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). 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 doctrine, 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).

when he is merely repeating the doctrine of Syrianus\(^3\). Furthermore, Proclus accepts many ideas of Iamblichus in regard both to Platonic doctrine and to his interpretation of particular Platonic dialogues\(^4\).

Within this Neo-Platonic 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 hierarchy of conceptions, 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' theurgical 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 is 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 thought\(^7\). 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*.

Some of the citations from the *Sophist* are merely circumstantial and short; as, for example, when the Eleatic Stranger is presented as a real philosopher;\(^9\) when he asserts the difficulty of distinguishing between the philosopher, the sophist and the politician;\(^10\) when he points out the difference between the Ionian, Ionic and Athenian schools; or when he refers to the fragmentation of the body.\(^11\) 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)
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 centuries


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 *σκόπος* of the *Sophist* is the Demiurge operating in the sublunar world. 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 producers. In this way both the sophist and the Demiurge are image producers (ἐιδολοποιοί), and present many different faces (πολυχρόνοι), 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 (ἐμφάνια) exist in matter from the first Forms which are in him, it produces temporal images (ἐνδοξα 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 παράτημα ἐπιστημή), which represents the production of our intelligence (τὴν νοηματικὴν ἀπεισοδομημένη ποιήμαν), 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. Brison (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*.”
and totality will be bigger than unity”\textsuperscript{20}. That is, if being partakes in unity, it cannot be unity itself\textsuperscript{21}.

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 (πᾶθος τοῦ ἕνου). However, it is impossible for the One itself to receive unity (πεποιθὸς), because “what is really one (τὸ ἕλεθος ἕν) is totally indivisible (ἄμερος)”. 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 being\textsuperscript{22}, 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\textsuperscript{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 (προτέλεσις) for the mysteries in the Parmenides”\textsuperscript{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 ways\textsuperscript{25}, in the order of being, in the order of life and in the order

\textsuperscript{17} Th. Pl. I–29, 12–20
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Steel (1992) 62: “Le Sophiste est par excellence le dialogue qui démontre l’existence de l’Un au-delà de l’être”.
\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Th. Pl. I–4, 18, 13–24
\textsuperscript{20} Πεποιθὸς τε γὰρ τὸ ἕν ἐνία ποιὸν τὸ τοῦ ἑνοῦ φαινεῖται, καί πλέον δὴ τὰ πάντα ἕνον ἔσται.
\textsuperscript{21} For example, in Th. Pl., III–20, 68, 4: δι’ τοῦτο πεποιθὸς ἐστὶ τὸ ἕν καὶ μετέχει τοῦ ἕνος. Or further on in Th. Pl., III–20, 71, 3–5; or Th. Pl. I–4, 18, 18–19.
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Saffrey-Westernier (1997) II, X–XX.
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. Th. Pl. II–4.
\textsuperscript{24} Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν καὶ μικρὸν οὐσιον ἐπὶ πλὴν διαφρόδομως, ὅταν περὶ τοῦ Παρμενίδου λέγωμεν προτέλεσις γὰρ ἔστι τῶν Παρμενίδου λέγωμαν.
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Saffrey-Westernier (1997) II.
of intelligence. The first triad belongs to the domain of being (οὐσία), which includes, in a hidden way, the other categories, but, in the most exact terms, is neither moving nor resting, 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 difference.

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." Plato often alludes to this text, and, curiously, in a different way different from established interpretations. What he points out, in very simplified terms, is that Plato 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 as is 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, he goes directly to this question and makes explicit reference to the Sophist on four occasions. How is it reasonably (ἐκόπτω) possible to say something starting from what it is not? How can something be demonstrated or affirmed from non-being? We are given the answer, Proclus comments, by Plato in the Sophist, when he makes a distinction between what is not absolutely (τὸ μηδὲν μηδαμός ἄν) and deprivation (στάρσις, 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 (φανωμένως) but, properly, are not. And also the whole sensible universe, which never really exists (ἄτομος δὲ οὐδέποτε ἄν). Besides, there is non-being in souls (τὸ ἐν τοῖς ψυχαῖς μὴ ἄν), since they come to be and do not belong to the domain of intelligible beings. Starting in the Sophist, different senses for non-being can be distinguished, from absolute non-being to non-being in souls.

