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Dialogue versus Dialectic: Notes on a Platonic Form

1. Any genealogy of 'dialogue' in the European tradition would have to begin with Plato;¹ but what Platonic dialogue *is* is another question. The most striking feature of the corpus, on any open-minded survey, is its sheer diversity. Some dialogues are short, others very long; some are reported in the first person, others consist of direct dialogue, others again have elaborate framing narratives. Many feature Socrates in a starring role, but in others he is a bit player, and he is absent from the *Laws*. Dialogues like the *Charmides* and *Symposium* are lively evocations of the Athenian intelligentsia at play; most 'late' dialogues are almost impersonal catechisms; the *Timaeus-Critias* eventually settles down into a pair of monumental speeches. Most of the dialogues generally considered 'early'¹² are occupied by refutations; others involve positive theorizing, many are mixed. Quite a few centre on rhetorical set-piece displays -- *epideixeis*, encomia, even an extravagant barrage of etymologies in the *Cratylus* -- almost all of which are undercut in some way by what follows. Other dialogues culminate in eschatological myths. The ancient Platonists, passionately devoted both to the Platonic corpus and to classification, got snarled up in knots attempting a typology:

"Of the Platonic dialogue there are two highest genres, the *pedagogical* [*huphêgêtikos*, literally 'guiding'] and the *investigative* [*zêtêtikos*]. The pedagogical is divided into two other genres, *theoretic* and *practical*. And of these, the theoretic divides into the *natural-scientific* and the *logical*; and the practical into the *ethical* and *political*. And of the *zetetic* itself too

¹ Or perhaps with his precursors: see Kendall Sharp, *

² Though nothing much hangs on them, I will be making some commonplace and defensible assumptions about the chronology of Plato's works: see Brandwood, Mueller, Kahn...

there are two genres in the first instance: *gymnastic* and *agonistic*. And of the gymnastic, there are *maieutic* and *peirastic*, and of agonistic, *endeictic* and *anatreptic*." ³

This is unsatisfying in a number of ways. The mashing together of classifications by subject-matter and by method is bad form, and most of the methodological distinctions are questionable. *Huphêgêtikos* means something like pedagogical, didactic, or expository (LSJ *sv*), from a root meaning to guide; but almost all Platonic dialogues are pedagogical in one mode or another, taking place largely under the 'guidance' of a mature philosopher. Almost all are 'investigative' one way or another too, examining philosophical proposals in a search for the truth.⁴ The real contrast in view here seems to be between explicitly, *constructively* pedagogical dialogues like the *Sophist* and strictly refutative ones like the *Euthyphro* and *Laches*, which end in *aporia*, a state of being at a loss. But a great many dialogues fit neither template (*Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Meno*, *Gorgias*...); and these do not form any unified third species either. In short, the Platonic concepts here have their uses, but they identify *layers* or *flavours* of Platonic dialectic,

³ Diogenes Laertius 3.49, which gives some rival attempts at classification as well. Diogenes goes on to add the obvious examples for the subject-matter classes; as for the methodological categories, he cites the *Alcibiades*, *Theages*, *Lysis*, *Laches* as *maieutic*, ie involving Socratic 'midwifery'; for *peirastic*, i.e., testing (a real species of dialectic, discussed by Aristotle in the *Topics*), he lists the *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, *Ion*, *Charmides*, *Theaetetus* -- rather bizarrely, as it's in the *Theaetetus* that Socrates describes his method as maieutic. The *Protagoras* is cited as *endeictic*, a rather cryptic term -- revealing, diagnostic, show-offy? The *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias* and the two *Hippiases* are *anatreptic*, ie, 'overturning' (cf. *ho bios anatreptamenos*, *Gorgias* 481c3). This last group comprises Socrates' most combative encounters with sophists, but the claim that they share something *formal* or methodological which the *Protagoras* and *Euthyphro* do not is dubious.

⁴ If we take 'guidance' to involve, at a minimum, control of the proceedings by the lead character, the *Symposium*, in which a rota of speakers take turns according to custom, is probably an exception; likewise arguably the *Protagoras*, in which Socrates is socially the junior figure and can only guide the discussion up to a point. As for 'investigation', *zêtêsis*, the didactic storytelling of the *Timaeus-Critias* seems not to count, and perhaps we might again except the *Symposium* (though it adds up to a reasonably thorough investigation of the question: what is eros?). The ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics adopted *zêtêsis* for their refutative activity, so it is not surprising that a late text like Diogenes' would restrict it to critical investigations, excluding something like the *Republic*; but Plato himself uses the term simply for the search for truth.

not mutually exclusive species of it. Good luck finding anything Plato wrote which is *not* in some way agonistic.⁵

2. Is there anything we can say about dialogue as such? An important recent movement in Platonic interpretation has had for its slogan *to read the dialogues as wholes*. The starting point of this 'dramatic' reading is the recognition that the dialogues are not expository academic treatises, but sophisticated literary dramas: characterisation, narrative and imagery can all be fraught with philosophical meaning. Moreover, as proponents of the dramatic reading point out, Plato is writing all the parts here, and no one character can be identified with the author. (Presumably nobody really means to suggest that the presence of a character called 'Plato' would simplify matters.) Some go further, and insist that the dialogue form entails a kind of authorial distance or neutrality towards its characters and their assertions. Yet this seems just as arbitrary, in its way, as the old-fashioned Socrates-as-doctrinal-mouthpiece readings, and seems to be based on a somewhat hazy set of assumptions as to what 'drama' must involve -- assumptions which would fail for Shaw, and which no one would derive from reading Plato himself. The ancient Platonist interpreters made more elaborate use of the drama of the dialogues than any modern reader is likely to manage, or even stomach; but none doubted that Socrates, and substitute leading-men like Timaeus, have a special, normative role to play.

