

Claudia Marsico and Daniel Rossi Nunes Lopes (eds.)

Xenophon, the Philosopher

Argumentation and Ethics



PETER LANG

**Bibliographic Information published by the
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available online at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Printed by CPI books GmbH, Leck

ISBN 978-3-631-89005-9 (Print)
E-ISBN 978-3-631-89177-3 (E-PDF)
E-ISBN 978-3-631-89178-0 (EPUB)
DOI 10.3726/b20284

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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften
Berlin 2023
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Peter Lang – Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Warszawa · Wien

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Santiago Chame

The Dialectical Method in Xenophon and Antisthenes

Abstract: Xenophon's conception of the dialectical method shares many similarities with Antisthenes' point of view regarding the relation between language and reality. The key element supporting this reading is the parallel between Xenophon's method of *dialegein kata genē* and Antisthenes' method of *episkepsis tōn onomatōn*. In this paper, I claim that a correct understanding of both methods yields a clear structural proximity between the two Socratics on the issue of dialectics. Although they present some significant differences, which I will also explore, I will argue that both variants express a single Socratic motive with regard to dialectics. That is that dialectics, in its basic structure, consists of organizing reality through discourse in order to make it comprehensible. In particular, this is done through establishing unified instances capable of comprehending a multiplicity. This nuclear position could also be extended to include middle Plato's concept of dialectics. This concurrence takes up different forms in Plato, Xenophon and Antisthenes. Nevertheless, they share the same structure, which indicates quite plausibly a major characteristic of Socratic philosophies, as opposed to previous attempts by the Presocratics and the Sophists.

Keywords: Dialectics, Xenophon, Antisthenes, Plato, Socratics

In this article, I intend to revisit a hypothesis that was recently defended by Aldo Brancacci: that there is a connection between Xenophon's conception of dialectics presented in *Memorabilia* 4.5-6 and Antisthenes' philosophy. Scholarly debate on these passages from the *Memorabilia* has revolved around the significant expression *dialegein kata genē*, which appears in *Memorabilia*. 4.5, and it has been generally argued that it echoes Plato's definition of dialectics in *Sophist* 253d1-3.¹ Dorion argues that, although similar, they remain two distinct forms of dialectics (2011, 181). Brancacci has offered a different perspective: this passage is of Antisthenian inspiration. Both Natali (2006) and Dorion (2011) deem this interpretation as frail, and reduce it to the status of an unproven hypothesis. But I believe that there are, in fact, important points of coincidence between

1 Döring (1892), Patzer (1970), among others scholars, have held this position. The Platonic reading of the passage does not limit itself to the *Sophist*, but it also extends to similar expressions in *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Statesman*.

Xenophon and Antisthenes. The key element supporting this reading is the parallel between Xenophon's *dialegein kata genē* and Antisthenes method of *episkepsis tōn onomatōn*. The arguments I will put forward to establish this relation are not merely of a philological nature, but more importantly, of a conceptual nature. A correct understanding of both methods would yield a clear structural proximity between the two Socratics in their understanding of the relation between language and reality. Although they present some significant differences, which I will also explore, I will argue that both variants express a single Socratic with regard to dialectics. That is that dialectics, in its basic structure, consists of organizing reality through discourse in order to make it comprehensible. In particular, this is done through establishing unified instances capable of comprehending a multiplicity. This nuclear position could also be extended to include middle Plato's concept of dialectics. This concurrence takes up different forms in Plato, Xenophon and Antisthenes. Nevertheless, they share the same structure, which indicates quite plausibly a major characteristic of Socratic philosophies, as opposed to previous attempts by the Presocratics and the Sophists.

1. Xenophon's Conception of Dialectics

Let us begin by reviewing Xenophon's account of dialectics in *Memorabilia*. Book 4 presents Socrates' perspective on education and depicts not only a suggestive repertoire of the diverse educational practices enacted by him but also various of his alleged theoretical positions. One of the main problems presented in the text concerns the perennial difficulty of the relation between language and reality. In particular, chapters five and six of book 4 of the *Memorabilia* address the problem of discourse and dialectics. Xenophon analyzes the efficacy of dialectics, its relation to the ontological domain and, most significantly, its impact upon practical choices. Within this analysis, the notion of *enkrateia* emerges as a central concept, which is necessary to relate these diverse aspects satisfactorily and consistently. Dorion states that *enkrateia* is not only prior to dialectical knowledge, but it is also prior to any knowledge and to virtue itself (2011, 178). But although prior, it alone is insufficient to orient men towards virtuous action and happiness.

Dorion actively opposes the idea that this text reflects the Antisthenian conception of *enkrateia*. If we were to sustain the relationship between the two philosophers by way of this concept, it would certainly be doomed to fail. Nevertheless, here I contend that the relation is to be established not by means of their conceptions of *enkrateia* but by their concurrence in the question of language

and dialectics. Let us see the text to understand better the relation between *enkrateia*, dialectics, and happiness.

