

Difference and Negation: Plato's *Sophist* in Proclus

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1. Introduction

Like many other Neo-Platonist thinkers, Proclus (AD 412–485) sets out to offer a systematic exegesis of Plato's philosophy, relating it also to other traditions of either a philosophical nature (such as Eleaticism, Aristotelianism and Pythagoreanism) or a religious one (mainly *The Chaldean Oracles* and Orphism)¹. The totality of Plato's dialogues and his *agrapha dogmata* thus constitute a complete and coherent structure, with a philosophical and religious value, which surpasses and enhances any other philosophical or religious doctrine.

Chronologically, Proclus belongs to a late period of the Platonic tradition; so he is continually undertaking a critical revision of all previous interpretations of Plato's philosophy and texts, with the goal of establishing the correct exegesis of Platonic doctrine.

As such, the interpretation which Proclus provides of Plato's *Sophist* is embedded in a systematic doctrine², wherein each work of Plato has its own goal (σκοπός). In this way, Proclus' reading of the *Sophist* assumes that Platonic doctrine forms a unitary and coherent structure; and also that each dialogue occupies a precise place in Plato's doctrinal system.

Proclus' systematic understanding of Plato is consistent with the interpretation provided by other Platonic philosophers, notably Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Syrianus. However, while Proclus differs somewhat from Plotinus, he is acknowledged to be a faithful follower of the teachings of his master, Syrianus. Because of this, it is difficult to tell when Proclus' exegesis is offering us something novel and

1 This goal of reconciling all philosophical and religious traditions is particularly evident in the Neoplatonic School at Athens, re-established by Plutarch of Athens at the beginning of the 5th century and continued by Syrianus, Proclus' master. Cf. Saffrey (1992).

2 Cf. Charles-Saget (1991).

when he is merely repeating the doctrine of Syrianus³. Furthermore, Proclus accepts many ideas of Iamblichus in regard both to Platonic doctrine and to his interpretation of particular Platonic dialogues⁴.

Within this Neo-Platonist tradition, Proclus' philosophy is singular in its doctrinal stance. On the one hand, he offers a highly rationalist view, where everything has its "raison d'être" and where he tries to determine with precision the totality and continuity of every causal mediation. Dialectic and (especially) negation have a prime place in this rationalization of reality. It is a hierarchized conception, which reaches its highest point in the One and is extended to Matter, where everything is explained by its subordination to a superior reality in a relationship of strict causal dependence. On the other hand, along with this rigorous rationalism, Proclus is a convinced believer in traditional Greek religion (which had been itself transformed by the integration into it of elements from other religious traditions). He especially values *The Chaldean Oracles* as his main sacred text, and continues Iamblichus' theurgic tradition. Any religious text – including that of Homer – acquires philosophical and rational validity, given his allegorical exegesis.

This double facet – rational and religious – of Proclus' thinking explains why the same philosophic doctrine can be expounded in two apparently different works, the *Commentary on the Parmenides*⁵ and the *Platonic Theology*⁶. Both of them have as their backbone Plato's *Parmenides*, considered by Proclus to be the synthesis of Plato's theology. However, the one book is strictly a philosophical commentary on Plato's text, while the *Platonic Theology* tries to establish the philosophical basis of Greek religion, justifying, in detail, the reality of each divinity and other figures as daemons and heroes.

But Proclus' singular place in the Platonic tradition as a whole is also characterized by its place in history as well as its particular doctrinal stance. Unlike that of other authors (say Syrianus or Iamblichus), Proclus' subsequent influence is remarkable, despite the complexity of his

3 The abundance of surviving writings of Proclus significantly contrasts with the scarcity of those of Syrianus, for whose commentary we rely on some *loci* in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

4 Cf. Bechtle (2002).

5 I quote from the edition by V. Cousin (1961). For the English edition, cf. Dillon (1987).

6 Cf. Saffrey – Westerink (1997).

thought⁷. The best proof of his success lies in the preservation of so many of his writings.

2. The *Sophist* in Proclus

We do not have a specific commentary on the *Sophist*, and it is doubtful whether he ever wrote one. What we do have is the *Commentary on the Parmenides*, from which some have hypothesized that he also wrote one on the *Sophist*.⁸ Whatever the case, the explicit references to this dialogue are many, and they affect crucial issues in Proclus' thought. In particular, *The Elements of Theology* aside (which, because of its axiomatic treatment does not include textual references of any kind), allusions to the *Sophist* are very frequent in his three most relevant systematic works: the *Commentary on the Parmenides*, the *Platonic Theology*, and the *Commentary on the Timaeus*⁹.

Some of the citations from the *Sophist* are merely circumstantial and short: as, for example, when the Eleatic Stranger is presented as a real philosopher¹⁰; when he asserts the difficulty of distinguishing between the philosopher, the sophist and the politician¹¹; when he points out the difference between the Ionian, Italic and Athenian schools¹²; or when he refers to the fragmentation of the body¹³. However, in other instances his quotations from the *Sophist* are the basis for some of the most important themes in Proclus' philosophy. Three of them are: 1)

7 For my analysis of the reception of Proclus' philosophy and his writings – with particular attention to the Latin European tradition up to Nicholas of Cusa – see Garay (2007).

8 ὅπως δὲ χρὴ τὴν ἀμειξίαν αὐτῶν καὶ τὴν μίξιν ἐκλαμβάνειν, ἴσως καὶ εὐκαιρότερον ἐν ταῖς τοῦ Σοφιστοῦ διελεῖν ἐξηγήσεις (*In Parm.*, 774,24–26). C. Steel (1992) appears skeptical of the possibility that he ever wrote a commentary. However, L.G. Westerink and H.D. Saffrey (1997, III, 137) think it likely that he did write one, or at least made some comments on various places in the *Sophist* – for example, in his *Commentary on the Republic*. A. Charles-Saget (1991) 477 seems to support this hypothesis.