3. *On the other hand...* literary forms that depict human character necessarily appeal to our innate capacities for mirroring and empathy. A form organized around *speaking* human characters draws on those capacities to elicit engagement and identification. When those characters ask *questions*, the reader is included among those addressed by the question. When another character answers, a further question to the reader is embedded: would that have been *my* answer? (Not so much in *The Moonstone* or the *Tale of Genji*, maybe; but the questions asked in Platonic dialogues are often ones to which we *do* have answers.) In the course of the *Euthydemus* we may see ourselves in the

⁵ I discuss some agonistic set-pieces in 'Socrates Agonistes: The Case of the *Cratylus* Etymologies', *.

promising young Clinias, sympathize with his lover Ctesippus, be impressed by the sophist Euthydemus, be convinced by Socrates' refutations of him, and think that Socrates' friend Crito has a point when he dismisses the whole fandango -- all adding up to a complicated stance which is neither detached nor reducible to the taking of any one 'side'. This is, I think, what people mean when they speak, in an otherwise puzzling transference, of the Platonic dialogue as involving a 'dialogue' with the reader.⁶ The reader's freedom of movement and identification is absolute; and it does give the dialogue form a certain doctrinal *undecidability*. An intelligent reader is always free to conclude -- if he really wants to -- that Calicles actually wins the argument in the *Gorgias*, or that Protagoras makes more sense in the *Protagoras* than Socrates does, and that whether Plato wanted him to or not. (Perhaps, like Milton, Plato 'was of the devil's party without knowing it' -- though I suspect that this impression of inadvertance is itself a highly contrived artistic effect.) So even the extreme version of the dramatic reading has a point. The dialogue form gives the arguments depicted in it an irreducible openness to interpretive diversity and philosophical disagreement; and there is no denying that that is part of what keeps them alive.

4. Still, none of this gets to the heart of the matter, which is what Plato is using the dialogue form *for*. Whatever we may think about dialogue in the abstract, *Platonic* dialogue is a distinctive, historically located genre with its own ground rules and purposes. And we can only figure out what these are by looking carefully at the dialogues themselves.

5. Plato's dialogues (the literary products) are rightly so called because, for the most part, they are *depictions* of dialogue (the human activity): a dialogue is *mimesis*, imitation, of *dialegesthai*, to discuss. Notoriously, Plato himself uses *dialegesthai* and cognates not just for any old verbal exchange, but as honorific terms for the correct method of philosophical discussion. (Whatever he takes that to be at the moment: the dialogues are so diverse in part because his conception of correct method, which is

⁶ Cf. the *Anonymous Prolegomena* (IV, esp. at (6)): this is the best quick survey I know of the defining features of the dialogue form and Plato's multifarious reasons for using it.

complicated from the beginning, keeps developing.) At the same time *dialegesthai* never becomes a technical term; the honorific sense is always continuous with the broad everyday one. For correct philosophical discussion just *is* discussion in its best and truest form -- discussion in the strict sense, but not in a special sense. In the *Parmenides*, Parmenides presents devastating objections to the theory of Forms advanced by the young Socrates. But he concludes that we must keep faith with some such theory, or *dialegesthai* will be entirely impossible:

"Yet on the other hand, Socrates," said Parmenides, "if someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of the same sort, won't allow that there are Forms for things and won't mark off a Form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way he will destroy the power of discussion [*dunamis tou dialegesthai*] altogether." (*Parm.* 135b-c)⁷

Parmenides' warning is tantalizingly vague. What is this 'power of discussion' which is threatened; what is it to have nowhere to 'turn one's thought'? And thanks to the slippery duality of *dialegesthai*, the *scope* of the warning is ambiguous. Is Parmenides' point that philosophical discussion becomes pointless without a shared framework of commitment to objective natural kinds (or whatever we take to constitute a bare-bones theory of Forms)? Or that *any meaningful communication at all* really presupposes such a framework, whether the participants realize it or not? Like so many important Platonic ambiguities, this has got to be highly deliberate: Plato is goading us into thinking about how the two might stand or fall together.

6. To the extent that Platonic dialogues belong to a genre recognisable at the time, they are *Sôkratikoî logoi*, discourses about Socrates. They are not unique in that: Socrates' martyrdom in 399 BC set off a literary explosion among his disciples. Authors of

⁷ Translations from Plato's works are from the various hands in Cooper ed., sometimes with modifications.

Socratic *logoi* included Antisthenes, Aeschines, Euclides, Phaedo and possibly Simon the shoemaker.⁸ But we have only the tiniest scraps -- a brief quotation here, a possibly bogus title there -- for most Socratic authors. A number of Socratic texts by Xenophon do survive: an *Apology* and a *Symposium* to compete with Plato's, the *Oeconomicus* and the all-purpose *Memorabilia*. But all seem to be contaminated by Platonic influences and appropriations of various kinds. So there is little hope of reconstructing the original genre *Sôkratikos logos* before Plato bent it to his will. To take one obvious question, we have no way of telling how far the obvious commemorative purpose was from the start combined with philosophical novelty (and, no doubt, a factional struggle to define and commandeer the Socratic legacy). In any case Plato expanded and transformed the form beyond recognition: whatever the *Sophist* and *Timaeus* are, neither is a *Sôkratikos logos*, and not only for the obvious reason that Socrates figures as a bit player.

