

# The Image of the Noble Sophist

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I begin with an account of the initial distinction between likenesses and appearances, a distinction which may resemble the difference between sophists and philosophers. That distinction first arises immediately after the puzzling appearance of the noble sophist, who seems to occupy an odd space in between sophist and philosopher. In the second section, I look more closely at the noble sophist, and on what that figure might tell us about images and the use of images. I also attempt to use the insights provided by the noble sophist in an investigation of the kind of images that Plato the author produces. This raises the question of the general notion of image as it appears in the *Sophist*, and especially of the dual nature of all images, which in turn invites reflection on certain features of the examination of being and non-being late in the dialogue. Finally, I return to the deception inherent in images, and I argue that this dialogue does not present the possibility of completely honest images. Nevertheless, I hope to show that some uses of deceptions and images are better than others.

If you're going to be safe," the Eleatic Visitor tells Theaetetus in the *Sophist*, "you have to be especially careful about similarities" (ὁμοιότητος) (231a6–8).<sup>1</sup> Dangerous similarities, likenesses, and apparitions haunt the text of the *Sophist*, and these images repeatedly confound the characters as they attempt to distinguish the philosopher from her all too similar counterpart, the sophist. Indeed, the caution from the Visitor comes as they encounter a figure too noble to be called a sophist. This "noble sophist," who resembles the best and worst of both sophists and philosophers, provides an excellent opportunity to test the boundaries between these people. The resemblance all three share, likewise, highlights the dangers of relying on images.

In many ways, the problem of images comes to represent the entire puzzling project of the *Sophist*: what does it take to depict a conversation that seeks to go beyond appearance and reveal genuine and original philosophical thought? It is no accident, then, that Plato's clearest attempt to address the nature of various

images occurs in the *Sophist*. Our noble sophist is clearly some kind of image, but what kind is much less clear.

The characters draw the important distinction between seemingly better and worse images, between likenesses (εἰκόνες) and appearances (φαντάσματα) (235c9–236c7). Indeed, the possibility for doing better with certain images seems always present. Both types of images, though, share in the nature of images. That nature gives rise to two other aspects of images as they appear in the *Sophist*. First, because all images are like their originals even while they are ontologically distinct from those originals, all images can deceive. Second, although all images deceive, some image makers seem capable of drawing attention to the deceptive nature of their images, and thereby capable of encouraging a change, perhaps even an improvement, in the viewer. Since εἰκόνες look misshapen when viewed from a viewpoint that is not beautiful, and since φαντάσματα look too good to be true, one response—perhaps the philosophical response—should be to seek a more beautiful vantage for viewing all images.

In this paper, I begin with an account of the initial distinction between likenesses and appearances, a distinction which may resemble the difference between sophists and philosophers. That distinction first arises immediately after the puzzling appearance of the noble sophist, who seems to occupy an odd space in between sophist and philosopher. In the second section, I look more closely at the noble sophist, and on what that species might tell us about images and the use of images. The third section attempts to use the insights provided by the noble sophist in an investigation of the kind of images that Plato the author produces. Next, I examine the general notion of image as it appears in the *Sophist*, focusing especially on the dual nature of all images, which in turn invites reflection on certain features of the examination of being and non-being late in the dialogue. Finally, I return to the deception inherent in images, and I argue that this dialogue does not present the possibility of completely honest images. Nevertheless, I hope to show that some uses of deceptions and images are better than others.

## 1. APPEARANCES AND LIKENESSES

Because Socrates was curious about the fact that philosophers appear (φαντάζονται) sometimes to be sophists and sometimes statesmen (*Sophist*, 216c8–d1), Theaetetus and the unnamed Visitor from Elea begin an attempt to state the nature of the sophist. In that attempt to define the sophist, Theaetetus and the Visitor offer six definitions—after the sixth has been offered, though, the Visitor advises that they look for one definition of the sophist that might explain his many appearances. They then seek “what it is in his expertise that all of those many pieces of learning focus on” (*Sophist*, 232a4–5). What seems common in all aspects of the sophist is his ability to “engage in disputes” (ἀντιλογικὸν . . .

εἶναι), or carry on “controversies about absolutely everything” (περὶ πάντων . . . ἀμφισβήτησιν) (232b6, 232e3–4). Since neither the sophist nor anyone else can be wise about absolutely everything (233a), his activity must be the imitation (μίμησις) of everything (234a–235a). Thus, they must divide the sophist’s craft, “image-making” (εἰδωλοποιική), in order to determine the nature of the sophist himself (235b8–c2).

The Visitor defines the first sort of image-making in terms of propriety. Likeness-making, εἰκαστική, he says, appears

whenever someone produces an imitation by keeping to the proportions of length, breadth, and depth of his model, and also by keeping to the appropriate colors of its parts.

ἔστι δ’ αὕτη μάλιστα ὁπότεν κατὰ τὰς τοῦ παραδείγματος συμμετρίας τις ἐν μήκει καὶ πλάτει καὶ βάθει, καὶ πρὸς τούτοις ἔτι χρώματα ἀποδιδούς τὰ προσήκοντα ἐκάστοις, τὴν τοῦ μιμήματος γένεσιν ἀπεργάζηται. (235d7–e1)

This craft, in other words, seems to involve the production of accurate, faithful reproductions. Some artists, on the other hand, produce images that distort the true proportions of their originals: such an artist is not engaged in εἰκαστική, but rather in “appearance-making,” φανταστική (235d–236c). Such craftsmen, the Visitor explains,

say goodbye to truth, and produce in their images the proportions that seem to be beautiful instead of the real ones.

