to an account of not-being that is grounded in difference (Chapter Five). For something to *not be* is really to say that it is not X, which is to say that it is different from what is X. For example, to speak of not-beauty is not to speak of what *is not* simpliciter, but rather to speak of what is different from everything that falls under the kind "beauty." Or, as Crivelli puts it, "the part of difference corresponding to a kind K is generated from difference by isolating within it the part that is differen[t] from everything falling under K" (p217). This allows Crivelli to hold that the negative kinds (i.e., not-beauty or not-justice) have a nature, and, as a result, we can meaningfully say that they exist. This is a highly significant result, as it allows us to avoid one of the primary aspects of the puzzles of false opinion pointed out above; that to speak of what is not is to speak of nothing.

The account of not-being as tied to difference is linked to Crivelli's account of sentences in Chapter Six, and these two together provide us with the over-arching solution to the general falsehood paradox. As pointed out above, Crivelli eschews the modern notion of propositions as unitary ontological beings. As he says, "there are no proposition-like unitary targets of acts of saying" (p3). Instead, every proposition is a composite consisting of at least a name and an action. Sentences are not one thing, but rather say one thing of another thing. A false sentence, therefore, does not say what is not, but rather says what is not about an object, i.e., attributes an action to a name that does not instantiate that action. This solves the paradox of falsehood, behind which the sophist was hiding in order to avoid being defined as a person who produces false sentences that imitate true ones.

Throughout the book Crivelli engages with reams of exegeses from a wide variety of sources, raising a selection of interpretations for each passage, and then offering some reasons (at times with some hesitancy) for accepting one of them over the others. As a collection of scholarship alone, the work is notable. He pays close attention to issues regarding translation, spending considerable effort justifying his particular readings of passages. All of this make for a valuable academic work.

The over-arching account of falsehood offered in *Plato's Account of Falsehood* is relatively clear and helpful, though I was left with several questions that seemed to me fundamental to the problems that Crivelli is concerned with. As pointed out above, the relation between ordinary and definitional sentences, while logically clear, raises some significant ontological questions that I did not find answered. Specifically, it seems that this distinction between sentences raises a distinction within the notions of truth and falsity; that, perhaps, there are levels of truth and falsity at work in the dialogue. This is connected to my second question; what is the connection between the method of division and the account of falsehood? Neither of the two types of sentences seem to be compatible with the types of statements made by a person engaging in the method of division. Crivelli states that "the central concept of [his] rough characterization of the method of division is that of subordination" (p16), but it is unclear to me how a statement illustrating a subordination would be either definitional or ordinary.

That Crivelli leaves some questions unanswered is, of course, not much of a criticism. He has written an impressive book. For any scholar interested in the details of each of the dialogue's arguments, or looking for help navigating the Greek text, Crivelli's work will be a welcome find. It provides a viable and well argued position from which to navigate the problems associated with false sentences and beliefs, and presents the problems that Plato wrestles with in the *Sophist* in a way suited to contemporary analytic philosophy. I wholeheartedly agree with Crivelli's self-characterization of the book as an account of Plato's *Sophist* that "combines exegetical and philological considerations with a philosophically minded attitude" (p11).

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