9 An exhaustive documentation of references to the *Sophist* can be found in Guérard (1991). My own exposition will focus strictly on the *Commentary on the Parmenides* and *Platonic Theology*.

10 Cf. *In Parm.*, I,672 (cf. *Sof.*, 216a)

11 Cf. *In Parm.*, I,681 (cf. *Sof.*, 217b)

12 Cf. *In Parm.*, I,630 (cf. *Sof.*, 217c)

13 Cf. *Th.Pl.*, IV–19, 55 (cf. *Sof.*, 246b9–c2)

philosophy as the production of images; 2) the priority of the One with respect to being; 3) negation as anterior to affirmation, and negation as difference. I shall allude briefly to the first two of these, and will then develop the third one in more detail.

However, as has been pointed out by Annick Charles-Saget, to understand Proclus' interpretation of the *Sophist* we cannot pay attention solely to explicit quotations from the dialogue; but we must also consider his silences and significance shifts. In other words, on the one hand there are important questions in the dialogue which Proclus hardly adverts to: for example, the sophist as deceiver, and purveyor of falsehood in general; on the other hand, there are matters which Proclus presents in a different way, such as the vindication of poetic production in light of the definition of the sophist. Also significant is the way in which a number of very short passages from the *Sophist* are adduced over and over and again in support of his thesis.

2.1. The *Sophist* in the Neo-Platonist curriculum

The *Sophist* was also included in the study plan which, from the time of Iamblichus on, was followed in the various Neo-Platonist schools of the fifth and sixth centuries¹⁴, including the Athenian School. This curriculum was organized in accordance with a progressive scale of virtues (political, purificatory and theoretical) corresponding to specific kinds of knowledge (from practical to theoretical sciences, and, within the theoretical sciences, from the physical to the theological). Along with the works of other authors (like those of Aristotle, Epictetus and Porphyry), twelve of Plato's dialogues were selected as being especially suitable for detailed written commentary, to serve as a basis for the examination of such subjects.

In a first study cycle, the *Sophist* was included in studies of the theoretical virtues and the theoretical sciences; for the study of nouns, the *Cratylus* was read first, and then, for the analysis of concepts, the *Theaetetus*; and finally, for the study of things in themselves, physical realities were examined first, with the aid of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, and then theological realities, with the aid of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. To end this first study cycle the *Philebus* served as a colophon. Then, in the second cycle, the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides* were utilized to give a deeper

14 Cf. O'Meara (2003); also Festugière (1971).

and more developed exposition of physical and theological realities respectively.

In other words, the *Sophist*, along with the *Statesman*, was studied with the aim of analyzing physical realities; the two dialogues are also in fact related in Plato. Proclus often mentions the *Statesman* in relation to the myth of Cronus and Zeus, and, more generally, with respect to world creation by the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. Either way, when Iamblichus or Proclus relate the *Sophist* to the physical world, they do so from the standpoint of their principles, especially that of the Demiurge.

A good illustration of this is the way in which Iamblichus considered that the σκοπός of the *Sophist* is the Demiurge operating in the sublunar world¹⁵. This could explain why Iamblichus considered the *Sophist* an appropriate dialogue for the study of the physical world. The sophist, in Iamblichus, was unencumbered with the more pejorative connotations he might have in Plato; he was an image producer, and similar to the Demiurge of the sublunar world. If the art of production can be divided into human and divine production, both gods and men are producers¹⁶. In this way both the sophist and the Demiurge are image producers (εἰδωλοποιός), and present many different faces (πολυκέφαλος), thanks to their interrelation with material things and movement.

So the sophist is akin to the philosopher, who is presented as an imitator of the Demiurge. Iamblichus points out how the art of division, typical of the philosopher, imitates the precedence of being which starts with the One. Proclus in turn takes up these correspondences between human and divine production, between philosophers and the Demiurge: "In the same way demiurgic Intellect makes appearances (ἐμφάσεις) exist in matter from the first Forms which are in him, it produces temporal images (εἶδωλα παράγει) coming from eternal beings, divisible images coming from indivisible beings, and pictorial images coming from true being. In the same fashion, I think, our scientific knowledge (ἡ παρ' ἡμῖν ἐπιστήμη), which represents the production of our intelligence (τὴν νοερὰν ἀποτυπουμένη ποίησιν), fashions, through speech (διὰ λόγου

15 So Festugière (1971) 539; also Charles-Saget (1991) 487–488. For references to Iamblichus, see Dillon (1973).

16 Cf. Brisson (1974) 103: "...classer la sophistique en la définissant comme l'art de la production humaine de simulacres par la mimétique nous est d'un grand secours pour déterminer le sens et la nature de la production divine dans le *Timée*".

δημιουργεῖ), similarities with other realities and even with the gods themselves: what is indivisible by means of compounded things, what is simple by means of diverse things, what is unified by means of plurality¹⁷. In this way philosophical speech produces images of physical reality, but also of the gods, representing indivisible and eternal things by means of complex and articulate language.

2.2. The *Sophist* as an initiation to the *Parmenides*

Proclus' interest in the *Sophist* is not confined to his ideas concerning the Demiurge and the physical world. In the two works where this dialogue is most often quoted (*Commentary on the Parmenides* and *Platonic Theology*) he analyses matters different from these. As Carlos Steel has shown¹⁸, the *Sophist* has, for Proclus, a clear theological relevance, and offers some of the basic arguments affirming the reality of the One above being; hence it is to be used as a preparation (προτέλεια) for the reading of the *Parmenides*. According to Proclus, the *Sophist* and the *Parmenides* are the two dialogues in which Plato expounds in a scientific way, i. e. dialectically (διαλεκτικῶς), the priority of the One over being¹⁹.

In this sense, *Platonic Theology*, III–20, where Proclus offers an analysis of *Sophist* 242c–245e, plays a determinant role. As Proclus understands him, Plato is arguing, first that being is the cause of plurality (and thus opposing authors like Empedocles), and secondly that the One is the cause of being (and thus opposing Parmenides himself). Proclus himself maintains the transcendence of the One with respect to being, along with his exposition of the intelligible triads (being, life, intelligence), which are presented starting from the negation of the One-which-is (ἔν ὄν), the negation of totality (ὅλον) and the negation of allness (πᾶν).