Nevertheless, "before existing in souls, non-being exists in intelligible things themselves (τὸ ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς νοητῶς μὴ ἄν), non-being which..." edly uses the phrase οὐ τιμέω (τὸ μὴ ἄν τοῦ ἄτομος), 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 τιμέω. 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.

29 ὃς ἐστιν, ἢ τῆς θεότητος μαρτύρας φόνος καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἄτομος πρὸς ἄλληλα ἄληκτα ἄνθρωπον, εἰ ὁμοῖος ἔποιερ, ἄντρον τοῦ ἁγίου ἁγίου ἁγίου τοῦ ἄτομος ὑπερῆς, οὐκ ἔστιν ἄκεφος σημαίνουσα ἄλλα τοσοῦτον μάρτυρα, ἐπεξερεύνης.
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 Sophist 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 se 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 traité de la valeur de la négation (In Parm., VI, col. 1072.19–1074.21). On lit (col. 1072.32–37): ὅπως δὲ αὐτὸς (Platon) ἐν θεωρεῖ τὸ μὴ ἄν ἢ ἀληθος τὸ τὰ αἰῶνα συν ἄνθρωπον καὶ ἠτικός ἄντρον τὸ τῶν ἀτομῶν (τοῦ τοῦτον ἀτομων ὅπως καὶ ἀνθρώπων), οὐκ οὐκ θεοῦ τὸ τῆς θεοῦ ἀνθρώπων. Cf. in the same sense Dillon (1987) 286: "It is noteworthy that, in quoting Sophist 258b1–2, Proclus repea..."
is the first difference among beings (ἡ πρώτη ἐπαράγη τῶν ὄντων), in the way that the Sophist shows us when he says that non-being is not less real than being (τὸν ἄντον οὐ παρ’ ἔλεγον 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 (ἐπαράγη) 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 non-being, there exists non-being that is previous to being (πά πρὸ τοῦ ὄντος μὴ ὄν), which is the cause of all beings (ὅ καὶ σίτιον ἡκτὶ τῶν ὄντων ὀτόμεν-, τῶν), 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 it, and as 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 (ὅλος γὰρ οἱ ἀποφάσεις ἐγγούοι τῆς ἐπαράγης εἰς τῆς νοερᾶς)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 different. So, negation is the intellectual way (νοερᾶς) to think difference.

Once again Proclus refers to the Sophist43: non-being that is contrary (ἄναντιον) 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 (ἀμώμην μόνον ἡγούμεν τοῦ ὄντος), then many other senses of non-being appear44.

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 Parmenides45 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-is46; 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 effect. 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 ἄποφασκεται) really exists, in the way that was indicated in the *Sophist*.

Furthermore, after pointing out that the “one in the soul” (τὸ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ) (in other words, unity present in us) or “the flower of the soul” (τὸ ἀνθός τῆς ψυχῆς) is the basis of rational language, 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 being.

But non-being has many senses (πολλὰχος τὸ μή ὦ): 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 ἀποφάσεις ἀρξίου 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 ἄποφασείς στίς τῶν καταφάσεων εἶναι)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 ἐδώ τῆς ἀποφάσεως γενητικῶν ἐστι τοῦ πλῆθους τῶν καταφάσεων. In the *Sophist* 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 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 πᾶσις ἀντιθέσεως αὐτοῦ οὐτὸ πρὸς οὐδέν ἀντίκειται); for in that case, a previous cause for antithesis would exist55. And that is why negations generate affirmations (γενητικῶς τῶν καταφάσεων)57.

From this point on56 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 One. 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 One59. In the *Pamenides* 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 parts. 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 One.

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 infinitivity; and this is why divine souls and Intellect itself know the One through negation56.

