

Plato's Dialectics

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Dialectics, a process that leads us to the knowledge of Forms and ultimately to the highest Form of the Good (Seyffert, Nettleship, and Sandys 1894, 481), through discussion, reasoning, questionnaire, and interpretation, has preoccupied philosophers since antiquity (Corbett and Connors 1999). It is found in the work of Parmenides in the 5th century BC, continued by his student Zeno of Elea in his famous paradoxes (considered by Aristotle as the inventor of dialectics (Laertius 2018, bk. IX 25ff, VIII 57). Kant states that for the ancient Greeks dialectics meant a logic of false appearance, "the logic of illusion. It was a sophisticated art of giving one's ignorance, even intentional tricks, the outward appearance of truth by imitating the thorough and exact method that logic always requires, and by using his subject as a cloak for every empty statement." (Kant 1998, A 61))

Socrates practiced dialectics through the method of oral dialogue, which he called the art of "the birth of souls" (a method also called Mayanism, or the method of Elenchus (Wiktionary 2021)), which could lead, according to Socrates' intention, to confirmation or refutation (Wyss 2014) of some statements, or so-called "aporia" in which no definitive conclusion was reached (Ayer and O'Grady 1992, 484) (McTaggart 1911, 11). In Plato, dialectics is a type of knowledge (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI), with an ontological and metaphysical role, which is reached by confronting several positions to overcome opinion (*doxa*), a shift in the world of appearances. or "sensible") to intellectual knowledge (or "intelligible") to the first principles (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI, VII). It also involves the ordering of concepts into genera and species by the method of division, and embraces multiplicity in unity, being used to understand " the total process of enlightenment, whereby the philosopher is educated so as to achieve knowledge of the supreme good, the Form of the Good." (Blackburn 2008)

The main problem with science, for Plato, is that it treats its fundamental principles as "absolute" starting points, which must be accepted without argument (Plato and Jowett 1991, 510c—d). But if they are false, the whole system will collapse. Dialectics implies a defense of these starting points against objections, by resolving any aporias or problems that may arise (Plato and Jowett 1991, 534b—c, 437a). In this process, definitions can be changed conceptually to preserve their immunity to dialectical (*elenctica*) rejection. The philosopher, through dialectics, can bring them together in a unified, holistic theory, thus reaching authentic knowledge (Plato and Jowett 1991, 533d—534a) (Plato and Reeve 2004).

"... dialectic, and dialectic alone, goes directly to the first principle and is the only science which does away with hypotheses in order to make her ground secure." (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VII, 533b)

Plato's dialectic includes several methods of reasoning (Caraher 1992), such as the method of consequence (examining and testing all the consequences of a hypothesis) (White 1976) and the method of division (dividing the object of study and analyzing components) (Boethius and Stump 1988, 25) (Blackburn 2008). According to Plato, dialectics must answer questions such as "How do we reconcile the difference between the sensible and the intelligible world?", Or "How do the two planes of reality harmonize?" If the world of ideas and the real world are opposite, what sense does it make to place the idea as the cause of apparent reality? Would it not be more correct, as in *Parmenides*, to consider that there is only the world of ideas, reducing the world of nature to pure illusion? The first solution proposed by Plato was the theory of participation (*methexis*): private entities would each participate in the corresponding idea. Later, the philosopher proposed the theory of imitation (*mimesis*), according to which natural entities are imitations of their respective idea. The demiurge of *Timaeus* has the role of mediator between the two dimensions. (Plato 2015, 28ab – 29a)

At an advanced stage, the world of ideas takes on the appearance of a complex system, which includes the concepts of diversity and multiplicity. The principle of the division (*diairesis*) of the intelligible world makes possible the dialectical connection of each empirical reality to its supreme principle, bringing the dialectical method closer to the cognitive possibilities of the scientific method. To this end, Plato postulates a hierarchy or subdivision of ontological reality and to answer the problem with *Parmenides*, which he defined as "terrible and venerable" (Plato et al. 1992, 183 e5-184 a1) on the impossibility of objectifying Being.

Plato never gives a definition of dialectics, although he speaks of it as the most effective way to reach the truth. In *Phaedrus* the dialectic is a "process of union and multiplication" (Plato 1993, 265 d-e), the idea being in fact a unit of the multiple. In *Parmenides*, Plato gives a demonstration of how dialectics works in discourse: looking for all possible answers to a question, then, through a falsification procedure, refuting one after another the non-conforming answers, based on principles; the answer that is not falsified comes to be considered more true than the others, but never true in the absolute sense. Plato reformulates a new conception in *Philebus*, where Socrates undertakes to define what pleasure is by saying the famous phrase that "many are One and One is many." This reaffirms a principle of the Idea, to be unique and perfect, while reflecting the multiplicity of the sensible. The most coherent methodology of the application of dialectics is set out in the *Sophist* (dichotomous method): a) based on a question, it is isolated from the concept it is intended to define; b) this concept is attributed to a larger class in which it is understood; c) divide this class into two smaller parts to see which of the two subclasses the concept is still included in, and so on, subdividing until further fragmentation is no longer possible; d) it results that the definition found is the one that corresponds to the concept we wanted to explain. In

Cratylus, written about the same time as the *Republic*, Plato considers the use of dialectics for cognitive purposes. It should be noted that although it presents itself as a science (*episteme*), dialectics is only a rigorous procedure but never manages to reach the truth, resembling the one later developed by Descartes, and later by Hegel.

