

ESSAYS ON PLATO'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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ESSAYS ON PLATO'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Franco Trabattoni

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To Giuliana, Giovanni and Anna

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INTRODUCTION

A passage from the *Timaeus*, one extensively quoted within the Platonic tradition (28a), may be seen to effectively encapsulate Plato's philosophy from an ontological as much as epistemological perspective: there are two kinds of reality, one eternal, invisible and immobile, the other ever-changing, visible and mobile; and these correspond to two modes of knowledge, "intellection accompanied by *logos*" and "opinion conjoined with sense-perception devoid of *logos*". By examining other Platonic works, however, we soon realise that while this outline may be reliable on the ontological level (the presence of any intermediate mathematical entities in Platonic ontology would not affect its dualistic nature, since these entities would still be situated in the sphere of the intelligible), it is far less reliable on the epistemological level. What engenders some doubts is the nature of *logos*. In the passage from the *Timaeus* in question, *logos* is only fully attributed to *noesis*, whereas *doxa* is only the reflection of an *alogos* perception. Yet elsewhere (*Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Philebus*) Plato draws a very close link between *logos* and *doxa*: the knowledge founded on *logos* inherits the intrinsic fallibility of *doxa*, to which *logos* is connected, thereby considerably altering the clear-cut epistemological dualism outlined in the passage from the *Timaeus*. If *logos* is fallible by nature (as we read in a passage from the *Seventh Letter*¹), what kind of knowledge can man actually attain? Two possibilities emerge here. If we believe that Plato grants man the possibility to attain certain knowledge of reality (which of course means of intelligible nature according to the philosopher), we can either attempt to demonstrate that man has access to a kind of intuitive knowledge higher than the one ensured by *logos*, or we can attempt to demonstrate that the connections between *logos* and *doxa* in Plato are only sporadic and unessential, so that it is indeed possible to find certain and infallible *logoi* (possibly to be identified with definitions). Alternatively – and this is the hypothesis upheld in the present book – we must admit that according to Plato human beings, precisely by virtue of their being confined within the realm of *logos* and *doxa*, have no access to certain and definitive knowledge in this life.

The second hypothesis is not tantamount to claiming that according to Plato philosophy cannot attain any degree of truth at all or make any progress towards truth; less still does it imply that Plato was a sceptic philosopher. Rather, it means acknowledging the fact that well-founded doubts and objections are always possible, and hence that truth can only ever be grasped in a partial, approximate and incomplete way. The crucial assumption behind a reading of this sort, which

¹ On the *Seventh Letter* see ch. 1, n. 9.

aims to identify a guiding thread for Plato's philosophy as a whole, is a realist interpretation of Plato's metaphysics (i.e. the Two Worlds Theory) and doctrine of recollection. While this frame of reference may seem cumbersome (especially in the eyes of readers approaching Plato's writing with a modern sensitivity), in my view it cannot be removed without jeopardising our capacity to understand Plato's thought. Indeed, on the one hand the metaphysical framework provides a solid grounding in truth, enabling man to confidently pursue the task of discovering and interpreting reality; on the other hand, it explains why this task is a far from straightforward one in practice: why it is actually a rough and winding path laden with obstacles. It explains why, despite having the impression of living in a world marked by a clear-cut distinction between right and wrong, between true and false, between what works and what does not, man is not capable of producing unconditional and irrefutable truths to which everyone must bow. The reason for this apparent ambiguity lies precisely in reminiscence, which is to say the fact that truth is only accessible in a direct, evident and therefore indisputable way to the gods and the disembodied soul. Embodied souls, by contrast, can only draw upon their memories and the endless range of different *logoi* by which they strive to correctly describe a bygone vision. The pursuit of truth, for Plato, may therefore be seen as an attempt to find the unity or accordance (*homologia*) between *logoi* that comes closest to that pre-logical unity (the direct intuition of truth) which originally spawned the multiplicity of *logoi*.

The interpretative framework just outlined sums up the overall view of Plato's thought I have acquired ever since the first book I devoted to the philosopher.² The collection of studies presented in this volume – previously published essays that have been substantially revised³ – constitutes a further investigation of the

² Trabattini (1994). Since I suppose that the image of Plato I draw in the book could appear to many readers somehow unusual and odd, I would like to mention here – in no particular order – various scholars I feel particularly in tune with (and, no doubt, I am forgetting many others): S. Rosen, K. Sayre, F. Gonzalez, D. Hyland, D. Roochnik, Ch. Griswold, E. Heitsch, R. Polansky, P. Stemmer, Ch. Rowe, M. Dixsaut, G. Casertano, W. Watson, R. Barney, A. Capra, G.A. Scott, W. Welton, D. Barton, D. Blank, W. Detel, P. Stern, B. Wachterhauser, M. McCoy, J. Kastely.

³ For each text I will be quoting the title, place of publication and date of the first (usually Italian) edition. Ch. 1: *Il pensiero come dialogo interiore* (Theaet. 189e4–190a6), in *Il Teeteto di Platone: strutture e problematiche*, a c. di G. Casertano, Loffredo, Naples 2002, pp. 175–187; Ch. 2: *Logos e doxa: o significado da refutação da terceira definição de epistêmê no Teeteto*, in J. Trindade Santos (ed.), *Do Saber ao Conhecimento. Estudos sobre o Teeteto*, Lisboa 2005, pp. 111–126 (it. transl. Λόγος e δόξα: il significato della confutazione della terza definizione di ἐπιστήμη nel Teeteto, in “Rivista di cultura classica e medievale” 48 (2006), pp. 11–27); Ch. 3: *Theaetetus, 200d–201c: Truth without Certainty*, in A. Havlíček, F. Karfík, Š. Špinko (eds), *Plato's Theaetetus. Proceedings of the sixth Symposium Platonicum Pragense*,

above-described topics, with a special emphasis on epistemology. The revision work I just mentioned was chiefly carried out so as to lend unity and consistency to the volume, while reducing repetitions to a minimum. However, as the various chapters have not been conceived as a part of a single volume, this aim has only partly been achieved: some degree of repetition was unavoidable. This is particularly the case with the chapters on the *Theaetetus*, which – as might be expected in a work on Platonic epistemology – make up the bulk of the book.

In the *Theaetetus* Plato addresses a crucial problem, the solution of which directly bears upon the nature and very existence of philosophy (if by this term we understand that activity through which one seeks to *know* the truth). This being the case, it is certainly striking that the question raised in the dialogue, namely “What is knowledge?”, is given no answer which withstands *elenchos*. This is all the more surprising given the fact that when he composed the *Theaetetus* Plato had already long ceased writing dialogues with aporetic outcomes. The *Theaetetus* is therefore widely regarded as a remarkable dialogue, one difficult to bring in line with what are regarded as the key texts of Platonic epistemology (starting from the central books of the *Republic*). Hence the range of attempts which have been made to render this dialogue harmless by showing that it does not include everything that Plato had to say on the matter. In other words, the

Prag 2009, pp. 250–273; Ch. 4: *Fondazionalismo o coerentismo? In margine alla terza definizione di ἐπιστήμη nel Teeteto*, in G. Mazzara – V. Napoli (ed.), *Platone: la teoria del sogno nel Teeteto*, Atti del Convegno internazionale, Palermo 2008, Sankt Augustin 2010, pp. 295–317; Ch. 5: *Qual è il significato del Teeteto platonico? In margine a una nuova traduzione commentata del dialogo*, in “Elenchos” 33 (2013), pp. 69–107; Ch. 6: *Il Teeteto di David Sedley*, in “Rivista di Storia della filosofia” 63 (2008), pp. 61–73; Ch. 7: *Il “circolo virtuoso” del linguaggio. Sul significato del Cratilo platonico*, in G. Casertano (ed.), *Il Cratilo di Platone: struttura e problematiche*, Loffredo, Naples 2005, pp. 150–181; Ch. 8: *Il sapere del filosofo*, in M. Vegetti (ed.), *Platone. La Repubblica*, vol. v, libri vi–vii, Naples 2003, pp. 151–186; Ch. 9: *Che ruolo giocano le matematiche nella metafora della linea?*, in “Giornate Critico della Filosofia Italiana” 2010 (89), pp. 575–598; Ch. 10: *L'errore di Socrate*, in M. Barbanti – F. Romano (ed.), *Il Parmenide di Platone e la sua tradizione*, Catania 2002, pp. 143–153; Ch. 11: *Sui caratteri distintivi della “metafisica” di Platone (a partire dal Parmenide)*, “Methexis” 16 (2003), pp. 43–63; Ch. 12: *Esiste, secondo Aristotele, una “dottrina platonica delle idee”?*, “Methexis” 20 (2007), pp. 159–180; Ch. 13: *Unità della virtù e autopredicazione in Protagora 329e–332a*, in G. Casertano (ed.), *Il Protagora di Platone: struttura e problematiche*, Vol 1, Naples 2004, pp. 267–291; Ch. 14: *Plato: Philosophy, Politics and Knowledge. An Overview*, in A. Bosch-Veciana – J. Monserrat-Molas (eds), *Philosophy and Dialogue. Studies on Plato's Dialogues*, Vol. 1, Barcelona 2007, pp. 223–246. Except in a few cases, this revision does not include any real updating of the bibliography. In each chapter, the *status quaestionis* therefore refers to the period in which the first version of the essay was published.

most common approach to this dialogue is to downplay the significance of its aporetic component.

By contrast, I believe that we should not only avoid downplaying this component but that we should analyse it and bring it more sharply into focus, to reveal just how important it is for our overall understanding of Platonic epistemology. I would argue that Plato himself suggests a similar approach: for it is unlikely that he would have produced a text on such an important topic just after the *Republic* and immediately before other dialectical dialogues without lending any weight to its aporetic conclusion. If, as I believe, this is an unlikely hypothesis, then the *Theaetetus* must be regarded as the main text in which Plato observes that any attempt to define knowledge as in any way absolute or infallible is bound to fail. And the reason for this is the inevitable mingling of *logos* and *doxa*, an idea which finds its principle justification precisely in a passage from the *Theaetetus* and which constitutes the guiding thread for the second and third sections of the dialogue (discussing the definition of *epistêmê* as right opinion and as right opinion accompanied by *logos*).

Chapter One (*Thought as Inner Dialogue*, *Theaet.* 189e4–190a6) offers an explanation – within the framework I have just outlined – of the much-debated passage of the *Theaetetus* discussing *allogoxia*. The fact that Socrates rejects the definition of *epistêmê* as right opinion by questioning the assumption that it is possible to hold false opinions is paradoxical on more than one level: first of all, because nothing seems more evident than the fact that there is such a thing as false opinions; secondly, because what appears to be the decisive argument actually turns out to be rather weak: having false opinions does not mean stating that the odd is even, as Socrates claims; rather, it means calling even what is objectively odd, and vice-versa. On the other hand, a little further on Socrates himself acknowledges that denying the existence of false opinions would lead to many oddities. Taking all this evidence into account, I suggest the following solution. While it is true that it is impossible to deny the existence of false opinions, it is also necessary to understand under what conditions it is possible that a false opinion occurs. In particular, there can be no false opinion in those cases in which the knowledge possessed by the soul with regard to an object is so evident as to be incontrovertible. One pertinent example is that of the soul reflecting on its own knowledge in an immediate and direct way: no one, for instance, can call “even” what he thinks is odd. But this is no doubt an exceptional situation. In this case the judgement is infallible, because its object is the exclusive property of the subject and is directly dependent upon him. The point is that when we are to establish what the odd or the just are in general (as opposed to what *we* believe to be odd or just), we do not find ourselves in such a favourable situation. In other words, establishing when *allogoxia* is impossible means establishing under what conditions a judgement will be incontrovertible. These conditions do not at

all coincide with the ordinary conditions in which we pass judgement on abstract objects such as the good or the just: indeed, in such cases false opinions are all too common. All this dialectically shows that there can be no infallible intellectual knowledge since, in general, if knowledge involves something real outside itself – if, in Kantian terms, it is synthetic rather than analytic – it cannot respect those conditions that make *allogoxia* impossible. To put it differently, if intellectual knowledge is infallible, it is empty (as in the case “I know for certain that I do not call injustice what I call justice”, which entails no knowledge of justice and injustice); if it is full (e.g. “justice is the advantage of the one in power”), then it is fallible.

I have already noted above how, with the intersecting of *logos* and *doxa*, *logos* inherits its natural fallibility from *doxa*. However, an important corollary of this thesis is that *doxa* possesses two essentially distinct meanings for Plato, as the knowledge pertaining to sensible reality and as the judgement formulated by the soul in relation to a given *logos*, which in turn is meant to correctly describe a given state of affairs (be it sensible or intelligible). At the same time, these two kinds of *doxa* fall short of the goal of embodying genuine knowledge, for two different reasons: in the case of the former, it is because its object is a sensible rather than intelligible one; in the case of the latter, it is because both the *logos* and the *doxa* judging it, by granting or denying its assent, are fallible: as we read in an important passage of the *Sophist* (263d), they are structurally open to the “true/false” variable. Consequently, they cannot meet the requirements of necessity and infallibility which Plato establishes as the defining criteria of *epistêmê*. Now, the *Theaetetus* is also the dialogue which most clearly discusses and distinguishes the two meanings of *doxa*. For whereas the first part of the dialogue (the one dealing with the definition of knowledge as perception) concerns *doxa* as the knowledge of sensible reality, the second and third parts of it (discussing the other two definitions given by Theaetetus) bring into play *doxa* understood as judgement (and this transition is signalled quite clearly in the text).

Chapter Two (*Logos and Doxa: the Meaning of the Refutation of the Third Definition of Epistêmê in the Theaetetus*), building on the considerations outlined so far, analyses the so-called “dream theory”, which is to say Socrates’ interpretation of the third definition of *epistêmê* provided by Theaetetus (namely, as right opinion accompanied by *logos*). If this third definition entails that *epistêmê* stems from the union of *logos* with *doxa* understood as sense-perception (the kind of sense-perception which the *Timaeus* describes precisely as *alogos*), then the reason why it must be rejected is quite evident: the suggested definition of *epistêmê* implies the unacceptable presence of sense-perception, an originally opaque faculty which the addition of *logos* cannot make transparent (in terms of the “dream theory”, *epistêmê* would rest on non-intelligible elements). However, what Socrates’ formulation of the dream theory brings into play – unlike Theaetetus’

argument – is not the first kind of *doxa* (i.e. sense-perception) but rather the second kind of *doxa* (i.e. “judgement”), which is not only compatible with *logos* but, as we have seen, closely connected to it. In other words, if in the formula “*doxa* accompanied by *logos*” *doxa* means “sense-perception”, there is no *logos* that can turn this *doxa* into *epistêmê*. But if *doxa* means “judgement”, then why is “knowledge understood as a reasoned judgement on a given state of affairs” not a good definition of *epistêmê*? Because it is only possible to scientifically prove the correctness of the judgement passed on a given reality if one is capable of evaluating the correspondence between the state of affairs in question and the discourse describing it from an independent vantage point, which is not available to the knowing subject. In other words, if knowledge is a form of *doxa*, and if *doxa* is structurally open to the true/false variable, then knowledge cannot in any way be incontrovertible. It may be sound and well-reasoned knowledge, capable of withstanding objections; yet it will never coincide with infallible knowledge, as is instead meant to be the case with *epistêmê*. The quest for *epistêmê* in the *Theaetetus* is therefore destined to failure: for although human knowledge is capable of rising above the level of *doxa* as sense-perception (as is shown by the refutation of Protagoreanism in the first part of the *Theaetetus*), it is incapable of ever freeing itself from *doxa* understood as the soul’s reasoned yet nonetheless fallible judgement.

