

UNDER THE SIGN OF THE STRANGER

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Abstract

The paper aims at discussing some hypostases of the stranger encountered in the history of philosophy. The concept of the stranger we outline is not the one defined as such as a result of cultural differences; we are more interested in cases of characters who decline their identity in order to introduce to the audience new ideas, new ways of understanding the world. By means of our analysis we intend to draw attention on how different the freedom of speech is perceived at different times, given the differences of how fond people are of perpetuating traditional ways of understanding. Our main focus will be Plato's *Sophist*, a dialogue where we encounter an Eleatic Stranger.

Keywords: *Plato, Sophist, stranger, freedom of speech.*

The ideas for my paper have come from an interview that Anne Dufourmantelle takes to Jacques Derrida¹. In this interview Derrida speaks about the way we behave or should behave when confronted with new, different, uncommon attitudes, ideas, with taboos. What attracted my attention was that the one that introduced the new way of thinking was always someone called, or considered a stranger. You may say that this is perfectly natural, as long as there are always differences to be found between the manners in which people from different cultures, in different periods of times or places relate to the world. But in our case, or rather in the cases discussed by Derrida, the stranger was not defined as such because he came from far away, from different cultures. He was always someone from the same culture with the interlocutors, but the ideas he would express would be so different that they would create the necessity to hide one's identity. This prudence secures the speaker from possible extreme reactions from the community. Nowadays, we would say that he who does not speak his mind loudly is a coward; though, we should not forget

that in older times the courage to oppose tradition could cost one's life.

In present times, the category of the foreigner is pretty weak. The ones perceived by us as strangers are a few. We learn foreign languages by means of which we can communicate with those whose languages we cannot understand, we have access to all kinds of information regarding those who live far away. We had the chance to watch at least one documentary about the primitive populations that still exist. In the case of meeting by chance a representative of such a culture we would be able to find values to be exchanged. Actually, we would probably know from the start what we want from each other. But above all these, we accept now that there are different ways of understanding the world, of living one's life, and these differences should not be judged as being good and bad, but accepted and encouraged. Today, it is no longer the valid that a person speaking a different language or believing in other Gods than ours has no right to express oneself, or that the one from a different culture is cannot be considered a human being. We could say that, as long as believing in certain realities specific to a culture loses ground, both the difference of the representative of a different culture, and the danger of supporting unconventional ideas diminishes.

It was not at all like this in older times. According to Andrei Cornea "whoever was not born in the town, in the tribe or even in the village he arrived, would be a stranger. Nevertheless, some distinctions are essential: for Greeks, Hellenic strangers coming to a citadel were named *xenoi* – they were strangers moderated by sameness. Greeks traveled much, needed accommodation, so they established

mutual hospitality relations between persons and families, so that *xenos* came to mean *friend* or guest from another town. Step by step, *xenia* became an important institution for the Hellenic world, responsible for the exchange of information, for establishing business relations, for signing treaties between citadels. However, the word (and the notion), never lost its unsettling ambiguity: the *other* never completely dissolves into the *same*, which does not mean incompatibility."² As long as the stranger could be designated by *xenos*, which meant that he spoke the same language or, at least, a cognate dialect, had the same gods or some others recognized by the host, had similar habits, the host felt responsible for him, he had to be received as a guest. *Xenos* was the only one to offer openness to an unknown world.

Those who spoke an unknown language had a different ethnicity and different gods were treated in a completely different way. Not only that communication was considered to be totally impossible to establish with them, which led to not trying to initiate anything in this respect, but they were considered to be enemies; they had no right to hospitality, they were definitely rejected. "The *other* was rendered absolute stranger, he became not only *somebody* else, but *something* else. Such an absolute stranger was almost excluded from humanity: he was a *barbaros* – said the Hellenes – somebody who stutters, does not speak intelligible and does not articulate as people do. /.../ *Xenoi* could be friends and guests, violating the law of hospitality towards them was a sin, but *barbaroi* remained forever the enemy par excellence."³ Barbarians were considered *Untermenschen* by nature. Aristotle writes: "among people there are individuals as worthless in comparison to others, as the soul in comparison to the body or the beast in comparison to man; the best thing to do with them is to make use of the strength of their body. These individuals are destined by nature to be slaves because nothing suits them better than obedience."⁴ They were not given the chance to improve their condition by means of education, by acquiring new habits. If towards *xenoi* Greeks had the duty to behave in a careful and polite way, towards barbarians they did not only have the right, but the duty to appeal to violence, being allowed to

turn them into slaves, which gave them the right of life and death over them.

