

Why are Change and Stability Different from Difference and Sameness? A Reappraisal of *Sophist* 255a4-255b7¹

Nicolas Zaks

F.R.S.–FNRS/Université Libre de Bruxelles

In the center of Plato's *Sophist*, we find the Eleatic Stranger studying the relationship between five very important kinds: change, stability, sameness, difference and being. The Stranger notably attempts to prove that change and stability are distinct from sameness and difference (255a4-255b7). The argument offered to that effect raises an exegetical difficulty about the stability of the kind change. Part of the proof relies on regarding the stability of change as an impossible situation, whereas the Stranger's previous commitments in the dialogue should force him to grant the stability of change. Although the scholarly effort to solve this difficulty has been impressive, I argue that it calls for a reappraisal. In this paper, I propose an interpretation of the proof according to which the stability of change is rejected because, in the argument under consideration, the relation of participation affects the nature of the participant. I also argue that the proposed reading could be fruitfully applied to other passages belonging to the core of the *Sophist*.

Change, Stability, Sameness, Difference, Participation, Nature

What is a sophist? A producer of falsehood, replies the Eleatic Stranger, the main interlocutor of Plato's *Sophist* (216a1-237a2²). But producing falsehood implies saying what is not, something that Parmenides forbids. Hence, either Parmenides is wrong or the sophist is not a producer of falsehood (237a3-242b5). The Stranger's strategy for showing that Parmenides is wrong and that it is possible to say what is not relies on studying the relations between five very important kinds: change, stability, sameness, difference and being. The first part of his study consists in three arguments which prove that these kinds are different from each other (254e2-255e7). These proofs are difficult to interpret and require careful attention. In this paper, I

1 I would like to thank my audience at the Symposium Platonicum XIII, whose stimulating feedback helped me clarify certain parts of my argument. I also thank Lea Cantor for revising my English.

2 Throughout this paper, I use the text and line numbers of the new Oxford edition, Duke et. al. 1995.

will focus on the Stranger's attempt to distinguish change and stability from sameness and difference (255a4-255b7).

As I explain in the first section of the paper, the argument offered by the Stranger raises an exegetical difficulty about the stability of the kind change. Part of the proof relies on regarding the stability of change as an impossible situation, whereas the Stranger's previous commitments should force him to grant the stability of change. Although the scholarly effort to solve this difficulty has been impressive, I argue that it calls for a reappraisal. I therefore propose an interpretation of the proof according to which the stability of change is rejected because, in the argument under consideration, the relation of participation affects the nature of the participant. I end the paper by reflecting on the consequences of the proposed reading for other key passages in the dialogue.

1. The proof and the exegetical difficulty it raises

Let us consider the Greek text and a translation of the proof (255a4-255b7):

ΞΕ. ἀλλ' οὐ τι μὴν κίνησις γε καὶ στάσις οὐθ' ἕτερον 255a4
οὔτε ταυτόν ἐστι. a5

ΘΕΑΙ. πῶς; a6

ΞΕ. ὅτιπερ ἂν κοινή προσείπωμεν κίνησιν καὶ στάσιν, a7
τοῦτο οὐδέτερον αὐτοῖν οἶόν τε εἶναι. a8

ΘΕΑΙ. τί δῆ; a9

ΞΕ. κίνησις τε στήσεται καὶ στάσις αὖ κινήσεται. a10
περὶ γὰρ ἀμφοτέρα θάτερον ὅποτερονοῦν γιγνόμενον a11
αὐτοῖν ἀναγκάσει μεταβάλλειν αὖ θάτερον ἐπὶ τούναντίον a12
τῆς αὐτοῦ φύσεως, ἅτε μετασχὼν τοῦ ἐναντίου. b1

ΘΕΑΙ. κομιδῇ γε. b2

ΞΕ. μετέχeton μὴν ἅμφω ταύτου καὶ θατέρου. b3

ΘΕΑΙ. ναί. b4

ΞΕ. μὴ τοῖνυν λέγωμεν κίνησιν γ' εἶναι ταυτόν ἢ b5
θάτερον, μηδ' αὖ στάσιν. b6

ΘΕΑΙ. μὴ γάρ. b7

★

Eleatic Stranger. But at least change and stability are neither difference nor sameness.

Theaetetus. How so?

Eleatic Stranger. Whatever we say in common of change and stability, this cannot be either of them.

Theaetetus. Why?

Eleatic Stranger. Change will be stable and stability will, in turn, change. For any of those things [i.e. of change and stability] which becomes of both will force the other to change into the contrary of its own nature, since it participates in this contrary.

Theaetetus. For sure.

Eleatic Stranger. Yet both participate in sameness and difference.

Theaetetus. Yes.

Eleatic Stranger. Let us not say, then, that change is sameness or difference, nor that stability is.

Theaetetus. Let us not say it.

