

# Platonic Dialectic – Inquiring into the nature of things

## University of Bergen, May 31-June 2nd

### Abstracts

#### Thursday, May 31st

##### 10.15-11.45 Vasilis Politis (Trinity College Dublin)

###### Is there any epistemology in Plato?

###### Dialectic versus epistemology in regard to the work of Plato

When modern epistemologists want an account of knowledge, what they want is an account of the act of attaining knowledge and the state of knowing, without reference to any process and activity of enquiry that may have led to this act and state. Indeed, it seems a hallmark of modern epistemology to suppose that the account of knowledge is separate from the account of enquiry.

I suspect that critics that have looked for Plato's epistemology have generally borrowed this modern supposition and have treated Plato's account of knowledge as separate from his account of enquiry.

In this talk, I argue that this is a mistake. In positive terms, I argue that Plato conceives of knowledge as, purely and simply, a successful terminus of enquiry; and that he does not have anything substantive to say about the act of attaining knowledge and the state of knowing something, if that act and state is understood as having a nature of its own and independently of the enquiry of which, if all has gone well, it is the terminus.

I conduct the argument in two steps.

As a first step, I consider what I take to be certain familiar and readily recognisable sources in Plato of the common supposition among critics that Plato sees it as one of his tasks to provide an account of knowledge, and of knowledge as opposed to enquiry; and I argue that these sources do not support this supposition. The sources I have singled out for this assessment and criticism are as follows: first, the supposed epistemology in pre-*Phaedo* dialogues, associated with the so-called principle of the priority of definition for knowledge; secondly, a famous passage in the *Meno*, 97e-98a, in which Plato distinguishes knowledge from true opinion; and, thirdly, the *Theaetetus* and its distinctive question, What is knowledge?

As a second step, I consider Plato's account of dialectic in the middle books of the *Republic* (5-6-7), where dialectic is conceived as *the* supreme intellectual *dunamis*. I argue that dialectic contains Plato's account of enquiry, and that only as a consequence does it contain an account of knowledge.

A remarkable consequence of the conclusion of this paper is that, when, in *Phaedo* 75a5-8, Plato asserts that sense-perception is necessary for thinking of Forms, we need not, contra many critics, suppose that this assertion is only about the place of sense-perception in

enquiry and not about its place in knowledge. On the contrary, we may suppose that what Plato asserts is that sense-perception is an element in both enquiry and knowledge. Plato is not, therefore, a rationalist who thinks knowledge is *a priori*; and this even though, famously, he denies that Forms can be directly perceived by the senses.

In considering Plato's account of dialectic in the *Republic*, I conclude that this remarkable consequence is confirmed in that account.

### **13.00-14.15 Evan Rodriguez (Idaho State University)**

#### A Long Lost Relative in the *Parmenides*? Plato's Family of Dialectical Methods

In this paper I argue that Plato's *Parmenides* contains a unique but overlooked method for testing first principles, a method I call 'exploring both sides'. He explicitly recommends exploring the consequences of both a hypothesis and its contradictory and thematizes this structure throughout the dialogue. It is a genuine dialectical method, but distinct from the so-called 'method of hypothesis' in both structure and aim.

Both methods crucially involve positing a hypothesis and exploring its consequences, but the canonical method of hypothesis involves the 'vertical' step of finding a higher hypothesis by which to test the thesis in question, whereas exploring both sides involves the 'lateral' step of looking to the contradictory hypothesis to see which one is true. This 'lateral' step is precisely what is needed when testing candidate first principles; in the case of a genuine first principle, there is nowhere higher 'up' to go.

Furthermore, the method can be used to encourage further inquiry when an interlocutor might otherwise give up. This is precisely what Plato has Parmenides do when he points out that, despite the serious problems they have encountered with Socrates' theory of forms, someone who denies their existence will "destroy the power of dialectic" (135c1–2). It is immediately after this that Parmenides recommends the method of exploring both sides.