Consequently, in ancient times opinions could cost one's life. We have, for example, the well-known example of Socrates who, due to the fact that he talked differently about gods than the Greek tradition had established as a rule, he was sentenced to death. This measure was aimed at preventing heretical ideas to reach the ears of young people. "Freedom of thought and of speech, especially when it came to gods, was null."⁵ In follows we will concentrate on two Platonic dialogues, *Parmenides* and *The Sophist*, where Plato dares to present the Socratic ideas critical to the traditional Eleatic philosophy.⁶ These dialogues are of interest to us because the ideas presented here, due to their dangerous potential, are presented as belonging to a stranger, namely an Eleatic Stranger.

The *Parmenides* dialogue is a logical analysis of the pre Socrates doctrine on the One. For presocratics, the One was a unique principle, unique primordial matter out of which resulted the entire variety of the existing world. The doctrine on the One was closely connected to the one on Being: if the Being exists, then it must be one, which means to be at the same time unique and indivisible.⁷ To question the One, meant to question the very way of existence of the Being. To assert the impossibility of the existence of unity as described by Parmenides, meant to affirm that one can rationally and meaningfully talk only about the existence of diversity, namely of what is given to us through our senses.

They analyze 6 possible hypostases of the One, 3 starting from the hypothesis of the existence of the One, 3 from its inexistence. Parmenides will fail to draw a conclusion regarding the One. All he can do about it is to check all its possibilities, and discover that all these possibilities lead to absurd situations, to a vicious circle. The conclusion of the first hypothesis, "if One is one", it cannot exist. The conclusion of the second hypothesis, "if One exists", it cannot be one. From the penultimate hypothesis, "if One is not", follow exactly the same attributes, or better said lack of attributes, that resulted from the first hypothesis – "if One is one". The dialog ends as it started and as it

developed, namely without their being able to say something clear about the One.

In the introduction to *Parmenides*, Sorin Vieru remarks that the muses mislead Parmenides into saying at the same time that “the One partakes to Being, that Being partakes to One, which respects the Eleatic dogmas; but they also mislead him into saying that the One is different from Being, and that its partaking to time and becoming is not simple illusion.” This last statement severely contravenes to the Eleatic spirit, but Parmenides can be excused for expressing them, because they are the result of a logical exercise, which must take into account all the variables.

The unexpressed conclusion would be that we cannot pretend to dissect and subdue what is superior by means of knowledge rules applicable to what is accessible to our senses. We should begin our inquiries with what is first accessible to us, and before aiming to the above we should make sure we can master the fundamental level. This conclusion remains unexpressed in *Parmenides*, but its lines will be followed in *Sophist*, by the Eleatic Stranger; *Sophist* questions the Parmenidian doctrine on the world.

Nothingness is the theme of *Sophist*; An Eleatic Stranger examines it in the case of beings that are at the same time alike and different, making room for nothingness which exists and proves to be accessible to thought, unlike the “Eleatic nothingness that does not exist and cannot be really thought of.” At the beginning of the dialogue, Theaitetos introduces to Socrates the one who is going to speak about the sophists, namely “a stranger from Elea, who is a disciple of Parmenides and Zeno, and a true philosopher”.⁸

What qualifies this person as a stranger is not the fact that he comes from a far away place but, as we will see, the fact that the ideas he promotes contradict the tradition he should be representative of. He does not come from anywhere, but exactly from Elea; if he came from somewhere else, his words would not have the same importance anymore. Socrates will ask if it is not the case that they have in front of them not a stranger, but a divine being. Due to the mystery that xenos carried with them, one could never know for sure if their clothes do not disguise a divine messenger or even a god. “They are almost

as hard to be discerned as the gods. For the true philosophers, and such as are not merely made up for the occasion, appear in various forms unrecognized by the ignorance of men, and they «hover about cities», as Homer declares, looking from above upon human life; and some think nothing of them, and others can never think enough; and sometimes they appear as statesmen, and sometimes as sophists; and then, again, to many they seem to be no better than madmen.”⁹ Because they speak differently what they say can be overlooked as worthless, or can enhance aspects unnoticed by locals. It also happens though, that these strangers speak so differently that they seem to be madmen.