Ἄρ’ οὖν οὐ χαίρειν τὸ ἀληθὲς ἐάσαντες οἱ δημιουργοὶ νῦν οὐ τὰς οὐσας συμμετρίας ἀλλὰ τὰς δοξούσας εἶναι καλὰς. (236a4–5)

One standard (if anachronistic) example is Michelangelo’s *David*:<sup>2</sup> his head is disproportionately big because we’re supposed to see him from far below; if his head was not so big “the upper parts would appear smaller than they should, and the lower parts would appear larger, because we see the upper parts from farther away and the lower parts from closer” (235e7–236a2). Likenesses appear to recreate the proportions of their originals, then, while appearances distort.

The distortion of a φάντασμα bends truth for the sake of the viewer: indeed, it “appears to be like a beautiful thing, but only because it’s seen from a viewpoint that’s not beautiful” (οὐκ ἐκ καλοῦ θέαν) (236b4–5). In other words, the artist takes the viewer’s disadvantage into consideration, and uses it to create the false appearance of beauty. We might wonder here whether such distortion is as objectionable as the Visitor implies. After all, who wants a David that isn’t beautiful? In what sense would viewing the sculpture up close, so that it no longer seemed to resemble something beautiful, be better or be best described as seeing

it “adequately” (ικανῶς) (236b5–6)? Sure, we’ve said goodbye to truth, which is no small thing, but as a result a person unable to see the beautiful original now has caught at least a secondhand glimpse of that beauty. The Visitor does not initially locate the sophist among these artists, but when the conversation returns to images at the conclusion, the placement becomes clear (see 266d–e). But if the sophist’s fault appears in his resemblance to this sort of artist, why revile him so resoundingly?

## 2. INTERLUDE ON NOBLE SOPHISTRY

The key, I believe, lies in the difficulty that first led to the distinction between εἰκόνες and φαντάσματα, namely the problematic account of noble sophistry. That craft looks so similar (προσείκει γε, 231a4) to true sophistry that the Visitor needs to caution Theaetetus about the dangers of such a resemblance: there’s also a similarity “between a wolf and a dog, the wildest thing there is and the gentlest. If you’re going to be safe, you have to be especially careful about similarities” (ὁμοιότητας) (231a6–8). One thing that sets this figure apart from the sophist’s five other appearances is that the noble sophist actually causes a change in another. The other sophists sell things (223c–224e), hunt the wealthy (221c–223b), and excel in debate (224e–226a); the noble sophist alone asks that we reject our false beliefs, especially our false beliefs about ourselves. The Visitor gives this description of the activity of the noble sophist:

They cross-examine someone when he thinks he’s saying something though he’s saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer toward others. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them. Doctors who work on the body think it can’t benefit from any food that’s offered to it until what’s interfering with it from inside is removed. The people who cleanse the soul, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won’t get any advantage from any learning that’s offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does know, and nothing more. (230b4–d4)

This is in stark contrast to the other sophists, and indeed the final account of the sophist, the one intended to reveal the common feature of the previous appearances, seems upon inspection to explain only the first five, and not that noble sixth apparition.

## *The Image of the Noble Sophist*

A key feature of the sophist, as finally defined, is that he is “foolish and thinks he knows the things he only has beliefs about” (267e11–268a1); and his craft is the imitation of wisdom (268b–c). The craft of the noble sophist, on the other hand, is defined as “refutation of the empty belief in one’s own wisdom” (231b6). As others have pointed out,<sup>3</sup> this mismatch seems to indicate, among other things, that the conclusion of the book does finally succeed in differentiating the sophist from his noble counterpart: the former aims to “force the person talking with him to contradict himself” (268b3–5) for the sake of victory and money, whereas the latter, much like Socrates, aims to cleanse the soul for the sake of learning (230b–e).

Once the noble sophist stands apart from the sophist’s other appearances in the text, we might benefit from noticing other differences. I am particularly struck by the fact that the noble sophist only accomplishes his (or her, or their) goal if the interlocutor leaves cleansed and ready for learning. In other words, only the craft of the noble sophist involves a change on the part of the interlocutor.

Although the characters finally distinguish the noble sophist from the true sophist, the two look so similar that doing so takes them some thirty-five Stephanus pages and a reconsideration of Parmenides’s metaphysics. And so, to return to the division of images, is the noble sophist a φάντασμα, a mere appearance that looks like the true sophist only from a poor vantage, or is the likeness genuine?

Likenesses, unlike appearances, appear neither beautiful nor genuine until they are viewed from a beautiful viewpoint. Appearances, on the other hand, encourage complacency, since they distort their originals so that the viewer can enjoy them without moving or changing at all. In either case, it looks like the wise thing to do is to move, to take a look at each image from a different point of view. That way a person could find out for certain which images are truly beautiful; even better, they might find a way to see the originals behind the images.