Chapter Three (*Theaetetus 200d–201c: Truth without Certainty*) once again sets out from the same assumptions to examine the important passage of the *Theaetetus* in which Socrates endeavours to illustrate the difference between knowledge and right opinion through the example of a jury: only eyewitnesses can claim to have knowledge of an event, whereas those who are forced to rely on other people’s accounts can, at best, attain right opinion. The aim of this chapter is twofold. First of all, it seeks to provide a more convincing explanation of the passage than those suggested so far (particular reference is made to an influential article by M. Burnyeat). Secondly, it shows that the passage in question may be regarded as a fitting metaphor for Plato’s epistemological doctrine. Indeed, the condition of an eyewitness recalls the doctrine of reminiscence, according to which the soul, prior to its embodiment, was in full and direct intuitive contact with the ideas. For Plato this “vision” represents the loftiest and most perfect form of knowledge, the only one which deserves to be defined as *epistêmê*, if this term is used to describe unquestionable and incontrovertible knowledge (as I would argue is indeed the case in the *Theaetetus*).⁴ The condition of someone describing an event in words instead exemplifies the condition of the embodied soul, which cannot enjoy any vision of the ideas and therefore must base its

⁴ See ch. 5, pp. 68–70.

knowledge of them on *logoi* more or less accurately describing such vision. And since these *logoi* – as seen in the previous chapters – are inevitably subject to *doxa* as judgement (which must determine whether they are true or false), we are forced to conclude that human knowledge, even at its highest level, cannot rely on any self-evident and infallible knowledge, but only on a kind of knowledge in which persuasion plays a prominent role (that is, by leading the soul to accept a *logos* incapable of automatically asserting its truth). The chapter then suggests that an interpretation of the passage in question in the light of the metaphysical assumptions just enunciated can also help solve the problems it apparently raises.

The metaphysical assumptions we have just discussed imply a realistic interpretation of the Two Worlds Theory (TW) – to use what has become a widespread expression in the secondary literature. In other words, this interpretation acknowledges that one of the essential features of Platonic metaphysics is the distinction between two worlds: one “over here” and the other “over there”. In this respect, as I endeavour to show in several sections of the book and especially in **Chapter Four** (*Foundationalism or Coherentism? On the Third Definition of Epistêmê in the Theaetetus*), my interpretation of Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology differs quite sharply from the one authoritatively suggested by Gail Fine in recent years. Whereas according to Fine the juxtapositions between *epistêmê* and *doxa* in Plato prove that the TW is wrong, in my view they prove the exact opposite. The fact that human knowledge, even when it is directed towards purely intelligible reality, can never completely free itself of *doxa* and the limits it entails – as is illustrated, in my view, in the second and third parts of the *Theaetetus* – shows that the world of the ideas is indeed different and separate from the sensible one. Conversely, the TW would be disproved if *doxa* only applied to the sensible sphere but *epistêmê* ensured a way of accessing the intelligible realm without any trace of *doxa*. For in this case man would be free to turn either towards sensible reality (via *doxa*) or towards intelligible reality (via *epistêmê*), so that we would not have two worlds (one over here and the other over there), but simply two hemispheres of a single world inhabited by man as soul and body – whereas the TW implies a clear-cut separation between a sensible world, inhabited only by embodied souls, and an intelligible world, inhabited by disembodied souls.

When understood in the realistic terms just outlined, the TW provides a suitable metaphysical framework for the picture of Platonic epistemology I wish to present in this book. Drawing upon the language of contemporary philosophical debate, the separation between the world of ideas and the world inhabited by the embodied soul requires a “coherentist” rather than rigorously “foundationalist” conception of knowledge: since human beings in their mortal condition have no direct access to the knowledge of the ideas, the criterion for

evaluating the truth of our descriptions of intelligible objects cannot be the comparing of the objects themselves and their description, but only the relative coherence or incoherence of the descriptive picture suggested. Having said this, the metaphysical context just outlined makes Platonic “coherentism” stronger than modern forms of coherentism, which usually lack any such background. The essential element shared by all forms of coherentism is an unavoidable uncertainty concerning the degree of truth of the system of reference adopted and an explicit acknowledgement of the fact that better systems of reference are always possible. Furthermore, a coherentism not supported by the kind of metaphysical background we find in Plato is structurally at risk of going around in circles, simply because there is nothing to guarantee the actual existence of the single truth of which each frame of reference may only be regarded as an imperfect approximation. Now, the Platonic TW grants the existence of something that may be made the object of a correct and true description, and the doctrine of reminiscence connected to it shows that every human being had access to this truth in the past. The possibility that each frame of reference may prove equally ineffective is therefore ruled out a priori. In order for all this to work, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that reminiscence is not a method for apprehending the ideas (as is maintained by a prominent line of interpreters, the most influential being Dominic Scott), but only the assumption of the fact that what we perceive as “learning” is actually merely a “remembering”.⁵ According to Plato, dialectics is the only means of knowledge-acquisition available to man in his mortal condition; reminiscence is the condition of possibility for its fruitful exercising – i.e. what ensures that the coherentist method, when properly applied, will not go round in circles. The traces borne by the soul of the knowledge of the ideas it acquired in the supra-celestial region implicitly direct dialectics – which is inevitably circular by nature – towards the attainment of satisfactory goals. In other words, the method suitable for philosophical knowledge is, in its explicit formulation, a kind of coherentism, one which is fruitfully directed by a metaphysical and hence implicit foundation, so as to avoid any form of emptiness or circularity.

Chapter Five (*What Is the Meaning of Plato’s Theaetetus? Some Remarks on a New Annotated Translation of the Dialogue*) further develops and extends the interpretation of the *Theaetetus* presented in the first four chapters. The starting point is an annotated Italian translation of the dialogue recently published by Franco Ferrari. Setting out from the methodological assumption that the *Theaetetus* is a “peirastic” dialogue which does not present all that Plato had to say on the topic at the time of the composition of the text, Ferrari essentially

⁵ See Trabattoni 2011.

endorses Cornford's thesis that the dialogue has an aporetic outcome because the philosopher chose not to introduce the doctrine of the ideas within it. According to Ferrari, this explains why the *Theaetetus* features a unique combination of *doxa* and *epistêmê* that is largely foreign to Plato's epistemology (as reconstructed chiefly on the basis of the *Republic*). This interpretation defuses the at least partially aporetic and sceptical outcomes of the dialogue, with the result that there is nothing to prevent us from assigning Plato a strong conception of knowledge and of the possibility to acquire it. Indeed, according to Ferrari the reference to the ideas allows us to transcend the level of truth, which is also accessible to *doxa* (when, that is, *doxa* is true), and to attain that of certainty – that is, certain, absolute and incontrovertible knowledge (acquired through the retrieval of definitions).

The problem of definition is examined in other parts of the book. What this chapter illustrates, in opposition to Ferrari's thesis, are rather two different points. From a methodological perspective, it argues that it is incorrect to establish *a priori* in which dialogues Plato may be presenting the whole of his thought: for an approach of this sort clearly entails a *petitio principii*. In terms of content, the chapter instead once again emphasises the intrinsic fallibility of the *logos* established by the aforementioned passages of the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, and which rests on an essential rather than merely accidental connection between *logos* and *doxa*: for as long as knowledge remains within the sphere of *logoi*, it is bound to be at least to some extent dependent on *doxa*, which is to say the judgement formulated by the soul in order to determine the truth or falsehood of such *logoi*. What this means is that the notion of “incontrovertible *logos*” (as applied in relation to definitions, for instance) is intrinsically contradictory. *Logos* amounts to saying something about an object, and the complete correspondence between the two (*logos* and object), which is what might give the *logos* the seal of certainty, can never be inferred from the *logos* itself, but only through a comparison between the *logos* and the object. The chapter then endeavours to show, among other things, that the intrinsic fallibility of the Platonic way of constructing *logoi* had already been noted and criticised by Aristotle; that the relatively weak epistemology at work in the *Theaetetus* constitutes not an isolated phenomenon but rather one consistent with the overall framework which may be inferred from the other dialogues (not to mention the *Seventh Letter*); and, finally, that this epistemology is also variously confirmed by what is apparently the dialogue most foreign to such a perspective, namely the *Timaeus*.

Chapter Six (*David Sedley's Theaetetus*) is a critical note on the book which David Sedley has devoted to the *Theaetetus*. Sedley's study constitutes one of the most important and influential attempts to defuse – along Cornford's lines – the critical potential of the *Theaetetus* with respect to what appears to be the dominant and “conventional” interpretation of Platonic epistemology. Not least

because Sedley's book is very well argued and marked by subtle exegetical acumen, it seemed essential to me to discuss it, as a significant example of the methodological problems that beset any attempt to interpret the *Theaetetus* from a neo-Cornfordian perspective (also in the light of the new and important insights that have been acquired with regard to Plato's dialogical form over the last decades).

Chapter Seven (*The "Virtuous Circle" of Language. On the Meaning of Plato's Cratylus*) develops the topics discussed so far with a special reference to the *Cratylus*. Once again, the starting point of my analysis is the function and centrality of *logos* in Platonic epistemology. The fact that according to Plato knowledge of intelligible objects can only be achieved by means of *logos* is repeatedly stressed in the dialogues, as is shown by the extensive list of passages quoted in the first section of this chapter. If this is the case, it is clear that intellectual knowledge, for Plato, cannot coincide with the kind of direct, immediate intuition which only brings two elements into play: subject (or, better, the soul) and object. Rather, there will be at least three elements at play: the soul, the *logoi* it engenders and the objects which these attempt to describe. But if this is the essential structure of intellectual knowledge, then the possibility of assigning certainty and inconvertibility to this kind of knowledge is contingent upon the possibility of making the barrier of *logos* perfectly transparent, in such a way as not to alter the relation between the soul and its object in any way. In my view, a crucial passage of the *Cratylus* shows that according to Plato this goal cannot be attained. Once the etymological section of the dialogue has come to an end, Socrates extensively questions Cratylus, so as to lead him to grant that language is not the primary source of knowledge and learning. This aim is finally achieved when Cratylus grants that the name and the object named are not the same thing (430a–b). On the basis of this, Socrates can conclude not only that there are two ways of apprehending reality, namely starting from language and starting from the things themselves, but also that the latter way of apprehending reality is certainly better than the former. Once this has been established, the reader would probably expect Socrates to move on to illustrate the development of the method of apprehending intelligible reality without the mediation of language. Yet nothing of the sort occurs. In another passage of crucial importance for understanding the *Cratylus* (but also other Platonic texts), Socrates claims that a task of this sort lies not just beyond Cratylus' power but even beyond his own (439b); and considering Socrates' role in the Platonic dialogues, this is tantamount to saying that direct knowledge of intelligible reality is out of bounds for man. If this kind of knowledge really were accessible, the *logos* – which, as the *Cratylus* suggests, is a kind of image or imitation of its object – would become useless, insofar as it is useless to seek to apprehend something through images or imitations of it when the original is available (nor would it make sense for Plato to reiterate that

the use of *logoi* is unavoidable). If, vice-versa, the mediation of *logoi* is necessary, given that direct knowledge of the intelligible is unattainable, then it is clear that human knowledge cannot be infallible: as already noted, in order to ensure infallibility we would have to compare the *logoi* with the original objects, but this is only possible if we possess the kind of knowledge of the original object that makes the use of *logoi* superfluous, and so on. This point is made explicit by the metaphor of the “second sailing” presented in a famous passage of the *Phaedo*, which is frequently referred to in the present book. This metaphor, which in Greek was no doubt used to describe a “second best”, suggests that once the true causes of the existence and becoming of things (i.e. the ideas) have been found to possess an intelligible rather than sensible nature, the only way to achieve any result is to use the indirect method offered by *logoi*: for according to Plato in this life only the senses have an immediate and direct grasp of their objects, whereas the intellect no longer does. To express this in terms of the aforementioned doctrine of reminiscence, the soul enjoyed a direct vision of the ideas before its embodiment, but now it only has *logoi* to describe its memories, with all the structural problems this entails.

Chapters Eight (*The Knowledge of the Philosopher*) and **Nine** (*What Role Do the Mathematical Sciences Play in the Metaphor of the Line?*) examine the conclusions reached in the light of what is often regarded as the pinnacle of Platonic epistemology: the metaphor of the line at the end of Book 6 of the *Republic*. In Chapter Eight I first of all set out to prove that according to Plato intellectual knowledge has a discursive and indirect character, not an immediate and intuitive one. To do so, I first show that the Platonic use of optical (and sometimes tactile) metaphors to illustrate this kind of knowledge does not actually support the view upheld by “intuitionist” interpreters, who frequently refer to this passage. The reason for this is that *verba videndi* are employed in a metaphorical sense, to mean “to realise the existence of something” or “to apprehend the existence of something” – and not to know something in a direct and intuitive way, i.e. in the same way as sight and touch enter in contact with sensible reality. This conclusion is further confirmed by a correct interpretation of the upper segment of the line, the one articulated into *dianoia* and *noesis*. Contrary to the suggestions of a solid and long-established tradition rooted in so-called Middle Platonism, in the *Republic* there is no indication of the fact that *dianoia* coincides with discursive thought and *noesis* with intuitive thought. Indeed, not only does Socrates distinguish the two kinds of thought by using completely different arguments; but he also claims that a defining feature of *noesis* is the *dynamis tou dialegesthai*, which is to say a mode of thinking that is bound to be dianoetic and discursive.

The above conclusion finds support in the analysis of the Platonic text provided in Chapter Nine. Here I endeavour to show that, on the one hand, the

sphere of *dianoia* cannot fully be identified with the field of mathematics (this being merely an example which Socrates chooses in the text to make himself better understood by Glaucon); and, on the other hand, that since Socrates presents the use of images as the distinguishing feature of *dianoia*, the latter must describe the kind of second-best thought which seeks to grasp intelligible objects in an intuitive/visual way – i.e. by means of images rather than *dialegethai*. The example of mathematics, in other words, is very interesting for Plato because it represents the most significant instance of a kind of thought that, while having an intelligible reality as its object, does not stop at the “second sailing”, meaning indirect knowledge mediated by *logoi*, but attempts to adopt a direct approach to its object, as though it were somehow possible to “see” it. Ultimately, however, this operation proves counter-productive: since, according to Plato, direct contact with an object can only occur in the sphere of sensible knowledge, the attempt to go beyond and above the *logos* by aspiring to a direct vision of the ideas actually leads one to slip further down, into the sphere of the only kind of images that can truly be “seen” by man, namely sensible images. In other words, the attempt to lead intellectual knowledge above the *logos* ultimately leads it in the opposite direction, that is *below* the *logos*. As we read in the key passage of our text (511a), in order to intuitively grasp intelligible objects (such as the diagonal itself and square itself just mentioned by Socrates), mathematicians resort to original objects that serve as models for the images grasped by *eikasia*, which is to say precisely sensible objects.

But let us return now to Chapter Eight. Once it has established that according to Plato the kind of intellectual knowledge available to man has an exclusively discursive character, this chapter shows that this knowledge does not find its fulfilment in definitions and that, more generally, the attainment of definitions is not at all the aim which Plato was pursuing by basing many of his texts on the Socratic mode of enquiry. First of all, it is clear that very few definitions are actually produced in the dialogues; indeed, none at all are given if by “definition” we mean the “*non-provisional* definition of an *idea*” (for the definition of justice in the *Republic* is certainly *provisional*, and the idea of “sophist” hardly constitutes a salient example of a Platonic *idea*). Secondly, definition is impossible for Plato because the analysis of language has an unlimited, if not circular, character, given that each term can – and indeed must – be explained through other terms, according to a procedure that only comes to an end when the analysis abandons the sphere of language and attains a direct intuition of the idea. But this, as we know, is only possible for the disembodied soul.

