

Dynamis, Definition and Division in Plato's Sophist

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This paper aims to investigate the existence of a philosophical criterion by which Plato distinguished the last definition of sophistry from all the others in the *Sophist*. According to my thesis, the notion of *dynamis* provides such a criterion. In examining the occurrences of this term in the *Sophist*, I will note that its meaning is always related to sophistry's essential features, particularly the "productive art" in the last definition. Moreover, the *Statesman* will serve as an example to demonstrate how the use of *dynamis* in the *Statesman*'s division is similar to that in the *Sophist*. In conclusion, I will attempt to provide an ontological explanation for *dynamis*' presence in the divisions by linking it to the "*dynamis* proposal" of *Sph.* 247e.

division, definition, *dynamis*, essence, Form.

Introduction

In the *Sophist*, as a result of seven divisions, the Eleatic Stranger (herein referred to as "ES") proposes seven definitions of sophistry. Plato does not seem to have established, at least explicitly, a criterion according to which each is more or less valid. The problem is evident: how can the same tool (the *διαιρέσις*) produce, on the one hand, one true definition and, on the other, six false definitions? A first glance suggests two possibilities: either all definitions, including definition VII, are well-crafted and, presumably, true, or only the last division actually gives the true answer since the division in the first six definitions was not performed correctly.¹ The only information we have is found at the end of the *Sophist* (268d), where the ES states that, through the last description of the sophist, the absolute truth (*τάληθέστατα*) has been stated.

The aim of this paper is to explore the existence of a philosophical criterion according to which, in the *Sophist*, Plato distinguishes the last definition of sophistry from all the others. My thesis is that such a criterion can be found in the notion of *δύναμις*. The section of the dialogue in which the notion of *δύναμις κοινωνίας* is introduced allows Plato to elaborate definitions

1 Cf. Cornford 1935, 173; Notomi 1999, 296-301; Fronterotta 2007, 52-60; Crivelli 2012, 22; Gill 2012, 146-147.

that are methodologically grounded in a precise ontological conception. Since I am dealing with two of the more problematic sections of the *Sophist*, I do not pretend to develop all the implications of my interpretation in a few pages: I simply intend to chart a line of research and offer some clues about the possibility of linking the notion of δύναμις as the definition of being and the δύναμις as the ‘nature’ of a Form sought by division.

The seven definitions

The knowledge of Forms and their relations is the object of a dialectical investigation. If the philosophical task of the method is exhausted once it has found the essential features of F, the final goal of a διαίρεσις must be to produce a definition of F, namely a formula showing the essence.² Each division in the *Sophist* aims to elaborate a definition of sophistry by grasping its οἰκεία φύσις (*Sph.* 264e3-4). But if it is possible to show the essence of F by a single definition, as in the angler’s division, why are there several definitions of sophistry?

A possible answer to this question is that sophistry differs from any other Form because it is multifaceted and cannot be collected into a single kind.³ This hypothesis, nonetheless, seems to be disproved by the example of the *Statesman*. In his division of the τέχναι of the city in *Plt.* 303b-c, the ES makes full use of the last definition of the sophist: he refers in both contexts to the sophist as a γοής (*Sph.* 235al, *Plt.* 303c4), and, most importantly, the mention of εἰδώλων μεγίστων προστάτης (*Plt.* 303c2-3) can only refer to the εἰδωλοποικὴ τέχνη (*Sph.* 235b9, 260d9) constituting the heart of definition VII of the *Sophist*. Indeed, the ES distinguishes (in the *Statesman*) the sophist from the statesman because (in the *Sophist*) an already established and true definition of the sophist exists.

2 The idea that the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* seek the ‘definitions’ of sophistry and political science is defended by Brown 2010, 154-155 and El Murr 2016, 117-133, among others.

