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Rethinking Plato's Legacy: Neoplatonic Readings of Plato's *Sophist*[1]

Scholars currently interested in advocating rhetorics inspired by the classical sophists develop this advocacy in terms of a genealogy in which the sophists have been ignored or rejected by a predominantly Platonic West. Between Plato's derision of Gorgias and other sophists in his dialogues and Hegel's favorable reception of them in his *Lectures in the History of Philosophy* there lies, according to this history, a kind of sophistic vacuum, an empty space kept empty by the legacy of Plato's judgment of the sophists and his derision of sophistry. Jasper Neel gives full expression to this view when he writes at the end of his book that the dominant influence of Plato's *Phaedrus* on rhetorical theories and practices has only recently given way to the sophistic rhetorics it had always directly opposed:

> The direction composition studies have taken over the last twenty years has, in my opinion, been clearly sophistical. As we have moved farther and farther from neo-Platonic notions that good writing comes from some sort of divine inspiration toward notions that good writing can be, even must be learned . . . we have moved toward the time when strong discourse can actually occur in the writing classroom. Strong discourse in the classroom, like strong discourse anywhere else, will, of course, derive its strength from its ability to persuade adherents, not from its ability to satisfy the opinion of one teacher. . . . [M]erely recognizing that any 'single' discourse, even the teacher's, must be weak discourse is an accomplishment, given the prejudices against sophistry that dominate both Plato's academy and society at large. (210)

Strong discourse, born of communal assent, not derived from the authority of one person, is here the sophistic antithesis to weak, Platonic discourse that monologically imposes assent from above. Although Neel identifies monologic, antisophistic theories and practices of writing as Plato's legacy, he doesn't historically account for the development of modern "neo-Platonic" views of writing from the active reception of Plato's texts. His concern is not, however,

to consider how receptions and uses of Plato have contributed to a Platonic tradition and the formation of current neo-Platonic notions of writing.[2]

And while Susan Jarratt and John Poulakos have both made important contributions to the contemporary study of the classical sophists and to contemporary neosophistic theories of discourse, they, like Neel, leave aside discussions of the values assigned the term *sophist* and the idea of sophistry prior to the nineteenth century. Again, like Neel, they are not concerned with how the reconstruction and exegesis of Plato's writings may or may not have participated in the neglect of the sophists Gorgias and Protagoras. But I think that renewed attention to the sophists in histories of rhetoric makes it both possible and imperative to deepen our historical perspectives on notions of Platonism and sophistry in the intervening centuries. Absence of an historical context for the reception of Plato's writings only universalizes their current meaning and value and assumes uncontested transmission of Platonic doctrine from the time of its inscription to its current reevaluation. Such ahistoricism also constructs limited and at times idealized meanings and values for the terms *sophist*, *Platonist*, and even *neo-Platonist*, potentially occluding the significant contestations that inform the interactions of these terms and point to the intellectual and cultural valences for their transmission and continued uses.

In what follows I will historicize the reception of the terms *Platonist* and *sophist* by briefly exploring neo-Platonic discussions of sophistry and sophistic. As late Roman and early Christian exegetes of the Platonic texts, the neo-Platonists might at first seem unflinching adversaries of sophistry. While it might be unrealistic for us to expect any sympathetic treatment of Gorgias from scholars so invested in the authority of classical authors like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, we should not be surprised to find these same scholars promoting sophistry—the contingency of meaning in the context of expression—in the name of Plato.

George A. Kennedy, well known for his endorsement of a philosophical rhetoric, has remarked on Neo-Platonic attention to sophistry, noting in particular the neo-Platonic commentaries of Hermeias on the *Phaedrus* and Olympiodorus on the *Gorgias*. Kennedy calls the commentaries on these dialogues "the capstones of rhetorical theory, the clearest integration of [rhetoric] into a philosophical system" (132). An era in which "sophists" were active teachers and practitioners of rhetoric, late antiquity was also a time of openness between rhetoric and philosophy; to again quote Kennedy, "Sophists . . . often acquired leadership roles in their communities and sometimes even political influence. Unlike earlier sophists, they show little hostility to philosophy. Nor did the neo-Platonists share Plato's distrust of rhetoric. Hellenism was closing ranks" (133).

Without necessarily adhering to Kennedy's views of rhetoric, I am open to the possibility that neo-Platonists valued a certain kind of sophistry and can be

read as in some sense sophistic, for this possibility provides in turn an opportunity for reexamining our investments in a Platonic/sophistic polarization. The reasons neo-Platonists give for finding sophistic views in the Platonic corpus point beyond universalized dichotomies of Platonic and sophistic to broader cultural issues of the power of words, the affective investment in signs, and the struggles over harnessing and controlling, either individually or institutionally, this affective power. In what follows I will sketch a genealogy for what I am calling neo-Platonic sophistry. Developing the separate "sophistries" of Plotinus, Proclus, and an anonymous fourth-century CE neo-Platonist, I will argue that the separate commentaries of these three neo-Platonists reflect a collectively held valuation of sophistry. I will then consider how their sophistic elaborations on Platonic wisdom in turn become theories and practices explicitly rejected by Augustine in his description of a Christian rhetoric. If, as Kennedy writes, Hellenism closed ranks between sophist and Platonist, then, I suggest, the political and social changes characteristic of late Roman Christianity once again opened them. By exploring the significations of these distinctions, I hope to situate the transmissions and developments of sophistry, neo-Platonism, and Platonism in relation to textual practices that inform their current meaning and value.