Before distinguishing likenesses from appearances, the Visitor talks in general about the sophist’s words:

Wouldn’t he [trick young people] by putting words into their ears, and by showing them spoken images of everything [εἶδωλα λεγόμενα περὶ πάντων], so as to make them believe that the words are true and that the person who’s speaking to them is the wisest person there is? (234c5–7)

Later, the hearers grow older and most of them “inevitably change their earlier beliefs” once they come “into closer touch with real things and are forced by their experiences [διὰ παθημάτων ἀναγκαζομένους] to apprehend things clearly as they are” (234d1–6). The philosophical viewer must, like these people, learn to see past images; we must move, we must take another look.

That can seem daunting, and it may seem odd to seek forceful experiences. Fortunately, the Visitor offers another way: “all of us here will keep trying to take

you as close to [real things] as possible, but without your needing those experiences to force you” (234e5–6). The Visitor helps Theaetetus gain a better vantage point through his discussion, his conversation. Perhaps here we see the promise of a philosophical use of images: plenty of potentially deceitful appearances show up in the Visitor’s examples and arguments,<sup>4</sup> but it is the use of those, the questions and comments about the images that helps Theaetetus move. Just like an appearance that looks beautiful to me in my ugly place, the true sophist relies on his charming insincerity in order to appear wise in my eyes (267a–268d). A philosopher’s images, on the other hand, like the words of the noble sophist, seem intrinsically bound to alter their viewers.

This interlude, then, leaves us with at least one question: what sort of image, what sort of resemblance, do we see in the noble sophist? On the one hand, the image of the noble sophist, since it causes so much trouble in the text, seems best viewed as a likeness (εἰκών) rather than an appearance (φάντασμα). After all, when the noble sophists show up, the Visitor is disturbed and “afraid to call them sophists” (231a1). That doesn’t sound like an image that’s been distorted in order to appear beautiful. Indeed, much like the noble sophists themselves, this image seems to force Plato’s characters to rethink and even reject some of their earlier beliefs. Perhaps we should conclude that the noble sophist is best seen as a likeness, appropriately reproducing the proportions of its original and thereby encouraging its viewers to find a better vantage.

On the other hand, when the Visitor and Theaetetus review their initial account of the sophist (231c9–e6), they speak of the sophist appearing, using forms of φαίνεσθαι (231d2, 231d9), which suggests at least a superficial association with the notion of a φάντασμα. Furthermore, if we view the noble sophist as a likeness, as an accurate image of its original, then we might struggle to see why it would eventually be rejected as a true appearance of the sophist. Indeed, insofar as the resemblance falls away as the characters’ understanding grows, the noble sophist begins to look most like an image that only resembles its original when viewed from a poor vantage. In other words, the noble sophist looks like a phantasm, a mere appearance that, upon closer inspection, is not really like the true sophist at all.

Unless, in the end, our noble sophist is both. I believe that we should see him as an appearance of the sophist, but also as a likeness of the philosopher. In the opening pages, Socrates says that philosophers sometimes “take on the appearance [φαντάζονται] of statesmen, and sometimes of sophists” (216c8–d1). The noble sophist, unlike all other apparent sophists, offers beneficial cleansing to others, and so is no more like the true sophist than a dog is like a wolf (231a6); the project of separating true from false beliefs, of making accurate distinctions, on the other hand, is the philosopher’s work (253c–e). Our noble sophist, then, is

a true likeness of the philosopher, and so becomes, again, a distorted appearance of the sophist.

The Visitor's division of images parallels these figures: likenesses, like the noble sophist, trouble us unless we work to see their beauty (or perhaps, ultimately, to seek their originals);<sup>5</sup> appearances, like the sophist that our noble friend apparently resembles, bend toward us and our complacency.

### 3. LIKENESS RECONSIDERED

The contrast between the true sophist and the noble sophist suggests that part of the fault of the sophist lies not in his being an imitator, but in his failure to move the viewer. One reason we might object to a phantasm, which distorts the proportions of its original, is that by itself it cannot help to change or improve its viewer's position.

It might be worth pausing to ask just how many images are included in this problematic category? The Visitor does of course say that φανταστική covers "a great deal of painting and the rest of imitation," but that's not quite the same as saying that it covers all of it. Could there be examples of genuine likenesses, rather than appearances, outside of sculpture? Phenomena like acting and lying both seem covered under μίμησις, which Theaetetus and the Visitor view as a type of φανταστική (267a). I am tempted to wonder whether onomatopoeic words might count; or the "vegetarian ham" at the restaurant down the street? These cases, or similar ones, might in turn parallel the Visitor's proportionate sculpture enough to qualify as likenesses, but the list is clearly going to be a short one. And if most images end up in the appearance column, then the contrast between the philosophical and the sophistic use of images would become even more important.