7. Given the polymorphousness of dialogue-the-activity, *dialegesthai*, it is easiest to begin by saying a few things about what it is not. It is not -- ever -- a forum for expressing personal experiences and emotions, articulating a distinctive first-personal standpoint, appreciating the equally valid standpoint of the Other, enacting mutual recognition, promoting pluralistic empathy and understanding, or achieving consensus. In other words, as I always warn at the start of my undergraduate Plato survey: it is not *dialogue in the touchy-feely sense*. Uncritical receptivity and self-expression are the antithesis of Platonic dialogue. Rather, dialogue-the-activity, hereafter 'dialectic' [*dialektikê*], is in most of Plato's works a highly formal genre of competitive intellectual play and display. The rules and goals of the game vary and evolve, but one constant is that it is *asymmetrical*, with participants assigned the role of either questioner or respondent. Often that asymmetry is explicitly agonistic, with a questioner who wins if he refutes and a respondent whose goal is to avoid that refutation. (Players change roles at half-time for a complete dialectical 'verbal contest', *agôn logôn*, as in the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Euthydemus*.) In later dialogues, the asymmetry is pedagogical -- as Diogenes put it, literally 'guiding', *hyphegetic*: in a reversal of what we might expect, the student learns (with the reader tagging along) by

⁸ See Giannantoni 1990 and Kahn 1996, Ch. 1.

answering a senior philosopher, who controls the proceedings by knowing exactly what questions to ask.⁹ We might be tempted to see an intermediate group between these and the critical, aporetic dialogues: in the *Republic*, for instance, the dialectic seems to be pedagogical but also genuinely collaborative, and thus *zetetic*, investigative, in a stronger sense. We are seeing a theory not just expounded but constructed as each answer generates a further group of questions.¹⁰

8. So Platonic dialectic (in all its subspecies) is not just 'discussion' of any old kind, but philosophically rigorous question and answer. In the early, largely negative dialogues, much of that question and answer takes the form of the famous Socratic *elenchus* or refutation (literally a 'putting to shame'). On some influential readings of early dialogues, above all Gregory Vlastos', refutation is the only thing that Socrates does here; and it always takes the same form. This 'standard elenchus' starts from a thesis P asserted by Socrates' interlocutor; Socrates gets his interlocutor to agree to further auxiliary premises Q,R,S, etc., and then shows that these in conjunction entail $\sim P$. Thus the interlocutor's views are revealed to be contradictory, and a fortiori to include at least one falsehood. The original thesis P is then diagnosed as the source of the problem and is rejected -- though this is more than the *elenchus* can reveal in strictly logical terms. The *elenchus* is a negative, critical tool: it can demonstrate that an interlocutor is not wise (on the plausible assumption that a wise man or expert in some domain will not have contradictory beliefs on the subject of his wisdom); and it can (especially if applied repeatedly, with both P and $\sim P$ considered in conjunction with different sets of auxiliary premises) begin to suggest which views are more likely than others to survive

⁹ A method for which the theory of recollection advanced and displayed in the *Meno* (and reaffirmed in the *Phaedo*) could provide warrant.

¹⁰ Perhaps the same goes for the fully pedagogical dialogues, but there are at least presentational differences. In the *Sophist* it is made explicit that exactly the same content could be conveyed by means of a long speech. Socrates asks the Visitor, "When you want to explain something to somebody, do you usually prefer to explain it by yourself in a long speech, or to do it with questions?" His answer: "It's easier to do it the second way, Socrates, if you're talking with someone who's easy to handle and isn't a trouble-maker. Otherwise it's easier to do it alone" (217c-d, cf. 217e). It's hard to imagine the same being said of the *Republic* (even in Books II-IX), which is far more deeply shaped by the interlocutors' contributions.

critical investigation. But it never refutes P (or establishes \sim P) directly. What makes the elenchus a thing of beauty nonetheless, and a tool of remarkable philosophical power, is that it works with such minimal resources. The Socratic questioner need not himself know the truth of the matter about P or \sim P, or even have any beliefs about it. The whole point of the elenchus, in fact, is to enable someone who does *not* claim any wisdom or knowledge on some topic to examine those who do.