In this way I challenge the standard developmentalist story about Platonic dialectic, not to mention Richard Robinson's influential dismissal of the *Parmenides* as "bewildering, sceptical, and depressing" in its methodological aspect. The same method of exploring both sides appears in other dialogues in the discussion of first principles as well, including the *Cratylus*, the central discussion of being and not-being in the *Sophist*, and even the *Lysis*. The *Lysis* is traditionally taken to be from an earlier period of Plato's development, and in the *Sophist* exploring both sides appears simultaneously with the distinct method of collection and division. My argument suggests that, instead of changing his mind from one period to the next, Plato develops a family of distinct dialectical methods, each with its own peculiar aim.

### **14.30-15.45 Vivil Valvik Haraldsen (University of Oslo)**

#### What does dialectic tell us about reason in the *Republic*?

The overall argument in the *Republic* constitutes an answer to a challenge raised in the beginning of the dialogue: to show that the life of the just person is always happier than the life of the unjust person. In the course of the dialogue Socrates describes the soul of the just person as ruled by reason, and explains that it is proper for reason to rule because it is the element of the soul that may possess wisdom. Towards the end of the dialogue Socrates concludes that the challenge has been

met, and he encourages everyone to aim in all their actions to preserve a just regime, ruled by reason, in the soul.

What reason's rule and justice requires more specifically is a matter of dispute, however. According to a common interpretation, both require insight into the form of the good, i.e. the insight the philosopher-rulers described in Books 5-7 come to obtain. A problem with this interpretation, however, is that this insight seems obtainable only after rigorous training in dialectic, a training moreover reserved for the few who possess the suitable nature; but if this is correct, living a just life becomes in principle impossible for most people. Socrates' answer to the challenge to defend justice thus becomes irrelevant. For Socrates is asked to show that *everyone* should choose the just life, and he repeatedly states that their inquiry into justice is of great importance for all the interlocutors. On the other hand, if the description of dialectic and the philosopher's understanding of the good in the central books is not a description of the requirements of reason's rule, it remains a question what function this description has in the overall argument.

Many scholars simply sidestep this problem, others suggest that there is inconsistency in the conception of reason in the dialogue, and yet others that the overall argument simply fails. In this presentation I argue that we should take seriously the challenge of looking for a plausible connection between the description of reason in the person who is at "the heights of philosophy" and the overall argument in the dialogue, without assuming that it is simply the dialectician that is the just person. I argue that the descriptions of reason and dialectic in the central books are continuous with the descriptions of reason in other parts of the work despite apparent discrepancies, and function as a *paradeigma* casting light on what the rule of reason involves and why such a regime in the soul is beneficial, also for those who are not philosopher-rulers.

## **16.00-17.15 Pauline Sabrier (Sun Yat-Sen University, Zhuhai Campus)**

### The role of the *ti esti* question in Plato's *Sophist*

It is commonly held that dialogues that come after the *Parmenides* reveal a change in Plato's method of enquiry, in that the *ti esti* question emblematic of the early dialogues is supposed to be replaced by the later, more advanced method of collection and division. In this paper, I intend to challenge this view by showing that the central sections of the *Sophist* (242-259) dedicated to the enquiry about being do not support the view that there is a sharp methodological break between the *Sophist* and the early dialogues.

The main claim I shall defend here is that the question 'what is being?' (Q1) plays the primary role in the enquiry about being. I shall show (i) that Plato clearly distinguishes this question from other, related questions about being, and in particular, the question 'what is there?' (Q2); and (ii) that the conclusion of the Gigantomachia passage at 249d3-4 should be read as being primarily addressed to Q1, and not only, or not primarily, to Q2. This brings me to two qualifications: (iii) that Q1 is also raised and addressed together with Q2 and (iv) that the conclusion at 249d3-4 does not satisfy the unity requirement. I shall argue, however, that the rationale for (iii) and (iv) is not to be found in a change in Plato's method but in the object of the enquiry, namely Being itself. Finally, we shall see that the results achieved shed new light on the description of the *dialektikê epistêmê* at 253d-e.