Finally—and I hesitate to bring this up—what about a Platonic dialogue? Is the text of the *Sophist* an image that does not distort its original in order to appear beautiful to just anyone? Fiona Leigh, among others, has recently suggested such a view of the dialogues, writing that "since Plato has deliberately pointed out that there are such faithful representations [sc. εἰκόνες], it seems reasonable to entertain the idea that this is what he is taking himself to produce in his depiction of dialectic."<sup>6</sup> The key to Leigh's perceptive reading is the claim that Plato's text calls attention to the reader's perspective by confronting that reader with frustration and inconclusiveness.<sup>7</sup>

Plato has, in producing an artwork that draws attention to its imitative status and demands interpretation in these ways, produced an artwork that facilitates the process of coming to knowledge, and the aesthetic experience that comes with it, rather than thwarts it.<sup>8</sup>

The text itself, like the image of the noble sophist, seems to confound us; and in doing so, it seems to compel us past itself and toward its original, toward an actual philosophical dialogue.

For reasons both personal and scholarly I am strongly inclined to agree with this reading of Plato and his dialogues. Those same reasons, alas, make me unable to resist raising some difficulties with this view. First, in (rightly) calling the *Sophist* an “imitative” work, Leigh seems to threaten her own attempt to classify it as *eikastic*: Plato’s characters placed imitation, recall, under the genus of φανταστική (267a). It is true that in the earlier sections the characters treat imitation and image-making as interchangeable, while in the conclusion μίμησις has the narrower sense of “mimicry,”<sup>9</sup> but the sort of poetic or theatrical imitation discussed in the end could include Plato’s dialogues alongside the works of Homer. As Notomi says, this “kind of mimicking is typically seen in poetic narrative with imitation . . . which makes a speech as if the poet were someone else.”<sup>10</sup>

Seth Benardete, for one, argues that Plato has in fact produced φαντάσματα in writing the *Sophist*: in recognizing that his readers are not yet wise, Plato has distorted his images in order to encourage us to correct for our own perspective.<sup>11</sup> As far as I can tell (though I’ll happily admit my own ignorance here), Benardete has not actually attempted to say exactly where this reading would place Plato. Nevertheless, we might look to the concluding account of the sophist for guidance. In the final division of image-making, the Visitor places the sophist among those ignorant (ἀγνοοῦντες, 267c3) of the originals that they imitate, and along the way leaves unexamined “imitation accompanied by knowledge” (τὴν δὲ μετ’ ἐπιστήμης . . . μίμησιν), which he calls ἱστορική (267e2–3). Perhaps this is where Plato belongs?

In order to locate Plato here, as a practitioner of what Rosen translates as “investigative mimesis,” two objections must be addressed: first, why not place Plato among the makers of likenesses? And second, if ἱστορική, investigative mimesis, requires knowledge, can a philosopher—who by definition seeks and therefore lacks wisdom—practice this art? The simple answer to the first concern recalls what I mentioned above: in the final account, mimesis is one subset of φανταστική (267a), and since Plato’s text is clearly imitative, it belongs under φανταστική. More substantively, since each character and each line of dialogue represents Plato’s thinking in a way that is approachable, accessible, and often attractive to a variety of different readers with various perspectives, the text sounds very much like a phantasm.<sup>12</sup> Further, since the characters in the text are searching for answers rather than defending conclusions, their words should not be taken to be straightforward presentations of the true proportions of reality.<sup>13</sup>

Yet even if we accept that Plato’s text belongs among phantasms and not *eikones*, the other challenge to this placement of Plato remains: can any philosopher, even the “divine Plato,” make imitations μετ’ ἐπιστήμης? When the



Visitor makes the division of imitation, he sets aside investigative mimesis and focuses on imitation grounded in belief instead (267b)—could we place Plato’s text there? The Visitor divides the first branch of doxastic imitators as follows: “One sort of *δοξομιμητής* is foolish and thinks he knows the things he only has beliefs about” (267e10–268a1). I think it’s clear, given the ubiquitous disavowals of this sort of ignorance, that we can’t place Plato here. The other *δοξομιμητής* “has been around a lot of discussions, and so by temperament he’s suspicious and fearful that he doesn’t know the things that he pretends in front of others to know” (268a1–4). Again to me this does not sound like Plato. If for the sake of argument we accept the Visitors taxonomy, then we have little choice but to include Plato among the investigative imitators.

If Plato does indeed imitate with knowledge, what does Plato know when he makes these imitations? One option presented here is knowledge of the forms (e.g., “the character of justice and all of virtue taken together” [267c2–3]),<sup>14</sup> but that seems like a stretch given the various disclaimers about that sort of knowledge in the text.<sup>15</sup> But the Visitor also mentions character:

Vis: Some imitators know what they’re imitating and some don’t. And what division is more important than the one between ignorance and knowledge?

Tht: None.

Vis: Wasn’t the imitation that we just mentioned the kind that’s associated with knowledge? For someone who knows you and your figure might imitate you [τὸ γὰρ σὸν σχῆμα καὶ σὲ γινώσκων ἄν τις μιμήσαιο].

Tht: Of course (267b7–c1).

Plato, of course, has at least a fair claim to know these characters and their figures. Or rather, Plato seems to know what it looks like for philosophers to carry on a conversation. This doesn’t mean that the conversation is between two wise people who know the answer;<sup>16</sup> rather it’s a conversation between people open to looking for truth. Indeed, even as Theaetetus seems to tire and lose hope, the Visitor encourages him to keep searching: “Courage, Theaetetus—a person must have courage, even if they can only make a little progress. If someone loses heart in this situation, what will they do some other time when they don’t get anywhere or even are pushed back?” (261b5–8). I would argue that much more than showing us the true proportions of reality here, Plato is showing us real character in this text.<sup>17</sup> Theaetetus, in reply, rightly tells the Visitor that he speaks *καλῶς*, nobly and beautifully (261c5). The dialogue, then, is an imitation with knowledge, an investigative mimesis, a phantasm made with knowledge of the beautiful character of a philosopher.