At first glance, the proof says that if change or stability were sameness or difference, then, since sameness and difference apply both to change and stability, either stability (*ex hypothesi* identical to sameness or difference) will apply to change and change will be stable or change (*ex hypothesi* identical to sameness or difference) will apply to stability and stability will change. But both situations are taken to be impossible. Hence, neither change nor stability is identical to either sameness or difference.

The difficulty raised by this proof is that change and stability are very important kinds and that kinds, being the objects of knowledge, are supposed to be stable (249b8-c5). It is unclear, then, why the Stranger rejects the conclusion that change is stable as an impossibility and how his proof is meant to work.³ As I set out to show, the different solutions which have been suggested as a basis for fixing this problem are ultimately unsatisfying.

2. Existing attempts to solve the difficulty

First, some scholars believe that what is rejected is the conjunction 'stability changes *and* change is stable' (or even the conjunction 'stability changes and is stable, *and* change is stable and changes').⁴ Since only one member

3 This difficulty is helpfully explained by Crivelli 2012, 119. As Crivelli makes clear, the situation is not improved if one assumes that Plato accepts that there is a sense in which kinds change, because it then becomes hard to explain why the change of stability is regarded as an impossibility. (The solution I propose works whether or not some or all kinds change.)

4 See Teisserenc 2007, 261.

of a conjunction needs to be false for the entire conjunction to be false, and since it is false in the context of the *Sophist* that stability changes, the Stranger would be justified in believing that he has derived a false conclusion (whether or not change, like every kind, is stable). However, the Stranger does not deduce a conjunction. As his use of the particle $\alpha\tilde{\nu}$ indicates (at 255a10), he rather deduces two conclusions each resulting from two distinct hypotheses: either that change is sameness or difference, or that stability is sameness or difference.⁵

Second, some commentators argue that, in the conclusion ‘change is stable’, ‘change’ does not denote the kind change, but rather instances of change, which indeed cannot be stable, at least in exactly the same way as the one in which they change.⁶ Hence, the Stranger is justified in rejecting the conclusion according to which ‘change is stable’. However, change in this section of the dialogue consistently denotes a kind (indeed, a very important one).⁷ Even within the argument, the conclusion according to which change is stable derives from the participation of change in sameness and difference (255b3), a claim which certainly concerns the kind change, since it itself derives from the fact that the three first important kinds (change, stability, being) are the same as themselves and different from each other (254d14-15).⁸

Third, it is possible that the conclusion ‘change is stable’ is rejected because it is, in the Stranger’s view, not an ordinary predication about a property possessed by change, but the definition of change. ‘Change is stable’ is an impossible result because to be stable is not the definition of change. However, against this suggestion, one should once again note that ‘change is stable’ is derived from the participation of change in sameness and difference, an assumption that *cannot* be taken as a definition of change since the Stranger is precisely arguing that change is not sameness nor difference.⁹

Finally, some commentators understand the Stranger’s first premise (at 255a4-5) to be that anything said *in the same way(s)* of change as it is said of stability is different from both stability and change. This premise is true: suppose stability is said of change in the same way as it said of stability; since stability is said of stability in that it is identical to it, so too it would be said of

5 See Crivelli 2012, 133, whose discussion of the secondary literature I am following in the next two paragraphs.

6 See e.g. Bluck 1975, 113-114, 142.

7 See O’Brien 1995, 105.

8 As Bostock 1984, 108-109 has noticed.

9 Cf. Heinaman 1981, 61-62.

change in that it is identical to change, which is an absurdity; hence stability cannot be said of change in the same way as it said of stability (and similarly for change). Since difference and sameness *are said* of change in the same way as they are said of stability, they are different from both stability and change.¹⁰ I find it hard, however, to extract this reading from the Stranger's argument. In particular, the crucial qualification 'in exactly the same way as' seems to be missing from the Greek text.¹¹

3. A reappraisal of the proof

Given the difficulties facing existing interpretations of the proof, I propose to reassess the argument.¹² I start from the way the Stranger expresses what would happen if change or stability were sameness or difference. He says that, in this case, since both change and stability participate in sameness and difference, one of them, that is, whichever one is identical to sameness or difference, will force the other 'to change into the contrary of its own nature (τῆς αὐτοῦ φύσεως), because it participates in its contrary' (255a12-b1). According to this sentence, the hypothetical participation of change (stability) in stability (in change) necessarily transforms the nature of change (stability). In this sentence, then, when *x* participates in *y*, the nature of *x* is transformed.¹³ My interpretative suggestion is that participation grounds predications about the nature of the participant not only in this sentence, but in the entire argument. Once participation is understood to affect the nature of the participant, everything falls into place.