## **Friday, June 1st**

### **9.00-10.30 Walter Mesch (Universität Münster)**

#### **Between Variety and Unity. How to deal with Plato's Dialectic?**

Plato's dialectic has many faces. Most prominent, of course, is the general distinction between different methods displayed in his dialogues: critical inquiry (proceeding through question, answer and refutation), hypothetical ascension (leading to premises or principles) and the twofold procedure of division and collection (referring to concepts, entities or activities). But these methods themselves show a considerable variety connected with discussed topics, argumentative aims, ontological assumptions and dialogical settings, suggesting an even more diversified picture. Against this background, it seems far from obvious that there is one single unified conception of dialectic in Plato's dialogues. On the other hand, however, developmental models of dealing with this variety are also not unproblematic. It appears to be clear e.g., that the aforementioned methods do not simply succeed each other in different sets of dialogues, but rather are often combined in the same approach. So even if we can presuppose a certain kind of development we still have to ask, how variety and unity are combined in Plato's dialectic. In my paper, I want to analyse some important aspects of this problem and to consider possible solutions.

### **10.45-12.00 Marilena Vlad (University of Bucharest, Al. Dragomir Institute)**

#### **Dialectic and Philosophical Divination**

My paper focuses on the relationship between dialectic and divination in Plato's middle dialogues. I will show that dialectic originally relies on an act of divination (*μαντεία*) and it eventually acquires the sense of a philosophical divination. I start by distinguishing two types of divination. The first one is public: exercised by soothsayers and prophets, it is a manner of uttering true things, but deprived of understanding. Therefore, it is situated on an inferior level, far below philosophy (*Phaedrus* 244; 248). A second type of divination belongs to the philosopher and has a major role to play for the practice of dialectic. This higher divination is a method of unmediated knowledge, turned towards the intelligible realm. It gives access to the forms, which cannot be known directly. As Plato gradually specifies the meaning of this divination, dialectic too becomes more explicit in its technical details. Dialectic is primarily characterized in three aspects. (1) It consists in clinging to a trustworthy hypothesis and only admitting things that are in perfect agreement with it (*Phaedo*). (2) It is at times identified with knowledge (*Theaetetus*). (3) Finally, dialectic is characterized as a specific type of discourse, following certain rules (*Symposium*; *Phaedrus*). Whereas modern scholars concentrate on how the dialectical method functions, I try to show that, in the contexts where dialectic is elucidated, it never appears alone, as a purely scientific method of knowledge, but it is essentially linked with an act of divination or prophetic knowledge, which either precedes, accompanies, or accomplishes it. This analysis can shed more light on the ultimate goal of dialectic, which is not restricted to understanding the objects of knowledge.

### **13.00-14.15 Kristian Larsen (University of Bergen)**

#### Defining rhetoric dialectically – in defense of Socratic divisions in Plato's *Gorgias*

Plato wrote two dialogues treating of rhetoric, the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*. The *Gorgias* is commonly held to belong to an early period while the *Phaedrus* is supposed to belong among the later of Plato's middle period dialogues and to herald, together with the *Parmenides*, Plato's late period. Scholars accepting a developmental approach to Plato have regularly emphasized that the *Gorgias* puts forward a fierce critique of rhetoric that forms part of Plato's early defense of the Socratic ideal of inquiry, while the *Phaedrus*, by contrast, is held to develop a comparatively subtle and less negative assessment of rhetoric reflecting Plato's mature view. In a similar vein, scholars have assumed that the dialogues work with different conceptions of dialectic and methods for arriving at definitions – the *Gorgias* with a Socratic ideal of inquiry centered on *elenchos*, the *Phaedrus* with a later ideal centered on the method of collection and division.

This general consensus regarding the two dialogues notwithstanding, Socrates at various points in the *Gorgias* uses collection and division in the course of his inquiry into rhetoric, a fact that has been recognized by some scholars. In this presentation I take a cue from them and argue that Socrates uses collection and division in a manner parallel to the procedures of collection and division recommended and practiced in the *Phaedrus*, and further that they are central to the inquiry of the *Gorgias*. "More precisely, I argue for two claims:

1. The use of collection and division is crucial to Socrates' attempt to define rhetoric in the *Gorgias*.
2. Collection and division ground Socrates' claim that Gorgianic rhetoric is harmful to its practitioner, and help Socrates contrast rhetoric with philosophic conversation.