The Importance of Plato's *Sophist*

While Kennedy has identified the rhetorical views expressed in neo-Platonic commentaries on *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*, these dialogues along with their commentaries constitute neither the entire neo-Platonic teaching cycle nor the explicit neo-Platonic pronouncements on sophistry. Exclusive emphasis on these dialogues universalizes the view that the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias* form for all readers at all times the core of Plato's rhetorical canon. Another dialogue prominent in the neo-Platonic teaching cycle, a dialogue more representative of neo-Platonic ideas of sophistry, is Plato's dialogue, *Sophist*. Unlike Plato's *Gorgias* or his *Protagoras*, Socrates in the *Sophist* does not contend with the Older Sophists. Rather, the dialogue is between the Stranger from Elea and Theatetus, with a young Socrates looking on. The Eleatic Stranger agrees at Socrates' promptings to define the sophist, as distinct from the statesman and the philosopher, and in the process of defining the sophist, the Stranger quickly turns to questions of being and not-being. He begins by distinguishing six kinds of sophists, all sharing the trait of disputation; while the first sophist, a hunter after the "wealthy and prominent," is scorned, the sixth and final sophist, a "purger of souls," is respected as a practitioner of "sophistics noble and grand in descent" (223B, 231B). The disputational skills of all six sophists share a common bond in conjectural knowledge, a fact which leads the Stranger to consider general issues of appearances and imitations. He next moves to

explore the possibility of false appearances in terms of how a speaker may utter the phrase "that which is not" without thereby attributing the status of being to non-being (237B-D). The dialogue develops a lengthy discussion of this question by considering the nature of being and not-being and concludes with a consideration of being and not-being in language, for it is only through language that these categories have meaning; and as defining categories of language, being and not-being create the possibility for true and false statements respectively. Ultimately, the dialogue concludes with the Eleatic Stranger identifying the sophist as someone who practices the art of being "ironical," of making "contradictory speeches"; but as an evaluation of the sophist's art, this judgment is not so straightforwardly negative (268D).

The elusive sophist sought by Theatetus and the Eleatic Stranger, that practitioner of self-contradiction, could easily be, as Ellen Quandahl has recently remarked, Socrates; the Eleatic's teacher, Parmenides; or even the Stranger himself (346). Sophistry exists everywhere and on all levels in the dialogue because, according to the Stranger's admonishment of Theatetus, absolute distinctions of thought are "the mark of someone altogether unmusical and unphilosophic," "for it's on account of the weaving together of the species with one another that (the) speech has come to be for us" (259E). Lofty, philosophical discourse is, in this view, as subtle and allusive as the vilest lies. And as all discourse participates in being as well as not-being, the real problem according to the Stranger is to decide how best to use not-being to express through discourse "the things which are, are becoming, have become, or are going to be" (262D). Some discourses are better at this than others, not because they are more accurate representations of being, but because they are intentionally distorted to correct for errors in and limitations of perception, corrections which better "intimate" the reality discussed. The Eleatic Stranger's discussion of the being and not-being inherent in appearances and imitations unsettles, as Michael Allen observes, notions of truth carefully delineated in a dialogue like the *Republic* and raises as well profound ontological questions about the status of images and representations (122-23). Grappling with images, the intimation of being, and the ontological status of not-being, the neo-Platonists turned consistently to the *Sophist* in their commentaries.

Neo-Platonic Readings of Plato's *Sophist*

In their interpretations of the *Sophist*, neo-Platonists from Plotinus in the second century CE through Iamblichus in the fourth to Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth were generally agreed upon the dialogue's importance, choosing to contend instead over the text's main theme. Unanimously refusing to allow that the text focused on either venal sophistry or the nature of not-being—themes too trivial and negative to occupy an entire Platonic dialogue—neo-Platonists

viewed it in one of two ways. In *Ennead* 6.2, Plotinus, to the exclusion of the rest of the dialogue, specifically comments on the lines in which the Stranger expounds the doctrine of the five ontological classes—being, motion, rest, identity, and difference—and explores their mutual interrelations. The exceptional attention Plotinus gives to this passage is "one of those rare instances where Plotinus has taken up a text and studied it in such a systematic way that it qualifies as a commentary" (Charrue 206). Iamblichus, on the other hand, read the *Sophist* for its discussion of the image-making power of the "sublunar demiurge" of 266 (Allen; Westerink; Dillon, *Iamblichi Fragmenta*). Both readings converge in a scholion to the dialogue written perhaps by Proclus, or by Olympiodorus, in the fifth century CE. In the fifteenth century, Ficino privileges this scholion by repeating it verbatim in the introduction to his commentary on the *Sophist*, weaving the two readings into a single approach to the ontological issues of sophistry: intentionally making images that manifest being while they partake of the not-being of language and of the context of expression. It is in contending with these issues that I think the neo-Platonists elaborated a sophistic view of knowing, communicating, and being. To best express a neo-Platonic tradition of reading Plato's *Sophist*, and to demonstrate the sophistry of neo-Platonism, I will now trace some of the discussions of the dialogue from Plotinus in the third century CE to the scholiast in the fifth.