A further beauty of the elenchus is that, by restricting its examination to questions of internal coherence, it frees us from the vagaries of appeals to antecedent intuitions -- to the sense of the 'probable' [to *eikos*] on which ancient rhetorical argument was alleged to depend. In the *Gorgias* Socrates contrasts his method with that of his opponent, the rhetorician Polus. No doubt Polus could, as he claims, call practically all of the Greeks to 'bear witness' that Socrates' claims -- in particular, the claim that to do injustice is worse than to suffer it -- are absurd. But Socrates cares nothing for the votes of the majority; his concern is to make good his view with the person he is talking to:

"if I don't produce you as a single witness to agree with what I'm saying, then I suppose I've achieved nothing worth mentioning concerning the things we've been discussing. And I suppose you haven't either, if I don't testify on your side.... For I do know how to produce one witness to whatever I'm saying, and that's the man I'm having a discussion with. The majority I disregard. And I do know how to call for a vote from one man, but I don't even discuss things with the majority." (471e-4b)

Rhetoric *gratifies* an audience by catering to its prejudices and self-esteem; dialectic -- in all its forms, inherently a one-on-one practice -- *engages* an individual respondent, by testing and examination of his views. The elenchus in particular enables discussion to start from scratch and without any shared presuppositions or intuitive agreements: you and I may differ violently as to what looks most probable, but we can still agree in rejecting the impossible, and that includes any view which contradicts itself. And as

Sherlock Holmes pointed out: once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.¹¹

9. How Platonic dialectic evolves from this Socratic core is a complicated story, and I will not try to tell it here.¹² But I ought to point out that the *elenchus* is far from the whole story even about the early dialogues. For one thing, Socrates' refutations don't always take the form of the standard *elenchus*. Sometimes an interlocutor's definition of a virtue will be repudiated simply because he cannot spell what it means, or because it leads to ridiculous consequences.¹³ And it is not true that the early Socrates only ever refutes: even the earliest dialogues show him offering positive suggestions of his own (including definitions of the virtues, e.g. *Euthyphro* 12c-d). The *Crito*, an echt-Socratic dialogue by any reckoning, is not refutative at all, but a sustained piece of constructive argumentation starting from theses accepted by Socrates and Crito themselves. As a philosopher, Socrates is from Plato's earliest texts a fox, never a hedgehog.¹⁴ And dialectic is always zetetic and (in a loose sense) pedagogic; never exclusively critical or merely agonistic.

¹¹ *A Scandal in Bohemia*, *. This is of course an optimistic idealization, for almost no view of any interest is *directly* self-contradictory: Socrates' *elenchus* always depends on those all-important further auxiliary premises Q, R, and S. These are sometimes supported by a brief argument, but more often simply presented as intuitively obvious to all participants. This is why P is never strictly speaking refuted -- Q,R, or S might *really* be the falsehood which causes all the trouble. And one might object that the standing of Q,R and S as unproven reduces the *elenchus* as a whole to a matter of mere probability. But this devolves into the charge of incompleteness that can be leveled against any method of argument -- there is after all no way to demonstrate one's premises *ad infinitum*.

¹² Except to note that the method of the *elenchus* as I have described it is much like what Plato will somewhat later, in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, term the 'method of hypothesis'. On any question, we are to set down the thesis which seems most 'powerful', then examine it by extracting its consequences and testing them for coherence. The method of hypothesis, then, is just the *elenctic* method applied to Socrates' own theses, and with the explicitly constructive zetetic goal of testing them for acceptability (rather than, say, testing an interlocutor for wisdom or disabusing him of his illusions).

¹³ As Matthew Schwartz documents in detail in his doctoral thesis, *

¹⁴ The *eironeia*, irony, of which Socrates is chronically accused is also a foxy trait: when he disclaims expertise of the matter under discussion, he is like the folk-tale fox who limps to reassure his prey as he draws close. See Wolfsdorf, *

10. A further twist is that the elenctic form is not *formally* distinctive of Socrates or Plato. It is identical with what -- when anybody else does it -- gets called *eristic* (literally 'contentiousness') or sophistic refutation.¹⁵ For this too is a series of questions and answers, starting from a thesis affirmed by the respondent and ending with the contradictory of it. We see this practised professionally by the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in Plato's *Euthydemus*, and it was clearly a standard form of competitive intellectual display. (Both Socrates and Protagoras know the rules of the game in the *Protagoras* -- though there we also see that wrangling about the rules is part of the game.) According to at least one ancient source, it was devised by the first and greatest sophist Protagoras: as Diogenes Laertius rather paradoxically puts it, Protagoras "was first to launch [*ekinêse*] the Socratic kind of argument" (IX.53=DK80A1).¹⁶ This makes sense, for we know that Protagoras claimed to be able to argue on both sides of every question. And the ultimate victory in eristic (judging again by Plato's depiction of it in the *Euthydemus*) is to be able to offer your interlocutor his choice of P or ~P and refute him *whichever* side he chooses.

11. It is a cliché, but also true, to say that Socratic refutation is nonetheless very different from the sophistic original, in its goals and spirit. To put it too simply, Socrates aims at the truth¹⁷ where the sophist aims at victory. Socrates himself insists on the distinction; and when his interlocutors get annoyed, they hit back by denying that he is any different:

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle's *Sophistic Elenchi* and *Topics*. I argue for the claims which follow, and go through the evidence for Protagoras in detail, in 'Twenty Questions About Protagorean Wisdom' (Columbia Conference on Ancient Wisdom, forthcoming in *)

¹⁶ Diogenes thus presents 'Socratic argument' as an instance of *Stigler's Law of Eponymy*: No scientific or intellectual discovery is named after the person who actually first discovered it. Naturally the law applies to itself: Stigler credits its discovery to Robert K. Merton.

¹⁷ A standard, deceptively simple formulation which conceals a range of options: does Socrates aim at *discovering* the truth? At *confirming* it? Or at *teaching* it to others? In saying that Platonic dialectic is both zetetic and pedagogic across the board, I am assuming all three -- though the *elenchus* can only be a very inefficient method of discovery.