In 4.3.11-12, Xenophon states that the rational-discursive capacity (*logismos*) was given to men by the gods precisely to allow us to reflect on experience and “so learn in which way things are useful, and to devise several ways of enjoying the good things and defending ourselves from bad things”² The gods also gave man the capacity of expression (*hermēneia*), “by which, through mutual instruction, we relate to one another all good things, we partake in them, and we pass laws and govern cities”. This rational-discursive component thus occupies a central place in both individual moral action and the political organization of a community. A discursive operation is needed to go beyond mere perception and to distinguish the good from the bad, the useful from the useless. Furthermore, this knowledge can be conveyed to others through an expression or explanation (*hermēneia*), which is a necessary condition for political organization.

However, this apparently fundamental rational-discursive component is counterweighted some lines further into the text. In 4.4.8, Hippias, exhausted by the dialectical exchange, accuses Socrates of being eristic. Socrates defends himself and states at 4.4.9-10 that he never ceases to point out what he thinks to be just, either by way of a *logos* or by way of an action (*ergon*), which is even more credible than words. In accordance with this last passage, Xenophon states in 4.5.1. that Socrates exercised *enkrateia* more than any other man, and that in his conversations he exhorted them towards *enkrateia* above all else. He tells Euthydemus at 4.5.9 that in contrast to the freedom experienced by men with *enkrateia*, men with *akrasia* suffer the worst form of slavery, which hinders even the experience of pleasures, the only thing they pursue. On the contrary, *enkrateia* enables men to enjoy pleasures above all else.

Euthydemus extracts a conclusion at 4.5.11 from Socrates’ previous statements: he states that a man who is *akratēs* has nothing in common with virtue. Socrates replies that this is to be explained by the inability of the *akratēs* to attain some form of rational-discursive knowledge, which leads to virtue:

What is the difference between an *akratēs* man and the most ignorant beast (θηρίου τοῦ ἀμαθεστάτου)? That he who does not examine (σκοπεῖ) the things that matter most, but who seeks the things that are most pleasant by all means, in which way does he distinguish himself from the most senseless beasts? But only men with self-mastery (τοῖς ἐγκρατέσι) can examine (σκοπεῖν) the most important things (τὰ κράτιστα τῶν πραγμάτων), discussing them according to their genres (διαλέγοντας κατὰ γένη) in

2 Translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

discourse and in action, and choose the good ones and abstain from the bad ones. (*Mem.* 4.5.11)

Socrates makes explicit here the relation between *enkrateia* and an intellectual process. A man who is *akratēs* cannot be distinguished from a beast, that is, someone ignorant, with neither judgment nor restraint regarding pleasures. The *akratēs* seeks pleasure by all means, and thus cannot examine things and act in a virtuous manner. Therefore, it is clear that *enkrateia* constitutes a necessary precondition of any process of examination: only the one who is *enkratēs* can examine the most important things and discuss them through discourse and action, and sort them out into their diverse genres. And this enables one to choose the good over the bad. But the fact that a process of examination is needed to orient human action implies that *enkrateia* by itself is not sufficient to attain virtue. Socrates expands this idea and connects it explicitly to the notion of dialectics in the following line:

And this is how he said that men become better, most happy (εὐδαίμονεστάτους) and skilled in discussion (διαλέγεσθαι). He also said that the very word “*dialegesthai*”, according to him, comes from the practice of meeting together for common deliberation, discussing things and sorting them according to their genres (διαλέγοντας κατὰ γένη τὰ πράγματα)³: and therefore one should be ready and prepared for this and be zealous for it; for it makes men excellent, the best leaders and the best dialecticians. (*Mem.* 4.5.12)

The etymology of the term *dialegesthai* proposed by Xenophon is original and shows its distance from Plato’s conception of dialectics. Additionally, it should be noted that the definition goes beyond an exclusively refutative conception of dialectics. Although refutation constitutes a central aspect of Xenophon’s Socrates dialectical praxis, it is clear that it also contains a positive or constructive aspect, which Xenophon had already anticipated in book 1.⁴

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- 3 The participle *dialecontas* should be translated in accordance with the previous infinitive of the same verb *dialegesthai*, thus our translation “discussing”. But a literal translation misses the point Xenophon is trying to make: it is not only a matter of discussing things but also of distinguishing them according to their kinds; with this knowledge, one can choose and effectively carry out actions according to what is best.
- 4 “If anybody believes, based on what some write and say about him, that although Socrates was excellent in exhorting men towards virtue, he was unable to lead them to it, let him examine if Socrates was able of improving his companions, having taken into consideration not only the questions and refutations to which Socrates submitted those who thought themselves to know everything, in order to correct them, but also the things he used to say in everyday conversations to his companions”, *Mem.* 1.4.1-2.

The critical expression *dialegein kata genē* has been studied by numerous scholars, most recently by Brancacci (1990), Natali (2006), and Dorion (2011), and its precise meaning has provoked eager discussion. Before discussing the diverse interpretations, we need first to say: a) *enkrateia* seems to function as a condition *sine qua non* for the conceptual examination of *ta pragmata*;⁵ b) this type of examination consists in the classification and distinction of *ta pragmata* according to their kinds or genres, that is to say, according to a conceptual determination; c) it constitutes the core of Socratic dialectics, according to Xenophon.