Plotinus on the One and the Many

As I have already noted, Plotinus (204-270 CE) focuses in *Ennead* 6.2 exclusively on the Stranger's discussion of the five classes of being. In the *Sophist*, Plato's Stranger uses what he calls the science of dialectic to properly discern the divisions, separations, and isolations of being into the five universal classes of being, motion, rest, identity, and difference (253D-255E). His purpose, he says, is to demonstrate that not-being, in the form of difference, partakes of being and hence exists, a conclusion he will extend to not-being in language in his attempt to prove that falsehood exists (260-61). Plotinus's concern is not, however, ultimately with the not-being of language but rather with explaining the interrelationships between the transcendental One and the five ontological classes of things. Significantly, he frames the discussion in terms of the nature of the "plurality which is one" (6.2.5); assuming the unity of the five classes, Plotinus contends not that the many separate objects of the world taken together add up to one being but that the "one nature" has many manifestations, including not-being. As everything is always already an aspect of the One, the problem isn't how all things are joined but rather how they appear to be separated. Broaching the issue in this way, Plotinus makes an

important ontological distinction with equally significant rhetorical consequences.

Where Plato's Eleatic Stranger located the divisions of being in the method of dialectic, Plotinus locates them more generally in the acts of perception and contemplation. Since all beings are part of the One, perceptions of multiplicity are rhetorical constructs serving the needs of the moment (Wallis 70-73). The five classes of being are thus nothing but the consequences of a supercelestial perception which is itself the primary activity of life (6.2.6). And life itself is the potentiality of any soul that when it becomes active through the intellectual motion of contemplation generates the appearance of the classes. As Plotinus puts it, being "is one whole, but when it undertakes, one might say, to contemplate itself, it is many. . . . [I]ts contemplation is the cause of its appearing many, that it may think" (6.2.6). Where Plato has identified the One and the many as constructs of philosophical dialectic, Plotinus finds the One and the many mediated through the activities of perception and thought, the result of an observer's conceptual organization of her own perceptions (6.2.7). On an ontological level, intellect "does at once know and posit [the many], if it thinks, and they exist, if they have been thought" (6.2.8). The intellect is thus primarily responsible for the divisions and separations of objects into classes; perception of an individual object intimates being through "intuitive contact" (6.2.8).

I do not take Plotinus to imply here any kind of vulgar idealism, for an idealist position would only repeat the problems that gave rise to the Stranger's discussion of the five classes to begin with (244-50). Since the Stranger defines being as "the power of being affected or affecting (doing)," I take Plotinus to be saying that material objects and intellect affect each other through the act of perception (248C). Whatever else material reality is, our perceptions of it divide it and categorize it, we make sense of it by acting upon it, and how we act upon it is determined by what we want from it (Wallis 72-73). The dividing powers of perception thus work in opposition to and in dynamic tension with the unifying force of unperceived matter. According to Plotinus,

> things which are not one strive as far as they can to become one, natural things by their very nature coming together, wishing to be united in identity with themselves; for all individual things do not strive to get away from each other, but towards each other and towards themselves; and all souls would like to come to unity, following their own nature. (149)

The dialectical tension between the many tending toward the One and the perceptions of the One which create the many open what may at first appear like a closed Platonic circle of referentiality. But Plotinus is far from proposing

such a circle. Souls only begin to approach the unity of being through their perceptions of the many, yet perception itself generates the divisions that prevent direct access to the One, identity, and unity. Not explicitly a statement on sophistic practices, I think Plotinus's discussion of Plato's *Sophist* implicitly develops the context for sophistic discourse practices by locating the existence of being in the open-ended and multiplying effects of the mutual interactions and influences of being and not-being, intellect and perception on each other. Words take their force from a dynamic field of illusions and allusions, what the Eleatic Stranger called the "intimation of being."

Proclus on Friendship and Love

Proclus (412-481 CE) further develops the ontological perspective of sophistry in the discussion of Plato's *Sophist* contained in his *Parmenides Commentary*. In this brief treatment, Proclus claims to draw on his "exegesis of the *Sophist*" (774), but that text does not survive. In a section of the commentary primarily concerned with the union and division of Ideas in the intelligible world, Proclus turns to the *Sophist* to thoroughly elucidate the various means of "the participation and non-participation of the kinds of being" (774). Proclus's use of the term *participation* is significant and central to any insight into his thought. Pointing to more than a logical union of like with like, participation presupposes for Proclus the influence of intellect's "generative and infinitely productive powers" on a nonintellectual, sensible reality (776; Wallis 126-27). The volitional implications of participation fully inform Proclus's discussion, and I want to read them as a continuation and refinement of his sophistic ontology.

Limiting the means of the "mixture" of the five classes of being to three—"beings of the same rank will mingle with each other in one fashion, superiors with inferiors in another, and the inferior with their superiors in still another" (775)—Proclus proceeds in his *Parmenides Commentary* to identify the relational principles involved in each kind of mingling. Equal beings share freely their powers, the superior mingle with inferiors by giving them their powers, and inferiors passively exist in their superiors as causes; these three kinds of participation explain for Proclus how within themselves the species, as well as the genera, "mingle variously with one another; how genera "give something of themselves to their species"; and how species are "already causally" in the genera because of the "constitution of all things in the indivisible" (775). Proclus goes on to claim authority for these distinctions by finding them symbolically expressed by theologians in the doctrine of "sacred marriages." Decoding the "mystical language" of the theologians, Proclus explains that a marriage is "a homogeneous union and community between two

divine causes," and he concludes that the "special character of each such union" be read into the intermingling of the Ideas (775).