Suppose stability is identical to difference or sameness. Since stability and change participate in sameness and difference, that is, since sameness and difference transform the nature of change and stability, stability (which *ex*

10 See Moravcsik 1962, 45-47; Crivelli 2012, 131-136.

11 Crivelli 2012, 134-135, however argues that there is a parallel between the argument under consideration and two previous arguments in the dialogue showing that being is identical neither to the hot and the cold (243e4-7), nor to change and stability (250a8-c5) and that 'the adverb "in common" ("κοινῇ" at 255a7 [that is, in the present argument]) plays the same role as the adverb "in the same way" ("ὁμοίως") in the two earlier arguments (at 243e5 and 250a11)' (135).

12 My proposal develops some suggestions made by Berger 1965, 75-77.

13 Which is not to say that *y* is the definition of *x*, nor that *x* and *y* are identical. The nature of change, for instance, is not identical to the nature of the difference and is therefore insufficient for grounding the difference between change and the other kinds. The nature of change needs to be affected by its participation in difference to be different from the other kinds (this, at any rate, is how I take 255e4-6).

hypothesi is identical to sameness or difference) will transform the nature of change, which is impossible because change and stability have contrary natures. Hence stability is neither difference nor sameness. The same reasoning would hold if change were identical to difference or sameness. The argument becomes unimpeachable.

To be sure, the Stranger earlier committed himself to the view that kinds are stable insofar as they are objects of knowledge. So, he must think that change is stable *as* a kind. However, I suggest that, in the present argument, the Stranger does not contemplate what kinds are *as* kinds, but restricts himself to considering what the specific nature of each kind is and how the participation between the kinds affects their natures. From this point of view, the Stranger must have realized that the natures of change and stability are contrary and therefore cannot communicate. Hence, with this in mind, change is not stable and stability does not change.

4. Consequences for key passages of the *Sophist*

The main feature of my reading of the Stranger's proof is that participation transforms the nature of the participant. In other words, participation, in this argument, involves something different from an ordinary predication telling us what property a given kind has, displays or exemplifies. The idea that the relation of participation grounds something stronger than an ordinary predication and transforms the nature of the participants clarifies, I submit, other difficult passages of the dialogue.

For a start, previously in the *Sophist*, the Stranger rejected the idea that all kinds mix, because then stability will change and change will be stable (252d9-10). This is once again hard to understand, because change, like every kind, is stable. However, if I am right that the Stranger restricts himself to considering the nature of the kinds and to how the relation of participation affects the natures of kinds, it is to be expected that he should reject the idea that change is stable: the nature of change is not affected by the nature of stability.

Similarly, later in the dialogue, the Stranger says that 'if change itself had somehow participated in stability, there would be nothing strange to call it stable' (Οὐκοῦν καὶ ἐῖ περ μετελάμβανεν αὐτὴ κίνησις στάσεως, οὐδὲν ἄν ἄτοπον ἦν στάσιμον αὐτὴν προσαγορεύειν; (256b6-8). The sentence has the form of a counterfactual: it has εἰ + imperfect in the protasis, and ἄν and the

imperfect in the apodosis.¹⁴ Hence, the Stranger's formulation implies for a third time that change does not in fact participate in stability. If I am right, this is because the Stranger does not have in view relations grounding ordinary predications about change, but rather relations grounding predications about the nature of change, which is not affected by the nature of stability.

Finally, it is notoriously difficult to extract an account of negative predications from the Stranger's remarks on the semantics of negation (257b9-c3). On the one hand, key features seem to be missing from the Greek text to provide the Stranger with an adequate account of negative predication;¹⁵ on the other, alternative accounts of negative predication are either too narrow¹⁶ or do not fit other general lessons from Plato's dialogues.¹⁷ If I am right that participation does not ground ordinary predications in the central section of the *Sophist*, one can bracket the difficult task of extracting an account of negative ordinary predications from the Stranger's remarks on the semantics of negation at 257b9-c3 (which does not prevent the Stranger from offering up such an account at a later point of the dialogue where ordinary predication indeed comes into focus, see 263a2-d5).

To conclude, the idea that participation grounds predications about the nature of the participant not only helps clarify the logic of the argument about change, stability, difference and sameness that occurs at 255a4-b7, but it promises to be applied fruitfully to other difficult passages of the Stranger's argument in the *Sophist*.¹⁸

14 See e.g. Vlastos [1970] 1981b, 284-286, 293-294; Roberts 1986, 240 n. 5; van Eck 2000, 57 n.8.

15 See Crivelli 2012, 186-187's discussion of why the so-called 'Oxford interpretation' of negative predications cannot be read into 257b9-c3.

16 Accounts of negative predications in terms of 'incompatibility' or 'otherness into a range of incompatible forms' cannot account for sentences such as 'virtue is not square', as Crivelli 2012, 188-189, 191-192 convincingly argues.

17 The so-called 'extensional interpretation' of negative predications clashes with the fact that Plato generally accepts that the same thing can be both *f* and not *f*, as Szaif [1996] 1998, 436-437 remarks.

18 I have pursued this avenue of research in Zaks 2023.