Firstly, Natali rejects the Antisthenian reading put forward by Brancacci, mainly because Xenophon refers to *ta pragmata* and Antisthenes to *ta onomata* in his method of *episkepsis tōn onomatōn*. However, as we will see below, Antisthenes' conception of *oikeios logos* reveals an inextricable relation between reality and discourse, *pragmata* and *logos*, which would prove that a relation between both philosophers could be established on a conceptual level. Secondly, for Natali (2006, 10), given the previous context of the passage, it should be noted that the expression *dialegein kata genē* refers to a practical choice, not an intellectual one. Natali argues that the process which Xenophon has in mind with the expression *dialegein kata genē* is a mere choice between two options: good and bad, just and unjust. I do not find convincing this reduction of the notion of *genē*; as Gourinat (2008, 154) contends, the general character of Xenophon's expression regarding dialectics seems to transcend the mere ethical domain. Moreover, there are no conclusive arguments for dismissing the possibility of a broader reading of the expression, which would imply the distinction of definitions of several types of beings. Thirdly, a common feature of the bibliography is to point that, according to the context that surrounds this passage, *enkrateia* has a fundamental role as the basis for any dialectical endeavor. In this sense, the reason *enkrateia* does make Socrates' followers more dialectical is not that it makes them better in the exchange of questions and answers, but that it has a direct impact on their capacity to distinguish different things into genres or classes, according to a clear distinction between what is better and what is worse, what is good and what is bad (Arnim 1923, 211; Gourinat 2008, 150; Natali 2006, 11). However, there is a fundamental divergence since *enkrateia* does not belong properly to the conceptual domain: it is, instead, a condition for conceptuality and a foundation of virtue (1.5.4). As Dorion states (2003, 653–654), *enkrateia* is not a form of moral knowledge, and it alone is not enough to make Socrates' companions better and

5 This is Dorion's most important claim about this passage. Döring (1892, 186) and Natali (2006, 11) concur with this thesis.

to acquire the knowledge of virtue. It seems that, according to Xenophon's Socrates, a conceptual structure is required, capable of being articulated in discourse, a form of knowledge that can guide the actions of men. Dialectics, understood in this radical sense, provides exactly the means of establishing this structure. This *dialegethai* is necessarily elenctic, as 4.6.13-15 shows. Through this elenctic process, a kind of knowledge is reached, one which relates things to their genres and enables men to choose wisely. Passages 4.5 and 4.6 seem to describe this positive conception of dialectics, which aims to make Socrates' companions better and for them to know virtue.

Xenophon expands this idea at 4.6., where he expresses a version somewhat different from what had been said previously:

Socrates considered that those who know what each thing is (τί ἕκαστον εἶη τῶν ὄντων) are also able to explain it to others, while it would not be a surprise if those who do not know misled themselves and misled others. It is for this reason that he never ceased to examine (σκοπῶν) in the company of his followers what each thing is (τί ἕκαστον εἶη τῶν ὄντων). It would be a great task to expose in detail all his definitions (διωρίζετο). I will present those which will suffice to demonstrate the method of his investigation (τὸν τρόπον τῆς ἐπισκέψεως) (*Mem.* 4.6.1).

Xenophon explicitly states that there is an intrinsic relation between “what each thing is” (τί ἕκαστον εἶη τῶν ὄντων) and a series of definitions (διωρίζετο), between the ontological and the linguistic domains.⁶ Gourinat (2008) points out that the expression τί ἕκαστον εἶη τῶν ὄντων⁷ refers not only to ethical notions but more generally to the ensemble of beings, which again seems to go against Natali's reading.

Although the definition of dialectics presented in 4.6 seems to differ from the immediately previous one in 4.5, I believe that they constitute two variants of the fundamental dialectical praxis of Socrates, according to Xenophon. The method by which one can know the being of each thing is developed in a dialectical

6 The relation of *Mem.* 4.6 with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1078b17-30 has been signaled by Maier (1913, 96-102), and upon this basis, he sustains that Xenophon represents a major contribution in Aristotle's representation of the historical Socrates. Although the consensus among scholars is that his representation is based almost entirely on Plato, the possibility of a contribution of Xenophon should not be dismissed, much less when there is such a strong agreement between the sources.

7 Regarding this expression, Maier (1913, 58-9) has noted its proximity to Plato, specifically, to a passage of *Phaedrus* where he uses the same expression (262b7-8). However, Dorion (2011, 188), together with Brancacci, convincingly dismisses a direct relation between both texts on the grounds of the heterogeneity of the contexts.

manner, as in the case of the discussion of beings according to their genres (*dialegein kata genē*). The examples that Xenophon provides after 4.6.1 show the dialectical nature of his investigations: in 4.6.2 Socrates discusses the cases of piety (*eusebeia*, 4.6.2-4), justice (4.6.6), wisdom (*sophia*, 4.6.7-9) and courage (*andreia*, 4.6.10-11). The first example involves –significantly– the definition of piety, which involves a dialectical exchange with Euthydemus. The difference from Plato’s rendering of the definition of piety revolves around the scope of the question posed by Socrates. It is usually believed that Plato’s Socrates’ definitions are intended to be essential definitions (*ti esti*), while Xenophon’s Socrates seems to try to render the quality (*poion ti*) of, in this case, piety. As has been said, however, in 4.6.1 Xenophon clearly states that Socrates researches what each thing is (τί ἕκαστον εἶη τῶν ὄντων). Antisthenes, conversely, rejects any general notion of quality: he maintains, according to Simplicius (*in Cat.* 208.28-32 = SSR, V.A.149), the existence of only concrete qualified beings.