Sharing and giving their powers to each other through "sacred marriages," the many aspects of the One participate in each other through a "friendship and love" that characterizes their unity (755-57). The desire inherent in all participation binds the multiplicity within the one. Proclus explains how the Stranger's organization of the classes of being reflects a unity grounded in this force:

> If then, as we have said, unity and plurality are seen throughout the whole of Intellect, motion and rest in the primary genera, and likeness and unlikeness in the secondary ones, then perhaps the first pair are most in evidence in the part of Intellect which rests (for that also is many and one), the second pair in the part which goes forth (for what goes forth from it is stable in its movement), and the third pair in that which reverts, for every such being is both like and unlike that to which it returns. (776)

Staying within a given level of reality, going forth into lower levels of reality, or returning from a lower to a higher level of reality, being's participation with itself creates an apparent multiplicity while it expresses at all times an inherent unity; the many are always also one, motion is always also stable, like is always also unlike, the identity of any being at any time in any activity is dynamic and open, the result of an interplay of participation's "friendship and love" rather than of the strict circumscription of classes and hierarchies.

These complexities may best be clarified in terms of the neo-Platonists' doctrine of *epistrophe*. A rhetorical term for a "turning about" through the repetition of a word or phrase (Lanham 69), epistrophe also specifies neo-Platonic reversion of souls to the One beyond being. As A. C. Lloyd demonstrates, epistrophe expresses a rich neo-Platonic concept, sometimes meaning simply an inclination to return, other times indicating a completed return it also indicates, for the soul or intellect, not a physical but rather a conceptual change or transformation in "the content of consciousness or thought, say from parts of a whole to the whole" (126-27). Through physical images and images of thought, through images manipulated to best intimate being, neo-Platonists like Plotinus and Proclus sought to return their individual consciousnesses to awareness of the One. Paradoxically, this change of consciousness implied as well a heightened sense of differentiation, a coming to awareness of one's self as distinct from some other and yet as having an identity contingent upon that other. As a result, neo-Platonic epistrophe involves a recognition of one's self and of one's images as simultaneously aspects of being and not-being. Lloyd summarizes this aspect of epistrophe with reference to

Hegel, "The not One which has proceeded from the One tries, in reverting, to grasp the One but finds something else in its grasp. . . . It reminds one of Hegel's famous simile of 'consciousness which can come only upon the grave of its own life'" (132-33). The individuated being, reaching for the One, always grabs hold instead of images, images through which the soul becomes self-consciously aware of itself as both being and not-being (Lloyd 127); epistrophe, then, describes the dynamic interaction by which individual beings, through their own perceptions, create themselves by imagistically mediating their distance from a Unity they participate in but can never directly experience or express.

Neo-Platonic Sophistry as Love

Epistrophe, as awareness of the "difference" of identity, is, as I have been arguing it, a concept that necessarily implies a sophistic discourse. The neo-Platonists embraced the enigmas involved in creating and experiencing copies, replicas, and illusions. It is quite clear, however, that they were not willing to give equal weight to all images, some copies, after all, intimate the One better than others. In the works of Plotinus and Proclus and later neo-Platonists, the idea of imagistically mediating as a sophistic practice is more clearly expressed with reference to another important Platonic dialogue, the *Symposium*. A dialogue devoted to the praises of love in all its forms, the *Symposium* was a central text in neo-Platonic thought, for love or desire was the animating force in the neo-Platonic universe. Focusing on Diotima, who characterized love as an enchanter, sorcerer, and a sophist, neo-Platonists explained the interconnectedness of images of being and not-being, what the Stranger called their power of "affecting" or of being "affected," with reference to the universal force of desire. Love infuses a person's images with the power to affect another. Love charges spells, deception, and persuasion because, according to Diotima, it is always mediatory, halfway between wisdom and ignorance, good and evil, binding opposites together in the dynamic significations of words and other such images of being in the sophistical realm of not-being (203).

Diotima's teachings about love provide the Plotinian cosmos a mechanism for mediating between the One and the many through beauty, love, and Intellect, and Plotinus treats Diotima's teachings extensively in several places throughout the *Enneads*. In *Ennead* 3.5, Plotinus comments on Plato's "many passages dealing with love," though the one passage he focuses on in particular is Diotima's sermon on the birth of love. Since love is born of poverty and plenty, and since love has an intimate connection with the goddess Aphrodite, Plotinus concludes that the God love is the activating principle of the universal Intellect and the World Soul. Each human soul as well is activated by the emotion of desire. So while Plotinus distinguishes among the God, the natural

force, and the human emotion, he at the same time finds them to be manifestations of one and the same power, the desire for unity (the mechanism of epistrophe) inherent in "all that has life" (3.5.4). The life force of desire for unity is aroused in the natural force and the emotional state by perceptions of beauty (3.5.1). The capacity for perceiving beauty—the harmony and divine communion of created things—depends upon a "perceptive faculty" that "molds into unity as far as possible the multiplicity and in so doing perceives the Idea" (1.6.3). This perceptive ability to remanufacture the unity of being from the multiplicity of existence is itself that same sophistic skill I discussed above, a skill that becomes most explicit in Plotinus in his discussions of how to use desire for images of beauty to enact psychical epistrophe.

