

LEGEIN TO WHAT END?

Merrick Anderson

It is a good thing that “First Chop your *logos*...Socrates and the Sophists on Language, Logic and Development” is such a rich and wide-ranging paper. Enough people were invited to comment on the article – including several well-established scholars – that I was initially worried all the philosophically interesting material would be covered by others and I would be left addressing issues that were at best marginally important. Fortunately, my worry was unfounded. M.M. McCabe’s fertile paper advances an impressive number of provocative and insightful claims about the *Euthydemus* while at the same time offering a fresh perspective on many well-studied topics in Platonic scholarship. There is certainly no shortage of material meriting response. Because the other commentators’ attention will surely be on McCabe’s analysis of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus’ arguments, the theory of ‘chopped *logos*’ found lying behind them and the ever-present question of fallacy, long been regarded as central to the dialogue, I have decided to largely ignore issues pertaining to the sophisms of the brothers and discuss instead the positive account of *legein* that is attributed to Socrates in the paper.

Let me start by noting that McCabe does a great service by reminding her readers that learning is a long and complex process and that any given person can be more or less learned. She attends carefully to the structure of learning and depends on it for two of her paper’s most important contributions. First, she argues that this structure points towards a new way of understanding Socrates’ response to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus’ opening set of eristic refutations. The brothers succeed in tripping-up their victims only by asking questions that actively obscure the fact that there are different stages in the complex process of learning. Cleinias is forced to answer ‘those who are wise do *x*’ or ‘those who are unlearned do *x*’ when really he should answer that ‘those who are still in the process of learning do *x*’ or ‘those who

have no learning whatsoever do x'. To this argumentative tactic of the brothers, we are told, Socrates responds by 'focusing our attention on something important: on the complexity of the nature of learning itself, and of its processes' [15-16]. He thereby indicates an important truth about the metaphysics of learning and gestures towards a way out of the brother's eristic trap. Second, learning serves as a model informing a theory of saying that is superior to the theory of 'chopped *logos*' put forward by the sophists. Says McCabe:

It seems that the structure of *saying*, on Socrates' account, echoes the structure of his account of *learning*, and the structure of *doing* too: all are (what I called) endeavors, engaging both an aim (knowledge, the truth) and an agent (the speaker, the learner), which jointly constrain the process. The structure is teleological...In the case of learning, the end is knowledge; in the case of saying, the end is truth – where this is understood as the analogue of knowledge or understanding or wisdom [26].

By attending to the structure of learning we apparently gain great insight into Socrates' preferred theory of *legein*.

I am delighted by the first of these contributions. With characteristic style and charm McCabe has plumbed the deep structure of learning to shine light on the shadier side of the sophists' arguments. I cannot, however, agree with the account of saying that she attributes to Socrates on the basis of her discussion of learning. In particular, I reject the claim that truth is the end of saying. Such an idea is both philosophically unattractive and unmotivated by our dialogue. I shall argue that McCabe arrives at this idea because she confuses the end of teleological processes with the goals of those who engage in them and, as a consequence, fails to recognize that processes of the sort that she insists saying is have ends independent of both the particular agents who use them and the goals for which they may be used. This error is not fatal to her purposes – indeed, I shall suggest a resolution to it that is friendly to the spirit of her paper – but it is symptomatic of a more general failure to appreciate the many sources of normativity found in Plato's philosophy that requires modification.

A cursory amount of reflection will reveal that many of our speech acts are not truth-apt: that is to say, they are not the sort of utterances that can be true or false. Consider the ‘ouch’ I cry out after stubbing my toe. Although it may be true to say that ‘I am in pain’, the expression ‘ouch is true’ sounds at best like something a flustered toddler might whimper after being scolded for feigning injury. The expletives that we use when we are angry or hurt are not the sort of utterances that aim at truth; rather, their purpose is to vent frustration, caution others, or call for help. Consider, too, demands made using an imperative. If I were to order my partner to ‘bugger off!’ there would be many true things one could say about me – perhaps that I am annoyed or quite rude – but it would not be intelligible to say of the expression ‘bugger off!’ that it is true. Something similar can be said about certain questions, such as ‘Are you happy now that she has bugged off?’. Though this question certainly has an answer that will be true, the question itself is not and could never be true. Of course, we also say many things that are truth-apt. The many assertions we make on a daily basis typically are true or false, and yet, for all that, the sorts of utterances highlighted above are indispensable and ubiquitous features of speech. Our language and our interaction with others would be severely impoverished if we were not able to ask questions, make demands, or hurl curse-words, even though the speech-acts we use to do these things are neither true nor false.