The fact that Xenophon speaks in terms of definitions does not render his position equal to Plato’s early conception of dialectics, centered around *ti esti* questions and definitions. Stavru (2008, 146) argues that although the definition is indeed the point of arrival of the process of investigation described at 4.6.1, it does not constitute the core of his method. According to Stavru, the procedure itself is Socrates’ primary concern, not the resulting definitions, which have a necessary provisional character.⁸ This reconstruction of the dialectical method brings forth a much more aporetic Socrates, not necessarily aiming to attain a static form of knowledge but deeply committed to the procedure of investigating things in order to develop the wisdom necessary for virtuous action. He does this by uncovering (albeit in an approximate manner) the foundation (*hypothesis*) of a *logos*, the commonly agreed basis which emerges from a dialogical exchange and which is most close to the truth: “Whenever someone contradicted him [sc. Socrates] on any matter without having anything precise to say, but saying without any kind of demonstration that, for example, a man was wiser than him, or a better politician or braver or any other quality of the like, he would lead the discussion back to its foundation” (ἐπι τὴν ὑπόθεσιν ἐπανήγεν ἄν πάντα τὸν λόγον ὧδέ ἔπωζ, *Mem.* 4.6.13).⁹ The example that follows (4.6.14) shows that there is little trace of essential definitions, and that Socrates concentrates

8 Patzer (1999, 63) had already noted that the definition of piety which results from Socrates’ discussion with Euthydemus only defines the pious man, and not piety itself.

9 Cf. Stavru 2008, 152 for useful discussion of this passage.

on leading the discussion towards concrete examples, which lead in turn to an agreement with the interlocutor.

But even if the definition is not the main concern of Xenophon's Socrates, this does not contradict the basic fact to be taken into account: the fundamental role of dialectics in developing a virtuous *praxis*. Both *enkrateia* and dialectics constitute necessary contributions to a correct practical orientation for men. But while the former is a necessary precondition, the latter constitutes the proper activity required in order to attain knowledge and thus act virtuously. The attempts to eliminate any shred of intellectual or even metaphysical weight from Xenophon's conception of dialectics seems to ignore the foundations that provide structure to any practical choice. In this rather difficult subject, it is not easy to distinguish between domains: how can a practical choice be rational if this classification is not structured according to some sort of firm parameter, or at least according to a set of semantically unified instances? In fact, this very problem led Plato to develop his most significant metaphysical contributions. It is evident that Xenophon is not trying to put forward a theoretical system such as Plato's, but to deflate all ontological aspects of his claims is, it seems, to deny the justice of his thought and of the text itself. A more balanced reading would acknowledge the theoretical implications of Xenophon's claims and, accordingly, establish their range and scope. Naturally, Xenophon does not espouse a conception of dialectics in the vein of Plato's, and it would be wrong to say there is some sort of theory of the essence in Xenophon. But it should also be noted that the two philosophers share not only a common origin in Socrates but also that they deal with similar problems and share the same context and intellectual background. The need to find a basis for virtuous action that can also be transmitted drives both thinkers to develop their own variants of a dialectical method capable of organizing the multiplicity characteristic of common experience according to some degree of ontological –and consequently, logical– classification. A mere nominal distinction between *pragmata*, without regard to its being and its practical connotations, would prove useless in classifying hierarchically between virtuous and vicious actions.

2. Antisthenes and the Relation between Language and Reality

Brancacci (1990, 138–44) maintains that the passages of *Memorabilia* that we have seen are clearly influenced by another contemporary Socratic philosopher: Antisthenes of Athens. He argues that the tone of the passages reveals their proximity to the theoretical problem of *orthotēs onomatōn*, the correctness of

names. This was a major issue in classical Greek thought and was at the center of the reflections on the problem of the relation between language and reality.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, primarily because of the work of Schleiermacher, there has been a tendency to try to find the remnants of Antisthenes' philosophy throughout the works of other philosophers, especially Plato. Although Antisthenes was of great importance in the classical period, his works, unfortunately, have not been conserved properly, and this tendency to uncover his presence in the works of other philosophers led scholars to revisit Plato's dialogues in order to trace his contributions. This exegetical line was opposed by, among others, Kirk (1951), who claimed that this Antisthenic reading was unfruitful and misguided. More recently, the work of other scholars such as Caizzi (1966), Patzer (1970), Giannantoni (1990), Mársico (2014) and Prince (2015) which focused on the compilation of fragments and testimonies, allowed a more prudent reconstruction of his thought. It has set up a structure within which we can establish secure relations between Antisthenes and other contemporary thinkers. However, instead of tracing Antisthenes' theses in Xenophon or in Plato's dialogues, I will compare Xenophon's and Antisthenes' thoughts on the relation between language and reality in order to extract their common Socratic roots, which are also fundamentally shared by Plato.