Specifically, the text in the *Sophist* which is most often mentioned by Proclus is 245b8–10: “Since, although being is affected (πεπρονθός) in a certain way by Unity, it does not seem to be the same as oneness,

17 *Th. Pl.*, I–29, 12–20

18 Cf. Steel (1992) 62: “Le *Sophiste* est par excellence le dialogue qui démontre l'existence de l'Un au delà de l'être”.

19 Cf. *Th. Pl.*, I–4, 18, 13–24

and totality will be bigger than unity”²⁰. That is, if being partakes in unity, it cannot be unity itself²¹.

At 245ab Proclus discovers the main argument that the Stranger propounds to Parmenides to establish the priority of the One over the One-which-is (i. e., over being): the One-which-is in Parmenides is a complete whole and has unity as a characteristic (πάθος τοῦ ἑνός). However, it is impossible for the One itself to receive unity (πεπρονθός), because “what is really one (τὸ ἀληθῶς ἔν) is totally indivisible (ἀμερές)”. If the One is a whole, then that one is not the first, because it would have parts, and the One-which-is-first does not have parts.

The transcendence of the One with respect to being is one of the main tenets of the Neo-Platonist interpretation of Plato, and is so considered by Proclus in his critique of the interpretation of Origen the Platonist, who would have denied such a separation of the One with respect to being²², basing himself on the scepticism established by the *Parmenides*. This is the reason why the points made in the *Sophist* are really important, since they reinforce and extend other affirmations by Plato about the transcendence of the One in the *Republic* and the *Philebus*²³.

According to Proclus, the *Sophist* contains the necessary line of argument, with respect to the One in itself, for the later development of the hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. Hence, after completing *Th. Pl.* III–20, he affirms at the beginning of chapter 21: “We will deal with these themes in more detail a little later, when we discuss the *Parmenides*, because the Eleatic's reflections are a preparation (προτέλεια) for the mysteries in the *Parmenides*”²⁴.

So the *Sophist* deals with being and the categories of being, since they are the introduction to, or preparation for, study of the One. The five categories of being in Proclus are ordered in three triads which form the order of intelligibility. All of them can be found, in different ways²⁵, in the order of being, in the order of life and in the order

20 Πεπρονθός τε γὰρ τὸ ὄν ἔν εἶναι πως οὐ ταῦτὸν ὄν τῶ ἐνὶ φανεῖται, καὶ πλέονα δὴ τὰ πάντα ἑνός ἔσται.

21 For example, in *Th. Pl.*, III–20, 68, 4: ὅτι τοῦτο πεπρονθός ἐστι τὸ ἔν καὶ μετέχει τοῦ ἑνός. Or further on in *Th. Pl.*, III–20, 71, 3–5; or *Th. Pl.*, I–4, 18, 18–19.

22 Cf. Saffrey-Westerink (1997) II, X–XX.

23 Cf. *Th. Pl.* II–4.

24 Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν καὶ μικρὸν ὑστερον ἐπὶ πλεόν διαρθρώσομεν, ὅταν περὶ τοῦ Παρμενίδου λέγωμεν προτέλεια γάρ ἐστι τῶν Παρμενίδου λέγωμεν.

25 Cf. Saffrey-Westerink (1997) II.

of intelligence. The first triad belongs to the domain of being (οὐσία), which includes, in a hidden way, the other categories²⁶, but, in the most exact terms, is neither moving nor resting²⁷, neither itself nor the other. The second triad defines the domain of life, and is determined by rest and movement. The third triad, the properly intellectual one, is determined by the categories of identity and difference²⁸.

3. Negation

3.1. Senses of non-being

At *Sophist* 258a11–b4, Plato affirms: “Then, as it seems, the opposition of a part of the nature of different, and the nature of being, when they are reciprocally contrasted, is not less real – if it is licit to say that – than being itself, because the former does not mean contrariness to the latter, but just something different than this”²⁹. Proclus often alludes to this text, and, curiously, in a different way different from established interpretations³⁰. What he points out, in very simplified terms, is that Plato

26 Cf. Steel (1992) 63–64.

27 Cf. *Soph.*, 250c 3–7.

28 Cf. *Th. Pl.*, III–27.

29 Οὐκον, ὡς εἰοικεν, ἡ τῆς Θατέρου μορίου φύσεως καὶ τῆς τοῦ ὄντος πρὸς ἀλλήλα ἀντικειμένων ἀντίθεσις οὐδὲν ἦττον, εἰ Θέμις εἰπεῖν, αὐτοῦ τοῦ ὄντος οὐσία ἐστίν, οὐκ ἐναντίον ἐκείνῳ σημαίνουσα ἀλλὰ τοσοῦτον μόνον, ἕτερον ἐκείνου.

30 With regard to *Th. Pl.*, II–5,39, 1–2, H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink (II, 99–100, note) offer a detailed explanation of the presence of this text in Proclus as follows: “Il y a chez Proclus plusieurs lieux parallèles pour cette citation du *Sophiste* 258 B 1–2 dans le cadre de la discussion sur la valeur comparée de l’affirmation et de la négation en fonction des degrés de l’être auxquels on les applique. Si on les recense, on constate que jamais Proclus ne suit exactement le texte reçu de Platon et que notre citation de la *Théol. plat.* diffère également de la manière habituelle dont Proclus rapporte ce texte. Le parallèle le plus proche se trouve dans cette sorte d’introduction à l’exégèse de la première hypothèse du *Parménide*, dans laquelle Proclus aborde neuf questions d’ordre général, cf. H.D.Saffrey dans *Philologus* 105, 1961, 318–319. La troisième de ces questions traite de la valeur de la négation (*In Parm.*, VI, col. 1072.19–1074.21). On lit (col. 1072.32–37): ὅπως δὲ αὐτός (Platon) ἐν Σοφιστῇ τὸ μὴ ὄν ἔφατο πρὸς τὸ ὄν ἔχειν οὐκ ἄδηλον καὶ ὅτι κρείττον τὸ ὄν· οὐ παρ’ ἔλαττον (*non in minus*, Moerbeke, οὔπερ ἔλαττον, Cousin!) μὲν γὰρ οὐδὲ τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι φησιν ἢ τὸ ὄν, ἀλλὰ προσθεῖς τὸ εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν ἐδήλωσε τὴν τοῦ ὄντος ὑπεροχὴν”. Cf. in the same sense Dillon (1987) 286: “It is noteworthy that, in quoting *Sophist* 258b1–2, Proclus repeat-

