wish to discuss the μέγιστα γένη section of the Sophist (251a5-259d8) and in particular some difficulties in the passage 253a1-c3.

Let us begin by considering a couple of general points about the Sophist: 1. What is the Sophist about? Answers commonly given are that it is concerned with the relations of Ideas to one another, or with the elucidation of significant negative and of false statement, or with a development in Plato's ontology, or with the practical illustration of the method of Collection and Division, or with a number of these topics.

Even on the assumption (which I do not share) that all these topics are to be found treated in the dialogue, it does not seem to me that their treatment is other than incidental to a more fundamental theme: philosophy. The dialogue is an exercise in doing philosophy, which is distinct from its counterfeit, sophistry or casuistry. Of course all the dialogues are in a sense exercises in doing philosophy: the reader's mind is exercised by them in philosophical questions. But the Sophist is a dialogue which is itself pre-eminently a demonstration of philosophy in action. The passages concerned with significant negative and with false statement, for instance, are practical examples of casuistical positions refuted. No-one strongly interested in philosophy is likely to find the dialogue dry or technical. These adjectives may be applied to it by those more interested in literature than philosophy.

2. The discussion is led by a visitor from Elea who, it is emphasized at the beginning of the dialogue and elsewhere, is a philosopher and no mere logic-chopper. He is, in fact, indistinguishable from Plato's Socrates in some traits: for example, his use of the aporematic method, and his penchant for the method of diaeresis.

The dialogue, then, shows us philosophy in action, and is conducted by a serious philosopher.

A main question which a reader of the Sophist must ask is, What are

---

1 I call him an 'Elean' rather than an 'Eleatic' since, although he is described at the opening of the dialogue as ἔλεινον...τῶν ἀμφί Παρμενίδην καὶ Ζήνωνα, it becomes clear in the course of the dialogue that he does not adopt the Eleatic position.
we to make of the μέγιστα γένη section? Is some new development in Plato’s thought taking place before our eyes?\textsuperscript{2} What are γένη? Are they Ideas? If not, what?

The section is preceded by an aporematic passage (236c9-251a4) which is summarized at 250e5ff.: “Our difficulty is now fully stated: we are equally at a loss regarding being and not-being.” The difficulty here referred to began to be stated at 236e1ff.: in alleging that the sophist’s knowledge is merely reputed and apparent, and that his statement that he knows everything is not to be taken as true, we are implying that what is not (real, or true) is (apparent, or false); and this might seem a contradiction. That is the difficulty about not-being. But we are in an equal state of confusion over being: for example, being seems to be neither changing nor at rest; yet one might suppose that it must be in one state or the other (250d1-3).\textsuperscript{3} It does not matter whether we start by examining being or not-being, if we are in equal difficulty with both: either may shed light on the other.

Let us start with being: there is a problem of predication in general,

\textsuperscript{2} As e.g. Professor G. Ryle suggested in his articles on the Parmenides in Mind XLVIII nos. 190 and 191 (1939): “…Plato was becoming aware of some important differences of type between concepts.” (no. 191, p. 324); “The mode of arrangement of letters which constitutes them a syllable is not itself a letter; and Plato uses this analogy to explain how certain concepts like existence and non-existence have a different sort of logical behaviour from most ordinary concepts, just (as I construe him) because they are not terms in the propositions which we think but the forms of the combinations of those elements into propositions.” (no. 190, p. 146)

\textsuperscript{3} At 250b2-5 the Elean asks, “When you say that change and rest are, do you mean either that they are changing or that they are at rest?” Of course ‘are’ doesn’t mean ‘change’ or ‘rest’; so Theaetetus’s reply at c1-2, that being seems to be a third thing, distinct from change and rest, is correct. The Elean’s subsequent remark at c6-7, however, (“In its own nature, then, τὸ ὅν is neither at rest nor in change”) contains an ambiguity: does τὸ ὅν there mean ‘the meaning of is’ or ‘that which is’? It should, in accordance with the argument of 250a-c so far employed by Plato, mean ‘the meaning of is’; and 250c6-7 should aim to state only that ‘is’ doesn’t in itself mean either ‘changes’ or ‘rests’. c12-d3, however, reveals that Plato elects to employ τὸ ὅν at d2 to mean ‘that which is’, for he thereby produces the artificial difficulty about being with which those lines are concerned.

I should myself grant that the argument of 250 is fallacious, and say that Plato here, not unusually, is prepared to use merely plausible arguments in order to claim, as he does at 250e5ff., that we are now in equal ἀπόφασις concerning both being and not-being. Plato often seems willing to use any method to suggest to his reader that there is a difficulty to be solved.