

SOCRATIC DIALOGUE AND PLATONIC DIALECTIC
- HOW THE SOUL KNOWS IN THE REPUBLIC -

1. Knowledge as dialectic

"Knowledge" (ἐπιστήμη), the highest stage of our cognition, is explained as "dialectic" in the central books of the *Republic*, while the mathematical sciences, which we usually call knowledge, are placed in the second stage "thinking" (διάνοια), somewhere between knowledge and opinion (VII 533c-e; cf. 534e-535a). However, it is not clear what "dialectic" means here and how it constitutes "knowledge." Plato's explanation is notoriously brief, and is intended to be (cf. VII 533a).

Here a fundamental difficulty arises in interpreting Plato's concept of knowledge as dialectic: how to unite (or reconcile) dialectic with "engaging in dialogue" (διαλέγεσθαι), which is Socrates' preferred mode of discourse. To solve this difficulty, I suggest that we should reject one general assumption, namely, that knowledge is the system of doctrines or true propositions (as what is known) or the cognitive state of possessing it (e.g. "justified true beliefs," as modern philosophers suppose). Instead, we shall consider the idea that knowledge is the soul's ability and activity of conducting the kind of discourse (λόγος) that allows it to deal properly with the forms.

In this paper, I will seek the most fruitful approach to seeing Plato's concept of dialectic as being in line with Socratic dialogue.

2. The difficulty concerning dialogue and dialectic

First, let us examine the difficulty we have to face in interpreting Plato's philosophy from the perspective of the question raised here.

The *Republic* introduces the idea of "dialectic" in the Simile of the Divided Line, where the higher subsection of the intelligible is said to be "that which *logos* itself grasps by the ability to engage in dialogue (ἢ δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι)" (VI 511b). After this official introduction of dialectic, the adjective "διαλεκτικός" is used eight times in Book VII (531d, 532a, 533c, 534b, e, 536d, 537c bis). Plato probably coined this word out of the common

verb *διαλέγεσθαι* (to engage in dialogue), and gave it more technical connotations.

Socrates considered his engagement in philosophical dialogue as his life's mission, and this is why Plato chose the dialogue form for his philosophy and kept writing "Socratic dialogues" (*Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι*) until late in his career. On the other hand, Plato proposes dialectic in the middle and later dialogues as the genuine knowledge and art of philosophers (esp. *Soph.* 253b-254b). Dialogue and dialectic look so different (or even opposite) that scholars tend to separate the two and ascribe them to different stages in the development of Plato's philosophy. It is often supposed that dialogue is the Socratic method, reproduced mainly in the earlier dialogues, while dialectic, presented in the middle and later dialogues, is the originally Platonic concept of philosophy, which has little to do with actual dialogue. To examine this view, let us clarify the apparent contrasts between the two.

First, Socratic dialogue is a living discussion between Socrates and his interlocutor(s), set in a particular time, place, and context. By contrast, Platonic dialectic seems to be pure thinking, independent of any particular situation.

Second, Socrates aims to examine other people's opinions (*δόξα*), whereas Plato clearly denies that dialectic deals with human opinions (*Rep.* VII 533b, 534c). He insists that, at the highest stage, the soul "uses forms themselves through forms to forms, and ends in forms" (VI 511c; cf. 510b, VII 532a-b, 533b).

Third, Socratic dialogue, in discussing what a virtue is, cross-examines and refutes others, and usually ends in *aporia*. It does not reach any positive conclusion. On the other hand, Platonic dialectic is believed to provide positive doctrines, such as the theory of forms, and to reach the truth as equivalent to seeing the form of Good (cf. VII 532b).

Thus, in spite of their etymological connection, dialogue (living process) and dialectic (genuine knowledge) are regarded by many scholars as distinct and incompatible. This appearance, however, may mislead us into assuming a total separation between Socrates' and Plato's philosophies, an assumption that seems highly implausible to me.