As Leigh points out, however, this kind of reading seems to depend on viewing all *φαντάσματα* as distorted for the sake of conveying true representations to

those of us with poor vantage points, and this view seems impossible to square with the fact that “the sophist does not put his audience in mind of a true representation.”<sup>18</sup> Since the sophist produces φαντάσματα, and since the sophist’s images do not bring truth to mind, it seems difficult to locate Plato among these craftsmen. And so we reach an impasse: viewing Plato’s provocative dialogues as imitations seems to rule out calling them εἰκόνες, but the severing of truth from φαντάσματα should give us pause about placing the *Sophist* in the other group.

In response, first recall that the sophist is not the only producer of appearances: imitative appearances can also be made with knowledge (μετ’ ἐπιστήμης) (267e2–3). Still, even a phantasm made with knowledge is distorted and deceptive; do we want to describe Plato’s text that way? To find a way out of this impasse, readers must look beyond the images in the text and must also think about the use of the images. Perhaps Plato, like the Visitor with Theaetetus, has tried to provide ways to help us get a new perspective without having our experience force us (234e). Note for example the way that the Visitor brings in his first main image, the angler: he suggests that they “focus on something trivial and try to use it as a pattern [παράδειγμα] for the more important issue” (218d8–9). Right from the start, images are presented by Plato’s characters as things to move past rather than things to simply gaze upon. Likewise in the image of the battle of gods & giants, the Visitor immediately says they have to use their words (λόγω) to distort their portrayal of the people who define being as body in order to get them to answer the Visitor’s questions (246d4–7).

The issue of being able to answer questions and make philosophical progress returns us, finally, to the noble sophist, who asks so many questions and refutes so effectively. The Visitor of course grants the similarity of the noble sophist to the genuine sophist, but as we’ve already seen he immediately cautions Theaetetus: there is of course a similarity “between a wolf and a dog, the wildest thing there is and the gentlest. If you’re going to be safe, you have to be especially careful about similarities” (231a6–8). In the end what sets the philosopher apart from the sophist is not the kind of image that each produces but the use each makes of their images. The sophist uses images—namely the image of the wise person, which the sophist imitates—to make himself appear wise. The philosopher, on the other hand, uses images to help us take courage and move forward (261b5–8).

Nevertheless, the resemblance between philosopher, noble sophist, and true sophist remains. Each of them seems implicated in the production of phantasms and also in the questioning and refuting of both people and images. In order to gain a clearer view of these kinds and their differences, therefore, we must look closer at the nature of images.

#### 4. DEFINING IMAGES

The sophist produces appearances, things which are not what they appear to be. Talking about such appearing and “this seeming but not being” (236e1), however, proves difficult: it “involves the rash assumption that that which is not is” (237a3–4). After these problems arise with saying “that which is not”—which Theaetetus and the Visitor seem to need in order to talk about the falsity of the sophist’s images—the Visitor tells Theaetetus that they must attempt a definition of the word “image” (εἶδωλον) (239d3–6). Even a likeness is not what it is a likeness of: images in general, both likenesses and appearances, involve what is not. Theaetetus presents paradigm examples of images, mentioning images in water and mirrors, as well as images “drawn and stamped and everything else like that” (239d7–9). These images, both natural and artificial, could be likenesses or appearances, but the Visitor tells Theaetetus that his list fails to explain to someone with no experience of such images just what it is that makes all of these things images. Theaetetus must imagine that the sophist demands a definition of images “only in terms of words” (λόγοι) (240a2). Thus Theaetetus offers the initial definition of an image: what unites the examples he gave, what makes each an image is that each is something “which, through having been made similar to some true thing, is another such thing” (τὸ πρὸς τᾷληθινὸν ἀφωμοιωμένον ἕτερον τοιοῦτον) (240a7–8). Examining this definition promises both to clarify the troubling nature of all images and to help us see the nature of those seemingly better images, the things called εἰκόνες.

Three features of image appear in Theaetetus’s statement: an image is similar to its original; it is different from its original; and it depends upon the original, since it is an image just insofar as it has been “made similar” to the original. During the ensuing discussion, the language of Theaetetus’s description of images gains clarity: the three features of images evident at the start, however, remain. The image, that “which is like” (τὸ εἰκόζ), is “not really that which is” (οὐκ ὄντως ὄν), according to the Visitor’s statement of Theaetetus’s claim (240b7).<sup>19</sup> Thus, an image must be both similar to and different from its original.

The ontological status of images, though, becomes problematic here: even if an image is “not really that which is,” neither can it be nothing: Theaetetus asserts that “it *is*, in a way” (240b9).<sup>20</sup> The Visitor clarifies that it is “not truly” (οὐκ οὖν ἀληθῶς), and Theaetetus replies that it is not, “except that it really is what we call a likeness” (πλὴν γ’ εἰκῶν ὄντως) (240b10–11). An image, then, in the words of the Visitor, is “not really what is, but it really is what we call a likeness” (οὐκ ὄν ἄρα ὄντως, ἔστιν ὄντως ἢν λέγομεν εἰκόνα) (240b12–13). Images, therefore, reveal a sort of dual nature—an image both is and is not what it appears to be.