Antisthenes' position on the question of *orthotēs onomatōn*, which resonates in the reviewed passages of *Memorabilia*, was somewhat ignored by traditional historiography. Antisthenes' thesis of *oikeios logos*¹⁰ implies that each entity is revealed through a linguistic expression, which many interpreters identify with a name (*onoma*)¹¹ that reflects its being without interference. Thus, the analysis of the correctness of names is to be obtained by *episkepsis tōn onomatōn*, the investigation of names. It consists in a method of analysis of the semantic content of discourse, in which the several meanings associated with a term are distinguished in order to assess the proper linguistic use of a particular term on

10 "Antisthenes believed candidly that nothing can be said with relevance except by way of a proper discourse (*tōi oikeiōi logōi*), one for each thing (*hen eph' henos*)." (Arist. *Metaph.* V.1024b26-1025a10; SSR V.A.152).

11 Cordero (2001) has argued that the thesis of *oikeios logos* has necessarily an onomastic basis, by taking into account that in Aristotle's testimony, the *hen* in the appositive clause *hen eph' henos* is neutral and cannot refer to the masculine *logos*. Therefore, the reference must be to a neutral term present in the context, which Cordero identifies with *onoma*. Although this hypothesis seems correct, the claim that Antisthenes' thesis of *oikeios logos* is oriented *exclusively* towards an onomastic structure seems exaggerated (Cf. Chame 2017, 61-62)

a particular occasion. The importance of such a method in Antisthenes' philosophy is attested by Epictetus, who writes that for Antisthenes "the beginning of education is the investigation of names" (ἀρχὴ παιδεύσεως ἢ τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐπίσκεψις) (SSR, V.A.160). Natali's dismissal of a connection between Xenophon and Antisthenes regarding *Mem.* 4.5-6 relies on the exclusion of Epictetus' testimony. Nevertheless, he does not address the conceptual proximity between the two formulations, which provides a much stronger argument for their relationship than a single testimony such as Epictetus'.

Brancacci (1990, 60–64) suggests that the direct precedent of the idea of an investigation of names is to be found in Prodicus. Plato states in *Euthydemus* 277e that Prodicus taught about the correct use of names (περὶ ὀνομάτων ὀρθότητος). He also manifests the basic points of his teachings: it consists of an examination of the polysemic nature of the terms, by taking a random term to determine its correct meaning in order to find the corresponding congruence between *onoma* and *pragma*.

For Antisthenes, the relation between ontology and language is two-way: a *logos* shows (*dēloun*) what was or is an entity.¹² Upon this basis, it makes sense for Antisthenes to propose a way of analyzing names along the same lines as Prodicus' *diairesis tōn onomatōn*. By way of this analysis it is possible to address reality in a proper (*oikeios*) manner since language is a legitimate way of revelation and not mediation of that which is. For Antisthenes, the plexuses of different meanings that constitute the diverse terms account for the different possibilities in their use, in accordance with the multiplicity inherent in reality. Consequently, it makes even more sense to appeal to the revelatory character of *logos*, which accounts for the variability and contingency of experience.

Porphyry offers a precise testimony of this practice. He presents Antisthenes' analysis of the epithet of *polutropos* which Homer ascribes to Odysseus. According to Brancacci (1990, 64) the exegesis of the Homeric poems occupied a crucial part of Antisthenes' own philosophical and literary activity. Brancacci connects this work on the Homeric texts with Antisthenes' preoccupation with the pair *alētheia-doxa*, which would be represented in an array of passages of the Homeric text that would seem contradictory at first sight. For Antisthenes, the shift from the domain of *doxa* towards *alētheia* depends on the revelation of the correct nature of the terms by means of a thorough linguistic and semantic investigation. In the case of Odysseus' epithet, in order to avoid the extended

12 "[Antisthenes] defined for the first time *logos* by saying: *logos* is that which shows what was or is (*logos estin ho to ti ēn ē esti dēlōn*)" (Diogenes Laertius 6.3 = SSR V.A.151).

association between the manifold or resourceful man (*polutropos*) and the liar (*pseudēs*), Antisthenes puts forward the study of the nuclear term *tropos* and reviews its diverse senses:

Is Odysseus wicked because he was called *polutropos* and was not he called this way because he was wise? Does not *tropos* mean (σημαίνει) in one <verse> character and in another one the use of speech (σημαίνει τὴν τοῦ λόγου χρῆσιν)? Because *eutropos* is a man that has his character turned towards the good, and *tropoi* are the various styles of speech (τρόποι δὲ λόγων αἱ ποιαὶ πλάσεις). And Homer also uses (χρηῖται) the term *tropos* regarding the voice (ἐπὶ φωνῆς) and the variety of melodies (ἐπὶ μελῶν ἐξαλλαγῆς), as in the case of the nightingale, which often spreads out many-toned changing sounds (πολυχέα φωνήν). (Porph. *ad Od.* 1.1 (= SSR V.A.187))