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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
knowledge. In this second meaning, it is not true that air as \( \text{qua} \) air contains light, because air does not necessarily imply light\(^{71}\).

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 Intelelct 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 Intelelct 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 discourse\(^{72}\), which culminates in the assertion of a diversity of unified senses in a single intelligible essence\(^{73}\). In this way Intelelct makes pos-

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64 Cf. In Parm., II, 754. 1–6
65 Cf. Ibid., 754. 26–28
66 Cf. 755. 5–8
67 \( \pi\os \os\os \kai \tau\i\na \t\i\p\o\tau\o\n \p\e\r\i \a\u\t\o\u \e\i\a\l\e\k\e\t\e\u\o\n; \) (755.8–9)
68 756. 33–40
69 Cf. 755. 36–37
70 Cf. 755. 37–756.4
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”: \( \pi\a\nu \tau\o \m\u\t\e\p\i\o\u \tau\o \h\o\u \kai \i\n \e\i\t\i\k \kai \o\c\h \e\n \) (Inst., 2). With respect to participation in unity, cf. Inst., 4: something will participate in unity \( \text{qua} \) (\( \os \)) unified. With respect to producer \( \tau\o \p\a\r\a\g\o\u\) and produced \( \tau\o \p\a\r\a\g\o\u\) (\( \pi\a\r\a\g\o\u\) \( \text{qua} \)), see proposition 28: in one sense \( \pi\i\n \u\i\n \) the product is distinguished from the producer and in another sense \( \pi\i\n \) they are identical. Cf. the same point in proposition 30; \( \o\u\) \( \os \) \( \os \) \( \os \) \( \os \) \( \os \) \( \os \). And the same differences among senses can be found between being according to cause \( \k\a\r\a\i\os \) \( \o\i\a\i\os \), being according to existence \( \k\a\r\a\i\os \) \( \o\i\a\i\os \), and being according to participation \( \k\a\r\a\i\os \) \( \o\i\a\i\os \); 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, 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.
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 ἐπιροτής) 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 ἕν, ἡ ἕνωσις) – plurality (τὸ πλήθος, 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 difference, Proclus shows that unity and plurality are presupposed in the distinction among categories of being, hence these should be considered the most general (γενικότερα) of all beings. Proclus adds that it is not surpr.

prising that Plato does not include them in the Sophist, since unity and plurality are not in Intellect, but are Intellect itself (οὐκ εν τῷ νῷ ἐστιν, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ὁ νοῦς); their unity is a wholeness (ὅλης), 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 (πλήθος καὶ εἰς τὸ ἀνάμεσα ὧν οὐκ οὐσίας ἐστιν, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ οὐσίας); however, identity and difference exist in beings (ταὐτόν ἐστι καὶ ἐπαρχον ἐν οὐσίαις).” Hence, Proclus insists, it is not surprising that Plato does not include them as categories of being. In that section of the Sophist Plato calls being the greatest and most supreme of all categories (τὸ ἀνάμεσα καὶ ἀρχιερεῖα τῶν γενέων); at this level identity and difference are appropriate, but they are not so in the case of absolute unity and plurality (ἀπλασώ), whose reality is prior to being.

Unity and plurality can be distinguished (διαφέρον) from identity and difference because the former have a nature that is absolute (καθ' αὑτόν) while the latter are always relative (πρὸς τι). The priority of unity and plurality is that of absolute to relative. So negation, because of its being relative to something (non-), 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 τοῦ πρώτου καὶ τῆς προ-τίττερας αἴτησιος), since what unifies plurality is limit, while infinitude causes plurality in every thing. Not all infinitude causes plurality, but the origin of plurality is infinitude. 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.

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”: Πάντα δὲ τὸ γενόμενον ἐν τῷ μείζονι οὖσας ἀλλ' ὁ μείζον ἀμφιθέκτως ἀπόλος πάντας, τῶν δὲ μείζον ἀνάλογον  ἀπόλος καθ' ἐν τῷ μείζονι.