3 Cf. Brown 2010, 157-163.

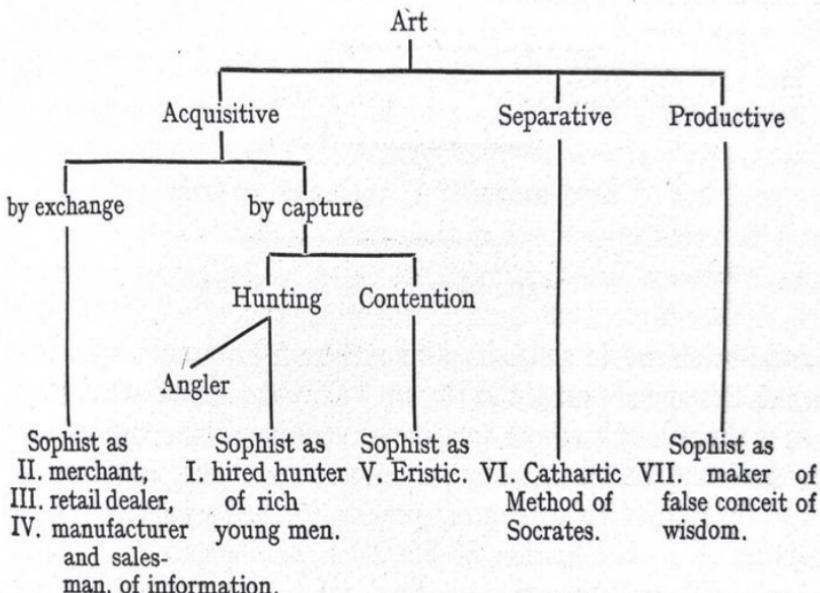


Image by Cornford (1935: 171)

My premise will be, then, that only the last definition encompasses the essential characteristics of sophistry. If several definitions of the sophist are proposed, the division procedure must have then failed to grasp, in some way, the essential features of the object sought. It would not be surprising for such a failure to occur in the *Sophist* because this is what we see in the *Statesman*. In the *Statesman*, however, the error is purely operational: the cut leads to an incorrect definition, which only the cosmogonic myth can reveal as such because the king is not a “shepherd of men”. Whereas nowhere in the *Sophist* does Plato state that an operation error has been made, since from a Platonic perspective a sophist can be described by all the seven proposed definitions. For instance, the art that “hunts young men and pretends to educate them for money” (as in definition I) undoubtedly corresponds to a certain Platonic conception of sophistry.

Therefore, there must be a criterion whereby Plato establishes a methodological distinction between the last definition and the others. One notable difference between the last definition and the previous ones is that sophistry was sought in the “acquisitive art” in the first five (definition VI has a unique status) and in the “productive art” in the last definition. Is it possible to find

such a criterion in this distinction? In the next section we will investigate this possibility.

Dynamis and definition in the Sophist

The key to understanding why the first six definitions of sophistry differ methodologically from the last one is, I propose, the notion of δύναμις. This term occurs 19 times in the *Sophist*: 9 times in the ontological context of the δύναμις κοινωνίας⁴, 5 times in the divisions⁵ and 5 times with a trivial meaning.⁶ To see if the term δύναμις might be a criterion which could indicate the essence of sophistry,⁷ I shall present the contexts in which the term appears in the divisions. Considering that the number of occurrences is not compelling and needs to be supported by a study of δύναμις in the *Statesman*, I will conceive this paper as a preliminary study of this hypothesis.

In the first five definitions, the ES begins the division from the “acquisitive art” (τέχνη κτητική). Since the “acquisitive nature” represents a feature admitted by Plato as belonging to sophistry, the ES does not explicitly refer to these five divisions as being wrong.⁸ Even if their results seem insufficient to capture the sophist, it is in definition V that we find an interesting mention of δύναμις. Note, however, that this occurrence is significant precisely because it does not concern the acquisitive nature of sophistry, but comes out when the ES attributes the τέχνη ἀντιλογική to it (*Sph.* 231e2-4):

ἀτὰρ δὴ τὸ τῆς ἀντιλογικῆς τέχνης ἄρ' οὐκ ἐν κεφαλαίῳ περὶ πάντων πρὸς ἀμφισβήτησιν ικανή τις δύναμις ἔσοικ' εἶναι.

Well, does it not seem, after all, that what concerns the art of dispute is a sort of δύναμις capable of arguing about every argument?

In fact, δύναμις is mentioned in a crucial point of the inquiry since an entirely true definition can be given afterwards only by interweaving the

4 Sph. 247d8, 247e4, 248b5, 248c5, 248c8, 248c9, 251e8, 252d2, 254c5.

5 Sph. 219a6, 219b9, 232e4, 233a8, 265b9.

6 At Sph. 226b1, 244b7, 263b1 δύναμις is preceded by the prepositions εἰς or κατά, meaning ‘as far as possible’; cf. Lefebvre 2018, 45-54 for this kind of expression. At Sph. 227b7 the term δύναμις indicates the ‘faculties’ of the body, and at Sph. 236b5 it simply means ‘capacity to see clearly’.

7 Sph. 219a6 will not be included because it refers to the division of the angler (whose definition, by the way, is presented as valid).

8 Vlasitis 2023, 22-25 persuasively argues that a division does not require, in order to be corrected, showing essential properties.

τέχνη ἀντιλογική with the other essential characteristics. Having found this feature is hence necessary to commence the seventh and last definition.