establishes in the *Sophist* that non-being is not inferior to being. The many times that he mentions this text are evidence how strongly he thinks they support the truth that non-being is – at least – on the same level as being. And because the differences between intelligible beings can be considered forms of non-being, Proclus will go further and emphasize the superiority of negation and non-being over affirmation and being. But first he has to show that non-being is not inferior to being; and nothing is as necessary for his argument as a reference to Plato himself.

Proclus is of course aware of the difficulty of maintaining that non-being is superior to being, and that something can be affirmed starting from a negation. In the *Commentary on the Parmenides*³¹, he goes directly to this question and makes explicit reference to the *Sophist* on four occasions. How is it reasonably (εἰκότως) possible to say something starting from what it is not? How can something be demonstrated or affirmed from non-being?³² We are given the answer, Proclus comments, by Plato in the *Sophist*³³, when he makes a distinction between what is not absolutely (τὸ μηδαμῆ μηδαμῶς ὄν) and deprivation (στέρησις, which is not itself except by accident). Besides, there are other senses of non-being: matter, and everything that is material, which exist at a phenomenal level (φαινομένως) but, properly, are not. And also the whole sensible universe, which never really exists (ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν)³⁴. Besides, there is non-being in souls (τὸ ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς μὴ ὄν), since they come to be and do not belong to the domain of intelligible beings³⁵. Starting in the *Sophist*, different senses for non-being can be distinguished, from absolute not-being to non-being in souls.

Nevertheless, “before existing in souls, non-being exists in intelligible things themselves (τὸ ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς νοητοῖς μὴ ὄν), non-being which

edly uses the phrase οὐ παρ’ ἔλαττον (τὸ μὴ ὄν τοῦ ὄντος), which is not in Plato’s text. [...] The text is quoted also above, 999.34–36, 1012.11–13, and below, 1076.8–10, 1184.37–39, always with παρ’ ἔλαττον. Either Proclus is following a variant reading, or he has developed a fixed false recollection of this text”. Whatever the case, the complexity of *Sophist* 258a11–b4 (cf. Cordero [1988] 449–451) is simplified in Proclus’ assertion: non-being is not inferior to being. From there, Proclus will advance to: non-being is superior to being.

31 *In Parm.*, V, 999.13–1000.33

32 *Ibid.*, 999.13–19

33 *Soph.*, 258e

34 *In Parm.*, V, 999. 19–29

35 *Ibid.*, 999. 29–32

is the first difference among beings (ἡ πρώτη ἑτερότης τῶν ὄντων), in the way that the *Sophist* shows us³⁶ when he says that non-being is not less real than being (τοῦ ὄντος οὐ παρ' ἕλαττον εἶναι)³⁷. That is: if, as far as the level of soul, non-being implies a deprivation of being, in the intelligible domain not-being is, by contrast, considered to be at the same level as being. And it is considered to be at the same level because difference (ἑτερότης) among beings is necessary for the affirmation of identity in each being. And this is the teaching of the *Sophist*, which establishes difference as one of the supreme categories of being.

However, “over and above this diversity of senses of non-being, there exists non-being that is previous to being (τὸ πρὸ τοῦ ὄντος μὴ ὄν), which is the cause of all beings (ὁ καὶ αἴτιον ἐστὶ τῶν ὄντων ἀπάντων), and which transcends the plurality of beings.”³⁸ Hence there is a third sense of not-being, in which non-being is superior to being and its cause. Consequently, the senses of non-being can be divided into three levels: as inferior to being, as equal to being, and as superior to, and the cause of, being.

For this reason, the Eleatic Stranger agrees with Parmenides³⁹ rejection of the idea that one can say or think something about what is nothing at all⁴⁰. However, when we say that plurality is not, or that the soul or the One are not, we are not saying that they are not at all but that they are in certain sense and are not in another sense⁴¹.

“In general, negations come from difference in the intellectual domain (ὄλως γὰρ αἱ ἀποφάσεις ἕγγονοι τῆς ἑτερότητός εἰσι τῆς νοεῶς)”⁴². That is to say, when we think the differences which exist in reality, we think of them by means of negations. If for example, Proclus continues, we say that something is not a horse, it is because it is something different⁴³. So, negation is the intellectual way (νοεῶς) to think difference.

Once again Proclus refers to the *Sophist*⁴⁴: non-being that is contrary (ἐναντίον) to being is absolute not-being, about which nothing can be

36 *Soph.*, 258b 1–2

37 *In Parm.*, V, 999. 32–36

38 *Ibid.*, 999. 36–39

39 *Soph.*, 260d 2–3

40 *In Parm.*, V, 999. 39–1000.10

41 *Ibid.*, 1000. 10–21

42 *Ibid.*, 1000. 22–23

43 *Ibid.*, 1000.23–24

44 *Soph.*, 257b and 258e

said or thought; but when it is just the negation of being (ἀρνησιμὸν μόνον λέγομεν τοῦ ὄντος), then many other senses of non-being appear⁴⁵.