Since all beings participate in the One, how a person chooses to affectively invest in images of beauty decides the level at which she intimates being. For Plotinus, the highest awareness of beauty involves the practice of the "Holy Celebration of the Mysteries" (1.6.7), by means of which the self becomes artist of its own Soul. He uses the image of the sculptor who crafts from the clay lump a being in the image of her conception, an image she desires because of its intellectual beauty (1.6.9). This refashioning of the unity of the soul's beauty is itself the inversion of the Intellectual Principle's fashioning of the soul and its physical form. In *Ennead* 5.8, Plotinus uses the same analogy of a sculptor, this time a divine artisan, to explain the nature of the physical universe and its relation to the divine (5.8.1). The physical beauty of the world is an imitation of divine beauty because that beauty exists in the mind of the divine artisan:

> This form is not in the material; it is in the designer before ever it enters the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands but by his participation in his art. The beauty, therefore, exists in a far higher state in the art; for it does not come over integrally into the work; that original beauty is not transferred; what comes over is a derivative and a minor: and even that shows itself upon the statue not integrally and with entire realization of intention but only in so far as it has subdued the resistance of the material. (5.8.1)

The beauty of images, the power of those images to arouse desire, enacts the ever-changing interplay of imitations and models by which meaning is artistically created and the many are bound in the One.

Read in terms of his commentary on the *Sophist*, and understood as additional elaborations on the ontological mechanisms of epistrophe, these passages signal a sophistic world view of the interactions of being with desire and perception and expression. Plotinus has taken from Diotima's equation of the sophist, love, magic, and nature a sense of love as the power inherent in "all

that has life," and a sense of nature and the soul as sophists. Plotinus, however, stops short of suggesting a magical or theurgic verbal practice by which being and desire and perception may be taken hold of, controlled, and manipulated; consistent with his practice of not advocating magical doctrine, he doesn't follow Diotima's conjunction of the sympathetic powers of love and nature with the powers of magic.

Sophistry as Magic

Proclus, on the other hand, does develop Diotima's equations of magic and sophistry into a verbal practice of manipulating signs for theurgic ends. Unlike Plotinus, who claimed to have reverted to the One several times, and hence who had no need of theurgic rites, Proclus considered union with the One beyond the unaided grasp of human power. For Proclus, following Iamblichus (Shaw), intellectual apotheosis "requires the operation of a transcendental force, with which theurgy puts us in contact" (Wallis 152-53). In the only surviving text of ancient magical theory, *On the Priestly Art According to the Greeks*, Proclus describes an art of apotheosis grounded in theories of ontological and psychological sympathy. This short treatise, which later became an important source for Ficino's own widely read Renaissance magical treatise, *Three Books of Life*, far from expressing the spurious hopes of a charlatan, was a theoretically informed, profoundly serious undertaking, and Diotima's teachings, according to Brian Copenhaver, provide for it a legitimate philosophical pretext (86). The debt is obvious from the first few lines:

> Just as lovers systematically leave behind what is fair to sensation and attain the one true source of all that is fair and intelligible, in the same way priests—observing how all things are in all from the sympathy that all visible things have for one another and for the invisible powers—have also framed their priestly knowledge. For they were amazed to see the last in the first and the very first in the last; in heaven they saw earthly things acting causally and in a heavenly manner, in the earth heavenly things in an earthly manner. (103)

The magic of lovers, deriving from the doctrine of sympathies that states that "all things are in all," depends, as Copenhaver puts it, on "the manipulation of sensible objects" (86). This manipulation enacts the doctrine of epistrophe and expresses a kind of magical sophistic practice. By arranging perceptible signs in arousing configurations, the priests intimate the "invisible powers" of universal sympathetic desire. As Copenhaver puts it, "natural magic becomes an erotic embrace of the insensible divine. . . . Because God's love had created

and vitalized the world, knowledge of the world was a means of knowing God" (86-87). But as was clear, knowledge of the world is not a direct experience of the One beyond being. Words and other sensible images differ and defer from God; they multiply and lead away just as they point back. Such, however, is the nature of the desire without which one never begins to know. As the Stranger suggested of Being, and as Diotima taught about desire, everything exists in a dynamic tension.

I would infer from Proclus's separate uses of the doctrine of desire in his discussion of the *Sophist* and in his magical treatise that he recognized magic was a kind of sophistry, making both magic and sophistry dependent upon a universal desire. But his separate discussions of sophistry and magic may or may not inform each other in any number of ways. Plato had also, in the *Sophist* as well as in other dialogues, equated sophistry with magic (de Romilly 32); and when the Eleatic Stranger makes the comparison, the intent is clearly pejorative (235). Plotinus as well considered magic a kind of deceitful practice, perhaps akin to venal sophistry. Does this suggest, then, that when Proclus fails to explicate parallels between sophistry and magic, he displays a blatant disregard for deceitful sophistry?