### **14.30-15.45 Cristina Ionescu (The Catholic University of America)**

#### The Philosopher's Dialectical Art in the *Phaedrus*: What are the Objects that we Collect and Divide?

The dialectical method of collection and division is introduced in the *Phaedrus* to help us reach knowledge. While knowledge has intelligible Forms as its objects, Socrates applies collection and division to things that probably do not have directly corresponding intelligible Forms. At one point he distinguishes "things that are controversial" from "things that are not controversial", at another, he divides madness into four kinds; at yet another point he talks about expertise in distinguishing different types of souls, without mentioning a Form of Soul; other times he clearly divides intelligible Forms, like Beauty, Moderation, and Courage. The situation generates the inevitable question: What are the proper objects to collect and divide?

Scholars like Cornford, Moravcsik, Cohen, Sayre argue that the objects of the dialectical method are either exclusively Forms, or exclusively sensible things. Both suggestions face difficulties: If the objects of division are only sensible things, yet knowledge is of Forms, (a) how can this method lead us to knowledge? And (b) we have no way to do justice to Socrates' mention of the superhuman effort and divine stature of the dialectician in the *Phaedrus*, or to his characterization of the dialectician's activity as proceeding through forms alone without

the involvement of sensible images in the *Republic* (510b, 511c). If, on the other hand, we divide and collect only Forms, (a) how can we make sense of Socrates' application of this method to entities which do not have corresponding Forms, such as hubristic desires, for instance? Besides, (b) we have a hard time accounting for Socrates' declaration that everything that has ever been discovered in any art has been discovered by means of this method (*Philebus* 16c). And, again, (c) if Forms alone are to be divided, how are we to make sense of Socrates' drawing his inspiration from Hippocrates medical classifications of the various conditions of the body (*Phaedrus* 270a-c)?

The proposal that I am going to advance avoids these difficulties insofar as, instead of choosing either exclusively Forms or sensible things, I argue that we can rightfully divide both Forms and sensible things as long as we are fully aware each time what we divide and at what level of comprehension we carry out these divisions.

## **16.00-17.15 Justin Vlasits (Eberhard-Karls Universität Tübingen)**

### Plato's Dialectical Methods

While many parts of the hypothesis of Platonic development have come under question in recent decades, the literature on Platonic dialectic methods has, by and large, remained thoroughly developmentalist. There is the unquestioned assumption that his three famous "methods": elenchus, hypothesis, and collection and division, can be understood in isolation. In this paper, I will challenge this assumption in two ways.

1. I will show that there is no clean separation between the dialectical methods among the dialogues. The method of division is used in *Euthyphro* 11e ff and *Gorgias* 464a ff (supposed "elenctic dialogues") and alluded to in *Republic* 454a (supposedly committed to hypothesis) in such a way that it would be impossible to understand the argument without the method of division having already been commonplace. Hypothesis is used in *Sophist* 236c-46a, and possibly alluded to in *Protagoras* 361b. Elenchus is widely regarded to take place outside of the narrowly "elenctic" dialogues. In this way, we can conclude that the distribution of methods throughout the dialogues undermines any developmental hypothesis.
2. None of the famous descriptions of dialectic in (*Republic* VII, *Phaedrus* 266, *Sophist* 253, *Philebus* 57) rule out multiple methods being used.

Then I will sketch an alternative view, on which the three methods together function as a unified whole. Elenchus plays the role ascribed to Socratic conversation in conversation with Meno's slave (*Meno* 82b ff) and the Noble Sophist (*Sophist* 230 ff), preparing the soul for acquiring knowledge by dispelling ignorance. Hypothesis serves to break down complex inquiries into simpler inquiries and ultimately into inquiries about the definitions of forms. Collection and division, together, are designed to allow us to inquire, *unhypothetically*, into definitions. Viewing these methods as a unit, I argue, has significant philosophical payoff, as the strengths of each method compensate for the weaknesses in the others.

**Saturday, June 2nd**

### **9.30-11.00 Pauliina Remes (Uppsala University)**

#### Plotinus on Dialectic: Ennead I.3

Plotinus' *On Dialectic* (Ennead I.3., esp. chapter 4) is one of the few places where he explicitly deals with methodology with any greater length. It is a short, concise exposition that employs a variety of indirect references and vocabulary derived mostly from Plato. Typically perhaps for his era, Plotinus draws on several dialogues where dialectical methods of different kinds are used, expecting the reader to be well acquainted with relevant passages, and also assuming that the views, regardless of which dialogue they come from, form parts of a single philosophical undertaking.