The cited verse is *Odyssey* 19.521. The importance of the example lies precisely in the polysemic nature of the term *tropos*. Three basic senses are recovered. In the first place, a moral sense: the starting point is the etymology of the verb *trepō*, “to turn”. By the addition of the adverb *eu*, a relation is established with the term *eutropos*, to obtain the sense of “turned towards the good” (*eis to eu tetrammenon*). Secondly, the rhetorical dimension of the term is explored by way of a semantic explanation, relating *trepō* and *plassō*, “to turn” and “to form”, respectively. Thirdly, the ulterior sense of a multiple and variable character (*poluēkheia*) is extracted from the second rhetorical sense. This sense involves the different modulations of the *phōnē*. By way of this last analysis Antisthenes establishes a semantical association between *tropos* and *polus*, the two elements that compose *polutropos*. This method makes it possible to give an account of the three senses of a term without compromising its unity. It demonstrates in this case that the notion of multiplicity constitutes the fundamental semantic element of the lexeme. Consequently, the study of the semantic diversity of a term reveals its onto-linguistical multiplicity. This multiplicity manifests itself in experience, which is necessarily connected, according to Antisthenes, with a proper *logos*. This *logos* would consist in a basic semantic component that functions as a focal point for the diverse subsidiary senses.

Thus, Antisthenes is able to reconvert Odysseus’ epithet, which at first sight conveys a pejorative sense, into a description of his virtue:

And if the wise are skillful in discussion (*dialegesthai*), and they know how to say the same concept (*to auto noēma*)¹³ in several manners (*pollous tropous*) and knowing many

13 The interesting allusion to “a same concept” (*to auto noēma*) seems to imply that there is an instance that unifies and organizes the diverse semantical possibilities. We should

kinds of arguments (*pollous tropous logōn*) about them, they would be *polutropoi*. The wise are good at living with other men. That is why Homer says that because Odysseus is wise, he is *polutropos*, because he knew how to live with men in many ways (*pollois tropois*). (Porph. *ad Od.* 1.1 (= SSR V.A.187))

This is precisely what makes Odysseus virtuous: the man who is *polutropos* is capable of taking into account the multiplicity and contingency of reality, assigning a proper *logos* to each thing, adapting his discourse to the given interlocutor and to the concrete situation. This perspective is reinforced by the moral and rhetorical senses registered in the term in question. That is why he states:

It is proper of wisdom to find the mode (*tropon*) of wisdom proper to each one, while it is proper of ignorance to use a single mode of discourse with those who are dissimilar. (...) *tropos* is the variable (*palimbolon*) relative to the character, the changing (*polumetabolon*) and unstable. And the variety in the modes of speech (*logou de polutropia*) stems precisely from the manifold uses of discourse (*khṛēsis poikilē logou*) referred to various audiences (*eis poikilas akoas*) using a single mode (*monotropiai*). This is because a single thing is proper of each thing (*hen gar to hekastōi oikeion*), and so what is adequate to each thing assembles the variety of discourse in a single manifestation, the one which is adequate to each thing. (Porph. *ad Od.* 1.1 (= SSR V.A.187))

The terms *palimbolon* and *polumetabolon* stress precisely the primarily ethical sense of *tropos* that is explored by Antisthenes. This sense relates the notion of multiplicity with the orientation of character (*ēthos*). On the other hand, *polutropia* is associated with the second rhetorical sense, inasmuch as it refers to the variety of discursive modes (*logou polutropia*) and the resulting varied use (*khṛēsis*) of discourse. The result of the investigation of names is the refinement of the diverse senses associated with a given term, structured in a similar way. This, as Mársico (2005, 88–91, 95–98) suggests, could be related to the contemporary notion of semantic field. In this case, the result of the analysis is that the term *polutropos* is related to the rhetorical sense of *tropos*, which alludes to the discursive ability of a speaker who adapts himself to the requirements of diverse audiences.

As a corollary of this method, and taking into account the previous indication of a bidirectional relation between speech and things (ἐν γὰρ τὸ ἐκάστῳ oikeῖον) which links with the thesis of *oikeios logos*, it could be said that through the *episkepsis tōn onomatōn*, experience reveals the diverse meanings of the terms, which do not rely upon models or archetypes (ontologically charged instances that determine reality). Much to the contrary, the multiplicity of senses associated

interpret the reference to a unifying concept (*noēma*) in a semantical manner: it refers to a focal meaning which gathers the remaining ones.

with a term reveals the multiplicity of reality. The being of an entity manifests itself in, and in accordance with, language. An apparent contradiction between the semantic multiplicity and the simplicity of the proper *logos* of each thing can be resolved if we take into account that the relation between both domains does not follow a set of supra-linguistic or eidetic instances. Given that language reveals beings, the wise man can, conversely, adapt his discourse to reflect reality in a proper manner. Hence, Odysseus' wisdom. In summary, Antisthenes believes that language is a transparent vehicle that reveals that which is, in the manner of an ontological truth, with the condition of some kind of onomastic basis. The terms can be organized dialectically around focal semantic senses; this allows for a general classification and organization of terms capable of providing a framework for the practical and ethical orientation of men.