A Nobly Descended Neo-Platonic Sophistry

I want to recall here that in the *Sophist* Plato identified six kinds of sophist. The neo-Platonists ranked these six in terms of activities of creation and imitation, valuing sophistic practices which most evoked epistrophe—participation with others and in being—while devaluing those which most evoked dissension and nonbeing. Thus any sophistic or even magical practices paired with the nobly descended sixth sophist would themselves be noble sophistic, magical practices. This reading of the dialogue is most straightforwardly expressed in an anonymous fourth-century CE scholion attributed to Proclus, thereby treated as authoritative, and consequently repeated by the most influential European translator of Plato, Marsilio Ficino. In this scholion the author clarifies the ways in which Plato distinguishes good sophists and sophistries from the bad. The scholiast begins:

> Plato uses the term *sophist* to signify not only a particular man but also Love, Pluto, Jupiter; and he refers to the sophistic art as *most eminent*. From this we may gather that the dialogue is concerned with a more noble subject than might first appear. For, according to the great Iamblichus, Plato's intention was to treat of the sublunar craftsman. (Allen 90)

Westerink explains that this reading, emphasizing as it does the Eleatic Stranger's all-too-brief statement of divine sophistry, makes sense when we recall that the neo-Platonists paired the *Sophist* with the *Statesman*, in particular with its myth of a "heavenly King and Lawgiver," a divine Statesman for whom the sixth sophist was a divine counterpart (38).

In addition, defining the subject of the dialogue as the Timaeic demiurge reinforces for the neo-Platonists the dialogue's prominent place in the Platonic teaching cycle (Westerink 37; Allen). Nonetheless, as the scholiast recognizes, the dialogue also discusses the more reprehensible sophistries of hunting "rich young men" and loving "what is truly false." But rather than dwell on such ignoble sophistries, the scholiast uses them to further highlight the nobler sophistries of nature, humankind, and the deities. Moving from the ignoble to the noble sophists and sophistries, the scholion continues by equating sophistry with a magical power, much as the Stranger had at 235, but even more so as Diotima had in the *Symposium*:

> This same sophist is also a mage in generation when he so enchants and entices souls with natural reasons that they are separated with great difficulty from generation. Love, moreover, is a mage, and nature is called a mage by some because of the reciprocal attractions and enchantments that proceed in the course of nature. Now, therefore, Plato means to proclaim the sophist in every way. For the philosopher too is a sophist in that he imitates both the celestial craftsman and the craftsman of generation. (Allen 91)

Sophistry and magic aren't here the arts of dissemblers and jugglers, as the Stranger called them; they are the arts of love and nature and the deities as Diotima characterized them. Magic enchants souls away from physical generation to the philosophical contemplation of being; those same magical attractions draw objects toward each other much as Proclus suggested in his discussion of participation. Sophistry and magic infuse the universe and are the terms given to those activities that bind together all things in all.

Equating the proclaimed sophist with nature, with magic, and with love also bespeaks the inherent value neo-Platonists placed on a perspective of imaginative participation of self in the being of the world. As the scholiast puts it, recalling Plotinus, "the faculty that makes distinctions imitates the progress of things from the One, and the craftsman of generation imitates the celestial craftsman; wherefore he is a sophist" (91). Giving a central role to the cognitive faculty of distinction and generation, the imagination (or phantasia), the scholiast prioritizes creative power over being and not-being and states what I take as the most fully developed neo-Platonic conception of sophistry: that it is the power to fashion and respond to images that arouse and sustain the desires

animating identification and differentiation. Since, in neo-Platonic thought, this desire is universal, it, to borrow I. A. Richard's term, *interinanimates* everything: our relationships, the images by and through which we engage others, even the social contexts, environments, and cosmos of those engagements. And because these desires are responsive to sophistic images, they become susceptible at every level to manipulation by sympathetic magic.

By the fourth century CE, the neo-Platonists, making parallels between love and magic, and sophistry, describe a rhetoric of universal sympathetic magic that enacts desire through the manipulation of imaginative images. These images are at one and the same time the physical perceptions of the realm of not-being, spiritual intimations of the realm of being, and the creative psychological capacity to shape responses to both perception and intimation. All relationships are lived through imaginative images that stimulate identity or difference by concretizing the erotic desires of people who define themselves as isolated or joined to others through their investments in and uses of the physical manifestations of those imaginative symbols. Investing themselves in images and their meanings, persons create themselves as rhetorical beings. Thus the authority of physical images rests not in their representation of reality. It consists instead of the lived experience of their meanings and values, their valence within a matrix of social, emotional, and intellectual spheres, which in turn charge the imaginative receptions of those images, in essence investing them with the daemonic power of cognitive and emotional force.

Augustine and the Neo-Platonists

I want to turn now to the reception of these views by St. Augustine, so as to identify the valences of the terms *Platonic* and *sophistic* prior to the Renaissance, in particular in the fourth century CE. A time marked by the increasing distinction between pagan and Christian, and the further institutionalization of the Church, the fourth century's most enduring contribution to theories of rhetoric and rhetorical practices is Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. Augustine's world view has been labeled "Platonic," even though it is not certain he ever read Plato. His Platonism was, however, directly influenced by the neo-Platonists, particularly Plotinus (Knowles 38-50). While neo-Platonic doctrine may have strongly influenced his theology, my contention is that his attitudes toward rhetoric are informed by his rejection of the neo-Platonic valuation of images, what I have been referring to as their sophistry. If the terms *sophist* and *sophistry* have had certain positive connotations for Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus, then they carry for Augustine the negative connotations of the pagan term, *neo-Platonic*.