After being introduced to each other, the persons of the dialogue begin their search for what means to be a sophist. In their inquiry they will come to a troublesome conclusion, namely that both (mere) appearance and falsehood exist; from there follows that not-being exists. The Eleatic Stranger recalls at this point: “He who says that falsehood exists has the audacity to assert the being of not-being; for this is implied in the possibility of falsehood. But, my boy, in the days when I was a boy, the great Parmenides protested against this doctrine, and to the end of his life he continued to inculcate the same lesson—always repeating both in verse and out of verse:

Keep your mind from this way of enquiry, for never will you show that not-being is Such is his testimony, which is confirmed by the very expression when sifted a little. Would you object to begin with the consideration of the words themselves?”¹⁰

Keeping this in mind, the Stranger discovers that in everyday language people would use phrases like “not being at all”, “not something”, “what is not”. They will try to say something meaningful about what is not, without adding to it being, unity or plurality, and they will find themselves in difficulty. They realize they contradict themselves saying “something is not”, and, at the same time, saying that something of the sort is unutterable, unspeakable, and indescribable, as Parmenides considers them to be. They realize that appearing in front of a sophist with such contradictions they would be immediately smashed, but they decide not to

give up, they should not step back. They want to catch the sophist, so they decide to start arguing in favor of not-being! We can understand why they are cautious. They decide that they should start this argument not because they believe in the existence of not-being, but because they want to defeat the sophist. The Stranger, first of all, is cautious; He asks Theodoros: “/.../ promise not to regard me as a parricide. /.../ Because, in self-defense, I must test the philosophy of my father Parmenides, and try to prove by main force, that in a certain sense not-being is, and that being, on the other hand, is not.”¹¹

The stranger knows that arguing as he is going to, the others will be entitled to accuse him of parricide. This stranger is not just any stranger, and it is not for nothing that he declines his identity. He knows what a dangerous road he has in front of him. He knows from the start what his spiritual fathers would have to say about this, and that is why it is so difficult for him to start. “I tremble at the thought of what I have said, and expect that you will deem me mad, when you hear of my sudden changes and shiftings; Let me therefore observe, that I am examining the question entirely out of regard for you.”¹² He tries to distract attention from himself, mentioning that the other is the central point of his argument. He mentions that it was not his idea, and declares himself unconfident on the outcome.

Precautions being taken, he emphasizes that in current speech what they are about to argue for raises no problem, this is actually evident even for a blind man. In *Hippias Maior*, we read that things that are accessible to everyone, as an appropriate use of wood spoons, or simply saying that something is one way and not in another one, are not very appreciated by those who pretend to own subtlety of spirit. The latter would come up a pretensions speech, ignoring what is most evident. Now the stranger laughs at these people, and lets himself be guided by common sense. He understood that the predecessors were only telling myths to children. But he can now see the fabulous in these stories, so he aims to dispel myths. The elders, says the Stranger, “went on their several ways disdaining to notice people like ourselves; they did not care whether they took us with them, or left us behind them.”¹³ They do not offend their elders now, all

they are doing is looking for the truth, they only request the liberty to be objective. They do not want to accept, as if having a child's mind, what their elders say, but want to be allowed to look at things as with the eyes of a child, with the simplicity and naturalness a child experiences the world, because for him it is absolutely natural that things change, that some are alike, while other are completely different.

One conclusion we can draw - instead of complaining on the presumably bad consequences globalization has, we should consider that it can be the sign of understanding that no matter what religious belief or cultural aspects may have, all people should be recognized the freedom of speech. Everyone has the possibility and the right to choose what he finds to suite him better, no matter what tradition prescribes for him to prefer or think.

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Endnotes

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6. See Ștefan Bezdechi, *Introducere la un dialog platonice*, in Platon, *Sofistul*, translated by Ștefan Bezdechi

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