3.2. Superiority of negation over affirmation

Summarizing what has been said up to now about Proclus' exegesis of the *Sophist*:

1. The philosopher reproduces dialectically – in the same way as does the Demiurge – through speech differentiation and articulation, all the differences and articulations within the real. The *Sophist* articulates this correspondence between divine and philosophical production. Dialectic uses negation as an adequate tool to reproduce differences in the real.
2. The One is superior to being and, in general, to all intelligible reality, which is plural. In the *Sophist* Plato shows that being has a certain totality but also has parts, and therefore is not first because it lacks the indivisibility of the One.
3. There is a great diversity in the senses of non-being and negation. The *Sophist* shows that non-being as difference is not inferior to being, and that it cannot be confused with absolute nothingness. And over and above the non-being of difference we have a sense of non-being as superior to being, and this is the non-being of the One.

These opinions, which Proclus draws by rational argument from the *Sophist*, are used as preparation to showing the superiority of negation to affirmation. In a long passage in the *Commentary on the Parmenides*⁴⁶ which serves as an introduction to the first hypothesis, Proclus analyzes the validity of Plato's argumentation in the dialogue that is marked by the use of negation. Hence he has to examine the validity of negation as a method within philosophy. In these pages Proclus refers frequently to the *Sophist* (and basically to the places already mentioned), but now he tries to show why negation is superior to affirmation.

In the first place he establishes the doctrine of the existence of a One in itself beyond Parmenides' One-that-is⁴⁷; and he does it by referring

45 *In Parm.*, V, 1000. 25–40

46 *In Parm.*, VI, 1064. 18–1092. 15

47 *Ibid.*, 1064.21–1071. 8

once again to the argument in the *Sophist* that the One itself does not have parts and is therefore prior to being, because being is a whole and has unity as an effect⁴⁸. But if this Primal One lacks parts, then nothing can be affirmed about it (because affirmation implies composition from parts) but merely negated. And this One about which everything is negated (οὐ πάντα ἀποφάσκειται) really exists, in the way that was indicated in the *Sophist*⁴⁹.

Furthermore, after pointing out that the “one in the soul” (τὸ ἐν τῆς ψυχῆς) (in other words, unity present in us) or “the flower of the soul” (τὸ ἄνθος τῆς ψυχῆς) is the basis of rational language⁵⁰, he addresses the main question, which is how negation can be superior to affirmation. First of all, he accepts that in the differentiated domain of being affirmation is superior to negation: and he quotes *Sophist* 258b 1–2 as evidence that Plato’s reticence (“if it is licit to say” [that non-being is inferior to being]) alludes to the fact that, in the field of beings, it is paradoxical to place non-being on the same level as being⁵¹.

But non-being has many senses (πολλαχῶς τὸ μὴ ὄν): one as superior to being, another as equal to being, and another as deprived of being. And it is in the area where it is superior to being that negation is more appropriate than affirmation. Properly speaking, neither affirmation nor negation is valid, but negation is more appropriate because “negations have an indefinite potency” (αἱ δὲ ἀποφάσεις ἀόριστον ἔχουσι δύναμιν)⁵². Therefore, they are more suitable for the revealing of the indefinite and incomprehensible nature of the One.

Also, “in the same way as the One is cause of everything, so negations are cause of affirmations” (οὕτω καὶ ἀποφάσεις αἴτιαι τῶν καταφάσεων εἰσιν)⁵³. As a consequence⁵⁴, all the affirmations that can be made in the second hypothesis (in other words, affirmations about beings) have their cause in negations of the One: καὶ οὕτω τοῦτο τὸ εἶδος τῆς ἀποφάσεως γεννητικόν ἐστι τοῦ πλήθους τῶν καταφάσεων. In the *Sophist*⁵⁵ it is shown that affirmation is as valid as negation in the area of being (and in that of difference considered as non-being), but

48 *Ibid.*, 1065. 15–21

49 1065.31–1066.2

50 1071.9–1072.18

51 1072.19–1073.1

52 1074.2–3

53 1075.17–19

54 1075.33–37

55 1076.8–10

everything that can be said about being comes from what has previously been negated of the One, since all oppositions and antitheses originate in the One, such that negations of the One are the source of all subsequent affirmations. “The cause of all antithesis is not itself opposed to anything” (τὸ δὲ πάσης ἀντιθέσεως αἴτιον αὐτὸ πρὸς οὐδὲν ἀντίκειται); for in that case, a previous cause for antithesis would exist⁵⁶. And that is why negations generate affirmations (γεννητικὰς τῶν καταφάσεων)⁵⁷.

From this point on⁵⁸ the argument of the *Sophist* plays a determinant role once more. The question that Proclus asks himself is why Parmenides – in the dialogue of the same name – states that he is going to set out his hypothesis concerning the One, and then goes on to propound an argument in which he sets out several *negations* of the One⁵⁹. In answer to this question Proclus points out that Parmenides’ attitude in this dialogue is similar to the one that the Eleatic Stranger evinces in the *Sophist*. There the Stranger admits the wisdom of Parmenides in taking the One to be above plurality, but goes on to wonder whether that One Being is actually the Primal One. And he comes to the conclusion that it is not the Primal One, because it is a whole and non-indivisible; and hence receives its unity as something in which it participates. The person who follows this reasoning will necessarily end up negating every feature of the One⁶⁰. In the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* Plato begins the series of negations with a first negation: the One is not a whole, and that means that it does not have parts⁶¹. All other negations stem from this one, and later on, all affirmations. Even the categories of being examined in the *Sophist* (being, rest, movement, identity, difference) presuppose a previous negation of the One⁶².

Regardless of this, Proclus warns us, referring to the One by negation is not a sign of human impotence, but the appropriate way to approach it, given its infinity; and this is why divine souls and Intellect itself know the One through negation⁶³.

56 1077.8–11

57 1077.11–14

58 1077.19–1079.26

59 1077.19–1078.13

60 1078. 13–1079.4

61 1079. 14–18

62 1084. 5 ff.