This suggests that truth is not *the* end of our saying. Too much of what we do when we speak is concerned with practical affairs, such as getting what we want from others or expressing our emotions, not getting at the truth. Admittedly, one might be justifiably worried about inferring anything about the Greek practice of *legein* from our own practice of saying. The meaning of the Greek terminology certainly differs in significant ways from the meaning of the English terminology McCabe uses to translate ‘*legein*’ and ‘*logos*’, and one might wonder whether crying out from pain, issuing orders, or asking questions would count as examples of

legein in Greek.¹ I think that some Platonic passages suggest that these speech-acts would count as genuine examples of *logoi*, and, therefore, that expressing them would count as a genuine instance of *legein*;² but even if this were not the case and the activity of *legein* only extended to making assertions that are truth-apt, it would not follow that truth was the end of saying. It is difficult to construe ‘I would like some food’ as aiming at truth.

These considerations are sufficiently obvious that one must wonder why anyone might think that Socrates holds truth to be the end of *legein*. So why does McCabe think this? As best as I can tell, she thinks this for the simple reason that Socrates is motivated to discover truth and says things as a means to accomplish this goal.³ But this, I think, is a real mistake in so far as it presumes that the normativity of Socrates’ saying derives from Socrates’ goals rather than from the process of saying itself. One must remember that, according to Plato, teleological processes have ends determined by their own nature, which are distinct from the psychological motivations of those who engage in them. Moreover, the ends of these processes are immutable: they cannot be substituted or replaced by the idiosyncratic goals of their practitioners.⁴ It is for this reason that they are *teleological processes* rather than *processes used teleologically*.

The *Euthydemus* has much to teach us about the nature and structure of teleological processes such as saying, including much about how they are related to their ends, but I would suggest that the *technai*, rather than learning, serve as our model for understanding *legein*. Not only are the crafts the paradigmatic teleological processes in Plato’s works, but the dialogue in

¹ Thanks to Daniel Kranzelbinder for pressing me to think more about this possibility.

² Consider *Gorg.* 502c, where Socrates suggests that what remains when any piece of poetry is stripped of rhythm and meter are *logoi*. Because Greek poetry frequently included questions, demands and cries of emotion, it seems to follow that each of these qualify as genuine *logoi*.

³ McCabe is not as clear about this as one might hope, but a number of passages seem to imply that Socrates’ own aims determine the end of his saying. She says, for example, that ‘Socrates’ offers us truth-directedness,’ and he allows ‘saying to be an aspiration towards a body of truth’ [24-25]. Earlier she says the normativity of saying “is underwritten by the aims and aspirations of the subject who says” [22].

⁴ To keep things tidy I use the term ‘goal’ to refer to that at which an agent aims and ‘end’ to refer to that at which a process aims.

fact refers to *legein* as a craft! In the course of explaining to Crito the many crafts that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus possess, Socrates insists that the brothers are the ‘strongest at teaching another to say’ [κρατίστω...καὶ ἄλλον διδάξαι λέγειν, 272a2-3]. The wording and the context of this passage strongly suggest that saying is conceived of as a craft, and even if the scope is here restricted to the courtroom, it seems to me obviously significant that Socrates uses the bare infinitive ‘*legein*’ to make his point. Plato is inviting his readers to think about saying as a craft. My own (somewhat idiosyncratic) view is that we are meant to take very seriously the possibility that the brothers possess the crafts that Socrates says they do, and, therefore, that we are to assume, at least in so far as the *Euthydemus* is concerned, that they might genuinely teach something to Socrates about saying.⁵ One need not accept this, however, to see that *legein* is being treated as a craft at this point in the dialogue. The nature and structure of the crafts are, then, clearly relevant for appreciating the nature and the structure of saying.

The crafts are discussed at length in the two conversations Socrates has with Cleinias [278e-282d and 288d-293a].⁶ From the latter of these discussions we learn that each craft has one unique end: the craft of lyre-making produces lyres, the craft of speech-making produces speeches, the craft of generalship hunts down cities or armies, etc. [289c-290d]. And lest one think that this end is optional or may be skirted for one reason or another, the discussion of the hunting crafts makes clear that the crafts aim at nothing but their unique end. “None [of the crafts], he said, belonging to hunting itself are over more than chasing and subduing” [290b7-8].⁷ One simply is not practicing the craft of generalship if one is not chasing or subduing cities or

⁵ It is often assumed that Socrates’ many statements expressing a desire to learn from the brothers must be completely ironic, but this cannot be correct. Socrates makes most of these statements to Crito and Socrates has no reason to be ironical about this issue with his good friend.

⁶ Other dialogues discuss the nature of the crafts and their ends as well: see the lengthy discussion at *Rep.* 342c-5 and 345e-347a; *Gorg.* 449c-453a; and *Charm.* 165c-166c.