"I think that you just want to win the argument, Socrates, and that is why you are forcing me to answer. So I will gratify you and say that, on the basis of what we have agreed upon, it seems to me to be impossible.
 -- I have no other reason for asking these things than my desire to answer these questions about virtue, especially what virtue is in itself."
 (Prot. 360e-1a)

12. So Socratic dialectic aims at truth. But this is not a matter of neutral, detached, scientific inquiry -- or not *just* that. The stakes are personal and ethical, and Socrates also sees his method as *therapeutic*:

"So, I'm afraid to pursue my examination of you, for fear that you should take me to be speaking with eagerness to win against you, rather than to have our subject become clear. For my part, I'd be pleased to continue questioning you if you're the same kind of man I am, otherwise I would drop it.... For I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it. I don't suppose there's anything quite so bad for a person as having false belief about the things we're discussing right now. " (Gorgias 357e-8a)

According to Socrates, everyone hates and fears to have falsehood in his soul (*Republic* 382a-b). But the evil purged by the *elenchus* is not merely false belief; it is self-contradiction, which is even worse. For this is a guarantee of -- or just *is* -- mental conflict, and can only cause dysfunctional, self-frustrating behaviour:

"if you leave this unrefuted, then by the Dog, the god of the Egyptians, Callicles will not agree with you, Callicles, but will be dissonant with you all your life long. And yet for my part, my good man, I think it's better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and

have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I'm only one person." (482b-c)

Without Socratic intervention, almost all of us are prone to this kind of psychic disarray and self-frustration -- that is why the unexamined life is not worth living. And it is at least in part because of this therapeutic aim that Socrates urges his interlocutors to say what they believe in answering his questions (rather than just adopting any old thesis, or the most widely accepted one). This therapy can be an unpleasant experience. Polus, for instance, must be soothed into answering with a medical analogy: "Don't shrink back from answering, Polus. You won't get hurt in any way. Submit yourself nobly to the argument, as you would to a doctor, and answer me." (475d) Like medical treatment, the replacement of false views with true is an enormous long-term benefit, but involves short-term pain.

13. So dialectic calls for certain *virtues* in its practitioners, and courage above all.¹⁸ For the talking cure to work, the respondent must be able willing to state his real views fearlessly, endure a searching examination, and bear up under the pains of refutation. These pains come largely from *shame*, which plays a crucial and complicated role in dialectic. The good interlocutor will be responsive to the really shameful condition of having been refuted, and be prepared to give up the beliefs which have led to that state; but he will also be loyal to what he really does think, so that he refuses to deny or conceal views which are unpopular or unrespectable. To meet both conditions, his sense of shame must be not only lively but truth-oriented or *educated* -- able to sort the really shameful from the merely embarrassing. Shame and courage are both located in *thumos*, the spirited part of soul, home to the whole family of motivations and emotions which involve anger, aggression, honour, self-esteem and competitiveness (*Republic* IV). Particularly in the early, largely refutative dialogues, it is the *thumos*-motivations which both drive the dialectic and, sooner or later, derail it. And the difference between a respondent who can benefit from dialectic and one who cannot is largely a difference

¹⁸ Cf. *Laches* 194a

in the quality of their *thumos*. The former prizes the real honours and benefits of discovering the truth, is happy to pursue them collaboratively, and is ashamed at the fact of failure; the other aggressively seeks victory in argument, and his shame at failure is contaminated by anger at his interlocutors. An uneducated *thumos* cannot appreciate goods which are non-zero-sum, like the possession of the truth, and purely intellectual rather than social and agonistic; perhaps it cannot even grasp that short-term pains are worth the long-term benefits. Which means, of course, that those most in need of Socratic therapy are least able to endure it, or even to recognise it as such.

14. So Socratic dialectic moves along two tracks at once: it investigates the truth and it attempts to cure a soul. And though the emphasis may shift from dialogue to dialogue and even moment to moment, in principle *zêtêsis* comes first:

"So, does someone who acts unjustly seem temperate to you in that he acts unjustly?

-- I would be ashamed to say that is so, Socrates, although many people do say it.

Then shall I address myself to them or to you?

-- If you like, why don't you debate the majority position first?

It makes no difference to me, provided you give the answers, whether it is your own opinion or not. I am primarily interested in testing the argument, although it may happen both that the questioner, myself, and my respondent wind up being tested." (*Protagoras* 333b-c)

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates proclaims himself delighted to have Callicles as an interlocutor, since he combines the dialectical virtues of goodwill, frankness and expertise (487a-e):

"If there's any point in our discussions on which you agree with me, then that point will have been adequately put to the text by you and me... for you'd never have conceded the point through lack of wisdom or excess

of shame, and you wouldn't do so by lying to me either.... So, our mutual agreement will really lay hold of truth in the end." (487e)

When Socrates later points out that his thesis, that the pleasant and the good are the same, commits him to endorsing the pleasures of the catamite, a surly Callicles bites the bullet:

"Well, to keep my argument from being inconsistent if I say that they're different, I say that they're the same.