3. Xenophon, Antisthenes and Plato on Dialectics: The Common Socratic Root

In an important passage of the *Statesman* (285a-b), Plato describes dialectics as a process of examination (*skopein*) of things, which should be arranged according to species (*eidē*). But he is careful to point out that we should distinguish *properly* between what belongs to a species and what is different (in contrast to what most people do, putting together dissimilar things and separating similar things). After recognizing the common element present among a multiplicity of things, we should not cease from exploring thoroughly all the differences among them. Likewise, when facing a set of different things, we should search for the one common feature which makes it possible to include them under one genre (*genos*). This passage, whose language is reminiscent of *Mem.* 4.5.11, can serve as a methodological guideline by which to assess the points of contact and divergence between Xenophon, Antisthenes, and Plato's passages on dialectics. Although each philosopher presents a different take on dialectics, they share one common feature which renders them structurally analogous. Examining this comparison thoroughly would require much more extensive analysis, but let us make some brief statements on the matter.

A significant difference between Xenophon and Antisthenes is that Xenophon's method is not limited to a semantical or etymological examination, as Antisthenes' passages on the investigation of names seem to be. This alone would be enough to establish a stark contrast between them. But there are also some striking similarities. Firstly, it is worth noting that Xenophon's testimony in *Mem.* 4.5 revolves around a group of closely related terms, such as *enkrateia*, *enkratēs*, *akratēs*, *ta kratista*, which resemble the treatment of *tropos* and its derived

notions in Antisthenes' analysis of the Homeric judgment of Odysseus. Secondly, the allusion to the "ignorant beasts" in 4.5.11 relates closely to the terms used by Antisthenes to describe Polyphemus in the same scholium to *Odyssey*. The analysis of Polyphemus serves to establish the notion of injustice, and similarities with Xenophon's passage in 4.5.11 have been noted by Brancacci (1990, 141). A third element is that Xenophon states that Socrates presented Odysseus as a trustworthy speaker (*asphalē rhētora*) in *Mem.* 4.6.15, since he can adapt his discourse to the most commonly accepted assumptions of a given audience, much as in the case of Antisthenes' analysis. Xenophon likens Socrates to Odysseus, as sharing the same method, a method which could be conceived both as rhetorical or dialectical (the line that separates these dimensions seems unclear). But the fact that Xenophon and Antisthenes both focus on the method of the investigation rather than on its result reveals a deeper similarity. Xenophon's Socrates is neither necessarily nor exclusively interested in static definitions, but in the method of investigation *itself*, since it is the dialectical process itself that allows us to further knowledge and wisdom by way of contrasting examples and leading a discourse back to its foundation (which is contingent on the agreement between the interlocutors, and results in provisional definitions). At the same time, our interpretation of Antisthenes' method of the investigation of names also shows that he puts the focus on the process and not necessarily in its result, basically because, for Antisthenes, there cannot be such a thing as a *ti esti* definition. The *logos* reveals a multiplicity that needs to be studied and interpreted by the wise, who can grasp the unifying semantic element that comprehends the semantic variations, which in turn depend on different contexts and interlocutors. The ability to study and comprehend language and its variable character is more important than extracting a static knowledge of clearly delimited definitions.

The fundamental thing to note is that Xenophon deals with the same basic problems faced by Antisthenes, one of which is the problematic relation between reality and discourse. Xenophon refers explicitly to the dialogical process as a way of addressing things and sorting them according to their genres, a procedure that undoubtedly requires a linguistic element. Unlike Antisthenes, Xenophon does not present this dialectical process as an exclusively linguistic analysis: he seems to emphasize the importance of examples as a way of attaining knowledge and moral virtue. However, both of them attempt to extract with their *episkepseis* some sort of unified parameter from the multiplicity of reality: be it the *hypothesis* of a discourse in the case of Xenophon or the basic lexematic element of the multiple meanings of a *logos* in the case of Antisthenes.

One question that arises naturally here is: how do these accounts of dialectics relate to Plato's conception of dialectics? Answering this question would deserve

a much more extensive analysis than we can offer in these pages. But a few words on this matter might establish some preliminary conclusions, a starting point for further analysis.

The concept of dialectics in Plato is difficult to grasp, since it underwent several variations throughout his dialogues.¹⁴ It can refer to the Socratic *elenkhos* of the early dialogues, to the dialectical method in *Republic*, or to the process of union and division that appears in, for example, the *Sophist*. Nevertheless, deferring to the limits of this work, I will briefly refer to the middle version of dialectics as it appears in the *Republic*.