63 1079. 27–1082. 9

3.3. Negation as a difference of sense

There is a question in the *Sophist* to which Proclus pays particular attention: the community of the categories among themselves and their distinction one from another; hence the articulation of Sameness and Otherness, of Identity and Difference. On the one hand⁶⁴ it would be absurd (ἄτοπον) if the Forms could not partake of, or mix with one other, because being part of the One Intellect (τοῦ ἑνὸς νοῦ) they must move through one another and be in one other. It is precisely this interrelationship among the Forms which is the proper object of Intellect⁶⁵. In conclusion, we cannot say that the Forms are altogether unmixed and lacking in community with one another, nor must we say, on the other hand, that each one of them is all of them⁶⁶. How, Proclus wonders, are we to deal rationally with this question?⁶⁷

The first answer is to be found in the *Sophist*. “When Plato demonstrates, in the *Sophist*, the community of Identity and Difference (τὴν κοινωνίαν ταυτότητος καὶ ἑτερότητος), he does not call Identity Difference as well, but ‘different’ (ἕτερον), and hence *not-x*. For it became different by participation (τῇ μετουσίᾳ), while remaining Identity in essence (τῇ οὐσίᾳ)”⁶⁸. In short, each Form is what it is in essence, but by participation shares in the others.

To illustrate how we can rationally say that something is essentially one thing but another by participation; or whether it is rational to say that something is partially one thing but partially another, Proclus resorts to distinctions among senses, or manners of signification. “The term *as* (τό καθὸ) has a double usage”⁶⁹. On the one hand, we may use it to express the fact that if one thing is present then another thing is present also; for instance, when someone says that “just as” something is air, so too it is light, since air gets lightened⁷⁰. On the other hand, we can use the term in another way, meaning what we customarily express by *qua* (ἧ); for example, man *qua* man (ἧ ἄνθρωπος), is receptive of

64 Cf. *In Parm.*, II, 754. 1–6

65 Cf. *Ibid.*, 754. 26–28

66 Cf. 755. 5–8

67 Πῶς οὖν καὶ τίνα τρόπον περὶ αὐτοῦ διαλεκτέον; (755.8–9)

68 756. 33–40

69 Cf. 755. 36–37

70 Cf. 755. 37–756.4

knowledge. In this second meaning, it is not true that air as (*qua*) air contains light, because air does not necessarily imply light⁷¹.

These opinions of Proclus are not just a simple terminological digression. By means of the distinctions among senses (something is one thing in one sense but another in a different sense) he is able once again to indicate the way in which a plurality of senses can be articulated in a single term. Indeed, his logic is founded on the task of articulating differences among senses. What Intellect does is to think in a unified way what the senses present as diversity. In other words, the plurality of the senses is completely real because both Intellect which thinks and its intelligible realities are totally real. That is why the differences presented by the senses are also real. But these differences (something is A as A, but is B as B) would be expressed dialectically (something is A as A, but is not A as B). Negation and non-being establish dialectical discourse⁷², which culminates in the assertion of a diversity of unified senses in a single intelligible essence⁷³. In this way Intellect makes pos-

71 Cf. 756. 4–11

72 Cf. *In Parm.*, I, 649. 36–650. 9: “The wise Eleatic, however, just like the companions of Parmenides and Zeno, looks at what he says when explaining dialectical methods in the *Sophist* and “is able to do this (Plato is talking about not thinking that sameness is otherness and otherness is sameness): to distinguish one single Form which spreads out completely through many others which are, each of them, separate; and many, each of them different from the others, and surrounded from outside by only one; and not only one but made up now into a unity stemming from several groups; with many differences, and totally separate” (*Sph.*, 253d 5–9)”.

73 Cf. the constant use that Proclus makes of differences among senses in the *Elements of Theology* (*Inst.*). Already at the beginning he announces: “everything that participates in the One is one and not one”: Πᾶν τὸ μετέχον τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ ἓν ἔστι καὶ οὐχ ἓν (*Inst.*, 2). With respect to participation in unity, cf. *Inst.*, 4: something will participate in unity *qua* (ἧ) unified. With respect to producer (τὸ παράγον) and produced (τὸ παραγόμενον), see proposition 28: in one sense (πῇ μὲν) the product is distinguished from the producer and in another sense (πῇ δὲ) they are identical. Cf. the same point in proposition 30: ἧ μὲν... ἧ δὲ. And the same differences among senses can be found between being according to cause (κατ’ αἰτίαν), being according to existence (καθ’ ὑπαρξιν), and being according to participation (κατὰ μέθεξιν); cf. the same point in proposition 65, 118 and 140. In short, differences among senses are presented as the central notion forming the ultimate explanation for other notions, such as those involving cause or participation. If everything is related in accordance with this causal process, then everything is tied to everything (cf. *Inst.*, 103), and everything is, in some sense, present in everything, but is so in a different way in each case.

sible both community among and separation among the Forms, because it establishes the unity of a plurality of senses.

Each of these different senses (expressed as difference or non-being) corresponds, according to Proclus, to the partial intelligences which know all of reality but in a partial aspect only⁷⁴. So expressing Difference as non-being is just a provisional phase of dialectical discourse in the expression of Difference and Identity.

3.4. Negation and senses of Difference

The question for Proclus is whether there are other senses of Difference which might be prior to that Difference (ἡ ἑτερότης) which Plato presents in the *Sophist* as being one of the five first categories of being. And the answer is that there are at least three senses of Difference which are prior to Difference when it is viewed as the supreme category of being. This series of distinctions is very typical of Proclus' thinking, since Proclus, in disagreement with Plotinus, is continually looking to establish a strict continuity between all beings, from the absolute One to material infinitude. So the distance between the One and the five categories must be explained, and they are so, structurally, by Unity and Plurality. These latter, in turn, are explained by Limit and Infinite; and these, finally, by the One itself.