Interestingly, Plotinus is fairly systematic in the way that he does this. First, he separates three stages of this activity: there is the broadest possible use of the term, as an activity that discusses even sensible things, and is hypothetical. The higher kind of dialectic divides into two: the one that gets rid of hypotheses, and maps the whole reality through collection and division - very much an activity - and another that he metaphorically captures as a kind of vision, a state of ideal grasp of the whole system.

The paper will provide an analysis of the three stages as they appear in the text. Besides giving an overview of Plotinus' understanding of dialectic, I will take stance to two controversies. First, dialectic is less dependent upon Forms than is sometimes assumed, given the first hypothetical usage of the term. (It is, however, dependent upon the greatest kinds.) Second, I will argue that Plotinus' negative take on logic and argumentation is in the research literature grossly overstated and partly misunderstood.

### **11.15-12.30 Emily Austin (Wake Forest College)**

#### The Special Object of Dialectic in Plato's *Charmides* and *Euthydemus*

Plato's *Charmides* and *Euthydemus* occupy a troubled zone for scholars invested in 'Socratic' or 'developmentalist' methodologies. The *Charmides* appears to be a standard dialogue of definition, but it ends with a technical discussion of the possibility and political benefit of a knowledge that takes itself as its own object while also knowing the objects of the other sciences. The first protreptic of the *Euthydemus* is a stomping ground for 'Socratic' scholars, but the second protreptic (288d-292e) terminates in an *aporia* about the special object of statesmanship and dialectic, whether such knowledge could produce anything other than itself, and how and whether it could ensure political happiness.

In this paper, I focus primarily on the *aporia* of the second protreptic, with some reference to how the *Charmides* informs my interpretation. Scholars have struggled to diagnose where the argument goes wrong and have offered multiple accounts of the nature of the regress that leads Socrates and Clinias to abandon the discussion. I contend that the argument ends in puzzlement for two reasons. First, Socrates and Clinias fail to determine a special object of knowledge for the dialectician and ruler, so they see no option other than that it is self-reflexive knowledge. Second, even if self-reflexive knowledge were possible, Socrates and Clinias cannot explain whether and how the ruler would 'use' that special

knowledge to ensure civic happiness. I show that the solution to the first puzzle lies within the *Euthydemus* itself in an overlooked passage in which Socrates appears to offer a theory of a separate Form of the Beautiful which bears a participation relation to particular beautiful things (300e-301c). The second puzzle, I argue, can only be solved by recognizing that the 'use' or transmission of the statesman's art is not through teaching, as Socrates and Clinias suppose, but in ordering the city in line with her knowledge of the good. As such, the answer to a core question of the dialogue, whether wisdom can be taught, is 'no.'

#### **14.00-15.15 Naoya Iwata (University of Oxford)**

##### Collection and Division and the Method of Hippocrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*

In the *Phaedrus* Plato introduces two apparently distinct methods which characterize the genuine art of rhetoric: philosophical dialectic consisting of collection and division (265d3–266b2), and the Hippocratic method (270c10–d8) according to which the nature of a subject matter is discovered by examining the manifestations of its power (*dunamis*). In the existing literature little attention has been paid to the connection between these two methods. This is mainly due to the prevalent (incorrect in my view) presupposition about the former method: that collection is the process of identifying the genus to which a target object belongs, and that division is in turn the process of dividing that genus into species and subspecies until discovering a definition of the thing in question. In this paper I first argue that love is defined in Socrates' second speech as the psychological state striving to recollect the Form of Beauty, and then that the task of discovering that definition of love is in fact carried out by the process of collection. The general point I will make about the method by referring to some other later dialogues as well, especially the *Sophist*, is that collection is the process of gleaning information on a subject matter by observing various manifestations of its power, and of inductively inferring its nature by speculating what gives a good causal account of those manifestations. As such this process can be seen as having a strong affinity with the Hippocratic method. The process of division, on the other hand, is intended to confirm the discovered definition of the subject matter by clarifying its relation to other things. Construed this way, I conclude, the method of collection and division shares such a two-way procedure with the method of hypothesis Plato introduces in his middle dialogues.