The distinctive features of dialectics, for Sean McAleer (McAleer 2020) are: the possibility to give an account of the being of everything (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VII 534b), knowledge integrated through connections between individual Forms (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VII 531c), purely formal reasoning “without making use of anything visible at all, but only of Forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms” (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI 511b), understanding how different Forms are related to the Form of Good which is “the unhypothetical first principle of everything” (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI 511b), and foundationalism (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VII 534bc), Sean McAleer warns that it is dangerous for dialectics to be practiced without love for the truth, being the quintessential tool of the true philosopher, which allows for full understanding (McAleer 2020). The dialectic embedded in the education of philosopher-kings, as Socrates explains, is a form of dialogue that incorporates arguments to obtain a secure and true understanding of reality (Being) and a knowledge of the Good itself. Dialectics is therefore a way of testing explanations (Magrini 2012). Thus, M. Peters considers that "dialectic is a progressively more synoptic ascent, via a series of ‘positions’ [hypotheses], until an ultimate is reached". (Peters 1967)

In the context of dialectics, James Magrini assumes that the knowledge that philosophy strives to achieve is the knowledge of sentences. His conclusion is that the knowledge or understanding of virtue for Socrates is not objective (scientific), nor any technique (*episteme*) expressed through a propositional discourse. For Magrini, the characteristics of philosophical

knowledge are: a form of unpropositional, manifest insight, and which is entirely neither subjective nor objective in nature, rather mediates both realms, " but it is intensely "reflexive" in nature, i.e. it is a form of self-knowledge, wherein self is known, and in varying degrees, transformed in relation to the Being of virtue, and so there is a distinctly phronetic character to this understanding" (Magrini 2012).

E.T. Gendlin states that dialectics is an activity of formation of the concept starting from a "reminiscence", a forgotten memory. It all starts with a statement or a definition of a concept starting from this pre-conceptual knowledge, and its implications (the activity of dialectics) are extracted. When the implications come to contradict the statement, it is abandoned. The contradiction contains in itself the indications for the formation of the next better definition. Dialectics is the formation of the concept, controlled by and within the order of nature, including activities, predefined knowledge, experiential, desire and choice. In the end, dialectics is self-knowledge. (Gendlin 1966)

According to F. Gonzalez, dialectics is both "negative" and "positive":

"This dialectic is negative only in showing that no proposition can capture the specific the specific nature in question; it is positive, however, insofar as the very process of examining and refuting suggested definitions can provide insight into what this nature is [...] in the very process of refuting words, propositions, and images for the inability to express that nature in question (the "fifth"), insight is barely gained into what he nature is. The qualification "barely (mogis) is important. Because it shows that this insight [...] is not the kind of knowledge that will put an end to all inquiry or that can be "grasped" once and for all." (Gonzalez 1998, 267)

"[The] dialectician, therefore, does not fool himself into to thinking that the flaws of ordinary experience can be overcome through the construction of an ideal language or the systematization of a formal logic." (Gonzalez 1998, 271)

But, according to Gadamer, the discursive movement between the four modes of dialectics, while essential, does not guarantee that " if one avails oneself of them," it is possible to " grasp the thing itself with complete certainty." (Gadamer and Smith 1980) (Magrini 2012)

Simon Blackburn states that Plato's dialectic is "the process of eliciting the truth by means of questions aimed at opening out what is already implicitly known, or at exposing the contradictions and muddles of an opponent's position" (Blackburn 2008, 104). Louis Hartz considers that in Plato's dialectic the predominant opinion is modeled by the synthesis of many contradictory opinions, by debate. (Hartz 1984) Karl Popper regards dialectics as the art of intuition for "visualising the divine originals, the Forms or Ideas, of unveiling the Great Mystery behind the common man's everyday world of appearances," (K. R. Popper 2020, vol. 1: 133) but he criticized it for its willingness to "bear contradictions" (K. Popper 2002, 316):

"The whole development of dialectic should be a warning against the dangers inherent in philosophical system-building. It should remind us that philosophy should not be made a basis for any sort of scientific system and that philosophers should be much more modest in their claims. One task which they can fulfill quite usefully is the study of the critical methods of science." (K. Popper 2002, 335)

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