76 Ibid., 764.1–2
3.4.2. The distinction Limit (τὸ περάτω) = Infinite (τὸ ἀπειρον, ἢ ἀπειρία)

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 δυστῶν ἀρχαὶ προσεχός ἐκ τοῦ ἕνος ἀναφανεύσασα κατὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος θεολογίας)". Proclus bases this doctrine on the Philebus: God has made everything by mixing the limit with the infinite. In this, Plato has followed the theological thinking of his predecessors, and also agrees with what Philolous has written.

The argument puts in a further appearance in an implicit quotation from the Sophist. 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 γενεινηθη) . This potency is an intermediate existence between producer and produced. As a consequence, “the being that is produced and is not the One itself but has the form of the One (οὐκ ἐν αὐτῶν, ἀλλ’ ἐν οὐδένι) originates from the One thanks to potency (διὰ τὴν δύναμιν); from this comes being, which makes manifest the One”. In the Philebus Plato characterizes as infinite (ἀπειρον) this generating potency of being (τὴν δὲ γεγενηθη τοῦ ὀντος δύναμιν).

“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 Infinitude. So Unity and Plurality depend on Limit and Infinitude, while Infinitude means generating or multiplying potency.

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

being is not inferior to being, but on this occasion it carries a different sense from other such quotations from the Sophist. “How can non-essences produce essence?” If Limit and Infinitude are above essence (ὑπόστασις), then essence has being (ὑπόστασιν) which comes from non-essences (ἐκ μη σύνοι) and being. Proclus finds the answer to this question in the same Sophist, when Plato defines the first being as a possessor of potency (δυνάμενον) and further as potency (δύναμιν). 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 (ὁς πάντα ἐν ἐν οὐδένι) . “Potency is everywhere the cause of fertile productions 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.”

To sum up: plurality is the result of the infinitude 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 infinitude 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.

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96 Cf. Sph., 258b 1–2
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. Soph., 247e4: ἔτι δὲν ὡς ἄλλο τι πλήθη δύναμιν). 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 δὲν ὧν οὐκ ἔτι εἰς τὸ κρυφεῖν δύναμιν καὶ δύναμιν ἄποκρυψις.
101 Cf. Th. Pl., III–9, 39, 10
102 Th. Pl., III–9, 39, 11–14: ἡ γὰρ δύναμις αὕτη παντοτικός τῶν γονίων προάδως καὶ παντός πληθεύσεως, ἢ μὲν κρυφεῖ δύναμιν τοῦ κρυφεῖ τὸ πληθεύσω, ἢ δὲ κατ’ ἐνέργειαν καὶ ἑαυτὴν ἐφερόμενον καὶ παντελοῦσαν.
3.4.3. Transcendence (ἡ ἐπεροχή, τὸ ἐξερήθαι) of the One with respect to being

Finally, the transcendence of the One with respect to being cannot be identified with difference (ἡ ἐπεροχή) as a category of being. Separation (χωριστών) means something different when it refers to the separation of the One with respect to being and when it refers to difference among beings. 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). Transcendence (τὸ ἐξερήθαι) 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 (ἐπεροχή) that divides beings, while the transcendence of the One consists in its priority with respect to such a difference (πρὸ ἐπεροχής).

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 (ἐπεροχή), because difference is, in a way, non-being and in another way being; on the other hand, non-being is not inferior to being, and just as difference involves being and non-being, so too can the transcendence of the One be distinguished from difference in being.

So if negation and difference are considered equal at the level of being, it is because being-another is an affirmation (τὸ δὲ ἐπεροχή κατάφασις). 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 One.

So the categories of being analyzed by Plato in the *Sophist* are indications of divine and intellectual orders. On the other hand, as is shown in the *Parmenides*, identity and difference are completely inappropirate to the One, which is the cause of so-called “transcendental negations” (ὑπεραπαθόφασις), though without participating in such negations or being any of them, because the One lies beyond the intellectual domain (τῆς νοησίς διακοσμήσεως). 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 others.