-- You're wrecking your earlier statements, Callicles, and you'd no longer be adequately inquiring into the truth of the matter with me if you speak contrary to what you think." (495a)

Callicles has no good option here: inconsistency is shameful, but so is feeling forced to answer against one's real views. And what Socrates emphasises is that the latter makes Callicles unfit for collaboration in *zêtêsis*. Any cure of his inconsistencies will depend on the success of the investigative project: for it is by trying sincerely to find out where the truth lies that we detect where our own antecedent beliefs fall short. As interpreters have often noted, Socrates (in the *Gorgias* in particular) is remarkably confident that he will be able to run the elenchus on anyone who holds false beliefs on the central ethical questions. And that confidence seems to presuppose that *everyone* is equipped with a sufficient stock of *true* moral beliefs, however latent. The key dialectical virtue, then, is simply the guts to risk refutation -- and with it shame and unpleasant self-knowledge -- in the pursuit of a truth which is already within our grasp.

15. Callicles' debate with Socrates culminates in a fit of the sulks, leaving Socrates to complete the discussion by playing both questioner and respondent -- the most dramatic breakdown of dialectic anywhere depicted in the dialogues. Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that the debate was all along doomed by their fundamental disagreements about value. In his early enthusiastic moments, Socrates identifies some points of commonality, in a deliberately frivolous-sounding vein:

"Well, Callicles, if human beings didn't share common experiences, some sharing one, others sharing another, but one of us had some unique experience not shared by others, it wouldn't be easy for him to communicate what he experienced to the other. I say this because I realize that you and I are both now sharing a common experience: each of the two of us is a lover of two objects, I of Alcibiades, Clinias' son, and of philosophy, and you of the *demos* of Athens, and the Demos who's the son of Pnylilampes. I notice that in each case you're unable to contradict your beloved, clever though you are, no matter what he says or what he claims is so. You keep shifting back and forth.... As for that son of Clinias, what he says differs from one time to the next, but what philosophy says always stays the same, and she's saying things that now astound you, although you were present when they were said." (481c-2b)

In the 'philosophical digression' of the *Theaetetus*, Socrates seems to return to the scene of the *Gorgias* with his contrast between the philosopher, dedicated to the pursuit of universal truths, and the harried, servile, yet self-important lawyer. He predicts that the latter will not be able to sustain his views under examination, even in his own eyes:

"But there is one accident to which the unjust man is liable. When it comes to giving and taking an account in a private discussion of the things he disparages; when he is willing to stand his ground like a man for long enough, instead of running away like a coward, then, my friend, an odd thing happens. In the end the things he says do not satisfy even himself; that famous eloquence of his somehow dries up, and he is left looking nothing more than a child." (*Theaet.* 177b)

This sounds like a description of Callicles' dialectical failure; and Socrates here turns the tables on Callicles' preferred rhetoric of manliness, power and dignity. Through this

Plato means, I think, to claim something important about dialectical method quite generally:

16. We can have a dialogue, a genuinely zetetic one, with someone whose fundamental values are profoundly different from our own. All we need is *some* thread of commonality -- enough to feel a tug of kinship and goodwill -- and some shared vocabulary with which to argue. Not a common foundation but a mid-air bridge, however rickety. Philosopher and lawyer disagree fundamentally on what the good life is; but they agree that it is marked by 'freedom' [*eleutheria*], and that the desirable life is one fit for a gentleman. And this is all Socrates needs to get started: he can then argue that the lawyer's life is hopelessly unfree, and that his *own* values should lead him to rank the life of the philosopher more highly.

17. So Parmenides' warning does not mean that we must agree on the *content* of our theories at some basic level. Dialogue need not begin from first principles -- and in Plato's dialogues, as in real life, it never does. His characters just find themselves getting into an argument -- about how best to seduce some pretty new face at the gym, or what classes the kids should be enrolled in, or comparing notes while they wait in line at the courtroom. Dialogue is individual, local, concrete: it begins from particular puzzles and everyday irritants. All we need to get the ball rolling is a neighbour with a similar problem.

18. Plato traces the boundaries of dialectic not so much through its moments of breakdown, but through the cases in which it can only be done at all by proxy. For one thing, dialogue is necessarily an *individual* enterprise: in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras must be enlisted to answer, however reluctantly, on behalf of 'the many'. Dialectic also requires a certain openness: in the *Philebus*, since Philebus is avowedly unbudgeable in his hedonism, there is no point in his pretending to debate; he can only hand over his thesis to the more flexible Protarchus (12a). In the *Theaetetus*, it is Socrates who must voice and defend the anti-realist views of Protagoras, which seem to preclude genuine disagreement (admittedly, Protagoras also happens to be dead); likewise with the

strictly ineffable Heraclitean 'Secret Doctrine'. In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Visitor undertakes to reconcile the views of earlier materialists and Platonists (or their kin) in the 'battle of the gods and the giants'. The giants must be 'reformed' to be amenable to dialectical engagement, but there is nothing wrong with that kind of idealization:

"It seems to me that we have to deal with them this way.

-- Namely...?

Mainly be making them better than they actually are -- if we somehow could. But if we can't do that in fact, then let's do it in words, by supposing that they're willing to answer less wildly than they actually do. Something that better people agree to is worth more than what worse ones agree to. Anyway we're not concerned with the people; we're looking for what's true." (246d)

Again, it is examination of the *logos* which takes priority. But the best way to examine the *logos* of a philosopher is through dialectic with that philosopher -- or, if need be, with an idealized variant. Interpreters have also seen great significance in Socrates' switch in interlocutors between *Republic* Book I and Book II, from the truculent sophist Thrasymachus to the biddable student-figures Glaucon and Adeimantus, who are not genuinely committed to the immoralist thesis they propose. A real immoralist *can* be refuted, Plato seems to be saying, but only in the rather unsatisfactory and superficial way we see in Book I.¹⁹ The kind of constructive argument that can really diagnose and fully disarm the appeal of immoralism (and Thrasymachus apparently *is* disarmed and won over, long after having fallen silent, cf. *Rep.* V, 450a) calls for more tractable interlocutors.