3.4.1. The distinction unity (τὸ ἓν, ἡ ἕνωσις) – plurality (τὸ πλῆθος, τὰ πολλά)

In an attempt to clarify how it is possible to conjoin into a unity the five categories of being, and in particular identity and difference⁷⁵, Proclus shows that unity and plurality are presupposed in the distinction among categories of being, hence these should be considered the most general (γενικώτατα) of all beings⁷⁶. Proclus adds that it is not sur-

74 Cf. *Inst.*, 170: "Each intelligence understands all things simultaneously; but whereas unparticipated intelligence understands everything in an absolute way, every intelligence sequential to this knows everything but only in one particular aspect": Πᾶς νοῦς πάντα ἅμα νοεῖ· ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἀμέθεκτος ἀπλῶς πάντα, τῶν δὲ μετ' ἐκείνων ἕκαστος καθ' ἓν πάντα.

75 Cf. *In Parm.* II, 753–757. Cf. *supra* 3.3.

76 *Ibid.*, 764.1–2

prising that Plato does not include them in the *Sophist*⁷⁷, since unity and plurality are not in Intellect, but are Intellect itself⁷⁸ (οὐκ ἐν τῷ νοῦ ἔστιν, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ὁ νοῦς): their unity is a wholeness (δλότης), and their plurality the many parts of wholeness. Unity and plurality are, therefore, the cause of all the Forms, being both one and many.

In other words, "plurality and unity not only exist at the level of being, but also above being (πλῆθος καὶ ἓν οὐ μόνον οὐσιῶδες ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν); however, identity and difference exist in beings (ταῦτὸν δὲ καὶ ἕτερον ἐν οὐσίαις)"⁷⁹. Hence, Proclus insists, it is not surprising that Plato does not include them as categories of being⁸⁰. In that section of the *Sophist* Plato calls being the greatest and most supreme of all categories (τὸ ὄν μέγιστον καὶ ἀρχηγικὸν τῶν γενῶν); at this level identity and difference are appropriate, but they are not so in the case of absolute unity and plurality (ἀπλῶς), whose reality is prior to being⁸¹.

Unity and plurality can be distinguished (διέστηκε) from identity and difference because the former have a nature that is absolute (καθ'αὐτὸ) while the latter are always relative (πρὸς τι). The priority of unity and plurality is that of absolute to relative⁸². So negation, because of its being relative to something (non-x), lies clearly within the ambit of difference, not that of plurality.

There is an analogy between unity and plurality and the first Limit and the first Infinitude (ἀνάλογον πρὸς τὸ πέρασ τὸ πρῶτον καὶ τὴν πρωτίστην ἀπειρίαν), since what unifies plurality is limit⁸³, while infinitude causes plurality in every thing⁸⁴. Not all infinitude causes plurality, but the origin of plurality is infinitude⁸⁵. In other words, neither Unity nor Plurality is viewed by Proclus as the first distinction in the real, because prior to them one can find the first Limit and the first Infinitude.

77 764.3–5

78 764.5–11

79 764.28–30

80 764.26–28

81 764.34–765.2

82 765.6–15

83 764.20–22

84 765.18–21

85 764.21–26

3.4.2. The distinction Limit (τὸ πέρασ) – Infinite (τὸ ἄπειρον, ἢ ἄπειρία)

Limit and Infinity are “in Plato’s theology the two principles of beings that manifest themselves as coming immediately from the One (αἱ δύο τῶν ὄντων ἀρχαὶ προσεχῶς ἐκ τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀναφανείσσαι κατὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος θεολογίαν)”⁸⁶. Proclus bases this doctrine on the *Philebus*: God has made everything by mixing the limit with the infinite⁸⁷. In this, Plato has followed the theological thinking of his predecessors, and also agrees with what Philolaus has written⁸⁸.

The argument⁸⁹ puts in a further appearance in an implicit quotation from the *Sophist*⁹⁰: The One itself is prior to the One-which-is, because the latter includes not only unity but also plurality. To explain how plurality of being can arise from the One, we have to presuppose that the One has potency for generation (δύναμις γεννητική)⁹¹. This potency is an intermediate existence between producer and produced⁹². As a consequence, “the being that is produced and is not the One itself but has the form of the One (οὐκ ὄν αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἐνοειδές) originates from the One thanks to potency (διὰ τὴν δύναμιν); from this comes being, which makes manifest the One”⁹³. In the *Philebus* Plato characterizes as infinite (ἄπειρον) this generating potency of being (τὴν δὲ γεννητικὴν τοῦ ὄντος δύναμιν)⁹⁴.

“Each unity, totality or community of beings, and all divine measures depend on the first Limit, while every division and fertile production and every procession towards plurality emerge from this essential Infinity”⁹⁵. So Unity and Plurality depend on Limit and Infinity, while Infinity means generating or multiplying potency.

At *Platonic Theology* III–9 Proclus continues with his exposition of the doctrine of Limit and Infinity, and quotes the *Sophist* three times. The first is a restatement of the Platonic assertion that non-

86 *Th.Pl.*, III–9, 34. 21–23

87 *Th.Pl.*, III–8, 30. 19–21

88 *Ibid.*, 30. 17–23

89 30. 23–34.19

90 31. 2: ὡς τὸ πεπρονθὸς τὸ ἓν (cf. *Soph.*, 245b8–9)

91 31. 19

92 31. 21–22

93 31. 23–32.1

94 32. 4–5

95 32.21–23: Πᾶσα μὲν γὰρ ἔνωσις καὶ ὁλότης καὶ κοινωνία τῶν ὄντων καὶ πάντα τὰ θεῖα μέτρα τοῦ πρωτίστου πέρατος ἐξήρηται, πᾶσα δὲ διαίρεσις καὶ γόνιμος ποίησις καὶ ἢ εἰς πλῆθος πρόοδος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρχηγικωτάτης ταύτης ἀπειρίας ὑφέστηκεν.

being is not inferior to being⁹⁶, but on this occasion it carries a different sense from other such quotations from the *Sophist*⁹⁷. “How can non-essences produce essence?”⁹⁸ If Limit and Infinity are above essence (ὑπερούσια), then essence has being (ὑπόστασις) which comes from non-essences (ἐκ μὴ οὐσιῶν).