3. Problems concerning knowledge

Scholars endorsing the above-mentioned position may be assuming that the highest "knowledge" (ἐπιστήμη) consists of systematic doctrine or of true propositions concerning the forms, or of the cognitive state of possessing them, and that a person who possesses that system is called "dialectician." According to this view, Socratic dialogue turns into merely preparatory exercises in argument, to pave the way for knowledge; by refutation (ἔλεγχος), such dialogue clears away wrong opinions that constitute an obstacle to further inquiry. Only after such exercises (in the first stage), one may reach the truth and possess knowledge (in the second stage). This two-stage view, however, raises three crucial problems.

First, if Socratic dialogue (used in most of the Platonic dialogues) is merely a preparation, where does Plato actually perform dialectic? Although the *Republic* puts forward the idea of dialectic, this dialogue itself does not seem to employ it in a direct way (as implied in VII 532d-533a). Maybe we have to wait for the second part of the *Parmenides*, the middle part of the *Sophist*, or the divine method of the *Philebus*, but in that case, all the other accounts will remain far removed from knowledge or true philosophy. Alternatively, Plato may, as some scholars believe, have refrained entirely from writing his fundamental doctrines in the dialogues, and have reserved them for the "Unwritten Doctrines."

Second, the type of aporia to which Socratic dialogue leads, does not necessarily prepare for positive conclusions or truth, despite the optimistic view Socrates derives from the geometrical demonstration in the *Meno*. Unless a drastic turn from negative refutation to positive truth is guaranteed, the two stages will remain disconnected. Even if Socratic dialogue constitutes a necessary condition for the next stage, it may not be a sufficient one.

Third, we cannot understand why "dialectic" is linguistically associated with "dialogue," if there is no need for living exchange of words in possessing a system of doctrines. For a system is usually deemed static, and as such incompatible with process.

These problems arise, I believe, from mistaken assumptions about knowledge. In the *Republic*, "knowledge" is not explained in terms of a system or set of true propositions. Instead, it is repeatedly said to be an ability or process of inquiry (VI 510b, VII 532a, d, 533c; cf. V 476d, 477b-478b). We should not project our anachronistic conception of knowledge, namely, as a system of doctrines obtained and possessed, onto Plato. For Plato, knowledge is primarily the soul's ability (δύναμις) and process of engaging properly in a dialogue.

To strengthen this claim, I take a closer look at one passage in the *Republic*.

4. Dialogue on the equality between the sexes

In Book V, when Socrates and his interlocutors examine the extraordinary idea of sexual equality in occupation and education (called the "First Wave"), Socrates abruptly calls their attention to the distinction between dialectical and antilogical or eristical arguments (454a-d). This passage is usually neglected by interpreters, but is particularly important for our inquiry. For Socrates explicitly performs dialectic in this living dialogue with Glaucon and rejects wrong ways of argumentation. This exercise of dialectic in dialogue comes before the introduction of the theory of forms, and anticipates the formal explanation of dialectic in the subsequent books and in the later dialogues (cf. κατ' εἶδη διαπορούμενοι 454a, to be cited below).

Socrates imagines that someone is mounting a counter-argument (ἀμφισβητεῖν, 452e-453a) that, since men and women differ in nature, they should handle different tasks. Next Socrates warns that one may be unaware of using an eristical argument and employing the art of antilogic, while believing to be actually engaged in a true dialogue (454a: following Grube-Reeve's translation with small changes):

"Ah! Glaucon, great is the power of the art of antilogic."

"Why is that?"

"Because many fall into it against their wills. They think they are having not a quarrel (ἐρίζειν) but a dialogue (διαλέγεσθαι), because they are unable to examine what has been said by dividing it up according to forms (κατ' εἶδη διαπορούμενοι). Hence, they pursue mere verbal contradictions of what has been said and have a quarrel rather than a dialogue."

"That does happen to lots of people, but it isn't happening to us at the moment, is it?"