In this respect, it is worth noting that Aristotle was able to introduce definition only on the basis of the qualitative differences between the kinds of predicates he identified in the *Topics* and *Categories*, whereas such differences are essentially foreign to Platonic dialectics. The act of defining, according to Plato, therefore

amounts to an endless accumulation of properties (in more technical terms, it has more an extentional than intentional character), which explains why the practise of dialectics that is variously referred to in the *Sophist*, *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides* actually has an unlimited nature and is never fully accomplished (see ch. 2, p. 30, n. 35). Finally, we should note that the very term “definition” (*horismòs*) was coined by Aristotle but never occurs in Plato. It is important to stress that the rather frequent practise of translating verbs such as *horizo* and *diorizo* in Plato as though they were related to the notion of definition is most certainly wrong. In this regard, Chapter Eight recalls the analysis of some passages from the *Parmenides* presented in Chapter Ten, which shows that the verbs in question indicate the act of separating one thing from the rest, so as to make it an independent reality, and not the act of defining a thing by stating what it is (as when we say that man is a featherless biped).

This point becomes crucial when such verbs are applied to ideas, because the purpose of the sentences they occur in is to establish that the ideas exist as separate objects (against all those who deny this, be they ordinary people or philosophers such as Antisthenes), and not to define what an idea is. But if definition is impossible, then why does Plato’s Socrates pose questions “of definition”? His aim – as in my view may be inferred from the first part of the *Meno* – is the following one. For Plato, a question of definition actually has a paradoxical character, because on the one hand it is inter-subjectively comprehensible (for all the interlocutors perfectly understand what object they are discussing); but, on the other hand, it seems impossible to find the answer (that is, the definition). Plato therefore poses questions of definition in order to lead the reader to identify the conditions of possibility for this peculiar state of affairs. And the outcome for the reader ought to be the doctrine of reminiscence: the question of the essence of *x* is only comprehensible because man already had knowledge of *x* in the past; yet the definition of *x* cannot be given because the ultimate knowledge which it is expected to express is in fact exclusively ensured by intuition, which is only available to the disembodied soul.

The ambiguous nature of the *logos* just described is closely related to the issue of the nature of philosophy according to Plato, as I endeavour to show in Chapter Eight. The picture I have outlined – and on which I will shortly be returning in greater detail – entails that according to Plato there are good reasons to separate the ideas from all other things (i.e. that ideas such as those of the just and the beautiful really do exist), but that it is impossible to affirm what these ideas are (i.e. that is impossible to define the beautiful or the just). Indeed, this is certainly the case if saying what the beautiful and the just are means giving a definition of them. However, this does not imply that men are incapable of saying anything sensible about the beautiful or the just. This being the case, the investigation into the “which” and that into the “what” are closely intertwined. In

science the two procedures are usually separate (as Aristotle himself appears to believe in the *Analytics*). Someone practising zoology, for instance, will first claim that objects such as animals exist and then set out to describe them. Someone practising philosophy in the Platonic sense, where the objects of enquiry are the ideas, cannot proceed in the same manner: for there is no evidence that the objects in question actually exist. Therefore, philosophy – in the Platonic sense of the term – is bound to have a self-referential character, since it must first of all prove the existence of its object; and this operation can only be conducted in a circular way. In other words, a process of feedback emerges between the “which” and the “what”, whereby a certain idea of what the beautiful and the just are suggests we posit the beautiful and the just as universal, self-standing entities; and this belief that they are universal, self-standing entities in turn leads us to refine and generalise our descriptions of them. Just as in the coherentist epistemological model, the overall operation here can engender a virtuous rather than vicious circle through the external point of reference of the metaphysical assumptions underpinning the theory as a whole (relativism and nominalism are self-contradictory; truth exists and there is only one truth; man knew this truth prior to the embodiment of the soul, etc.).

The general perspective endorsed in this book casts some doubts as to the fact that, as is often maintained, the theory of the ideas lies at the very heart of Plato’s philosophy; indeed, it questions the very hypothesis that Plato ever developed such a thing as a “theory” of the ideas. One important dialogue to consider when investigating this problem is no doubt the *Parmenides*, the only one in which Plato expounds and discusses the problems raised by the notion of the ideas (upheld by Socrates as an antidote to Zeno’s paradoxes at the beginning of the dialogue). The *Parmenides* is the focus of **Chapter Ten** (*Socrates’ Error in the Parmenides*) and **Chapter Eleven** (*On the Distinguishing Features of Plato’s “Metaphysics”; Starting from the Parmenides*) – although, to some extent, Chapters Twelve and Thirteen also deal with this dialogue. Chapter Ten chiefly addresses a general question. If the ideas are not “seen” in the same way as we experience ordinary objects, but are rather “posited” as a requirement inferred from experiential data (in the case of the *Parmenides*, in order to explain apparent contradictions in our experience), then the nature we assign to the ideas should not run against this requirement. The case presented in the chapter (as “Parmenides’ error”) is that of a person who sets out from a notion of separateness, chiefly understood as an acknowledgement of the fact that the ideas have an existence of their own, separate from that of other things, but then ultimately conceives of this separation in absolute terms, as though there were no relation between the ideas and sensible reality (i.e. between the one and the many, of which the ideas and sensible objects are an expression). This is what Parmenides refers to in the dialogue as “the greatest difficulty”. Actually, according to Plato there truly is

a separation between the ideas and sensible object: indeed, he conceives of it in much stronger terms than Aristotle. Yet this should not lead us to lose sight of the fact that although unity is separate for Plato, it is also present within multiplicity (in the *Philebus* the philosopher significantly states that the one is the many, and vice-versa⁶). If this were not the case – if no semblance of the ideas were to be found in sensible things, and if there were no subject capable of detecting it (through reminiscence, as the *Phaedo* suggests), then the acquisition of knowledge would indeed be a hopeless task for man.

That said, the above considerations on how the notion of the ideas was developed can help us establish not just the possibility of the task in question but also its limits. This issue is especially discussed in Chapter Eleven. Ever since the debates conducted within the Academy, the so-called “theory of ideas” has raised a series of difficult problems. What kind of entities are the ideas? How do they relate to sensible reality? In what sense are they “separate” from it? In what sense may be described as causes? What is meant by “relation of participation”? What does it mean to say that the ideas are models imitated by ordinary objects? From the very beginning (i.e. from Aristotle onwards) interpreters have realised that Plato’s dialogues do not furnish any real answers to these questions. This also applies to the *Parmenides*, although it is the one dialogue which examines the “theory of ideas” from different points of view. What should we make of this? And what is the meaning of the *Parmenides*, given that – as F. Gonzalez has perspicaciously noted – Plato apparently does not even attempt to solve the problems raised in the dialogue? Chapter Eleven suggests an answer to these questions which is consistent with the general interpretation of Plato upheld in the book. As may be inferred from the first part of the dialogue, Socrates speaks of the ideas not on the basis of any independent knowledge of them, but on the basis of an inference drawn from sensible objects (the only objects of which man has independent and direct knowledge). The ideas are posited as truly existing objects in order to account for the resemblances to be found in sensible reality. In other words, Socrates does not speak of the idea of “the great” because he has somehow acquired knowledge of it, but because he realises that the quality of greatness occurs with the same characteristics in a range of different objects. This is what leads him to conclude that greatness as such exists, even though he has never directly experienced it. If it is in this precise way that man attains “knowledge” of the ideas, then both the potential and limits of the theory are quite evident. Human beings detect traces of unitary, universal and changeless characters in sensible reality, which itself is multiple, particular and transient by nature. As Plato sets out to prove in the *Phaedo* (74e–75c), this discrepancy shows

⁶ 14c.

that the only real condition of possibility for the kind of knowledge in question is reminiscence: for if men recognise universals in what they experience, despite the fact that experience itself cannot produce anything of the sort, this must be because they had knowledge of them prior to any sensible experience. This vague trace of the universal, however, is all that survives in the soul of the knowledge of the ideas it possessed in its disembodied condition. So if the ideas may be said to exist, it is only on the basis of this trace. The actual existence of the ideas as separate entities is therefore the outcome of a process of inference beyond which we cannot proceed – it is not the outcome of an enquiry on the basis of which it is possible for us to state what kind of entities the ideas are, in what sense they are causes, what participation means, etc. The mere “inference” of the existence of the ideas is not enough for an enquiry of this sort: what is required is objective, direct confirmation of their existence. Here, I would contend, is where the significance of the first part of the *Parmenides* lies. The knowledge of the ideas filtered through reminiscence is a sufficient condition for conducting a fruitful enquiry into the nature of the beautiful, the just, the good, etc. (even though this will never lead to any definition). By contrast, it is not a sufficient condition for addressing the “ontological” questions enunciated in the dialogue. To paraphrase Kant, this section of the *Parmenides* is designed to show just how many insoluble problems emerge when human reason seeks to overstep its limits: human reason is capable of establishing that universal ideas exist and even of progressively clarifying their noetic content; but it is not capable of determining what kind of entities these are, how exactly they relate to sensible reality, etc.

Chapter Twelve (*Is There Such a Thing as a “Platonic Theory of the Ideas” According to Aristotle?*) illustrates how the state of affairs just outlined is duly confirmed by Aristotle’s criticism of Plato. For reasons internal to his own thought, Aristotle was particularly interested in ontological questions pertaining to the nature of immobile substances, their relations to mobile ones etc. Now, Aristotle behaves with regard to Plato not as though the latter had advanced some erroneous theories on the matter, but as though he had not proposed any theory at all. According to Aristotle, for example, Plato does not offer any explanation of participation, but simply engages in “empty talk”, using “poetic metaphors” (*Met.* A 991a20–22, 992a28–29). Clearly, this is a serious shortcoming for Aristotle. However, it is far from evident that Plato too regarded it in these terms – contrary to what has been suggested by a long string of interpreters from Antiquity down to the present day. Having acknowledged the existence of objects that are universal, eternal, immaterial etc., Plato consciously refused to build an ontology suited to them (as Aristotle and Plotinus were later to do), simply because he regarded this as an impossible (and probably uninteresting) feat. Philosophy, by contrast, can achieve something both possible (given reminiscence) and useful

(from an ethical and political perspective) by addressing – over and over again, in an increasing detail – Socratic questions such as “What is the just?”, “What is the beautiful?”, “What is the good?”, etc.

Chapter Thirteen (*The Unity of Virtue, Self-Predication and the “Third Man” in Protagoras 329e–332a*) has been included in the present collection of essays in order to show how the interpretation of Plato suggested here is capable of providing a satisfying answer to long-standing and by now almost worn problems, such as that of the so-called “Third Man”. As has clearly been established by now, the Third Man Argument rests on the principle of self-predication. While the idea of greatness (the second greatness) is posited in order to account for the fact that the same quality, “greatness”, is predicated of many different things, the need to posit a “third greatness” stems from the fact that the idea of greatness too is a thing of which the quality of greatness is predicated. But if it is true – as I have suggested – that an idea is not something known independently, but rather something inferred from sensible knowledge, then this analogy no longer holds: based on inference, all we can say is that “there exists such a thing as greatness”, not that there exists a thing, i.e. an idea, to which the predicate “great” applies in the same way as to all other great things. Consequently, self-predication is not meant to express the notion just enunciated (that the idea of greatness is a great thing), but is rather one of the peculiar ways in which Plato has chosen to illustrate the fact that an idea merely manifests the corresponding quality in all its purity. All that Plato means to argue through self-predication is that only the great as such (i.e. the idea of greatness) is always nothing but great, whereas a “great” thing (i.e. a sensible object) is bound to be many other things in addition to great (for instance, small).

The last chapter (*Plato: Philosophy, Politics and Knowledge. An Overview*) aims to solve a problem that is often addressed by anyone who, like me, favours a non-dogmatic (or at any rate relatively weak) interpretation of Plato’s epistemology. From this perspective, one may object, what are we to make of the ambitious political project outlined in the *Republic* and the *Laws*? How is it possible to endorse such pretentious plans on the basis of a relatively weak epistemology? Whereas the first part of the chapter confirms and sums up the epistemological picture drawn so far, the second part attempts to answer the questions just formulated. The key to the whole argument is what may be described as the theory of the model, which Plato has Socrates present in a crucial passage of the *Republic* (472c–d). According to this theory we are capable of comparatively evaluating “intermediate” conditions only in the light of our idea of what ought to be the best condition. This is not to say that the best condition can or ought to be accomplished, nor that all other conditions must be regarded in negative terms. Rather, it means that the image of the best condition, while unachievable in itself, must serve as a guideline and hence a model to comparatively evaluate

the achievable intermediate conditions. In the specific case considered in the chapter, establishing that a perfect moral and civil life can only be founded on an equally complete and perfect knowledge of the good does not mean that moral and civil life cannot in any way be regulated and governed without such perfect knowledge. What it means, rather, is establishing a direct proportionality between knowledge and the good life, whereby the better developed and more detailed the knowledge of the good, the better will be the life of the men submitting to it. This is precisely what happens when perfect knowledge is not an aim which must necessarily be attained but rather one that must necessarily be imitated.

Let me conclude with a few words of thanks. First of all, I would like to thank my colleague and friend Jan Ospomer for having suggested Leuven University Press as a publisher for this book; I am also grateful to the two anonymous referees, whose suggestions have helped me improve the final draft of this work. I further wish to thank the directors and editors-in-chief of the journals and editors of the volumes in which the chapters of this book were originally published for having granted me their permission to republish them in an English translation (in the case of those contributions originally in Italian) and (in all cases) largely revised versions. Special thanks go to the person responsible for translating most of this book into English, Sergio Knipe, for his exquisite competence and helpfulness. Finally, I wish to thank all the friends and colleagues with whom I have had the opportunity to discuss and compare my ideas on Plato over the years, and in particular Mauro Bonazzi, Riccardo Chiaradonna, Emanuele Maffi, Filippo Forcignanò and Mariapaola Bergomi.

CHAPTER 1
THOUGHT AS INNER DIALOGUE
(Theaet. 189e4–190a6)

1. THOUGHT AND DOXA

In the essays published under the title of *Wahrheit und Methode – Ergänzungen – Register*¹ Hans Georg Gadamer makes several references to the passage from the *Theaetetus* (189e4–190a6) in which Socrates claims that thinking (*διανοεῖσθαι*) is a conversation the soul has with itself on the matters it is investigating.² Gadamer invokes this statement in support of one of the fundamental assumptions of philosophical hermeneutics: the idea that thought is inseparable from speech,³ and hence that there can be no kind of thought prior to language. Indeed, in this case – or rather *only* in this case – the exercise of understanding amounts to the endless act of interpreting, which on the one hand cannot be replaced with anything else, since the object to be interpreted is essentially already determined linguistically, and on the other can never come to an end, precisely because there is no way of attaining any sort of pre-linguistic understanding (or non-propositional understanding, to borrow an expression frequently employed by scholars of Plato).⁴

The problematic aspect of this hypothesis lies in the fact that it necessarily seems to expose knowledge to Protagorean objections. For if there can be no truth prior to language, and if on the other hand linguistic facts are subject to the endless dialectic of interpretation, we are forced to conclude that no underlying structures or stable truths exist; hence, it appears that the answer to the question of the nature of knowledge must lie in a form of relativism not unlike the one Protagoras is credited with in the first part of the *Theaetetus*. If there are no facts, but only interpretations, how can we escape the conclusion that knowledge has a subjective character, which is to say that it depends on the point of view of the interpreter, on his opinion (*doxa*)?

It will be useful to note right from the start that the Platonic passage from the *Theaetetus* we have set out from is not meant to state what thought is, but rather what *doxa* is. In the immediately ensuing lines, Socrates explains that the *doxa* of a soul emerges the moment the soul, after a lengthy or brief stage of

¹ Gadamer (1986/1993).

² See Gadamer (1986/1993), pp. 152, 184, 200, 204, 364; see also Gadamer (1995), pp. 107–109, 326.