⁷ Οὐδεμία, ἔφη, τῆς θηρευτικῆς αὐτῆς ἐπὶ πλέον ἐστὶν ἢ ὅσον θηρεῦσαι καὶ χειρώσασθαι. Throughout the Greek is Burnet’s [1903. *Platonis Opera* Vol. III. Oxford: Oxford University Press]. The Translation is my own.

armies, no matter how much one's actions may seem like the actions of a general to the ignorant onlooker. Note, too, that any mention of the individual motivations and desires of the craftspeople is absent from this long discussion. One person might choose to become a general because they want to become rich and achieve a reputation for valor, another might do so in order to save the city they love; yet so long as they are appropriately hunting and subduing other cities they are both engaging in generalship.⁸

This sustained discussion provides us with an account of the crafts and should be applied to saying as well (and, I would add, McCabe's own example of learning).⁹ Like other teleological processes *legein* has an end determined by its own nature, and neither Socrates' philosophical drive towards truth nor the sophists' rapacious desire to win acolytes can change this. So, what is the end of *legein*? Perhaps it is still truth. All I have said so far shows only that saying has an end and this end cannot be truth *because* of Socrates's own goals. But might Socrates pursue truth as his goal *because* he realizes that this is saying's natural end (and might McCabe have unwittingly discovered a new iteration of the Euthyphro Dilemma)? Sadly, I do not think so. Socrates is very comfortable with the idea that saying does not aim at truth much of the time. He himself points out that the *λογοποιοί* – those who make speeches for the courtrooms – may successfully produce speeches that will win legal cases, even though they operate by charming [*κήλησις*] their audience rather than by articulating the truth [289e-290b]. Moreover, Socrates himself claims to desire the craft of fighting in words [*ἐν τοῖς λόγοις μάχεσθαί*] taught

⁸ This point about motivation is made more explicitly in *Republic* I and II. In his discussion with Thrasymachus, Socrates explains that the craft of medicine has no other end but the health of the patient, and he further implies that a true doctor might pursue this end *because* it is good for the patient [342d]. However, Glaucon later makes clear that many doctors in fact practice medicine in order to make money [357c-d]. Those doctors who seek to profit from medicine still produce health in their patient; though their own personal goal does not coincide with the end of the teleological process of medicine, the *Republic* does not deny that they practice medicine.

⁹ There is one unique end of learning towards which one must actually progress in order to learn. We would not claim that Cleinias was genuinely learning if his responses to Socrates' questions were jokes or witty remarks that in no way contributed to the acquisition of knowledge, however earnestly Socrates was trying to teach him. For other teleological processes with a determinate end: Socrates gives the example of the knowledge and practice of finding gold [288e] as well as the knowledge and practice of making humans immortal [289a].

by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, even though this craft refutes true and false statements alike [272a-b]. This would be a strange skill for Socrates to want if he seriously believed that truth was the end of saying.

Whatever the end of saying is, it should allow that those who lie for their clients, deceive young Athenian gentlemen, or issue orders to others may all actually be engaging in the practice of saying. It would go far beyond the scope of these comments to argue in favor of my own preferred view, so I will here just offer the stipulative suggestion that the end of *legein* is the communication of desires, beliefs, judgements and emotions, something which facilitates the very possibility of successful social interaction and allows for communal planning, deliberation, and activity. This, in any case, seems to have been the view of other ancients.¹⁰ I hope this strikes my readers as a relatively attractive and non-objectionable suggestion, but it does not much matter if one agrees with the stipulation. All that matters for present purposes is that there is an end to the teleological process of saying other than truth and that this end is not determined by the goals of those who speak. This is enough to show that McCabe has erred in substituting the goal of an agent for the end of a process.

How damaging is this error for the overall purpose of her paper? I think the confusion in the case of *legein* points towards a general problem of downplaying the significance of teleological processes' own ends and locating normativity too quickly and exclusively in the idiosyncratic goals and intentions of agents. McCabe's elaborate comparison of saying with acting indicates that what she states clearly in the case of saying, namely that its normativity 'is underwritten by the aims and aspirations of the subject who says,' holds for acting as well [22]. According to McCabe, it seems that the aims and aspirations of the agent are the loci of their action's normativity and the ultimate standard by which the action is to be evaluated. Whatever

¹⁰ See, for example, Isocrates' famous hymn *logos* at *Nicoles* 5-9 and *Antidosis* 253-257.

one might think about the nature of normativity and the plausibility of this account more generally, this is far too reductive to do justice to the complex system of normativity found in Plato's philosophy. It is essential to Plato that there are, beyond the aims and aspirations of individual agents, objective standards and criteria to evaluate the activities and practices of human beings. Consider a blacksmith – I'll call him Bob – who is struck with the aspiration to produce art and who therefore transforms his workshop into an art studio in an ill-conceived attempt to paint pictures. If an agent's aims and aspirations are the only things underwriting the normativity of actions, so long as Bob is satisfied with his attempt to paint and the artwork that results from his artistic endeavors, there is no reason to criticize his dilettantism. Needless to say, Plato would never acquiesce to such an idea. It is a fundamental feature of his philosophy that there are objective, normative standards governing human affairs, including the production of paintings and the way blacksmiths must act, and Bob the dilettante will fail to meet them. Hammers make for poor paintbrushes, and paintings make for poor shields.