Glaucon's reply betrays his unawareness of his and his partner's own failure, but Socrates points out that they themselves unwillingly are falling into the trap of antilogic. For their argument did not specify on which point both sexes differ. The fallacy which they have committed amounts to claiming that, since bald and long-haired people differ in nature, their occupations must be different as well (454c).

We can observe that Socrates argues at two different levels here. In discussing the object (i.e. sexual equality), Socrates reflects on the manner of argumentation and rejects the wrong and eristical argument, so as to pursue the right and dialectical one. This leads them to the truth.

An argument may be discovered to be wrong without any methodological reflection on the mode of the argumentation itself. On the other hand, reflection alone is empty, if separated from an investigation into the actual object. Arguments at the two levels are in this way intertwined and together constitute a true reasoning. By performing the true method, Socrates indicates that proper dialogue must consist of these two: dialogue investigates an issue, and in doing so, considers how the very argument is valid and true.

This short performance of dialectic, thus, casts light on the essence of Plato's philosophy; for the relationship between these two aspects of the exercise will elucidate why Plato regards dialectic as the art of engaging in dialogue, and this union of dialectic and dialogue, in turn, as knowledge.

5. Dialectic as the art of *logos*

One striking feature of the descriptions of dialectic in the central books of the *Republic* is that they are mainly concerned with the right manner of conducting *logos*.

First, dialectic is directly connected with the ability to question and answer (VII 531d-e, 534d). Second, the dialectical process of inquiry (πορεία, μέθοδος; VII 532b, 533c) is said to be carried out through refutation

(ἐλέγχειν, 534c). These two points naturally remind us of Socratic dialogue. Third, a person who grasps the *logos* (definition) of the essence of each thing is deemed "dialectical" (534b). Therefore, Glaucon calls the ability to engage in dialogue (VI 511b; cf. VII 532b, 533a, 537d) the *knowledge* (ἐπιστήμη) of how to conduct a dialogue (VI 511b; cf. *Soph.* 253b-e).

To us, these descriptions may look strange, because we usually distinguish between knowing how to argue and knowing what each thing is. Conducting good arguments in itself does not seem to guarantee that truth be reached.

However, we should remember here what rhetoric teachers such as Gorgias claim: that one can possess the art of *logos* (i.e. how to speak well) without any knowledge of or acquaintance with the issues discussed. For example, a rhetorician can persuade a patient to take a certain course of action without having medical knowledge (*Gorg.* 456a-c). To separate the art or skills of *logos* from the knowledge of objects is at the heart of the sophist's art.

Plato severely criticizes this position, and believes that knowing how to argue properly is inseparable from, or even equal to, knowing the essence of each thing. Hence, the *Phaedrus* proposes that dialectic, as the true knowledge and art of discourse (*logos*), replaces rhetoric, 265c-266c, 273d-e; cf. 269b, 276c, e).

Knowledge of dealing with the forms (concepts) in proper argument (*logos*) yields the definition (*logos*) of each thing; knowing the definitions means knowing the things themselves. Therefore, knowing how to engage properly in dialogue includes knowing how to divide and to collect terms, to give an account, to define, and to observe the relations between forms, and thus is nothing else but knowledge. This view has been anticipated by the argument on sexual equality discussed above: reflective consideration (by the art of *logos*) makes knowing the central issue.

Finally, the ability and practice of dialogue belongs to our soul (ψυχή). When the soul performs dialectic, namely, proper reasoning through dialogue, we can properly say that the soul has knowledge. This is why Plato attacks the inadequate separation of knowledge from the knowing soul as sophistry; for the sophist insists that he can pour knowledge into others' soul

(VII 518b-c). According to Plato, in contrast, knowledge is innate in the soul, and its eyes have only to be turned around and activated to behold the truth.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the relationship between Socratic dialogue and Platonic dialectic: dialectic (genuine knowledge and philosophy) turns out to be a pure form of Socrates' activity of philosophical dialogue. One may still express his or her dissatisfaction with Plato's abstract description, but I would reply that dialectic need not lose the kind of liveliness of a dialogue between people on which Socrates thrived.

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