³ See Renaud (1999), p. 62 (with n. 29).

⁴ See Gonzalez (1998).

analysis, reaches a conclusion (*δρίσασα*) through inner questions and answers. In other words, reflecting on a given thing means formulating interrogative propositions in which a predicate is questioningly attributed to a given subject, whereas *doxa* emerges when the soul answers either yes or no: what results from this is precisely the soul's *doxa*.⁵

Further information may be gleaned from what is almost a 'twin' passage from the *Sophist* (263d6–264b4). Along much the same lines as the *Theaetetus*, the Eleatic Stranger here asks: "Aren't thought and speech the same, except that what we call thought is speech that occurs without the voice, inside the soul in conversation with itself?"⁶ (263e2–5) In this passage too, however, the identity between thought and speech represents not the outcome of the argument, but an intermediate term through which to establish something different. For it is a matter here of establishing that "both true and false thought and belief and representation (*φαντασία*) can occur in our soul" (263d6–8). Since affirmation and negation occur within speech (263e10–13), if we manage to show that thought, opinion and representation may be reduced to speech, then we will also have proven that they can be either true or false. This is indeed the case: thought is speech, *doxa*, is either silent affirmation or silent negation, and representation itself is the affirmation or negation which arises within the soul through sense-perception.

If things are so, it is easy to understand why there is such a risk of slipping into relativism. The avenue for affirmation and negation, that is to say the avenue in which the concepts of truth and falsehood first acquire meaning, is speech, understood as a dialogue consisting of questions and answers. Yet those who are responsible for this dialogue, and in particular for the answers given, are the souls – whether they are engaged in mutual dialogue or holding an inner conversation. In other words, it is the souls that assign truth or falsehood to speech;⁷ and they do so the very moment in which they develop and express an opinion – be it only inwardly – by stating "yes" or "no". Truth and falsehood would therefore appear to be governed by *doxa* – or rather by *doxai*, that is to say the opinions which the various souls (or various subjects, to put it in modern terms) adopt in different circumstances. How can one escape this relativistic outcome?

⁵ See also *Phil.* 38c–e: opinion springs from memory and sense-perception, and takes the form of an answer to an inner question (of the sort: "what might that thing be which I see under a plant near that rock?"). The inner answer (e.g. "it is a man") is one's *doxa*; and if it is verbally expressed to someone, this *doxa* becomes *logos* (λόγος δὴ γέγονεν οὕτως ὁ τότε δόξαν ἐκάλουμεν).

⁶ Unless otherwise signaled the English translations of Plato's texts are taken from J.M. Cooper & D.S. Hutchinson (eds), Plato. *Complete Works*, Cambridge/Indianapolis: Hackett 1997, sometimes with modifications.

⁷ See ch. 5, pp. 79–81.

2. SOME GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS

If an attempt is made to do so without foregoing the primacy of subjectivity, one might follow in the path traced by Kant, who envisaged a transcendent and lawmaking subjectivity; alternatively, one might accept the insights developed by Husserl's phenomenology with regard to the principle of intersubjectivity. Gadamer, however, while well aware of the need to avert the threat of relativism (which he considered impossible not just in principle but *de facto*), did not accept these solutions. In order to avoid relativism, there is no need to argue that something exists prior to language: it is enough to argue that something exists prior to the subject; and what exists prior to the subject, in Gadamer's view, is precisely language. According to what may in a sense be regarded as the traditional interpretation, Plato transcends subjectivism by denying the identity between thought and language: language can also be arbitrary and subjective, as the *Cratylus* suggests, but fortunately man can grasp the ideas directly through thought, without the mediation of language. Gadamer instead accepts the identity between thought and language and makes sure to separate the two from subjects (or souls, to use the Platonic expression). Gadamer can thus argue that: "Who thinks of 'language' already moves beyond subjectivity".⁸ Language, then, is no longer tied to the (relativistic) contingency of the speaking subject, but acquires a kind of objectivity which transcends all subjects. This notion largely underscores the now widespread philosophical idea according to which it is not so much the case that men utter language, as that they "are uttered" by it. What this means is that language is not just the medium for men's personal and subjective opinions, but most importantly the avenue for the manifestation of an objective background which is prior to all subjects and opinions.

I only wish to note here that this way of addressing the problem no longer has anything to do with Plato. No doubt, the philosopher was crucially concerned with refuting relativism. As the first part of the *Theaetetus* shows, Plato believed that relativism was not just a contradictory stance, but also something practically untenable. This, however, is only half of the problem. For it is not enough to argue that relativism is inconsistent in order to come up with a non-relativistic definition of knowledge. This is the very problem addressed in the second and third part of the *Theaetetus*, which get caught up in difficult and subtle *aporias* precisely because on the one hand the need to oppose relativism leads to an attempt to define knowledge in a way that is utterly independent from *doxa*; but on the other, the fact that *doxa* is the avenue for affirmation and negation (i.e. for

⁸ Gadamer (1995), p. 99.

truth and falsehood) keeps knowledge within the boundaries of the variables of *doxa* (true opinion; true opinion with *logos*). Consequently, the spectre of relativism can never fully be exorcised.

This view does not entail, however a ruinous fall back into the relativism of *doxa*. In Plato's view the structure of human knowledge certainly implies the existence of an original, pre-linguistic and direct – and hence non-propositional – way of knowing things; yet this knowledge is only to be found in the mythical and metaphysical realm of disembodied souls (as may be inferred from the doctrine of recollection, which is not surprisingly taken up in a rather late dialogue such as the *Phaedrus*). Gadamer largely overlooks this aspect – an approach in line with the many different attempts made in the 20th century to downplay the metaphysical import of Platonic philosophy. The idea that language cannot be transcended, which constitutes the linchpin of philosophical hermeneutics, may only be ascribed to Plato if we regard man's earthly condition as being exhaustive, and thus envisage the philosopher's metaphysical statements merely as a mythical and allegorical embellishment that is not to be taken seriously.

If, by contrast, we do take Plato's metaphysical statements seriously, then the *logos* – which is to say the kind of thought and speech that characterises man in his earthly condition – cannot be regarded as the non-transcendable source of all knowledge; rather, it ought to be seen as a kind of prism dividing a single ray of light it has not generated itself into beams of many different colours. What emerges here is both the invariably partial and approximate ability of man to trace back the various light rays to their one source (since experience shows precisely that the rays tend towards unity) and the impossibility of bypassing the prism, which is to say of stably attaining the one original truth. The outcome of this interpretation, in other words, is a kind of perspectivism which is neither elusive nor disheartening, since it may always be traced back – precisely in the Platonic sense of tracing multiplicity back to the one – to more or less limited convergences, which may constantly be renewed and extended by means of reasoning and persuasion.

This, of course, is not the only possible interpretation of Plato. First of all, there is the interpretation I have mentioned above, where I state it represents the traditional one in a way. It entails the idea that according to Plato there exists a kind of pre-linguistic objectivity, understood as a form of intellectual intuition, which is available to man already in this life; the latter stands in contrast to a weaker kind of thought, of the discursive sort, which only manifests itself in language. The salient difference between the two kinds of thought lies in the fact that the former grasps truth in a direct way, independent of speech, dialogue and hence the *doxastic* act by which the soul freely answers questions with a yes or no. This kind of thought entails the existence of an utterly non-perspectival form of knowledge, thus doing away with all traces of relativism.

Further evidence for the existence of these two kinds of knowledge would appear to be provided by some significant linguistic elements in Plato's writing. The word which I have translated as "thinking" in *Theaet.* 190e3 is *διανοεῖσθαι*, and *Soph.* 263d6 too speaks of *διάνοια*. This immediately brings to mind the scholastic classification of the various modes of knowledge which is provided at the end of Book 6 of the *Republic* – in relation to the metaphor of the divided line – and especially the distinction which is drawn in this passage between *διάνοια* and *νόησις* (511d8–9). *Διάνοια* would thus coincide with *logos*/speech, whereas *νόησις* would stand for intuition or pure vision, capable of grasping the reality and truth of the ideas directly, with no need for the soul to resort to speech and the spontaneous – if not downright arbitrary – act of assenting.

Actually, things are not so simple as that. As I will endeavour to show in chapters 8 and 9, as far as the divided line is concerned the following points can be stated:

- 1) the term *διάνοια* is used in the passage in neither a rigid nor a technical way;
- 2) the distinction between *νόησις* and *διάνοια* in the *Republic* serves a completely different purpose than to illustrate the existence of a kind of thought which is utterly free from the compromises with dialogue and *doxa* which are attributed to *διανοεῖσθαι* in *Theaet.* 189–190;
- 3) thirdly, it would show that in Plato's writing *διάνοια* and *διανοεῖσθαι* are used as generic terms for 'thought' and 'thinking': in *Resp.* 6, in particular, the articulation into *διάνοια* and *νόησις* is due to the need to distinguish between two different modes of knowledge serving two separate goals – not to any desire to affirm the existence of a kind of intuitive thought separate from discursive thought.

As for the so-called philosophical excursus of the *Seventh Letter*,⁹ which some scholars invoke as evidence of the idea of intellectual intuition in Plato's philosophy,¹⁰ I cannot but refer the reader to studies that I have already published

⁹ In my view, the *Letter* is most likely genuine. But this is not a point which I am keen to stress here. What I firmly believe, instead, is that the *Letter* cannot be regarded as spurious based on the assumption that its so-called "philosophical excursus" is not Platonic or not even philosophical (as recently argued by M. Burnyeat in Burnyeat – Frede 2015). On the contrary, not only does this passage fully fit within the overall picture of Platonic epistemology (which in some ways it even helps clarify), but it is also highly interesting from a philosophical perspective. My own reading of it can be found in Trabatttoni (1994, pp. 200–244) and Trabatttoni (2005, pp. 103–138). As regards Burnyeat's (and Frede's) arguments, I intend to address them elsewhere.

¹⁰ See e.g. Isnardi Parente (1970), esp. pp. 52–63.

elsewhere. My thesis is that, on the one hand, the weakness of the νοῦς is clearly stressed in the text, and that, on the other hand, one cannot take the notion of ἔκλαμψις (illumination) at the end of the excursus as referring to any kind of intellectual intuition.

3. THE “ALLODOXIA” PASSAGE

In line with this interpretative approach, I would argue that the lengthy discussions of the issue of error in the *Theaetetus* reflect Plato’s need to show that the soul’s acquisition of knowledge cannot be understood as a form of direct intellectual intuition: for in this case, there would be no way to account for falsehood and error.¹¹ Since an analysis of this problem – no matter how cursory – would require a study to itself, in the present chapter I shall only illustrate how the need in question emerges in the passage from which I originally set out.

Let me briefly recall the context of the passage. The final refutation of the first definition of knowledge, according to which knowledge coincides with sense-perception, rests on the fact that it is necessary to come up with a definition of knowledge capable of grasping the act by which the soul, by itself, engages with existing things (187a5–6: αὐτὴ καθ’ αὐτὴν πραγματεύεται περὶ τὰ ὄντα). The reason why knowledge cannot coincide with sense-perception lies precisely in the fact that the ultimate subject of all knowing is the soul. Hence, the investigation must turn from sense-perception to *doxa*. It is worth noting, in this respect, that *Theaetetus*’ introduction of *doxa* reflects an attempt to find a mode of knowledge conforming to to one indicated by Socrates (that is, to the work autonomously carried out by the soul) – something Socrates himself acknowledges to be an appropriate suggestion (187a9: Ὅρθως γὰρ οἶει, ὦ φίλε). Right from the start of this enquiry, then, it is clear that the knowledge sought for consists in δοξάζειν (‘having opinion’). Since *doxa* may be either true or false, however, *Theaetetus* adds that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) must be “right opinion” (ἀληθῆς δόξα, 187b6). At this point, Socrates raises the question of how to account for the existence of

¹¹ The thesis upheld here partially coincides with the one espoused in Barton (1999). Barton believes that in the *Theaetetus*, and especially in the passage of the dialogue discussing ἀλλοδοξία, Plato wishes to show that thought cannot be understood as a form of “mental grasping”, and that precisely for this reason Plato introduced a different explicative model in the *Sophist*: “The idea is that thinking is an activity in which a subject is ‘woven’ together with a predicate in such a way that the predicate says something *about* the subject” (p. 180). Barton, however, does not take into account the definition of thought as the soul’s inner dialogue, and more generally fails to further investigate the philosophical implications of the interpretation he has chosen to adopt.

false opinions. Here we have three cases: 1) false opinion in relation to what is known or not known; 2) false opinion in relation to what is or what is not; 3) false opinion as ἀλλοδοξία (literally, “to believe other”). Case 1) proves to be impossible, since no one could ever think that Theaetetus is Socrates, whether he knows the two or does not know them. Case 2) implies that anyone who opines what is false opines what is not, but this too is impossible, since anyone opining something always opines something that is. Hence, we are left with ἀλλοδοξία (or ἀλλοδοξεῖν).

This is a rather obscure concept,¹² on which interpreters have spent quite some time. The least we can say, in my view, is that ἀλλοδοξία must be explained in a way that marks it out from the two previous cases. In particular, the word must describe a situation in which what the soul actually knows or does not know is not really relevant, for else we would fall back to case 1.¹³ Indeed, this difference becomes clear the very moment ἀλλοδοξία is introduced, since διάνοια comes into play: we have ἀλλοδοξεῖν when someone affirms within his own διάνοια that one thing is another (189c1–2). Conversely, when διάνοια formulates any judgement of this sort, it necessarily thinks either both or only one of the things it is judging (189e1–2). The precondition for having ἀλλοδοξία, then, is that the soul must think something, regardless of whether it knows the thing it is thinking. False opinion, in this case, comes about as an error of thought. It is at this point that Socrates defines thinking as *logos*, which is to say as speech which the soul engages in within itself by raising and answering questions, by stating yes or no. Moreover, since this thought is the act by which the soul reaches a *doxa*, one might be inclined to argue that knowledge comes about the moment in which the *doxa* is true, i.e. when by stating yes or no the soul affirms or denies a certain thing correctly; and hence that error comes about when the soul states yes or no incorrectly.

If this were the case, then it would be possible to accept the second definition put forth by Theaetetus. Yet this is not at all the case according to Socrates, who maintains that it is impossible for διάνοια to make any mistakes, that is to claim that a thing is other than what it is. For who would ever say to himself that in general the beautiful is ugly, the just is unjust, and the even is odd (190b1–8)? Clearly, nobody. Consequently, the attempt to define false opinion as ἀλλοδοξία is also destined to failure.

There is something questionable in Socrates' reasoning, which may easily be brought to light. Certainly, no one can claim to disagree with himself, in the sense of believing that what *he regards* as beautiful is also ugly, and vice versa.

¹² Ἀλλοδοξεῖν is a *hapax*. Likewise, there are only very few occurrences of the term ἀλλοδοξία (including one in Plotinus IV 4.17.21).

¹³ See Ackrill (1966), p. 388.

Yet anyone might believe that the even is not even, if by this we mean that the person in question understands the word “even” to describe something other than what is truly even. It is not unreasonable, then, to question just how cogent Socrates’ argument really is, since all it does is to show that no one can be mistaken with regard to the content of his own thoughts and the words expressing them, whereas it does not rule out the possibility that someone might be mistaken with regard to the object which these words are meant to describe.¹⁴ Thus, for instance, no one could reasonably object to Thrasymachus that he is considering just what he regards as unjust, and vice versa, the moment he claims that justice is the advantage of the one in power. However, it would be perfectly legitimate to argue that Thrasymachus is confusing just and unjust because he is calling ‘justice’ something which instead ought to be described as injustice. He is mistaken, therefore, in the sense that he holds a false opinion on justice.