An image, on the one hand, is not truly (οὐκ οὖν ἀληθῶς) what it resembles; it really is, nevertheless, a likeness (εἰκῶν ὄντως). Two questions emerge from

this account of the dual nature of images: what should we make of the assimilation here of all images (εἶδωλα) to εἰκόνες; and what, if anything, does this section tell us about the difference between the two kinds of images that appeared earlier? In considering answers to these questions, I hope that we might find an account that hews close to the true proportions, which should in turn help us get a better view of the larger import of the claims about images in the text.

We might conclude that likenesses are the primary sort of images, so that whatever is true of them should be true of all images.<sup>21</sup> On this understanding, φαντάσματα are derivative, distorted εἰκόνες. In some sense, on this view, the φαντάσματα stand at a further remove from the original than simple or genuine images; they are, so to speak, images of images. We might liken them to the shadows of artifacts that appear on the wall of the cave in *Republic* 7.<sup>22</sup> This reading offers a nice account of the use of the term εἰκόνες in the definition of images, and it fits quite well with the earlier discussion of a φάντασμα that “appears to be like [ἐοικέναι] a beautiful thing, but only because it’s seen from a viewpoint that’s not beautiful” (236b4–5).

My ultimate hope here is that this account will help with my worries from the previous section. Are we now in a better position to see whether Plato’s text consists of φαντάσματα or εἰκόνες?

Perhaps if we emphasize the relation between ιστορική (267b–e) and inquiry (ἱστορία), we could now see Plato as a maker of mimetic appearances, appearances that themselves look like or appear to be philosophers, at least until we examine them up close. Socrates and the Visitor, and perhaps young Theaetetus as well, look quite a bit like philosophers. Of course, they aren’t: they are apparitions, characters in a text that’s almost certainly fiction. On my reading, Plato has crafted some attractive images, distorted for the sake of his readers, images that call to mind philosophers.<sup>23</sup> Philosophers, again, might best be seen as themselves images: the project of philosophy is sometimes described as a ὁμοίωσις θεῷ (e.g., *Theaetetus* 176b1), a becoming like god. Notomi, in fact, argues that the true philosopher is herself an imitator, a person who makes herself into a genuine likeness of that which is truly wise, namely the divine.<sup>24</sup> In the spirit of inquiry, then, Plato presents a book full of phantasms, partially distorted images that represent the project of philosophical imitation even as they encourage us to take on this project ourselves, to imitate these excellent images.

As for the silence about the many benefits that images might offer, I would argue that it isn’t quite right to say that εἰκόνες are set apart by their ability to pull us toward the truth.<sup>25</sup> The pull instead comes from the interplay of image and original, appearance and likeness. It is in laying out the nature of images and the relationships between various images and their viewers that Plato urges us forward.

## 5. IMAGE AND BEING

In part, Plato here urges us toward a closer look at what is and what is not. Images, as they are not their originals, force Plato's characters to consider what is not. Theaetetus and the Visitor must determine whether or not there is a way to speak of what is not. They conclude that they can speak not, as they tried earlier, of "that which in no way is" (τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν) (237b7–8) but rather of "each part of the nature of the different that's set over against" what is (258e2–3). That one thing is not another need not involve the former being nothing, but merely being different.

This explanation of non-being also reveals something central to idea of being itself: "being itself must have a primal character of *'imageability'*."<sup>26</sup> Images, of course, are impossible if non-being cannot mix with being, since an image is not what it seems to be, even at the same time as it *is* like its original (οὐκ ὄν ἄρα ὄντως, ἔστιν ὄντως ἢν λέγομεν εἰκόνα, 240b12–13). But being itself also involves this duplicity, as Klein calls it:<sup>27</sup> since rest is and motion is, but rest cannot move and motion cannot rest, things that are also always are not (250a, 255e–256d). "So it has to be possible for *that which is not* to be, in the case of change and also of all the kinds" (256d11–12). Difference, otherness, makes this possible: the fact that being and difference pervade all things and also each other (259a–b) enables rest and change to be without mixing with each other, since each is and each is different from the other.

This account also, of course, helps explain images, since images are and are not what they look like—now we can say that images simultaneously are what they look like even while remaining different from that thing. Insofar as the statue is a statue of David, it is, in a way, David that we see: David appears in or through the statue. At the time the statue is obviously *not* David; it is different from David himself. The "mirror-like nature" of being itself thus points the way to an understanding images.<sup>28</sup>

And so what does this mean for our understanding of the noble sophist, or for our understanding of the status of Plato's dialogues? In the same way that every real thing is also different, is also what is not, the activity of the philosopher must involve refutation, and thus the philosopher is always reflected in the image of the noble sophist.<sup>29</sup> And since the play of images like these reveals not only the operation of images but also the 'duplicity' of being itself, one might be tempted to see this Platonic text as a likeness, as an image that shows the true proportions of philosophical inquiry.<sup>30</sup>

The true proportions of philosophical thought, however, seem to escape. As Klein, among others, has argued, *logos* fails to capture the nature of being, since in the text the terms (being, rest, motion) appear as things we can count even while naming things that "*cannot be counted at all*."<sup>31</sup> Instead of seeing the true

structure of being here, we see hints, but we can't make much of those hints unless we move. The text confounds me, and it also encourages me to move to a better vantage and try to gain a fuller understanding of being. There's a duplicity in the text itself, a sense in which it is and is not philosophy. But if I simply read the beautiful words, I won't change my beliefs. What I need is either some experience that forces me into contact with real things (234d), or, like the Visitor for Theaetetus, someone to help me see clearer (234e). Since the text, by itself, cannot move me, the text must remain only a beautiful phantasm.