19. The most important boundaries are between dialectic and its truth-indifferent rivals. The practice most likely to be confused with dialectic is, again, *eristic* -- the purely agonistic twin of the Socratic elenchus. At one point Plato suggests, rather

¹⁹ I try to distinguish the many different ways in which the Book I arguments against Thrasymachus are and are not satisfactory in *.

oddly, that one can fall into eristic unwittingly. He speaks of those who "think they are having not a quarrel but a conversation, because they are unable to examine what has been said by dividing it up according to forms" (454a). And he fears that this has happened to Glaucon and himself:

"We're bravely, but in a quarrelsome and merely verbal fashion, pursuing the principle that natures that aren't the same must follow different ways of life. But... we didn't at all examine the form of natural difference and sameness we had in mind or in what regard we were distinguishing them." (*Republic V* 454b)

Socrates is here criticising as eristic an objection which he himself has raised against his own political proposals: it would sound odd to describe a positive line of argument as eristic even if it exhibited the same flaw. Still, his reasoning implies that we fall into eristic *whenever* we draw philosophical distinctions, tossing around the categories 'same' and 'different', without being concerned to pick out the *relevant* similarities and differences -- without striving to, as he puts it elsewhere, carve up nature at the joints.²⁰ But perhaps the pseudo-constructive crypto-eristic here hinted at is also already covered by the broader category of *rhetoric*. Rhetoric is speech which aims to persuade by inducing trust in the speaker, rather than by really teaching anybody anything, and so requires no knowledge in the speaker either (*Gorgias* 453d-5b, 464b-6a); presumably it can impersonate whatever form real pedagogy might take.

20. If all this is what Platonic dialectic is and does, how it operates and where its boundaries lie, then it is a standing challenge, even a rebuke, to dialogue in the touchy-feely sense. There are aspects of the Platonic project which might well be attractive to non- or even anti-Platonists: his conception of the dialectical virtues, for instance; the idea that dialogue proceeds from local bridges rather than foundations; and perhaps especially the idea of dialogue as a *therapy*, bringing to the surface internal conflicts and dishonesties so that we may be liberated from them. But all these features of

²⁰ Cf. *Statesman* 262d-e on the worthlessness of the category 'barbarian'.

Platonic dialectic are firmly marked out by him as dependent on its zetetic character, which is in turn defined by its orientation to objective truth. For Plato, therapeutic dialogue rides on the back of the zetetic kind; and zetetic dialectic is argument about the truth and the Forms.

21. To sharpen the contrast, consider the kind of dialogue advocated by Richard Rorty as the future of philosophy. The comparison has some traction because, though no twentieth-century philosopher strove harder than Rorty to renounce Plato and all his works, what Rorty propounded in place of the failed and exhausted Platonist tradition was what he called *conversation* -- in other words, *dialegethai* again. Rorty envisages *this* conversation as one freed from traditional philosophical worries about truth, in the sense of correspondence to objective reality: its point is to "help us stop worrying about objectivity by letting us be satisfied with intersubjectivity" (*). And Rorty insists that to do so is not to reject the hope of intellectual progress, the confidence that some questions and answers are *better* than others, and that through dialogue we converge on the latter: "in the process of playing vocabularies and cultures off against each other, we produce new and better ways of talking and acting -- not better by reference to a previously known standard, but just better in the sense that they come to *seem* clearly better than their predecessors" (xxxvii).²¹ This 'hermeneutic' or 'edifying' discourse is envisaged as one big interdisciplinary, even cross-cultural mashup, with the philosopher acting as translator and *animateur*:

"the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In his salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation." (PMN 317)

²¹ With this parrying of the realist's anxieties, Rorty comes very close to the Protagoreanism of Protagoras' Defence in the *Theaetetus*, though as a pragmatist he is allowed to use 'true' for the improvements Protagoras merely describes as 'better' (166d). I pursue this comparison further in *.

This 'Socratic' role is contrasted with a 'Platonic' one to be disavowed, as:

"the cultural overseer who knows everyone's common ground -- the Platonic philosopher-king who knows what everybody else is really doing whether *they* know it or not, because he knows about the ultimate context (the Forms, the Mind, Language) within which they are doing it."
(PMN 317-8)

And this difference defines two different kinds of discursive project:

"The first role is appropriate to hermeneutics, the second to epistemology... For epistemology, conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. Epistemology views the participants as united in what Oakeshott calls a *universitas* -- a group united by mutual interests in achieving a common end. Hermeneutics views them as united in what he called a *societas* -- persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by common ground." (PMN 318)²²

On the reading of Platonic dialogue which I have been urging, these oppositions are just what Plato's own work denies: 'Socratic' and 'Platonic' are everywhere mixed, the former depending on the latter. And dialectic is the attempt to forge a truth-oriented *universitas* from the diffuse local *societas* which gives rise to it.