The above error is only possible, however, if the knowledge of things such as beauty, goodness and justice differs from intuitive and direct knowledge. Previously Socrates had rightly claimed that someone who knows Socrates and Theaetetus could never mistake one for the other. Indeed, while it may take a propositional form, the knowledge of Socrates and Theaetetus is not ultimately grounded in speech and thought. While it is true that the act of knowing Theaetetus, insofar as it is carried out by the soul, will always lead to a propositional expression (such as: “Yes, the man I now see is Theaetetus”), it is equally true that in this case the soul is not required to decide, based on reasoning, whether the person it sees is Theaetetus. For behind this cognisance there lies an act of direct apprehension. In this case, no *ἄλλοδοξία* can arise, since the *doxai* are ensured by the evidence at hand. The problem lies in ascertaining whether the same kind of evidence may also be found for general concepts such as beauty and justice.¹⁵ The answer can only be a negative one – for else it would be impossible to account for the fact that men constantly make mistakes with regard to things of this sort.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Ackrill (1966), p. 389. Unlike Ackrill and many other interpreters I do not find it is very useful to examine Plato’s text from the point of view of its logical fallacies (whether we do so only in order to pin down or explain these errors, or with the charitable intention of proving they are not really errors at all). Plato’s arguments always serve a specific purpose, and it is up to the interpreter to discover just what this purpose might be. In the pursuit of this goal, the question of what may be considered valid or invalid from the point of view of contemporary logic matters not one whit.

¹⁵ The fact that the problems pertaining to false opinion concern general concepts and must therefore be examined at this level has been emphasised by Frede (1989), p. 28 (although I do not find Frede’s overall interpretation of the dialogue fully convincing).

¹⁶ To use the kind of terms which have shaped the whole debate since the 1950s (especially in the English-language world), we might wish to borrow Bertrand Russell’s

If this is the case, we have found one way to explain the existence of ἀλλοδοξία, namely by adducing the fact that no direct – and thus infallible – knowledge of the ideas is available to man. Indeed, it can hardly be a coincidence that all the examples Socrates presents in order to explain ἀλλοδοξία refer to general things (such as the beautiful, the just, the odd, the ox, the horse, etc.), i.e. things the only possible knowledge of which is not ‘by acquaintance’ – as in the case of individual objects such as Theaetetus – but ‘by description’.

There is one point worth noting with regard to the above explanation, whatever we might wish to make of it: the explanation does not at all imply that all *doxai* are equally true (for this would lead us back to the Protagorean view, which has already been refuted). Rather, the suggested explanation merely states that a hypothetical fallacious *doxa* concerning objects such as Theaetetus can only come about by accident (in the case of someone who does not know Theaetetus well), but is destined to vanish with the direct display of Theaetetus; whereas the same cannot be said of a fallacious *doxa* concerning justice, for in this case there is nothing to display: all one can do is examine the various *doxai* by means of the *logos* in order to determine through reasoning – in an inevitably provisional way – which might be the most valid and persuasive, the one least open to refutation. If, by contrast, the intellectual intuition of essences were possible, wrong opinion (ψευδῆς δόξα) would have a purely accidental character and it would be impossible to explain why Plato goes to such great lengths in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* (as well as in other dialogues) to discuss the problem of error. The fact is that truth is compatible with a non-propositional conception of knowledge, since knowledge may always be said to exist when the intellect grasps truth as though it were touching it (which is what Aristotle seems to be suggesting in *Metaph.* Θ 1051b22–24). What is not compatible with a non-propositional conception of knowledge, by contrast, is falsehood, since in non-propositional forms of knowledge we will not find anything equivalent to false opinion, but only the lack of knowledge. In other words, the expression ‘false opinion’ only makes sense in relation to propositional forms of knowledge.

Evidence in support of the solution just presented might be found in the fact that Plato, in the *Sophist*, solves the problem of error precisely by positing that knowledge has a dianoetic and propositional character. As we have seen, it is through *διάνοια* and *logos* that affirmation and negation come into play. On the

well-known distinction and argue that the knowledge of forms is only possible for Plato as ‘knowledge by description’ rather than ‘knowledge by acquaintance’. I trust that by leafing through the present book the reader will realize why, according to my view, Plato’s philosophy relies both on “knowledge by acquaintance” and on “knowledge by description” – only *not at the same time*.

other hand, error can only consist in a proposition falsely negating what ought not be negated. Error lies in connecting things which ought not to be connected, in joining genera that ought to remain separate – that is to say: in the copula, which is precisely a part of (internal or external) speech, the trigger for judgment and the avenue for *doxa*: “it is” (ἔσται) / “it is not” (οὐκ ἔσται).

4. LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Still, the hypothesis just presented seems far from correct. The idea that the propositional nature of knowledge may account for the possibility of ἀλλοδοξία seems utterly inadequate as a way of explaining a passage in which Socrates apparently claims the exact opposite, namely that ἀλλοδοξία is impossible. In other words, why does Plato merely note the impossibility of maintaining that the just is not the just, without apparently grasping that this is precisely where the origin of error is to be found, namely in the possibility of regarding as just what is not just at all?

This problem can be solved by noting that Plato’s argument here is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, grounded on the following assumptions:

- 1) ἀλλοδοξία is impossible ...
- 2) ... insofar as the knower has full knowledge of both the objects he is comparing, as in the case of knowledge gained “by acquaintance”. For instance, everyone has full knowledge of what *he or she regards* as beautiful or ugly (the person is obviously “acquainted” with that); hence, nobody can maintain that what *he or she* believes as beautiful is also ugly, and vice versa.

No positive conclusion follows from this assumption, only a condition of *aporia*. The reader will not fail to notice, however, that ἀλλοδοξία, in the sense of “believing that things are different from what they are”, far from being impossible, is on the contrary a very common occurrence. So, if one holds that 1) is absurd, one must also admit that 2) is false.

This said, Plato’s stress on the impossibility of ἀλλοδοξία has not only the negative function of pointing out the limits of knowledge: for it also serves the positive purpose of announcing its possibilities. Actually, the claim that nobody will ever say to himself that the beautiful is ugly or that the just is unjust contains a core piece of information which goes far beyond simple tautology.

The impossibility of maintaining that the just is unjust is invoked in order to establish the identity of universals. But in this case, unlike in the case of purely tautological statements such as “Socrates is Socrates”, what we have is not simply an empty principle: the fact of stating that the just is the just will not

prevent one from holding a wrong opinion of justice, but will at least prevent one from believing that justice is nothing at all. The identity of the name, and the impossibility it entails of calling just what is unjust, first of all ensures that something such as justice exists, and that it may also be grasped in some way – for else the very name would not be understood. In 147b2 Socrates asks Theaetetus: “do you believe that anyone can understand the name of a thing if he does not know what that thing is?” (ἢ οἶεi τίς τι συνίεσιν τινος ὄνομα, ὃ μὴ οἶδεν τί ἐστίν;). Certainly, this does not constitute complete knowledge, because otherwise it would be enough to merely know the name of a thing in order to know the thing itself. Yet understanding the name of a thing and being aware of the fact that universal concepts bear a significant name already marks the beginning of knowledge.

This beginning of knowledge is precisely what is required in order to make progress – to increasingly get to know the thing one is talking about through the *logos*. If there is no intellectual intuition, and if thought is speech and word, then one might be inclined to take the opposite view and conclude that thoughts and words have nothing to do with reality, that they are only the means by which men arbitrarily bring things together. In this case, not only would there be no way of ensuring intellectual knowledge by establishing a connection with things outside thought, but the very matter of which thought is comprised would turn out to be a volatile and fluid one open to any form of aggregation and any kind of linguistic game; we would also lose the possibility of evaluating opinions by means of the *logos*, and with it the distinction between truth and falsehood internal to *διάνοια*. This is not the case, however. Heracliteans in the *Theaetetus* (180a–b) and eristics in the *Euthydemus* like to play with language, but theirs is a conscious trick: playfulness and license cannot be regarded as the ultimate horizon of language. We know from the *Sophist* that not all genera mix with all others (252e), and that a difference exists between being and non-being: if both were infinite, there would be no difference between them; but only non-being is infinite, whereas being is great, but not infinite (256a). Certainly, we can take the liberty to call a round thing straight and vice versa, but we will still be sure that the thing signified has not changed (*VII Ep.* 343b).

By stating that no one in uttering within himself that inner word which conveys a thought will call the ugly beautiful and the unjust just, what Plato means to say, then, is that the reduction of thought to speech which is invoked in the *Sophist* in order to account for error does not rule out knowledge; rather, it is what enables one to speak the truth: for a name, however conventional it may be, stands for an invariance; and the fact that it will be understood precisely as a sign of the universal invariance of which it is a sign (i.e. as what allows one to replace a thing by a name without affecting the understanding of it) shows that man operates within the realm of the universal right from the very outset of his

engagement with language and knowledge-acquisition. However poor we may find this basic knowledge to be, it is already too late for us to be sceptical.

If we leave the intermediate stages of learning and forgetting aside, and focus our attention only on knowing and not knowing (as Socrates establishes in *Theaet.* 188a), we may argue that, generally speaking, everyone knows the truth to some degree and there are no absolutely false opinions: for what we call “not knowing” and “falsehood” is caused by poor recollection, or an insufficient acquisition of knowledge – which ultimately amounts to the same thing in Plato’s view. According to Plato, moreover, this hypothesis is meant to explain the rather ambiguous and paradoxical situation described in the *Theaetetus*: the apparent contrast between the unquestionable existence of intellectual fallacies and the just as unquestionable impossibility of ἀλλοδοξία. Alongside the original ignorance and forgetfulness responsible for error, there must be an equally original knowledge, a “memory” which accounts for the possibility of grasping the truth.

According to Plato, however, this mode of knowledge-acquisition does not depend on language: for in his view – unlike for Aristotle and Gadamer – language has no objectivity. It is hardly surprising, then, that despite all the references to Plato in Gadamer’s work, “hermeneutical ontology” draws inspiration from Aristotle’s thought. The objectivity of language is the Aristotelian avenue for the convergence of the continental tradition and the analytical (when the two indeed converge). The latter – as Enrico Berti writes¹⁷ – still trusts in “the possibility of building a metaphysics, or at any rate an ontology, based on the method of logical-linguistic analysis”. Many believe that this Aristotelian avenue is the only reliable way of rescuing Western philosophy from the threat of deconstruction. But in fact the Platonist path offers the same guarantees. Although language is not objective, it presupposes an objective reality, which manifests itself through language, while at the same time concealing itself (much like the wounds inflicted upon Pier delle Vigne by the harpies, which “give pain and pain’s outlet simultaneously”¹⁸). As such, language is unassailable by deconstruction.¹⁹

¹⁷ Berti (1999), p. 466.

¹⁸ “fanno dolore, e al dolor fenestra” (Dante, *Inferno* XIII, 102).

¹⁹ See Trabattoni (2004 bis).

CHAPTER 2
LOGOS AND DOXA
*The Meaning of the Refutation of the
Third Definition of Epistēmē in the Theaetetus*

1. THE RIDDLE OF THE THEAETETUS

The three definitions of knowledge (*epistēmē*, ἐπιστήμη) Theaetetus presents in the dialogue named after him are matched by three different refutations on Socrates' part, so that ultimately the dialogue ends without having reached any real conclusion. Critics have found all this rather surprising, at least for three plausible reasons:

1. from a thematic and chronological point of view, the *Theaetetus* falls within the group of so-called 'dialectical dialogues'; hence, it is not quite clear why Plato with this work chose to revert to the aporetic-elenchic method centred around the critical teaching of Socrates – a method typical of the philosopher's early writings, his so-called 'dialogues of definition';
2. the *Theaetetus* does not appear to make any explicit reference to the ideas, and this seems rather strange, especially in the eyes of those interpreters who believe that a reference to the doctrine of the ideas would have been the natural way to solve the *aporias* which the dialogue struggles with in vain;
3. while it is quite clear in what way the reduction of knowledge to sense-perception fails to account for the essential features of the former, it is far more difficult to understand why Socrates does not solve this difficulty by openly stating that the only real form of knowledge is intellectual knowledge, thus assigning the latter the kind of stability and soundness which the other kind of knowledge lacks. Nor is it clear why the notion of *logos* which is invoked in the third definition, and which ought to mark the transition from the sensible level of *doxa* to the intelligible one of the ideas, ultimately does not prove to be enough to solve the problem.

It seems to me that the difficulties just listed suggest that the traditional version of Platonic epistemology, with its clear-cut distinction between *doxa* as the aporetic knowledge of the sensible and *epistēmē* as the 'euporetic' knowledge of the intelligible, does not quite add up. Evidence of this failure is to be found in various passages from Plato's dialogues, some of which I will focus on in this book; they concern both a relative strengthening of *doxa* (which indicates more than just the knowledge of sensible reality) and a relative weakening of *logos* (which is far more closely intertwined with *doxa* than what is commonly

held to be the case, provided we understand the latter as standing for more than just sensory knowledge). One of the most revealing evidence in support of this hypothesis is to be found in the analysis and refutation of the third definition of knowledge presented by Theaetetus, namely knowledge as “right opinion accompanied by *logos*”.

2. THE “DREAM THEORY” AND THE MEANING OF *DOXA*

As other scholars before me, I no longer wish to discuss the possibility of attributing the so-called ‘dream theory’ (*Theaet.* 201c8 ff., henceforth D) to any specific philosopher (although on the basis of the observations made by Aldo Brancacci, a connection with the vocabulary and style of Antisthenes strikes me as a very likely prospect).¹ I shall merely note here that in my view a reference to a specific doctrine seems to be implicit both in Theaetetus’ short presentation and in Socrates’ lengthier explanation.² Indeed, both the fact that the definition “right opinion accompanied by *logos*” is framed in terms of a relation between the unknowable and the knowable, and the fact that this relation is in turn explained by Socrates by invoking the relation between a whole and its elements represent very specific and far from obvious developments of the definition, such that suggest a reference to a doctrine actually upheld by someone.

Let us analytically examine, then, how D is presented through the words of Theaetetus and those of Socrates. Theaetetus (201c–d) assumes that there is a difference between a true opinion accompanied by *logos* (a) and an opinion which is devoid of *logos* (b), and hence irrational. The former opinion would coincide with the object sought for, namely *epistêmê*. Theaetetus then moves from the subjective side of the knowledge relation to the objective one, by adding that the author of D calls ἐπιστητά (“knowable”) the objects correlative to (a) and οὐκ ἐπιστητά (“not knowable”) the objects correlative to (b).

In his speech, Socrates sets out to further elucidate the difference between ἐπιστητά and οὐκ ἐπιστητά. His aim is to lend meaning to the distinction generically suggested by Theaetetus – evidently on the basis of a specific doctrine known to both of them (and which Theaetetus only needs to be reminded of: 202c6). Socrates does so by clarifying what kind of objects lie behind these terms, since the distinctive and distinguishing features of these objects are precisely what make the former knowable and the latter unknowable. The main feature, as

¹ Brancacci (1999). For a succinct overview of the *status quaestionis*, see Ioppolo (1999), p. LXI, n. 105.

² See Bostock (1988), p. 202; Ioppolo (1999), p. LXI.

has already been mentioned, is the fact that wholes are knowable, whereas the elements of which they are comprised are unknowable.

1. οὐκ ἐπιστητά (“not knowable”): some simple elements exist which are out of reach for *logos*, and which can therefore be named one by one (cf. ὀνομάσαι, 201e3, ὀνομάζεται, 202b22), but not described through an articulated proposition. Aside from being ἀλογα (“unaccountable”) and ἄγνωστα (“unknowable”), these elements are αἰσθητά (“perceivable”, 202b6), i.e. only graspable through the senses. What makes them unknowable, then, is precisely the fact that they are only accessible to the senses and not to *logos*: for a person can only be said to know a thing if he or she is capable of giving and receiving *logos* concerning it (202c2–3).
2. ἐπιστητά (“knowable”): the elements mentioned under 1 can create compounds which, unlike the elements themselves, are accessible to both *logos* and ἀληθῆς δόξα (“true opinion/judgement”, 202b7). Since *logos* is ὀνομάτων συμπλοκή (“complex of names”, 202b4–5), the sum of elements that are only graspable individually through their names gives rise precisely to *logos* as a composition of names: the above-mentioned act of giving and receiving an account is only possible if words may be arranged in an articulated way.