In a passage widely quoted up through the Renaissance, Augustine states that of all the pagan philosophers, "There are none who come nearer to us

[Christians] than the Platonists" (8.5). Yet, as this statement suggests and as he makes completely clear in the *City of God*, neither are the neo-Platonists Christians nor is their rhetoric pious. Augustine's own theory of rhetoric, as it is developed in his *On Christian Doctrine*, is clearly antisophistical. Words, as signs, "cause us to think of something beyond the impression" made upon our senses (2.1.1), and such impressions lead us to reflect upon the ineffable being of God. While such a view may recall Plotinus, for Plotinus images or words intimate the One in proportion with how much desire their physical beauty inspires. Augustine demands just the opposite, that desires be suppressed, that people not "love for its own sake" those things, like words, used to satisfy a desire for God (1.4.4). Words are thus for Augustine the physical, perceivable, and therefore discardable vessels of spiritual, ineffable truths. Awareness of divine presence depends, therefore, on correctly directing one's desire away from immediate sensation of the vessel, by means of faith, hope, and charity, toward the passive reception of its spiritual content (1.39.43). According to Augustine, words signify in the same way the Word of God became flesh in Jerusalem, "without change that He might dwell among us" (1.13.12). Sarah Spence remarks that Augustine's attitude, a "hermeneutics of charity" (101), marks a shift for both Augustine personally and Christian culture as a whole from oratory to prayer (80). Because meaning is had for Augustine through supplication, Spence argues that the goal of Augustine's hermeneutics is a God "by definition unreachable within the limits and strictures of language, the journey to which is motivated by desire," a desire for union with God, but also a dissatisfaction with pagan means of achieving this end (101).

While such a journey may involve a kind of rhetoricity—a recognition of words as signs—and while Augustine shares with the neo-Platonists a recognition of the signifying potential of desire, he differs from them in his separation of desire for words from desire for the ineffable, and hence differs from them as well in his response to the sophistic, sympathetic magic of words. In the second book of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine denigrates the sophistic contingency of magic; he denies the truth of a theurgic embrace of signs and idols. Thoroughly enmeshed in their signs and symbols, diviners and idolaters, according to Augustine, "are made more curious and entangle themselves more and more in the multiple snares of a most pernicious error" (2.23.35), an error grounded in a mere "social consent" born of "suspicion and customary habits of thought" (2.24.37). Diviners, idolaters, and those who follow them have over invested their desire in creating signs and symbols and icons that only draw attention away from what lies beyond the vulgar features of rhetoric. The error in their rhetorical judgment, as well as their sin against God, is a faith in their own meaning-making abilities. And as he argues in Book eight of *The City of God*, this error and sin are the major flaw that keep the pagan neo-Platonists from becoming supplicating Christians (8.16-8.23).

Ultimately for Augustine, the magically persuasive force of words pridefully plying the desires must in every instance yield to the eternal verities of God.

In her reading of *On Christian Doctrine*, C. Jan Swearingen characterizes Augustine's treatment of diviners, idolaters, and dissemblers in terms of the central place he affords charitable desire or right intent. Words don't of themselves successfully signify for Augustine, as his discussions of diviners and idolaters demonstrates; rather, as Swearingen puts it, "they are intended to signify *to*, for a reason" (198). And the rhetor's "right" or "charitable" reason can only be for Augustine to show forth the ineffable God of Christianity. This focus on intent parallels for Swearingen Plato's discussion of deceptive imitation in the *Sophist:* "As in the distinction Plato draws in the *Sophist* between unknowing versus deliberate imitations of truth, Augustine emphasizes that the interior knowledge and intent that exists in an individual's mind is the definitive criterion of deceit" (203). In Swearingen's view Augustine's derision of secular rhetoric parallels Plato's derision of sophistry; secular rhetoric and sophistry both have argumentative conquest not unwavering truth as their ultimate goal (213). As I understand them, Plotinus, Proclus, and the anonymous scholiast have not read the imitation issues of the *Sophist* as a blanket dismissal of sophistry. They have instead accepted the gyring complexities of the interminglings of being and not-being as signaling divine mysteries of imitation and creation plumbable through magic, love, and sophistry. Not to be eased by ignoring their pull, the desires stimulated by images and imitations and replications are erotically embraced by the neo-Platonists as the genuine intimations of the greater force of being (see esp. Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.6).

Further, the terms of Augustine's dismissal of secular rhetoric (social consent born of a wrongful desire for words and signs) provide the terms by which he later, in *The City of God*, distances himself from the neo-Platonists, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry (8.12). Taking into account Augustine's reactions to the neo-Platonists, as well as their positions on sophistry as developed through the *Sophist*, concretizes and contextualizes Swearingen's parallel between Plato and Augustine at the same time that it complicates it. The similarities between Augustine's rhetoric and Plato's *Sophist* are concretized and contextualized when we read Augustine as reacting immediately to the doctrines espoused by Plotinus and Iamblichus and Porphyry. Augustine was not simply repeating Plato's moves against sophistry because they worked against pagan rhetorics inconsistent with Christianity; rather he was responding immediately and directly to conceptions of sophistry developed through neo-Platonic readings of the *Sophist*. That his opponents were the neo-Platonists, those proponents of pagan magic, complicates our view of Augustine's Platonism because they represented, for Augustine, through their discussions of sophistry, the Platonic doctrine he distinguished from his own

Christian doctrine. Calling Augustine Platonic may be informative and not wholly inaccurate, but doing so removes him and his works from their context and occludes a sense in which *Platonic* means *neo-Platonic*.

