

1-1-1997

## Review of *Plato's Sophist* by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem

Owen Goldin

Marquette University, [owen.goldin@marquette.edu](mailto:owen.goldin@marquette.edu)

**Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem, *Plato's Sophist or The Professor of Wisdom: Translation, Introduction, and Glossary*. Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 1996. Pp. 93. \$6.95. ISBN 0-941051-51-X (pb).**

---

**Reviewed by Owen Goldin, Marquette University, 6145goldino@vms.csd.mu.edu.**

For many years, the standard English translation of Plato's *Sophist* was that of F. M. Cornford, printed, with running commentary, in *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*.<sup>1</sup> Though Cornford's commentary greatly advanced the understanding of the dialogue, the translation was deeply flawed in a number of respects, most notably in the shift in the translation of O)/N from "being" to "real." This made it difficult for the reader to follow the line of the argument, and assumed that EI)=NAI is adequately understood as a monadic predicate, a position which was conclusively refuted by Kahn and Owen.<sup>2</sup>

Recent years have seen three worthy successors to Cornford, in translations of the *Sophist* by Benardete,<sup>3</sup> Cobb<sup>4</sup> and White.<sup>5</sup> Cobb and, to an even greater degree, Benardete, strive for a highly literal translation, with consist rendering of Greek terms, and attention to the details of expression. Proponents of readings of the dialogues as dramas have argued that such translations are necessary if the translation is not to erase the suggestive details that Plato inserted in his writing as indications for the careful reader, and if readers are not to be misled by a translator's facile interpretation of Plato's difficult views.<sup>6</sup> The translations of both Benardete and Cobb are admirably successes in this regard. But that of Benardete is available only conjoined with a long and difficult commentary, which put forward (in an esoteric manner) an unorthodox esoteric reading of the text, so it is not an attractive text for undergraduate classes. Cobb's translation is available only in a hardbound edition, which limits its purchasers to primarily libraries.

White, an analytic philosopher attracted to the *Sophist* for its probing discussions of meaning and reference, produced a translation that is exceptionally clear and faithful in Plato's technical discussion of these issues, and has the bonus of a lucid introduction concentrating on this discussion. This, its easy availability, and its affordable price, have quickly made it the current standard. Unfortunately, White's introduction pays little attention to what Plato indicates is the primary focus of the dialogue, the difference between the philosophy and sophistry. Further, the passages that are not directly concerned with meaning and reference are given a fluid, free rendering, that, although superior to that of Cornford, hides details of drama and language from the reader who cares to explore them.

We now have an outstanding new translation by Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem, which has virtues of its own, and in most respects easily rivals the other translations.

The translators, squarely in the camp of those paying close attention to the dialogue as drama, have striven for as accurate, literal and translation as possible. Care is taken to render one Greek word (or root) by one in English.<sup>7</sup> (Of course this has not always been possible in an accurate and intelligible translation, but in the present translation deviations from the principle are remedied by an excellent glossary which gives both Greek and the various English alternatives, and explains the etymological and semantic relations that hold among clusters of important words.) Particles are translated or reflected stylistically. Care is taken in giving exact renderings of even the slightest of Theaetetus' replies. Thus the reader, instead of the translator, can be the judge of the significance of the details of drama and expression.<sup>8</sup>

Literal translations, especially of literary works like the dialogues of Plato, often strike the reader as unduly difficult and stiff, rife with odd locutions. This is certainly a problem faced by the translations of Benardete and Cobb. In contrast, the translation of Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem reads naturally and gracefully, preserving the freshness and clarity of the Greek. On almost every page, the reader is struck by particularly felicitous renderings.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the freer translations of Cornford and White, the language sometimes seems odd, but this is only when there are good reasons for believing that something can be learned from preserving the way in which the interlocutors actually express themselves.

The translators tell us the translators tried to have "the translation of the most frequent and weighty words should be as unrestrained and nontechnical as possible, preserving the still fresh root meaning and suggestive connotations of a Greek vocabulary just on the point of becoming fixed and philosophical in the technical sense" (p. 14). Thus MEQO/DOS is rendered "way," I)DE/A as "look," A)RXH/ as "beginning," OU)SI/A as "beinghood," SHMAI/NEIN as "point to" and so forth. Though perhaps inspired by Heidegger's insistence that the vocabulary of Greek thought must be uncovered from the later theoretical accretions, the present translation nowhere in this regard falls prey to Heideggerian excess.

The edition has an admirable introduction, primarily written for the able undergraduate and general reader. The focus of the introduction is the teaching of the dialogue on the distinction between the human activities of sophistry and philosophy, and how the way of inquiry taken by the Stranger bears on this issue. (There is little on issues of linguistic and logical analysis, which are at the center of White's introduction.)