If we now compare Socrates’ lengthy explanation to the shorter one provided by Theaetetus, we shall immediately notice a striking divergence between the two. Whereas in the epistemological doctrine presented by Theaetetus *doxa* – when not accompanied by *logos* – falls within sphere of “not knowable”, in the clarification Socrates offers the level of “not knowable” is filled by those elements which can only be named and grasped through the senses, without any explicit reference to *doxa*. The latter is instead mentioned in relation to the opposite sphere, in combination with the adjective ἀληθῆς (“true”), as that faculty which, together with *logos*, is capable of accounting for compounds. Hence, as M. Burnyeat has noted,³ Socrates’ words seem to imply that according to D “true opinion” can refer to compounds, but not elements (and this would seem to find confirmation in 202d7).

In order to solve this problem, Burnyeat himself first of all considers the possibility of having “true opinion” with regard to elements as well, given that this is not something explicitly ruled out by the text. The scholar, however, immediately rejects this solution, following a subtle stylistic analysis of the relevant Greek lines; instead, he suggests a different solution: in order to understand why “true opinion” is placed on the side of *logos* in 202b1, what we must do is assume that

³ Burnyeat (1990), p. 174.

in this passage the expression has a meaning compatible with the idea that it cannot be applied to elements. According to Burnyeat, this meaning consists in a summary enumeration of elements, yet one still insufficient to attain the degree of completeness required by *epistêmê*.⁴

Burnyeat's suggestion is certainly ingenious, but on the one hand it closely relies on a particular understanding of *logos* in D,⁵ and on the other it has the (in my view crucial) defect of making the doctrine enunciated by Socrates completely different from the one enunciated by Theaetetus. Yet after listening to Socrates' explanation, Theaetetus himself informs us that the latter presented exactly the same theory as his own (202c6). In my view, therefore, it is essential to accept the solution rejected by Burnyeat and to conclude that *doxa* can exist both in relation to compounds and in relation to elements: in the latter case this will be an *ἄλογος δόξα* ("unaccountable opinion": albeit not necessarily one incapable of grasping its object; see *Tim.* 28a); in the former case it will be a *doxa* homogenous to the *logos* (see *Theaet.* 189e–190a and *Phil.* 38c–e), which may be true but also false of course (if the *logos* accompanying it does not adequately describe the object).

In order to understand how this may be possible, it will be useful to make one further observation and consider the fact that *doxa* has two different meanings in Plato's texts, and especially in the *Theaetetus*. According to the first and most common meaning of the term, which we find in various passages of the dialogue, *doxa* stands for sensible knowledge. In this case, the connection between the formulation of D presented by Theaetetus and Socrates' explanation is perfectly clear, since the level of *ἄλογος δόξα* ("unaccountable opinion") and of *οὐκ ἐπιστητά* ("not knowable") identified by Theaetetus can easily correspond to the level of *ἄλογα, ἄγνωστα, αἰσθητά* ('unaccountable', 'unknowable', 'sensible') described by Socrates. By contrast, as concerns the *doxa* which is said to accompany *logos* in 202b7, on the one hand it is not unreasonable to argue that compounds too may be grasped through sense-perception; but on the other, the second meaning of *doxa* may also be at work here, although it does not fully coincide with the meaning suggested by Burnyeat. The British scholar refers to 206d–e, where the content of true opinion is "anything that anyone thinks about something, so long as the thought is correct".⁶ This formulation can hardly be brought back to the "intermediate-level analysis" Burnyeat speaks of.⁷ Rather, the clearest evidence for it is to be found in 190a, where *doxa* is defined not as the knowledge

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 174–177.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

of sensible objects, but as λόγος εἰρημένος ('discourse pronounced', whether aloud or only entertained in one's mind), and hence conceived in a way that makes it closely connected to *logos*.⁸

In the light of the above considerations, it is now possible to put forth the following hypothesis (which I will shall endeavour to substantiate in the ensuing pages): given the two different meanings of *doxa* as knowledge of the sensible (*doxa_s*) and as the inner speech of the soul (*doxa_i*), by refuting D Socrates successfully demonstrates that *epistêmê* is independent of *doxa_s*, but fails to demonstrate that it is capable of rising above *doxa_i*.

3. SOCRATES' REFUTATION

In defining what is ἐπιστητόν ('knowable'), Socrates draws a picture of intellectual knowledge – i.e. knowledge based on *logos* – which seems to correspond quite closely to Plato's own view of the subject. Indeed, knowledge has to do with *logos*, and the latter is 'Platonically' understood as articulated speech expressing the reasons for one's opinions through the dialogical act of raising and answering questions (including in the case of a soul conversing with itself).⁹ What seems

⁸ See ch. 1.

⁹ Many scholars have argued that in order to grasp the nature of the passage it is necessary to clearly distinguish all the possible meanings of *logos* – starting from those it has in Plato – and then to decide which of these meanings is at work in the text (see e.g. Bostock 1988, pp. 202–203; Fine 1979, Burnyeat 1990, pp. 134–145). While this is certainly an important issue, in my view it can more easily be solved by examining the overall meaning which the term usually has in Plato than by adopting subtle analytical distinctions. For instance, it seems quite clear to me – as it does to Fine and Burnyeat – that *logos* here cannot simply mean "statement", but must rather be understood as "explanation" (Fine) or possibly "analytical description" (Burnyeat 1990, pp. 141–149). Likewise, it seems evident to me that the explanation or analytical description provided by *logos* cannot consist merely in the listing of the various elements that are part of a compound, as Bostock apparently holds (1988 p. 108). Fine quite rightly refuses to take the *logos* at work here to simply mean "enumeration" (Fine 2003, pp. 238–241); instead, she presents a promising interrelational model of knowledge (Fine 2003, p. 242f.). As previously noted, all this is not too difficult to understand from a fairly generic point of view: *logos* may be described as an articulated kind of speech marked by connections illustrating the reason for what is being stated. In such a way, on the one hand *logos* will preserve its original connection to the notions of 'speech' and 'reason'; on the other, it will continue to entail a reference to the act of gathering up what is manifold into a single whole which is typical of the verb λέγειν. I believe this rough outline is quite enough in order to clarify what Plato meant to state through his discussion of D, whereas a rigid ana-

completely anti-Platonic, by contrast, and what therefore lies at the basis of Socrates' rejection of \mathcal{D} , is the hypothesis that within the framework of this doctrine *logos* is thought to develop starting from an *ἄλογος δόξα* ('unaccountable opinion'), where *doxa* – being *alogos* – can only indicate the knowledge of sensible reality (see 202b6 and, of course, *Tim.* 28a). By combining the formulation of \mathcal{D} proposed by Theaetetus with the one offered by Socrates, what we get is indeed a kind of *doxa* which consists in the accurate grasping of a sensible element, whereas *logos* would appear to spring, as if by magic, simply from the union of the sensible elements that are the object of this *doxa*. However, it is clear that if this is the case, sensible and intellectual knowledge must have exactly the same kind of reality as their point of reference, namely material and sensible reality: the former kind of knowledge deals with sensible reality in the form of elements, the latter deals with the very same sensible reality in the form of wholes.¹⁰

Socrates' refutation, in other words, is meant to show that where there is *logos* (understood as the giving and receiving of an account, a reason, an argument), all we have – from start to finish – is purely *logos*, whereas we cannot reach *logos* by setting out from objects or forms of knowledge-acquisition that are foreign to

lytical approach is bound to lead to the (in my view highly unlikely hypothesis) that Plato consciously sought to develop his argument in such a way as to leave it open to different interpretations (see Burnyeat 1988, pp. 145–146, with n. 16). The assumption behind this view is that Plato must have reasoned like a 20th-century philosopher (one too clever not to be aware of linguistic ambiguities, yet at the same time bound by the deontological principle of never expressing oneself in an approximate way if not *pour cause*).

¹⁰ Burnyeat finds it strange that \mathcal{D} insists on referring to sensible objects and also addresses the problem of establishing – beyond the scope of the dialogue – whether this restriction “is necessary or wise” (1988, p. 185). This way of framing questions, however, is hardly the most appropriate one if we wish to understand Plato's text. Rather, we should take account of what Plato has written and then investigate why he chose to act as he did. It is quite true, as Burnyeat writes, that if the elements \mathcal{D} speaks of are sensibles, then the knowledge of the compounds it alludes to must have the same kind of reality as its object. And it is also true that “such a view should be anathema to Plato” (*ibid.*, p. 182). Yet there is no reason to believe that Plato presented \mathcal{D} with the aim of discussing an epistemology comprehensive of all forms of knowledge. On the contrary, it seems far more likely that the philosopher sought to refute a specific doctrine by illustrating its inner incongruities, and especially the fact that if the elements one sets out from are sensibles, then there is no way to account for intellectual knowledge. For the same reason, I find it unnecessary (as well as implausible) to suggest – as R. Polansky does (Polansky 1992, p. 216) – that the expression *αἰσθητὰ δέ* in \mathcal{D} refers not so much to sense-perception as such, as to the kind of perception which comes into play in the work of mathematicians.

it.¹¹ This does not mean that *logos* must be perfectly transparent or free from any trace of obscurity as either a compound (*ὀνομάτων συμπλοκή*) or element (*ὄνομα*), or even in the reciprocal relation between these two aspects; rather, it means that the elements of *logos* must be homogenous to it, and not belong to a different genus. Indeed, the problem noted by Socrates does not simply concern the contrast between the knowability of a compound and the unknowability of its elements, but rather draws attention to the anomaly of regarding *logos* as a (knowable) compound of (unknowable) *sensible* elements. Now, according to Plato a sheer sensation is nothing ‘logical’, since *logos* only comes into play with linguistic-rational reflection, including in those cases in which the latter focuses precisely on sensations. Thus the perception of the colour ‘red’, for instance, is devoid of *logos* in itself, whereas constructing the proposition “this object is red” is a matter of *logos*, since it is only at this level that universal concepts (such as ‘red’) come into play – these being the only possible object of *logos*. Indeed, the difference between *αἴσθησις* and *logos* coincides with the difference between particular and universal; and for Plato – just as much as for Aristotle – there can be neither *logos* nor *epistēmē* with regard to the particular. Consequently, the *συμπλοκή τῶν ὀνομάτων* (‘complex of names’) does not find its origin and point of reference in the *συμπλοκή τῶν στοιχείων* (‘complex of elements’), but rather in the relation between particular and universal which comes into being the very moment *logos* emerges: “this (particular) object is red (it is an instance of the general characteristic ‘red’)”.

The refutation of D, therefore, depends on the specific modes in which Socrates explains and sets out this theory: for according to him, *logos* has no characteristic which enables it to be set in relation to the basic kinds of knowledge – understood as sensations – of which it constitutes a compound. As previously stated, the above modes of exposition probably reflect a doctrine that was actually upheld by someone, and which Socrates sums up by integrating the definition presented by Theaetetus. Socrates’ refutation, then, is bound to this doctrine. Yet, as has also already been noted, it would be possible to spell out Theaetetus’ third definition in genuinely Platonic terms. To do so, we only need to understand *doxa* not as knowledge related to sensible objects – which is how it is understood within the Heraclitean-Protagorean context that provides the background to the first definition – but as the assent of the soul to a given thesis, which is how *doxa* had been described in the analysis of the second definition (190a). It is possible to argue, then, that knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) is to be found when the two following conditions are met:

¹¹ See Bostock (1988), pp. 221–222.

1. the soul gives its assent (*doxa*) in a truthful and correct way (*ἀληθής*), which is the case when it judges (opines) things to be as they are;
2. this judgment (opinion) is founded on reasoning which the soul is capable of expressing.

For the first of the two conditions we may wish to refer, by way of example, to what Socrates argues in *Resp.* 413a7–8, where he states that to *ἀληθεύειν* ('tell the truth') coincides with *τὰ ὄντα δοξάζειν* ('to believe the things that are'). The primary source for the second condition is instead the famous passage from the *Meno* in which the difference between *ἀληθῆς δόξα* ('true opinion') and *ἐπιστήμη* ('knowledge') is seen to lie in the fact that only the latter is connected to *αἰτίας λογισμῶ* ('an account of the reason why', 98a2–3). What matters for the sake of our argument is not so much the mention of *αἰτία* ('reason') here, as of *λογισμός* ('reasoning'): for this corresponds to the kind of articulated – and as such verbally expressible – reasoning represented by *logos* in the *Theaetetus* (cf. *Phaid.* 79a3, *Phaedr.* 249c1, *Parm.* 130a2, etc.), whereas the identification of *αἰτίαι* represents the specific way in which each reasoning operates.¹²

4. WHY THE THIRD DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE IS REJECTED

If things are so, why does Socrates reject the third definition of knowledge suggested by Theaetetus, even when considered apart from the not strictly necessary explication that is provided in D?¹³ Why does Socrates refute a definition of knowledge which is very similar to the one vigorously upheld by the same character in the *Meno* (98a5–b5)? The reasons Socrates puts forth in the *Theaetetus* are well known. After having discussed D by drawing upon a wide range of different arguments, Socrates moves on to examine the definition itself, overlooking all possible allusions to basic and sensory knowledge. In this case, we find that *logos* is freed from any association with the sensible, and hence ought to be

¹² On the meaning of *λογισμός*, see Fine (2004), pp. 57–58: "The word and its cognates are often used in a mathematical sense, but they can also be used more broadly; and that is how Plato generally uses them". An affinity with the *Meno* has also been noted by Bostock (1988, p. 203), who nonetheless further remarks that very few interpreters are willing to admit that *logos* in this passage of the *Theaetetus* is to be understood in the same sense as *λογισμός* in the *Meno*, namely as "reason, argument, or justification". In my view, the notion of articulated reasoning is largely implied by the ordinary use Plato makes of the term *logos*, and this also applies to the case at hand.

¹³ Bostock (1988) too (p. 210) has noted that the reference to sensible reality is not essential to D.

examined in itself, in order to ascertain whether it really represents the decisive factor for engendering *epistêmê*. Socrates, however, refutes this definition as well, showing that according to none of the three meanings that may be assigned to *logos* does the latter meet the goal of turning true opinion into *epistêmê*. In the first case, if we understand *logos* as the ability to express one's thoughts verbally, it is clear that those who have a right opinion will already be capable of doing as much (206e–208b). In the second case, if we take *logos* to mean the ability to list the elements of a whole, we may note that this listing does not always coincide with the knowledge of the object; hence, we are once again faced with a *logos* that is incapable of freeing itself of *doxa*, in such a way as to attain knowledge (206e–208b).¹⁴ Finally, the third case presents a similar situation to the first, since the ability to grasp the distinctive feature of each thing, here identified with *logos*, is in fact already possessed by right opinion – for else it would not be right at all (208c–209e).¹⁵

What we are dealing with, then, is a situation of the following sort. The epistemological doctrine presented in D (which must always be examined by bearing in mind both what Theaetetus states and what Socrates states) turns out to be fallacious, insofar as the true *doxa*, if *ἄλογον* is *ἐκτὸς ἐπιστήμης* ('unaccountable, falls outside the knowledge', 201d1–2) – pertaining to elements which are *οὐκ ἐπιστητά* ('not knowable', 201d2), *ἄλογα* ('not accountable') and *ἄγνωστα* ('unknowable', 202b6), and hence subject to *ὀνομάσαι μόνον* ('only be named', 201e2) and *αἰσθητά* ('sensible', 202b6) – can never attain by combination the level of the things of which there is an account, i.e. *ἐπιστητά* ('knowable', 201d3), that may be described through a *logos* which is *ὀνομάτων συμπλοκή* ('complex of names', 202b4–5), in such a way as to make them *γνωστοί* and *ῥητοί* ('knowable

¹⁴ Bostock 1988 (pp. 220–221) finds it strange that Plato here is getting back to the same question he had already previously settled (207b6). He suggests we solve the problem by positing that D and its refutation were only subsequently added on to the dialogue. Actually, we would be facing the same problem even if *logos* – as Bostock suggests – had the same meaning in D than it has in the second of the three definitions introduced starting from 206c. This, however, is a highly unlikely prospect, as we have already seen.