In short, the sophistry of neo-Platonic magic, by virtue of its daemonic interinanimation of the imagination, words, and the universe, becomes the target for Augustine's philosophical attack on it as social and ceremonial idolatry. Through such attacks, Augustine canonizes the authority of a Christian, antisophistic rhetoric. In the history of the spread of Platonic rhetoric throughout Europe, the neo-Platonists thus stand in opposition to the dissemination of rhetorical practices that inculcate authority, strip words of all but a referential function, and eradicate the role of personal power and social place in the creation of meaning. From a post-Augustinian perspective, neo-Platonic sophistry undermines attitudes of direct referentiality by imparting perspectives on being and images of being that enact desire in complex ways. These views exist in a context of the union of self and cosmos and attendant theories of psychology and cosmology, which explain how images cement union through the erotic power of the imagination. At odds with this world view and its sophistry is one premised on a referential charity that surrenders the authority over images and meaning to a transcendental power while at the same time transforming active desire into passively receptive, charitable intent. In broad terms Augustine's debate with the neo-Platonists represents a contention between the human power to create and manipulate images and the human supplication to eternally unchanging, preexistent realities.

Conclusion

To attend to Augustine's debate with the neo-Platonists, and to acknowledge the neo-Platonic reception and exegesis of the Platonic texts, is to begin to situate our current reception of Plato's debate with the sophists within an historical context of active reception. It is to begin to ask about the ways in which each new reception of Plato, such as that of Augustine or Plotinus or Proclus, is bound up with immediate questions about and crises in rhetorical theory and discourse practices, which in turn inform, and are used to inform, future questions and crises in rhetoric as well as writing. To begin to interrogate, for example, both how Augustine responded to Plato and Plotinus and how we in turn receive Augustine as "Platonic" while relinquishing Plotinus and Proclus and their "sophistry" to a secondary role is to begin to understand the historically accumulated contestations that shape the horizon of our current receptions of Plato and the sophists, Platonism and sophistry. In unsettling traditional receptions, my goal, to borrow from Catherine Osborne's discussion of ancient uses of Heraclitus, "is not a single conclusive reading but

an exploration of the range of meaning brought out by the creative use of the text" (10).

To recognize that Plotinus and Proclus and Augustine discerned and grappled with issues of sophistry raised by Plato in the *Sophist* is, I think, to recognize their creative influence over the subsequent reception and impact of classical rhetoric. The awareness that receptions and interpretations of Platonism and sophistry are highly contested and always unsettled, debated anew whenever and wherever readers sit down with texts from the past, is, however, lost to us if we narrow our Platonic canon to only a few possible readings of a few texts (Welch). Just as Susan Jarratt draws three "twentieth-century versions of the sophists" from "a number of disciplines other than rhetoric/composition" ("First" 70), Ellen Quandahl suggests that various versions of Plato persist, depending on who reads him for what purposes. "I want to question," she writes, "ways in which Plato has been appropriated and summarized, and the tradition in which the Plato of rhetoricians did not write the same texts as did the Plato of, say, logicians or ethicists" (347). Along these lines I have attempted to show how the *Sophist*, as one instance, was used and can be used to fashion sophistic or antisophistic perspectives, how readings of it by rhetoricians, logicians, and ethicists, or by Augustine, Plotinus, and Proclus, reiterate or reject an antagonism to sophistry. Reading Plato in this way, I think we benefit from finding that along with the sophist whose language skills eluded easy capture in the Stranger's philosophical net, the neo-Platonist similarly eludes well-defined historical categories. Adding the *Sophist* to our Plato makes more elusive, more sophistical, the contingent and contextual elements by which we fashion our rhetorical terms as historical, genealogical categories.

This approach also raises questions about the kinds of textual strategies that led to the dialogue's exclusion from Plato's rhetorical canon. Discussions of why the primary rhetoric texts in the Platonic corpus have come to be the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias* can and should inform discussions of what sophistry has meant throughout the years people have been forming this canon. Such selectivity presupposes reading and writing and talking about the dialogues in particular ways, employing strategies and making choices influenced by an inheritance of possible issues and conflicts as well as settled ways of reading and representing that reading that may or may not be identified as "sophistic." Attention to the neo-Platonists and their readings of Plato's *Sophist* thus points not only, as Quandahl says, to the rhetorical elements of Plato (347), such attention points as well to the contextual and contingent rhetorical strategies constantly at work in the shaping of philosophy's, rhetoric's, and sophistry's intertwined histories.

Notes

[1] I wish to thank Richard Enos and Edward Schiappa for their careful attention to and helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

[2] For a brief history of the interpretive debates and contestations attending receptions of Plato's writings, see E. N. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato*.

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