Once the Visitor helps Theaetetus see being and non-being clearer, images can again be examined, and so at the conclusion the characters succeed in locating the sophist within the craft of image-making (ειδωλοποιική) (*Sophist*, 264c). The sophist produces not likenesses but appearances, and he does so by means of the "imitation of the contrary-speech-producing, insincere, and opinion-based [δοξαστικῆς] sort" (268c8–9). The philosopher, again, should on the other hand be seen as producing likenesses—she makes herself like god. And Plato, in presenting images of these philosophical likenesses, imitates these divine images. Since this imitator is neither pretending to know things he doesn't know nor foolishly unaware of his own ignorance, his craft is best seen as "investigative mimesis,"<sup>32</sup> an imitation accompanied by knowledge (μετ' ἐπιστήμης ιστορικῆν τινα μίμησιν, 267e2).

## 6. DECEPTION, THEN, NECESSARILY

And what, finally, should we make of the fact that philosophers liken themselves to the divine, and that Plato offers us images of such likenesses? Since likenesses—perhaps like that of our noble sophist—represent "true proportions" and seem superior to appearances, they might avoid a negative assessment of images that would reject all images as deceptive. Readers have seen the distinction between likenesses and appearances in the *Sophist* as a reconsideration of the apparent distrust of images evident in what is thought to be Plato's earlier work, such as the *Republic*.<sup>33</sup> If some image-makers, the likeness-makers, do not "say goodbye to truth" (*Sophist*, 236a4), then perhaps their images would not be inherently deceptive. Furthermore, since an appearance deceives viewers when seen from certain vantages (235e–236a), while a likeness attempts no deception, but rather the representation of true proportions, the likeness seems to be an image that might not be inherently deceptive.

Despite the attractiveness of this position—for example, it would allow the philosopher to produce likenesses without being deceptive<sup>34</sup>—the claim that some images are not deceptive seems untenable. The status of a likeness as an image seems to require that the likeness have the potential to deceive: such an accurate reproduction, for example, might fool someone into mistaking it for its original.

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And no matter how genuine or true an image is, it is always also an image, and so it is never quite what it appears to be.<sup>35</sup> The best and most amazing likeness can only ever be *lifelike*; a beautiful, proportionate illusion, but an illusion nonetheless.

Indeed, the characters conclude that the presence of not-being allows for falsity, adding that “if there’s falsity then there’s deception” (ἀπάτη) (260c6). The Visitor then explains what must follow:

And if there’s deception then necessarily everything will already be full of images, likenesses, and appearance.

Καὶ μὴν ἀπάτης οὐσης εἰδώλων τε καὶ εἰκόνων ἤδη καὶ φαντασίας πάντα ἀνάγκη μεστὰ εἶναι. (260c8–9).

All images—not only appearances, but likenesses too—follow from deception.<sup>36</sup> No image can be entirely honest because every image, by definition, appears to be what it is not (see 236e, 240a–c). This misleading appearance is essential to images: if everything was exactly as it seemed, nothing would be an image. Since images are only possible when falsity and deception are possible, since deception is the ground of every image, we must expect that every image can deceive. The discussion of images in the *Sophist* confirms that Plato’s characters view images as both necessarily distinct from their originals and necessarily deceptive. The superiority of likenesses might signal a lesser danger of being deceived, but deception must remain possible.

The noble sophist might cleanse our souls and lead us toward philosophy, but he might also open the door to eristic, taking us even farther from philosophy.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, even the best images might lead us to truth, but they might also deceive us. And indeed, a text like the *Sophist* can seem to function as a likeness, a well-proportioned image of philosophical thought; but the price it pays for that beautiful appearance is the price of also seeming to be only an appearance, beautiful only to those of us who remain far from the truth.

We should, I think, embrace this result. The possibility of deception, after all, the risk we take with images, reflects nothing so much as the power of images. Plato is acutely aware of that danger and that power, and that awareness gives rise to some truly moving images.

## NOTES

This paper was first presented at a workshop on Plato’s *Sophist* at Seattle University, and I thank the participants for their comments. I would also like to thank Tom Tuozzo and the anonymous reviewer at *Epoché* for their many helpful suggestions. I am of course happy to claim all distortions and misleading appearances as my own.

1. In translating the *Sophist* I rely especially on Nicholas P. White in the Cooper edition; I have also consulted translations in Cornford, Notomi, and Rosen.