²² Rorty goes on to cite Oakeshott again as his source for the phrase 'the conversation of mankind' ("because it catches the tone in which, I think, philosophy should be discussed", PMN 389). But Raymond Geuss reports Rorty as having been struck, via Gadamer, by a line of Holderlin: *Seit ein Gespräch wir sind..* (<http://www.bu.edu/arion/Geuss.htm>). Either way, Rorty is a wily writer: my guess would be that he talks of 'conversation' precisely in order to avoid the Platonic baggage of 'dialogue', as well as the Platonic-Aristotelian-Hegelian baggage of 'dialectic'.

22. So Rortean conversation is dialectic reduced to a single, therapeutic track. The objectivist attempt to carve up nature at the joints is here abandoned in favour of the purely intersubjective attempt to help each other to think more clearly, humanely, and successfully. And the test of these improvements is always pragmatic, a matter of more successful functioning in the world. Rorty is prepared to bite the bullet and agree with Plato that to abandon objectivity in this way is also to abandon *zêtêsis*: "One way to see edifying philosophy as the love of wisdom is to see it as the attempt to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into a research program" (PMN 372).

23. From the Platonist point of view, Rorty is certainly right to call this something other than 'dialogue'. What the Platonist herself should call it is not so clear. In the ancient Greek context, the only visible alternative to relentlessly truth-seeking speech is relentlessly agonistic speech: perhaps Rortean conversation would be diagnosed by Plato as a sort of crypto-rhetorical, pseudo-interactive, agonistic display. (How different is an appeal to 'intersubjectivity', after all, from Polus' appeal to 'witnesses'?) Dialogue along the lines of a press conference, perhaps, with pre-established talking points. But Rorty's 'conversation' has always sounded to me more like a kind of interminable talk show -- endless *chitchat*, with participants taking turns in order of popularity. (A very 20th-century-American vision of intellectual exchange, just as *eristic* is almost unimaginable outside the cultural context of ancient Greece.) As I suggested earlier, Plato lacks, but *should* have, a concept which would be appropriate here: a more or less technical concept of *chitchat* or blather [*lêrein, adoleschia, makrologia*], as a kind of discourse which shares the *form* of constructive investigations as *eristic* does that of the *elenchus*, and like *eristic* is indifferent to truth.

24. What the talk-show image suggests to me is that the third way Rorty aspires to -- a dialogue which is neither investigative nor merely agonistic -- will strike the Platonist as doomed to triviality. The problem is with the *uncritical* character of the receptivity which conversation without investigation seems to impose. For me to interest myself in your views, not as candidates for truth but simply as *your views*, is for me to treat you, however politely, as an object of biographical study rather than a fellow subject.

Perhaps room for 'conversation' could be found under the heading of 'play' [*paidia*]; but that is just to say that it leads nowhere very interesting.

The Platonist will also charge that this conversation leaves no room for the dialectical virtues of courage and educated shame. Platonic dialectic calls for courage because the truth is painful: far from being 'what works', as the pragmatist would have it, the truth is what trips us up, interferes with our prejudices, demolishes our self-serving assumptions -- if we have the guts to let it loose. Pragmatic considerations, by contrast, must ultimately reduce to subjective satisfaction; and to make *that* the test of changes in belief is to make dialogue hostage to precisely the self-serving inclinations we need it to correct.

Worst of all, of course, if Parmenides' warning comes true, the 'Socratic' role for philosophy which Rorty approves must go the way of the 'Platonic' one he discards. The success of the therapeutic aim cannot be detached from the investigative one: what is bad for us just *is* to have falsehoods and contradictions in our soul.

25. To the Platonist, Rortean dialogue is soccer without goalposts, endless talk with never a cure. Then again, to the pragmatist, the Platonic project is one long saga of intellectual failure, and objectivism just a particularly sad case of the will to power. Plato and Rorty can still agree, I think, on something reasonably determinate to argue *about*, namely the validity of Parmenides' warning: whether the whole power of *dialegesthai* goes, therapeutic powers included, when the investigation of objective truth is given up. A harder question is whether Plato and Rorty have anything left to argue *with*. I think I see at least one of the local points of contact which I said earlier were essential: for Rorty would surely dispute the charge that his philosopher cannot have the dialectical virtues of courage and educated shame (under some suitable reinterpretation). As in the *Gorgias* and *Theaetetus*, the values of *thumos* may form a bridge over chasms of fundamental principles: the dispute could come into focus on the question of what exactly these jointly avowed virtues must involve.

26. Where might the debate go from there? And how could we hope to judge who wins it? We would have to begin by thinking harder about what *dialegesthai* becomes after its

zetetic 'power' has been destroyed, and how we can recognise it as such. There should be some more or less neutral, empirical markers by which to tell merely gratifying rhetoric from authentic therapy. But in truth, it is hard to imagine a non-question-begging, philosophically neutral way to test the truth of Parmenides' warning. (And how to keep score is a further tricky question: one could argue that if a real debate can take place here *at all* then Rorty wins it, since Parmenides' warning is falsified at once.) There are many paths which the *agôn* might take, and no point in trying to prejudge its outcome. To proceed interestingly we would have to turn to the individual, local and concrete: choose a *particular* pragmatist and Platonist, identify a real setting, and toss up a practical, local puzzle. In other words, set up a scene at the courthouse or the gym and trace the trajectory of a particular... dialogue? Or could it only be a conversation?