A word should be said on how Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem deal with one of the most difficult issues they face. The phrases TO\ O)/N can refer to either a particular thing that is, or to that feature that all things that are have in common. The translator must avoid Cornford's mistake of switching the translation of the phrase midway through the argument. In accordance with most of the current interpretations of Parmenides' poem (to which the Stranger refers), recent translations of the *Sophist* usually have opted for the translation "that which is" or the like. On the other hand, this poses problems when translating the passage discussing the five great Forms, when the phrase primarily refers to something in which a thing participates. Thus, Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem, alone among recent translators into English, opt for "Being." Consistency then demands that TO\ MH\ O)/N be rendered as Non-Being. But the questions that the Stranger raises concerning TO\ MH\ O)/N are not in regard to a Form of Nonbeing, in which things participate;

they concern the possibility of a *thing* which is not anything at all. This is one case in which there is no wholly satisfactory option.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars who consult this translation will be disappointed by the decision to not follow scholarly practice in indicating the primary edition employed, and where variant readings are followed. I detected only two misprints: p. 15 "kinis" for "kin is" and p. 71 "haviking" for "having." The book is attractively produced, and very reasonably priced.

This translation of the *Sophist* excels in lucidity, accuracy and style. Except in cases in which an instructor sees fit to assign White's fine introductory essay on the dialogue's logical and linguistic analyses, this is the best English *Sophist* for both student and scholar, and promises to be the standard for many years to come.

## NOTES

1. F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The Theaetetus and the Sophist*, New York, 1934, repr. 1957.
2. C. Kahn, "The Greek Verb To Be' and the Concept of Being," *Foundations of Language* 2 (1966), pp. 245-65 and *The Verb "Be" in Ancient Greek*, Dordrecht, Neth., 1973; G. E. L. Owen, "Plato on Not-Being," in *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City, NY, 1970, repr. Notre Dame, IN, 1978), pp. 223-67, repr. in G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, Science, and Dialectic*, ed. M. C. Nussbaum (Ithaca, NY, 1986), pp. 104-37.
3. S. Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman*, Chicago, 1984.
4. W.S. Cobb, *Plato's Sophist*, Savage, Md., 1990.
5. N. P. White, *Plato's Sophist, Translated with Introduction and Notes*, Indianapolis, 1993.
6. The most famous defense of this approach to translating Plato is the preface to A. Bloom, *The Republic of Plato, Translated with Notes and an Interpretive Essay*, New York, 1968, pp. vii-xx.
7. A small lapse in consistency is the translation of GUMNASTIKH/ as "gymnastics" at 227a and "physical training" at 229a.
8. It seems to me that at one point the translation falters here. Twice (233c and 268c), when the translators wish to point to the etymological connection of SOFO/S and SOFISTH/S, the latter is rendered as "Professor of Wisdom." The translators' introduction indicates that some stress is to be laid on the "professor" part of this formula: "... [T]he philosopher and sophist engage in like activities, though they diverge along others, as must an aspiring lover of wisdom diverge from a confident professor of wisdom. The sophist will appear as a universal expert, and the philosopher as a perpetual amateur of sorts." (p. 4). This profound distinction is Socratic to the core, but it is

not clear to that the Stranger anywhere proffers it. S. Rosen, *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven, 1983) has argued that the Stranger, unlike the Socratic questioner, understands the philosopher as one who has a TE/XNH in the sense of a technique, applicable to all kinds, blind to the distinction between high and low in human affairs. On this view, the Stranger, not Socrates, is one who is able to produce and profess a determinate body of knowledge, while the teaching of Plato is that philosophy must embody both this approach and that of Socrates. Rosen's view is controversial; my point is that concerning this issue of importance the translation is not neutral.

**9.** I must be content to give only one example Consider 236d1-3: A)LL' O)/NTWS QAUMASTO\S A(NH\R KAI\ KATIDEI=N PAGXA/LEPOS, E)PEI\ KAI\ NU=N MA/LA EU)= KAI\ KOMYW=S EI)S A)/PORON EI)=DOS DIEREUNH/SASQAI KATAPE/FEUGEN. Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem render this as "But the man is wondrous in his very being and utterly difficult to keep in our sights, since even now he's fled, in very good and clever fashion, down into a form that leaves no passage for our tracking." Compare Benardete: "But in his being, the man's amazing and very difficult to be caught sight of, since even now he has very skillfully and elegantly fled into a species that affords no way for a definite tracking" and White: "He's really an amazing man -- very hard to make out. He's still escaped neatly into an impossibly confusing type to search through." Benardete's translation is literal, but the rendering of EI)=DOS as "species" is questionable, on account of the technical use to which Aristotle puts it, and the sentence is wooden to the point of being painful to read. White's breezy translation has a pleasant conversational tone, but loses the metaphor of the downward pursuit that has been prominent throughout the Stranger's divisions. Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem preserve the best of both approaches.

**10.** A related point: The rendering of TO\ MHDAMW=S O)/N at 237b ("And tell me: I suppose we do dare to pronounce Utter-non-being?") is unfortunate; the (nowadays) more usual rendering of "that which in no way is" (or, alternatively, Non-being in all respects) is in accordance with scholarly consensus that the pre-Aristotelian use of EI)=NAI is least implicitly dyadic, and would foreshadow the results of the Stranger's identification of "to not be" as always "to not be something-or-other," i.e., "to be other than something-or-other."