The omission of any discussion pertaining to these normative standards is especially surprising given that they are crucial to the argument of the *Euthydemus*. Hunters, fishers, geometers, astronomers, and calculators all make a mistake and show themselves stupid [ἀνόητος] if and when they fail to hand over the product of their own craft to those who know how to use this product, whether or not doing so is what they aspire or aim to do [290b-c]. Only the cooks truly understands the criteria governing successful preparations of lamb and lobster, so it is incumbent on the hunters and fishers to pass their work over those expert in the culinary arts. Indeed, so committed is Plato to his belief in these objective standards that he posits a natural hierarchy to the crafts and other teleological processes: the bridle-maker passes their bridle onto a mounted soldier, the soldier gives their own work over to the general, who in turn passes on victories in war to the statesperson. The aims and aspirations of individuals cannot be allowed to

pervert the operation of this rigid hierarchy; it is imperative that a successful product be handed over to the practitioner of statesmanship so that they can structure society in a way that is conducive to the happiness of all its members. McCabe flattens the rich topography of Plato's ethical system by ignoring and implicitly denying the normativity of the objective standards governing these and other teleological processes.

While this is a real problem, I do not think it is insurmountable. In fact, I believe that my discussion of the hierarchical structure of the crafts points towards a more defensible account of Socrates' verbal practices – and one that nicely complements the spirit of McCabe's paper. For though I have argued that truth cannot be the end of *legein*, I see no reason to deny that there is a superordinate teleological process that essentially makes use of saying and has truth as its unique end. Just as the flautist essentially makes use of the art of the flute-maker, this process will make use of the communicative function of speech in the pursuit of truth. This process will have all of the essential features of the teleological account of saying attributed to Socrates by McCabe: because there are any number of ways that this process might go wrong, it will have many failure conditions, including those concerning the relationship between the different things said and the different people who say them; because of the discrepancy in natural aptitude and the varying concerns that beset humans, some people will engage in this process poorly whereas others will engage in it well; and, finally, because this will be a long and difficult process, there will be different stages to it – that is to say, it will have the sort of complexity that was so crucial to McCabe's account of understanding. And, in addition to all this, our hypothesized process will also be the sort of thing that Socrates, who not only aims to discover truth but also cares deeply

about employing the appropriate processes for the appropriate ends, might use in his search for truth. Let us call this superordinate teleological process dialectic.¹¹

My suggestion, then, is that Socrates often, though not always, engages in dialectic when he speaks in Plato's dialogues. While engaging in dialectic he will be engaging in a practice that uses saying in the pursuit of truth and so, in a way, his saying will aim at truth, but at other times it will have a different end. This allows for many of the insights of McCabe's paper to shine through, while at the same time respecting the point I have insisted on here: that teleological processes like saying and the crafts have objective ends that are independent of the agent who engages in them. Importantly, though, my suggestion has the implication that the confrontation between Socrates and the brothers may not be able to be settled on the battlefield of *legein* alone. For if saying aims at expressing desires, beliefs, judgements, and emotions, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus might well be successfully saying in the *Euthydemus* (whatever else they might also be doing). This suggestion might sound deeply antagonistic to the analysis that McCabe offers in her paper, but I do not think it is. McCabe herself admits at the end of her discussion that Socrates cannot in fact demonstrate that the brothers succumb to self-refutation, that the dialectical situation ends in a standoff, and that the resolution to this standoff must take place at the level of ethics. The questions of ethics will, I think, ultimately reduce to a question of whether Socrates or the sophists uses saying in a better way. How ought one *legein*? Although there are many ways one might answer this question, the forgoing suggests one attractive answer in particular: at least in many cases, *legein* ought to be used by the teleological process of dialectic for the purpose of discovering truth. This is what will best promote human happiness. But if I am right about this, then the

¹¹ I use this word in a technical sense, as it is sometimes used in Plato's dialogues and very frequently used by scholars in the secondary literature. Sometimes the Greek word *διαλέγεσθαι* just means to converse with another person [cf. *Euthyd.* 284e5]. In these cases, it is not being used in my technical sense.

difference between Socrates and the sophists will not just be a difference in their saying. Ultimately, it will be a difference in processes that guide their respective practices of *legein*.

Princeton University