Proclus finds the answer to this question in the same *Sophist*, when Plato defines the first being as a possessor of potency (δυνάμενον)⁹⁹ and further as potency (δύναμιν)¹⁰⁰. Being exists for participating in Limit, and being has potency for participating in that first potency which is the Infinite. If the Eleatic Stranger adds that being is potency, it is to emphasise that being generates all things and is all things in a unitary form (ὡς πάντα ὄν ἐνοειδῶς)¹⁰¹. “Potency is everywhere the cause of fertile processions and all plurality: hidden potency is the cause of hidden plurality; however, potency as an act that manifests itself is the cause of the totality of plurality”¹⁰².

To sum up: plurality is the result of the infinity of potency. In other words, the One is able to be all things (and all things indefinitely), and in the same measure is the cause of plurality. But the One is cause of plurality because it possesses a hidden potency, which manifests itself firstly as infinity as opposed to limit. And that is why this infinite potency is expressed more properly by means of negation, and not so much by affirmation. Because being able to be all things involves not being any one of them in particular, so nothing can be affirmed about this first potency, only denied.

96 Cf. *Sph.*, 258b 1–2

97 The text is corrupt: cf. Saffrey–Westerink (1997) III, 124.

98 Cf. *Th.Pl.*, III–9, 38. 15–16

99 Cf. *Th.Pl.*, III–9, 39. 4–6 (cf. *Soph.*, 247d8: κεκτημένον δύναμιν)

100 Cf. *Th.Pl.*, III–9, 39. 8–9 (cf. *Sph.*, 247e4: ἔστιν οὐκ ἄλλο τι πλὴν δύναμις). A similar reference to the *Sophist* (in that it defines being as vested with potency and as potency) is found at *Th.Pl.*, III–21, 74. 11–13: καὶ τὸ ὄν ὁ Ἐλεάτης ξένος δυνάμενον καὶ δύναμιν ἀποκαλεῖ.

101 Cf. *Th.Pl.*, III–9, 39. 10

102 *Th.Pl.*, III–9, 39. 11–14: Ἡ γὰρ δύναμις αἰτία πανταχοῦ τῶν γονίμων προόδων καὶ παντὸς πλῆθους, ἢ μὲν κρυφία δύναμις τοῦ κρυφίου πλῆθους, ἢ δὲ κατ’ ἐνέργειαν καὶ ἑαυτὴν ἐκφύνασα, τοῦ παντελοῦς.

3.4.3. Transcendence (ἡ ὑπεροχή, τὸ ἐξηρῆσθαι) of the One with respect to being

Finally, the transcendence of the One with respect to being cannot be identified with difference (ἡ ἑτερότης) as a category of being. Separation (χωριστόν) means something different when it refers to the separation of the One with respect to being and when it refers to difference among beings¹⁰³; in the same way, for example, the word *always* is used in a different way with respect to cosmos (because it is then the temporal always) and with respect to Intellect (where it is the eternal always, beyond all time)¹⁰⁴. *Transcendence* (τὸ ἐξηρῆσθαι) also means something different in the case of the One with respect to beings and in the case of Intellect with respect to the soul: Intellect spreads by means of the difference (ἑτερότητα) that divides beings, while the transcendence of the One consists in its priority with respect to such a difference (πρὸ ἑτερότητος)¹⁰⁵.

He appeals once again to the *Sophist* on two occasions to reinforce this sense: on the one hand, what is not absolute is not something else (ἕτερον), because difference is, in a way, non-being¹⁰⁶ and in another way being; on the other hand, non-being is not inferior to being¹⁰⁷, and just as difference involves being and non-being, so too can the transcendence of the One be distinguished from difference in being¹⁰⁸.

So if negation and difference are considered equal at the level of being, it is because being-another is an affirmation (τὸ δὲ ἕτερον κατάφασις)¹⁰⁹. That is, the non-being which is difference can be radically changed by an affirmation. However, the transcendence of the One is completely different: in this case it is not possible to transform negations into an affirmation, and not even the term *transcendence* or any other name is adequate to describe the One¹¹⁰.

So the categories of being analyzed by Plato in the *Sophist* are indications of divine and intellectual orders¹¹¹. On the other hand, as is

shown in the *Parmenides*¹¹², identity and difference are completely inappropriate to the One, which is the cause of so-called “transcendental negations” (ὑπεραποφάσεσιν)¹¹³, though without participating in such negations or being any of them, because the One lies beyond the intellectual domain (τῆς νοεῶς διακοσμήσεως)¹¹⁴. However, by means of negations of the categories of being – and especially of the four negations related to identity and difference – it is possible to refer to the One. The One: 1) is not other than itself; 2) is not other than the others; 3) is not the same as itself; 4) is not the same as the others¹¹⁵.

103 Cf. *In Parm.*, VII, 1184. 16–22. Cf. *ibid.*, *infra* (32–34): ἄλλως οὖν ἐκεῖνο κεχώρισται τῶν ὄλων καὶ ἄλλως ἢ ἑτερότης χωρίζει τὰ ὄντα ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων.

104 1184. 22–26

105 1184. 26–30

106 1184. 35–37: cf. *Soph.*, 257b 3–4

107 1184.37–39: cf. *Soph.*, 258b 1–2

108 1184. 39–1185. 5

109 1185. 8

110 1185. 5–10

111 1172. 31–33: ἐνταῦθα δὲ συνθήμασι θεῶν καὶ νοεῶν τάξεων

112 139b 5–6

113 Cf. *In Parm.*, VII, 1172. 34–35. See Dillon (1987) 523: “ὑπεραποφάσις, a technical term of Stoic logic [...], properly used of such a double negative as “It is not the case that it is not day”, or $\sim\sim P$. Presumably, in the case of the One, such a “hyper-negation” would be e.g. “It is not not at rest” or “not not the same”. For the Stoics, the double negative simply equalled an affirmative, while in this case it signifies the One’s transcendence of both sides of the opposition”.

114 Cf. 1172. 35–38

115 1177. 27–34