2. See for example Leigh, “Plato on Art, Perspective, and Beauty in the *Sophist*,” 192ff. Other discussions mention Phidias’s sculpture of Athena: see Notomi, *The Unity of Plato’s Sophist*, 150–1 and note 65 for other appeals to that example.
3. Especially Notomi, at 274–7, 292, and 295. Rosen, on the other hand, thinks that the conclusion stays consistent with the account of the noble sophist, and goes on to say that the Visitor is in fact accusing Socrates of being a sophist (Rosen, 313). I don’t have the space to engage his argument here, but I’ll just say that if Socrates is a sophist, then you can call me a philo-sophist.
4. For example, the comparison of sophist to wolf and noble sophist (or is it philosopher?) to dog at 231a seems clearly to be an example of an appearance, since presumably the true proportions of neither person match that of any canine.
5. Thanks to Tom Tuozzo for this promising suggestion.
6. Leigh, “Plato on Art,” 206.
7. *Ibid.*, 205–6.
8. *Ibid.*, 206.
9. See Notomi, *The Unity of Plato’s Sophist*, 279–83, for a thorough discussion of these different uses of μίμησις.
10. *Ibid.*, 283. And see *Republic* 3, 393c.
11. Benardete, *Plato’s Sophist*, II.111–112.
12. Rosen agrees, pointing to this as one of the “fantastic” restrictions placed on Plato: “Not everyone can understand the philosophical life in the same way, because we do not all understand life in the same way” (15). Benardete makes similar points at II.111–112.
13. Again, see Benardete, *Plato’s Sophist*, II.111–112.
14. As to whether these are the same forms as those in dialogues like the *Republic*, I remain here agnostic.
15. For example, at 235d, 249e, and even the description of the philosopher at 253c–254b, who is described as knowing how to discriminate between forms, which isn’t quite the same as knowing each form.
16. As Benardete also points out (II.111).
17. “Passages like this are more than mere literary ornamentation. They illustrate the necessary connection between nobility of character and λόγος in the philosophical nature. In order to be free, one must be spirited or brave” (Rosen, *Plato’s Sophist*, 299).
18. Leigh, “Plato on Art,” 213–214n41.
19. The Greek text becomes at this point rather difficult (*Sophist*, 240b7–13). Notomi offers an excellent summary of the various readings that have been proposed (Notomi, *The Unity of Plato’s Sophist*, 158). I hesitate to speculate on the merits of the different manuscripts: as different readings affect my argument, they will be addressed; otherwise I shall avoid controversy. At this point, the different readings (which differ over whether the words are a negative question or a straight-forward assertion) should give the same sense—an image, though like its original, is not the original.
20. White’s italics (for “ἔστι γέ”).



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21. Notomi endorses a version of this reading, at 151–5. Cornford also speaks along these lines, although he views εἰκόνες as perfect copies rather than true images; see 198–9.
22. Cornford's account comes the closest to invoking the cave (though he doesn't quite do so), at 199.
23. See Frede, "The Literary Form of the *Sophist*," for a nice discussion of Plato's use of the dialogue form in the *Sophist* to illustrate philosophical thought, especially 149–51.
24. Notomi, *The Unity of Plato's Sophist*, 299–300.
25. As Leigh, for example, argues (pp. 205–6).
26. Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, 82; emphasis in original.
27. *Ibid.*, 95.
28. *Ibid.*, 82.
29. "The shadow of 'non-being' necessarily attends all the 'being' of that which is—just as the sophistic refutation, the *elenchos*, belongs to the essential business of the philosopher (cf. 230a–231b)" (Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, 97).
30. My thanks to my anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to consider this line of thought.
31. Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, 95.
32. Rosen's translation (313).
33. Notomi writes, with respect to the conversation in the *Sophist*, that "[w]e should not reject all appearances as merely deceptive, as in the earlier works" (Notomi, *The Unity of Plato's Sophist*, 150). Cornford too says that in the case of likenesses "there is no element of deceit or illusion" (Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, 198). Cornford's reason, however, is that he mistakenly thinks likenesses are exact replicas, as the carpenter's bed in *Republic* 10 (but of course an exact replica is not an image, as *Cratylus* 432b–c makes clear). Since, as Dorter writes, "in a sense any image is a distortion of the original" (Dorter, *Form and Good*, 138), no image could lack the feature of being deceptive, since it should always be possible for a viewer to fail to notice the distortion. Rosen writes that a phantasm, unlike a likeness, "deceives . . . concerning the proportions of the original" (152). Rosen rightly sees, however, that due to issues of audience perspective, among other things, even the accurate likenesses can be misleading, as can the inaccurate phantasms, which look like their originals even though they don't represent the true proportions (see especially 172).
34. As Notomi argues, at Notomi, *The Unity of Plato's Sophist*, 155 and 287ff.
35. Bluck writes that "even 'true likenesses' involve the difficulty that although they are 'like' their originals, they are not genuine" (Bluck, *Plato's Sophist*, 60).
36. Notomi also acknowledges the ramifications of this passage, saying of 260c that "all images are there supposed to be in a way deceptive" (249n.83). Rosen notes that this commitment emerges much earlier, saying that at 236e the Visitor "commits himself to the view that *all* images contain falsehood" (151).
37. Rosen points out the danger of the refutation leading to a kind of "technical cleverness which soon degenerates into dogmatism and skepticism" (127).

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