In the *Republic*, dialectics appears as a mediating device that allows a progression towards “each thing which is in itself” (ἐπ’ αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν ἕκαστον) (*R.* VII 532a7).¹⁵ Book VI of the *Republic* presents the most complete formulation of this device, in the famous passage of the divided line.¹⁶ Without going into detail, it is enough to say that language, knowledge, and ontology intersect each other in Plato’s version of dialectics.¹⁷ Dialectics constitute the only possible way of leading philosophers towards the principles of reasoning and towards the essence of each thing, which is expressed discursively (ἡ καὶ διαλεκτικὸν καλεῖς τὸν λόγον ἕκαστου λαμβάνοντα τῆς οὐσίας, VII 534b3-4). Conversely, in *Republic X*, Plato states that there are Forms of all things that we have a name of.¹⁸ The ontological implications of these sorts of expressions are very strong since they suppose a determined principle that constitutes each thing. That is to say,

14 On the multiple meanings of dialectics and its development in Plato, see Berti 1987, 67–102, Dixsaut 2001; for the *Republic*, see Napolitano Valditara 2010, 117–148; for the *Sophist*, see Movia 1991, and Migliori 2013, vol. I, II, 191–442.

15 “When anyone attempts through dialectics, leaving aside all the sensations, to find his way by way of discourse towards each thing which is in itself, and does not abandon [the search] until he apprehends with pure thought what is the good in itself, he arrives at the limit of the intelligible, as the prisoner in our parable came to the limit of the visible” (οὕτω καὶ ὅταν τις τῷ διαλέγεσθαι ἐπιχειρῆ ἄνευ πασῶν τῶν αἰσθήσεων διὰ τοῦ λόγου ἐπ’ αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν ἕκαστον ὁρμᾶν, καὶ μὴ ἀποστῆ πρὶν ἂν αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν ἀγαθὸν αὐτῇ νοήσει λάβῃ, ἐπ’ αὐτῷ γίγνεται τῷ τοῦ νοητοῦ τέλει, ὡσπερ ἐκεῖνος τότε ἐπὶ τῷ τοῦ ὁρατοῦ) (*R.* VII 532a5-b2).

16 See Smith 1996 for discussion on this passage.

17 See White 1992.

18 “I think we used to postulate a unique Form for each multiplicity of things to which we give the same name” (εἶδος γάρ πού τι ἓν ἕκαστον εἰώθαμεν τίθεσθαι περὶ ἕκαστα τὰ πολλὰ, οἷς ταυτὸν ὄνομα ἐπιφέρομεν) (*R.* X 595a6-8).

there is a kind of entity that we know as “Form” (*eidos*), which is capable of being expressed in a *logos*.

The *logos* serves a crucial purpose since it allows us to access reality, which cannot be grasped directly. In a famous passage of *Phaedo* 99d-e, Socrates states that it is not possible to examine the things that are (*ta onta*) by direct means, but that it is necessary to take refuge in the *logoi* and to “examine in them the truth of those things that are” (*skopein tōn ontōn tēn alētheian*, 99e6-7). It is in the domain of discourse that the ideal entities appear, because it is in and through language that we establish the most immediate contact with the universal and ideal domain. In contrast, what we perceive with our senses exemplifies the correspondent Form in a particular and imperfect way. Language unifies multiplicity and relates it to the eidetical realm, as is stated in *Republic* VI 507b1-2: “That there are many beautiful things, many good things, and so with each multiplicity, we say that it is and we distinguish it by way of discourse” (πολλὰ καλά, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, καὶ πολλὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ ἕκαστα οὗτος εἶναι φαμέν τε καὶ διορίζομεν τῷ λόγῳ). In this sense, discourse does not constitute a mere image of things; according to its particular way of relating to them, it connects the sensible-corporeal domain with the intelligible one. Consequently, the progression from sensible and immediate experience to the realm of Forms, which constitutes their principle, can only be realized through discourse, and more precisely through dialectics.

How does this conception of dialectics relate to those of Xenophon and Antisthenes? Let us stress that, beyond the divergences, there seems to be a common trait, evidently of Socratic origin, which characterizes the different variants: dialectics, in its basic structure, consists in interpreting reality through discourse in order to make it comprehensible, by way of recognizing unified instances capable of comprehending a given multiplicity. In this sense, Xenophon, Antisthenes and Plato would share this basic assumption: that the multiplicity of different beings is necessarily unified, and they can be organized according to genres or types. This principle manifests itself in different ways, as we have seen. In Xenophon it takes the form of a dialogical investigation of the foundations of a discourse, in Antisthenes an investigation of names which seeks to establish the basic unifying element of a term, and in Plato a study of the eidetical foundations of reality and their linguistic correlates.¹⁹ However, the three positions seem to follow in

19 This fact is noted by Dorion (2011, 187) in the case of Xenophon and Plato. Dorion states that Xenophon’s definition of dialectics in *Mem.* 4.6 serves an analogous function to Plato’s dialectics such as it appears on *Republic*, especially since the aim of such

their core the *dictum* of the *dialegein kata genē* mentioned by Xenophon: the analysis of discourse and its ontological correlate, intended to establish unifying principles.

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dialectics is to form politicians/guardians capable of knowing the virtues and values which should guide the political praxis.

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