¹⁵ The fact that in the final section of the *Theaetetus* Plato analyses the three different meanings of *logos* is not evidence enough to argue that the meaning of D and its discussion – which can only be grasped once the meaning of *logos* has been established – is bound to remain ambiguous (as suggested by Burnyeat 1990, p. 148). Whereas in D and its discussion *logos* stands in contrast to *doxa* understood as sense-perception (and is therefore rather easy to determine), later on it is a matter of illustrating the necessary connection that exists between *logos* and another kind of *doxa*; and in order to do so, Plato must prove that *logos*, *however it is understood*, underscores this condition. The reason why Plato introduces the three meanings of *logos*, then, is not to clarify possible ambiguities (which play no significant role in this part of the dialogue).

and expressible' 202b8). Hence, if *logos* is to play a crucial role within *epistêmê*, it is necessary for the latter to be grounded on something which is *logos* right from the start.

The above condition, moreover, does not imply the complete absence of true opinion within the *epistêmê* thus conceived, since there is one instance of *doxa* (the one defined in 190a as judgement expressed by the soul in propositional terms) in which it appears to be more connected to *logos* than to sensation (as may also be gleaned from 202b5–7). Hence, the third definition of knowledge suggested by Theaetetus in the dialogue is certainly refuted if the true opinion it mentions represents a kind of knowledge which is not homogenous to *logos*, whereas it remains valid if:

1. there exists a kind of *doxa* homogeneous to *logos* and
2. the action of *logos* is capable of adding to this kind of *doxa* – provided it is true – something crucial for the attainment of *epistêmê* and which *doxa* itself lacks.

The investigation reaches no conclusion precisely because the analysis of the three meanings of *logos* shows that the last of the above-mentioned conditions (2) cannot be met.

According to the second definition, *logos* is too weak to attain knowledge, and hence remains confined to the lower level of *doxa*. According to the first and third definition, *doxa* is already strong enough in itself to include those defining differences which *logos* is meant to add on in order to engender *epistêmê*. It thus seems that the attempts made by *logos* to move beyond/above *doxa* for good are destined to fail – that ultimately *logos* always remains enmeshed within the mire of *doxa*, despite its yearning to break free from it. This is particularly evident in the analysis of the third definition of *logos*, where the addition of *logos* to right opinion merely amounts to the addition of right opinion to itself (209d8–10). The third definition of knowledge proves incorrect, then, for in one case it mentions a *doxa* which is not structurally capable of producing *logos*, and in the other it mentions a *doxa* which already includes what *logos* is meant to add to it.¹⁶

Based on what has been argued so far, it seems necessary to admit that from a certain perspective *doxa* represents a non-transcendible epistemological level. This may come across as a surprising conclusion, since it apparently conflicts with the idea of Platonic epistemology variously endorsed in many of the dialogues (such as the *Meno*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*), and according to which a

¹⁶ I will be discussing this point more extensively in ch. 5, pp. 77–79.

clear difference exists between *doxa* (including right *doxa*) on the one hand, and *logos* and *epistêmê* on the other. In my view, however, this only seems surprising because scholars are most reluctant to consider a possibility which might account for all the aspects of the problem. I shall sum it up in Drew Hyland's words: what Plato states to be "in principle intelligible" – Hyland is referring to the ideas here – is not bound to be "in fact completely or comprehensively intelligible".¹⁷ Indeed, it is quite reasonable to suggest that on the one hand Plato stresses the essential difference between *doxa* and *epistêmê*, with a special emphasis on the discrepancy between the knowledge of sensible reality and that of intelligible reality; but on the other acknowledges that it is very difficult to move beyond this discrepancy, particularly given that *doxa* also means the assent which each soul gives to an opinion it considers to be well-founded, and that the subjective variable in this assent seems to affect any human act of knowledge-acquisition – including any attempt to attain the higher level of *epistêmê*, since this will still be based on *logos* or λογισμός ('reasoning').

But if this is the case, the copresence in the dialogues of passages in which *logos* and *epistêmê* appear particularly strong and qualitatively distinct from *doxa* understood simply as the knowledge of sensible reality and of passages in which *logos* appears relatively weak and hardly distinguishable from *doxa* understood in different terms – and in which *epistêmê* appears to be a rather unattainable goal – cannot be regarded as a contradiction.

A striking example of this copresence is provided by the passages from the *Meno* I mentioned above. In this dialogue Socrates asserts the difference between true opinion and *epistêmê* with an emphasis that is rather unusual for a dialogue with an aporetic outcome (98a9–b5). Yet he also repeatedly states that in practical terms right opinion serves exactly the same function as knowledge (97c9–10, 98b7–9, c1–3). What can this careful balancing mean, if not – as Hyland suggests – that while right opinion and knowledge are completely different "in principle", "in fact" they ultimately prove far closer to one another than what might seem?

Possible confirmation of this may be provided by even only a partial analysis of the parallel between the field of love and that of knowledge drawn in the *Symposium*. In order to elucidate the intermediate nature of love, Socrates gives the example of right opinion, which stands half way between φρόνησις ('wisdom') and ἀμαθία ('ignorance'), since it is incapable of λόγον δούναι ('to give an account/reason', 202a). Later on in the dialogue, Socrates compares love (or the lover) to philosophy (or the philosopher), since the philosopher too is intermediate between σοφός ('wise') and ἀμαθής ('ignorant', 204b). By further explicating

¹⁷ Hyland (1995), p. 177.

these comparisons, we get that the epistemological degree corresponding to philosophy is that *ὀρθή δόξα* ('true opinion'), not that of *epistêmê*, and that its distinguishing feature is that of not being able to give an account (*λόγον δοῦναι*). If we were to translate this striking conclusion into terms familiar to us through the *Theaetetus*, we might say that the philosopher pursues a kind of knowledge based on *logos* (through discursive reasoning founded on the act of giving an account), but that this ambition – to paraphrase Hyland – never leads to a complete and comprehensive attainment of *epistêmê*, a complete and comprehensive break with the level of *doxa*. What this means, then, is not that the philosopher is forced to forgo *logos*, or to renounce the attempt to give an account for his opinions and claims; rather, it means that his account will never be a complete or final one. This lack of completeness, or inexorable rift between the philosopher and the attainment of *epistêmê*, illustrates precisely the degree to which he remains bound to *doxa*.

5. ON THE OVERALL MEANING OF THE *THEAETETUS*

Based on the argument I have presented so far, I shall now endeavour to provide an overall interpretation of the *Theaetetus*,¹⁸ and especially of its third and final section. The first preliminary step I should take in my attempt to successfully identify what Plato was trying to argue when writing the *Theaetetus* consists in abandoning the idea – upheld in a considerable number of studies¹⁹ – that Plato conceived this text as a kind of epistemological treatise which may be compared to contemporary research on the same subject.²⁰ Once we abandon this idea, we

¹⁸ For a more extensive discussion of this topic see ch. 5.

¹⁹ A fair share of these studies – among which Burnyeat's sharp and sophisticated commentary stands out – are mentioned in the present article. What is most significant, however, is the fact that in the English-language world interest in the *Theaetetus* was largely sparked precisely by the need to address theoretical issues, in the wake of a 1939 article by G. Ryle (Ryle 1939), followed by two more recent works (Ryle 1965 and 1990) written in the early 1950s but only posthumously published. The influence of the *Theaetetus* on philosophers interested in epistemological problems is also clearly illustrated by McDowell (1973).

²⁰ See Burnyeat (1990), p. 2. To deny that the *Theaetetus* may be read in these terms is not to say of course that the dialogue is of no contemporary interest. What it means, rather, is that the philosophical investigations presented in the dialogue – from the point of view of both the way they are framed and the results they attain – cannot be approached in the same terms as modern epistemological enquiries. To do so certainly constitutes a strained reading of a text that can only be approached with refined historical-hermeneutical

will probably also feel more inclined to call into question the far from self-evident preconception – still at work in most contemporary interpretations – according to which Plato promoted a strong and rigorous epistemology, and with it the attempt to probe this problematic dialogue with aporetic conclusions, in search of traces of a positive conception of knowledge capable of somehow confirming the above starting prejudice. One interpretation that clearly tows this line, for instance, is the one according to which the dialogue fails to solve the problems it raises simply because no traces are to be found within it of the doctrine of the ideas. According to this view, the distinction between the *objects* of *doxa* (sensibles) and the *objects* of *epistêmê* (the ideas) is adumbrated in the dialogue, but the failure in which the dialogue ends is due precisely to the fact that *doxa* is present in all three the attempts made to define *epistêmê*.²¹ However, even a far more cautious and subtle reading such as the one adopted by Burnyeat – who quite rightly rejects the above solution, since the infinite regress engendered especially by the third definition also concerns the ideas²² – ultimately rests on the same assumption. While Burnyeat refuses to simply adopt a negative reading of the *Theaetetus* by setting the nature of *epistêmê* in relation to *objects* other than those of *doxa*, he nonetheless continues to interpret the dialogue merely as an attempt – if only a very problematic attempt – to define the conditions in which it is realistically possible to speak of infallible knowledge – albeit with a whole range of restrictions.

I believe the same approach may also be seen to inform two opposite attempts that have recently been made to identify a positive outcome in the final section of the dialogue (which is undoubtedly the privileged avenue for endeavours of this kind). Some scholars maintain that Plato is covertly taking a stance in favour of non-propositional knowledge: since there is no *logos* of simple elements and since *logos* is always tainted with *doxa* to some degree (as Socrates shows by refuting the third and most promising definition of this term), the only way to spare *epistêmê* from any possible influence from lower forms of knowledge is to envisage it as the direct knowledge of an object, i.e. as a kind of *mental grasp* (or *knowledge by acquaintance*, to use Bertrand Russell's well-known expression).²³

awareness, and which is further conditioned by a range of 'dislocating factors' which must necessarily be taken into account (e.g. the dialogue form, the anonymity of the author, the frequent aporetic passages, the use of irony, etc.).

²¹ A striking spokesman for this thesis is F.M. Cornford (1935). Other references may be found in Burnyeat (1988) p. 238, n. 133.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 238.

²³ Supporters of this thesis – which in many ways may be regarded as the traditional one – include A.E. Taylor and P. Friedländer (see Burnyeat 1990, p. 239, n. 134). Fine mentions Robinson (1950), Runciman (1962), Crombie (1963) and Leshner (1969). To this list

A completely opposite solution is adopted by those scholars who accept the propositional nature of knowledge and attempt to show on the one hand that despite the refutation of Δ simple elements too are accessible to *logos*, and on the other that the refutation of the different definitions of *logos* does not rule out – or, rather, implicitly indicates – a way of envisaging *logos* compatible with the need to clearly distinguish between *logos* and *episteme*. A clever application of this thesis has been suggested by G. Fine,²⁴ according to whom elements turn out to be knowable through *logos* and the latter may be spared from any association with *doxa* if one adopts a relational model of knowledge, whereby the reality of an individual thing can only be known through articulated discourses revealing the mutual relations it entertains with other things (and vice versa).

A shortcoming common to all these interpretations is the fact that they infer something which the *Theaetetus* does not openly state, or indeed passes over in silence.²⁵ For there is nothing in the dialogue which suggests that Plato intended to solve the problems he left open by introducing the ideas, or that these problems only concern sensible knowledge. Secondly, there is no clear evidence to suggest that Plato wrote the dialogue in order to find “a better answer to the question ‘What is knowledge?’”;²⁶ rather, the explicitly aporetic outcome seems like a

we may also add N.P. White (1976), according to whom Plato would only seem to have overcome the inadequacies of language with the introduction of the concept of ‘enlightenment’ in the *Seventh Letter* (see., pp. 199–215). It must be noted, however, that the intuitionist hypothesis – which undoubtedly constitutes an important aspect of a very traditional way of interpreting Plato – has lost much ground among more recent critics, in favour of dialectical-propositional models. A case to itself is instead represented by more recent and sophisticated ‘non-propositionalist’ approaches such as those of Wieland (1982), Sayre (1995), and Gonzalez (1998). In this case, the acceptance of non-propositional knowledge does not entail the existence of intellectual intuition understood as genuine intellectual vision, and is therefore at least partly compatible with the idea of the centrality of *logos* accepted by less strict ‘propositionalists’ (what is ruled out is only the possibility that *logos* in Plato may lead to rigorous and conclusive definitions). On this topic, see also Gerson (2009), pp. 27–61.

²⁴ Fine (1979).

²⁵ One way to avoid this shortcoming, while preserving the premise that the *Theaetetus* provides a positive definition of knowledge, is illustrated by Polansky’s approach. The scholar argues that none of the points Plato has to make on the matter under consideration in general are lacking in the *Theaetetus* (in particular, there is no ‘fourth’ meaning of *logos* which would allow one to solve the difficulties left open in the third section of the dialogue: see Polansky 1992, pp. 211, 243). Polansky thus concludes that the outcome of the *Theaetetus* is not aporetic, since “the entire dialogue [...] acts out what it is about” (*ibid.*, p. 245). This strategy is similar to the one employed by Gonzalez with reference to some early aporetic dialogues (as noted by Gonzalez 1998, pp. 300–301, n. 88).

²⁶ Burnyeat (1990), p. 241. According to this interpretation, the *Theaetetus* ultimately

hint in the opposite direction. Equally poor is the textual evidence in favour of the idea of non-propositional knowledge (which I would argue is also difficult to come by in other Platonic texts that are usually held to be decisive in this respect)²⁷ or of an inter-connective dialectic of the sort suggested by Fine.²⁸

Some of the attempted solutions I have mentioned also take into consideration an interpretative strategy that is often applied to the aporetic dialogues in general: the idea that it is possible to grasp the aim and meaning of these dialogues simply by hypothesising that they covertly refer to the solutions Plato presents in his euporetic dialogues. But if this were the case, it would be difficult to understand why in addition to conclusive dialogues Plato also chose to write works that provide no solution to the problems they raise. And precisely because Plato did not write *only* aporetic dialogues, there is little use in the traditional thesis according to which, for purely educational reasons, the philosopher consciously chose to leave it up to his readers to find answers in between the lines to the questions the text leaves open.

In my view, then, we must change our perspective and assume that Platonic epistemology, while not sceptical in nature, has a far weaker character than what is commonly believed. This means that according to Plato *epistêmê* is always caught up in a non-exhaustive dialectic between *euporia* and *aporia*: between the conviction that human knowledge can take some decisive steps beyond the level of sensory knowledge and opinion, and the simultaneous acknowledgement that this moving beyond can never take the form of the definitive attainment of an indisputable epistemic dimension free from all conditioning. This complex intertwining of *euporia* and *aporia* is evidenced first of all, within the dialectical dialogues, by the copresence of aporetic works such as the *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides* on the one hand, and of euporetic texts such as the *Sophist* and *Philebus* on the other. Yet it is also at work within each individual dialogue, as the *Theaetetus* proves (in a particularly revealing manner, I would argue).