I certainly do not intend to attribute any particular theoretical force to this simple mention. But it seems significant that the notion of δύναμις appears in the divisions when an essential feature of the object sought has been found. We might say that talking about the τέχνη ἀντιλογική in terms of δύναμις in definition V invites us to pay attention to δύναμις as a criterion for the inquiry of the sophistry. Thus, definition V, albeit not exhaustive, succeeds in finding an essential element of sophistry even though the διαίρεσις had managed to grasp only one such element.

The inquiry takes a new turn precisely at this point. By recalling the term ἀντιλογικός (*Sph.* 232b6), the ES can explicitly ask a question about the sophist's δύναμις slightly later at *Sph.* 233a8:

Τί ποτ' οὖν ἀν εἴη τὸ τῆς σοφιστικῆς δυνάμεως θαῦμα;

Then, what might be the wonder [enacted] by the δύναμις of the sophistry?

This question is a second crucial step to elaborating the last and true definition because it leads to introducing the “productive art” (τέχνη ποιητική) and attributing it to the sophist.⁹ In fact, if we suppose that the last definition is the only essential definition, the passage from acquisitive art to productive art is necessary to produce the essential definition of sophistry. Note, however, that the notion of δύναμις turns to be involved precisely at this point; it is hence plausible that the ES, in seeking the δύναμις of F, is looking for the essential features of F. To put it another way, it is only when the question “τί ἔστι F?” is understood as “τίς ἔστι τοῦ F δύναμις” that enquiry can identify the productive art, starting from which it will be possible to provide the true definition.

Finally, the term δύναμις appears one last time at the end of the dialogue when the ES emphasises how his research has been directed from the beginning towards δύναμις precisely in reference to the productive art. At *Sph.* 265b8-10, the ES says:

Ποιητικήν, εἴπερ μεμνήμεθα τὰ κατ' ἀρχὰς λεχθέντα, πᾶσαν ἔφαμεν εἶναι δύναμιν ἡτις ἀν αἰτίᾳ γίγνηται τοῖς μὴ πρότερον οὖσιν ὑστερον γίγνεσθαι.

Every productive art, if we remember what was said at the beginning, has been defined as the δύναμις which is cause for entities that did not exist before their subsequent coming into being.

9 Cf. *Sph.* 233e-234d.

Indeed, mention has already been made of the δύναμις. At *Sph.* 219b8-9, when the text had not yet begun upon the division of sophistry, certain “productive arts” had been mentioned, and among them is the “imitative art” (μιμητικὴ τέχνη), which will be used afterwards to define the essence of sophistry:

Τὰ δέ γε νυνδὴ <ἄ> διήλθομεν ἀπαντα εἶχεν εἰς τοῦτο τὴν αὐτῶν δύναμιν.
That is the reason (*i.e.* because they bring to being) why every art we have just examined (*i.e.* agriculture, the art of caring for the body, the imitative art, etc.) has its δύναμις (*i.e.* the δύναμις of the “productive art”).

Therefore, the distinction between productive and acquisitive arts is not just an operational fact, but it implies a methodological evaluation, because it determines the success of the inquiry itself. Indeed, the earlier divisions fail because they make sophistry acquisitive and omit its essential productive δύναμις. So, if it is not a coincidence that the term δύναμις appears in the divisions of sophistry when an essential feature is sought (as in *Sph.* 233a8) or has been found (as in *Sph.* 231e2-4, 265b8-10), the failure of other divisions derives from their lack of content, but also from their method, which consist in not having seek the δύναμις of the sophistry.

Dynamis and definition in the Statesman

We will now briefly compare these clues with an example from the *Statesman*. This dialogue is a long division of the statesman that culminates in a determination of the statesman’s δύναμις (περιλαβόντες τὴν δύναμιν, *Plt.* 305e4-5). At the end of the dialogue, the statesman’s definition has been established by distinguishing political science from rhetoric, military science and judicial science (*Plt.* 303e6-305e6). These sciences are associated with political science because they take part, as direct causes, in making the statesman’s product. The division aims at discovering whether these sciences correspond to the statesman’s nature. The result is the same for each science: the nature of the statesman differs from that of the rhetorician, the strategist and the judge, because the statesman’s function consists of directing their tasks by indicating the opportune moment to carry it out.

We can point out that in the *Statesman* too δύναμις serves as a criterion to determine the definition of F. The division proceeds specifically by distinguishing the δύναμις of each science as if the notion of δύναμις correspond-

ed to the essence of the object sought.¹⁰ In paraphrasing the text of this section of the dialogue, the ES describes rhetoric as δύναμις τοῦ πείθειν (*Plt.* 304c7-8), military science as δύναμις τοῦ πολεμεῖν (*Plt.* 304e3-6), and judicial science as δύναμις τοῦ δικάζειν (*Plt.* 305b1-2). This distinction will lead the ES to propose a definition of the statesman that brings out his essential characteristics beginning from his relationship with the three sciences. Since the statesman's function is to direct the work of the three sciences, his nature is based on the 'directive capacity'. In fact, at the end of the dialogue, the ES says that the statesman possesses the δύναμις ἐπιστατική (*Plt.* 308e6), namely the capacity to direct other sciences to make a good product.¹¹

Grasping the essence of a Form

We have noted that the sophistry's final division is possible through understanding its "productive δύναμις" on which the ES can then base the final definition. We have also seen how a similar procedure is carried out in the *Statesman*, where δύναμις is the criterion for determining the "directive nature" of political science and thus distinguishing it from its subordinate sciences. A question then arises: Can we suppose a metaphysical background of these definitions based on the notion of the δύναμις? In my opinion, a possible answer can be found in the definition of Being as δύναμις proposed at *Sph.* 247e3-4.

I contend that section 247d-249e of the *Sophist* has to be interpreted as a genuinely Platonic theoretical proposal and that a proper definition of intelligible reality is elaborated in this context.¹² At *Sph.* 247e3-4, the ES says: "I give as a definition (*ὅπον*) that Being (*τὰ ὄντα*) is nothing other than δύναμις" referring to the "capacity to act on and be affected by other things" (δύναμις τοῦ ποιεῖν καὶ παθεῖν) mentioned just prior. If this is a proper definition of Being, it must be linked to the δύναμις κοινωνίας of *Sph.* 254c5, the capacity of Forms to commune with each other. Thus, being is to have a relational capacity.¹³ The hypothesis I would like to propose via my brief inquiry is that dialectical research of F, in order to be ontologically

10 Cf. Dixsaut et alii 2020, 20-22.

11 Cf. Lane 2021, 139-146.

12 As defended by Fronterotta 1995, 317-341; Leigh 2010, 76-81; Gill 2012, 96-7; Lefebvre 2018, 315-6, 323-4, among others.

13 Note that I am not stating that Forms are powers in a contemporary dispositional sense. I think, instead, that their essence consists of having the capacity to act and be affected (see Leigh 2012, 254-259).

grounded, must precisely seek the δύναμις of F, conceived as the capacity of a Form to commune.

Here I am obliged to clarify what I mean by the δύναμις of F. If we accept that the δύναμις κοινωνίας is the capacity to participate in the other Forms, each Form possesses a δύναμις relating it to a set of other Forms. But such a relational capacity can be interpreted not only as the mode of existence of all Forms (F is because it affects and is affected by other Forms) but also as the peculiar way in which each Form constitutes its nature by participation. Thus, we can argue, with Gill (2012, 230), that 'the capacity of something . . . to act on and be affected by other things is the thing's stable and definable nature.' So, if dialectics is the instrument conceived to recognise relations in the intelligible domain, its primary objective must be to seek *how* one Form interrelates with other Forms; that is, to seek what peculiar δύναμις that Form has.

In the *Sophist*, the notion of δύναμις is developed from an ontological perspective, whereas in the *Statesman*, the concept seems to be conceived from a methodological perspective as a mark of the final definition. However, my idea is that we can link these two domains by suggesting that in the *Sophist* too the goal of the division is to find the δύναμις of the *Sophist*. If this were the case, we might define the division as an operation of distinction aiming at discovering the δύναμις of an intelligible object through the recognition of its essential participatory relations. Therefore, the enquiry on being and its definition on the basis of δύναμις κοινωνίας would not only aim to provide an ontological explanation of being, but also to clarify why a true definition of sophistry is only possible when it is directed towards its δύναμις: seeking the δύναμις of sophistry means seeking its being, that is the participatory relations which it has *qua* Form and which determine what it is.

Conclusion.

Suppose we accept the notion of δύναμις in the ontological context as the essence of F. In that case, we can argue that it is the criterion for elaborating a definition grasping the essential features of F. Let us draw some provisional conclusions:

When the *Sophist* uses the notion of δύναμις in a philosophical context, it concerns either the Forms' capacity to interweave or the method of division.

The occurrences of the term δύναμις found in the divisions of sophistry properly concern the features present in the last definition, conceived by Plato as being completely true.

Plato may have used the term δύναμις in the divisions to indicate the path according to which it is possible to reach an ontologically grounded definition, which is hence completely true.

My suggestion would only be compelling if consistent with the role of the δύναμις in *Statesman*'s divisions, a question I intend to study elsewhere.