Most of the dialogue (the whole analysis of the first definition provided by *Theaetetus*, along with the refutation of the 'Antisthenic' doctrine of dreams) is chiefly aimed at showing that a qualitative difference exists between the knowledge of sensible reality and intellectual knowledge, which is based on the activity of a rational subject (the soul) and the use of *logos*, and geared towards the grasping of universals. Other sections of the dialogue – and especially the investigation

resembles one of Wittgenstein's notebooks, which are problematic on account of the difficult subject they discuss, but may be viewed a kind of work in progress in the search for a solution.

²⁷ See ch. 8.

²⁸ This has aptly been noted by Bostock (1988) pp. 245–250 and 265.

of *logos*, which according to the third definition of knowledge is added on to right opinion in order to attain *epistêmê* – have the aim of balancing the first thesis: they argue that it is possible to conceive *doxa* in such a way that *logos* will never fully transcend it; and that all human knowledge, therefore, including that situated at the highest epistemological level, is *doxastic* to some degree. And if this is the case, the intellectual knowledge actually available to man is not a kind of *logos* which has finally freed itself from the fetters of *doxa*, but rather a tireless and unbroken reasoning activity capable of articulating in an increasingly clear way the *logos* which true opinion already contains to some extent. According to Plato, making progress in knowledge does not mean attaining a higher epistemological level which totally differs from *doxa*, but finding better and better arguments to uphold the ‘true’ opinions to which we give assent – that is to say: increasingly well-founded rational reasons for which these opinions are held to be true.²⁹ For if we conceive of *doxa* in a broader sense, as the actualisation of an assent to propositions which the soul holds to be true, then no *logos* or *epistêmê* may be regarded as free from *doxastic* conditioning. Conversely, *logos* must already be somehow at work within true opinion, since it is only through *logos* (i.e. through reasoning of some sort, albeit it only embryonic reasoning) that the soul acquires the possibility of distinguishing – by granting its assent – between opinions which strike it as true and opinions which strike it as false.³⁰

²⁹ E. Heitsch has also clearly noted the fact that *doxa* (esp. ἀληθῆς δόξα) and *epistêmê* are not mutually exclusive, but in some way imply one another: “Nicht jede Meinung und auch nicht jede wahre Meinung is Wissen; doch Wissen kann etwas anderes als wahre Meinung nicht sein. Sofern wahre Meinung sich erklären und begründen kann, spricht in ihr Wissen und Erkenntnis” (1988, p. 201). Indeed, a sober evaluation of the human possibility of knowing shows that the only path we can take in order to approach knowledge is to state those things of which we are convinced (see *Theaet.* 171d5): “Und immerhin, im günstigen Fall wird so eine von Meinung zu Meinung fortschreitende Verdeutlichung desse gewonnen, was jeweils zur Debatte steht” (Heitsch 1988, p. 203). All this corresponds to a more general framework for Platonic thought – one I largely accept – in which the dialogic quality of the method carries essential weight from a philosophical perspective, as an indicator of the unsurpassable limits which *doxastic* and subjective conditioning imposes upon the possibility of enquiry.

³⁰ I agree here with J. Hardy (Hardy 2001, p. 290): “Die Erklärung [this being the term Hardy uses to translate *logos* in the final section of the *Theaetetus*] kann die Meinung nicht eigentlich ‘ergänzen’, sie muß bereits vollzogen sein, damit es sich überhaupt um eine *zutreffende* Meinung handelt”. The author maintains that it is possible to grasp what knowledge is within specific contexts if we are dealing with *erklärungskräftige* opinions, whereas any attempt to define knowledge in general – and hence to state what it adds to right opinion – necessarily creates a vicious circle. In this respect, knowledge is not so much a theoretical object which can be defined, as a kind of disposition to engender founded opinions, capable of accounting for its own truthfulness. See too Miller (1992).

If on the one hand, then, we must keep to what the dialogue actually states (without forcing it to state what it does not); and if, on the other hand, we wish to rule out the hypothesis that the *Theaetetus* only illustrates a failure (an implausible hypothesis, in my view, although some scholars have chosen to apply it to all the aporetic dialogues, including the *Parmenides*),³¹ we must necessarily posit that the dialogue is underscored by the twofold movement of *euporia* and *aporia* I have mentioned above.

A most appropriate way of elucidating and justifying this hypothesis is to refer precisely to the model of relational (and circular) knowledge suggested by Fine, which in my view indeed corresponds to Plato's conception of *epistêmê* (including in the *Theaetetus*). Like Fine, I believe that according to Plato the destiny of knowledge hangs on the possibility for the circle to have not merely a vicious character, but also a virtuous one.³² Yet unlike what Fine suggests, this admission of circularity, albeit it a virtuous circularity, means that knowledge never loses its *doxastic* character completely. While a vicious circle can only lead to *aporias*, and non-circular knowledge has an exclusively euporetic character, in the virtuous circle we found both *euporia* and *aporia*, both possibilities and limits.³³

With this, we have discovered exactly what Plato wishes to say, that is the positive conclusion he seeks to reach with the *Theaetetus*. An initial euporetic stage, in which Plato successfully discards the hypothesis that knowledge must be limited to sensible reality, is followed by an equal and contrary aporetic stage, showing that despite this intellectual knowledge cannot take the form of definitive and indisputable knowledge – that is, that it can never completely free itself from *doxa*. In order to solve the *aporia* once and for all, what would be required is direct intuition, not mediated by *logos*, for – as we have seen above – there is one instance of *doxa* inseparable from *logos*. We would reach exactly the

Ἀληθῆς δόξα and *logos* enable one another to play a constitutive role in the acquisition of knowledge: “As ‘enabled by’ and ‘answering to’ and ‘explicating’ right judgements, *logos* depends upon it for the very content that it articulates. On the other hand, it is only by the explication of this content that we are enabled to distinguish judgement (*doxa*) that is insightful from judgement that is misguided opinion (cf. δόξαστής, 208e5)” (p. 103).

³¹ See e.g. White (1976) p. 183.

³² Fine (2003), p. 244. Cf. Trabattoni (2001). See too ch. 3.

³³ Evidence for this may be found precisely in the discussion of the third definition of *logos*. For this can hardly be read as an implicit indication of the fact that the relational method is capable of moving beyond *doxa* and of attaining *epistêmê* (Fine 2003, pp. 248 ff.), since it explicitly states the opposite. Even if we were to understand *logos* as that which provides the countermarks to identify simple elements by setting them in relation to their framework, i.e. as representing the relational model of knowledge identified by Fine, even in this case – according to Socrates – we would never be able to free ourselves from *doxa*.

same outcome even if we possessed complete relational knowledge – clearly, not a realistic prospect.³⁴ The positive conclusion which may be drawn from the *Theaetetus*, then, consists in the fact that on the one hand it establishes the possibility of and need for non-empirical knowledge, and on the other it accurately and rigorously sets the limits of this knowledge. And ultimately, these coincide with the limits inherent to the fallen and refracted condition man finds himself living in.³⁵

³⁴ Let us consider, for instance, the “impracticable” (ἀμήχανον) method enunciated by Parmenides in the dialogue that takes his name (136b–c). Similar allusions to a hardly exhaustive interrelational dialectic, however, may also be found in *Phil.* 19b, *Soph.* 254c–d and *Pol.* 285a–b. Another way of expressing the limitation of the human knowledge here is alluded to consists in stressing that men can know the parts of the whole but not the whole itself (so, for instance, Stern 2008, pp. 59–63).

³⁵ What Fine’s interesting interpretation lacks, in my view, is an awareness of the fact that in the final section of the *Theaetetus* Plato also – and especially – wishes to indicate a limit, using as a marker precisely the concept of *doxa* (Fine ends her article by stating that the interconnective method leads from “true belief” to “pieces of knowledge” 2003, p. 251). This largely depends from the anti-metaphysical approach – an unwarranted approach, at least from a historiographical perspective – which Fine and many other scholars adopt in order to interpret Plato (this also includes Hardy, whose reading of the *Theaetetus* in many ways resembles Fine’s). As is well-known, Fine rejects the notion of the separation of the ideas and the so-called “Two World Theory” (Fine 1984). If, by contrast, this aspect is not overlooked, it is easy to see that according to Plato the logocentric relationality of human knowledge points to an out-of-this-world dimension with its own intuitionist epistemology. Lacking this element, Fine’s interpretative framework proves closer to Gadamer’s hermeneutics than it does to Plato’s conception as recorded in his dialogues. On Fine’s interpretation of the *Theaetetus*, and more in general of Plato’s epistemology, see also ch. 3, p. 40–42, and 4, pp. 50–51.

CHAPTER 3
THEAETETUS 200D–201C
*Truth without Certainty*¹

1. *THEAETETUS 200D–201C*: IS SOCRATES' ARGUMENT INCONSISTENT?

In a paper written many years ago² Myles Burnyeat addressed the final argument of the second part of the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates aims to prove that knowledge is not identical with true belief (200d–201c). In order to reach such a conclusion, Socrates introduces the notion of the jury as a counter-example. Let us imagine that in a court of law the jury are attempting to establish the truth behind the unfolding of a criminal event: “the jury, not having been present themselves as eyewitnesses to the crime, have to judge the case on the basis of testimony, on the word of others” (p. 173). Socrates argues, then, that the jury will only acquire true belief (if any), but they cannot gain knowledge. The text offers two different – and in Burnyeat’s view, mutually inconsistent – explanations in support of such a claim. The jury cannot obtain knowledge for the reasons that:

the rules of ancient Greek proceedings set time limits for the speakers (E1),

or else that:

only eyewitnesses can possess true knowledge (E2).

On the basis of E1, it may be assumed that if both the witnesses and the jury had had enough time to speak and the jury enough time to listen, thorough knowledge of the criminal actions could eventually be gained. On the basis of E2, however, we are compelled to state that the jury could not gain knowledge anyway, regardless of the allotted time, for “only an eyewitness can know (p. 181)”. To overcome this paradox, Burnyeat argues that knowledge in this passage has to be taken to signify “understanding” rather than “knowledge”.

A very common assumption in the Platonic corpus is that attaining understanding is a very difficult enterprise. Indeed, “understanding is not transmissible in the same sense as knowledge is” (p. 186), as it “in many fields ... requires that one master for oneself a proof or explanation” (pp. 186–187), and “proof or expla-

¹ I am very grateful to David Sedley, who read a draft version of this paper and sent me his comments and suggestions.

² Burnyeat (1980).

nation is something one must work at for oneself” (p. 187). Hence, the paradox can be removed by distinguishing between knowledge and understanding, and maintaining that Socrates here is referring to the latter. Indeed, according to Burnyeat, one cannot reasonably claim that it is eyewitnesses only who may achieve knowledge, insofar as there is no “defensible concept of knowledge such that only an eyewitness can know that Alcibiades mutilated the Hermae” (p. 188). Moreover, in his monograph on the *Theaetetus*, Burnyeat adds that E2 “has the immediate and paradoxical effect of making historical knowledge impossible (none of us witnessed Socrates’ death in 399 or that of Theaetetus in 369)”³

Burnyeat’s interpretation is attractive in several respects. For instance, he is undoubtedly right in pointing out that Plato’s basic concept of understanding is connected with a personal and intransmissible action of knowing, which prevents the process of education from being mechanical and unproblematic.⁴ However, its general interpretation is not fully persuasive, as he does not adequately account for the metaphysical features of both Platonic epistemology and philosophy.

In this paper I intend to show that one can submit a satisfactory interpretation of the passage only in the light of such a metaphysical background. More specifically, I aim to prove that the following propositions can be asserted:

There is no noticeable difference in Plato’s thought between something called ‘knowledge’ and something called ‘understanding’ (T1).

There is no contradiction in the *Theaetetus* passage between E1 and E2 (T2).

The assumption that “only an eyewitness can know” is neither un-Platonic nor unreasonable (T3).

The thesis arguing that historical knowledge is impossible is not paradoxical at all, providing true understanding of the idea of knowledge involved here can be gained (T4).

³ Burnyeat (1990), p. 125.

⁴ “There is no such speech-act as letting someone understand” (Burnyeat 1980, p. 191, n. 28) Though Burnyeat is speaking here from a logical point of view (he quotes Hintikka’s paradoxes), some important Platonic passages can also be brought to bear on the issue; see for example *Prot.* 314b, *Symp.* 175d, 518b–d, *Leg.* 890b–c.

2. EPISTÊMĒ VS. DOXA?

In support of my thesis I shall draft a set of general assumptions on Plato's philosophy, which lie at the core both of the present book and of my overall interpretation of Plato.⁵

Humans, in their mortal condition, do not have access to a complete and definitive knowledge of the forms, either in the way of mental insight (knowledge by acquaintance), or in the way of a definition (knowledge by description) (P1).⁶

Plato never renounced the recollection theory (P2).

Both the *Phaedo* and the recollection theory claim that humans can achieve perfect knowledge of forms only when the soul is aloof and detached from the body (P3).

Such knowledge is a kind of firm mental grasp over or insight into forms, and it is not a matter of discursive or propositional thought (P4).

In their lifetime, humans can only come within reach of knowledge of forms via the second-best way, provided by λόγοι (according to the “second sailing” metaphor in the *Phaedo*) (P5).

The *Theaetetus*' failure to find a reliable answer to the question of “what is knowledge?” lies in the fact that human intellectual knowledge cannot but be fallible, while the knowledge at issue in the dialogue is perfect and infallible (P6).

Let us begin with P5 and P6. In the passage examined by Burnyeat, Socrates introduces orators as examples of the kind of people who can engender opinion (ποιούντες δοξάζειν) but not teach (οὐ διδάσκοντες). Indeed, to Socrates, persuading is equivalent to generating a δόξα (opinion/judgement) in the person who is being persuaded: in other words, τὸ πείσαι (to persuade) is nothing more than ποιῆσαι δοξάσασθαι, “to produce conviction” (201a7–b5). The difference between *doxa* and *epistēmē* thus mirrors an analogous difference between persuading and teaching. Plato also stresses this difference in a well-known passage in the

⁵ For the overall interpretation see in particular Trablatoni (1994, 1998, 2005 and 2009).

⁶ On this subject see Trablatoni (2002).

Phaedrus, where Socrates ascribes to rhapsodes the production of discourses that are uttered only to generate persuasion, while being completely lacking in instructive power (277e8–9). The example of the rhapsodes, rather surprising to be found in a dialogue that is at loggerheads with orators and sophists, is actually quite interesting. As can be inferred from Xenophon,⁷ in classical Athens rhapsodes were classified as the lowest and most popular class of would-be intellectuals, who exerted an important educational influence over their fellow citizens. Since a good many of Plato's dialogues are committed to demonstrating how such would-be wise men are not wise at all, and should therefore not be allowed to teach, it was very important for him to stress that they are able to convey only a very poor kind of cognition (*doxa*), which actually has nothing in common with knowledge in the true sense of the word (*epistêmê*).

The framework we have outlined is often confirmed in Plato's work, and is usually taken for granted by modern scholars. Just consider, for instance, the last pages of the *Republic* v and the Simile of the Line in the same work. The representation of Plato's epistemology so far seems no less clear than unproblematic. On the one hand we have all sorts of would-be intellectuals, such as sophists, orators, rhetoricians, poets, rhapsodes, who are devoid of wisdom, and therefore can merely bring about opinion and persuasion (*doxa*) in their audience. On the other hand we have the philosophers, who possess wisdom (*epistêmê*), and consequently are the only ones entitled to teach their fellow citizens.

As a matter of fact, in Plato's dialogues many passages undermine the reliability of this rather schematic picture. The notion that in Plato's opinion philosophers possess wisdom is by no means as clear as it could seem at first sight: first of all it should not be forgotten that in at least three passages he writes that only the gods deserve the title of *sophoi*, whereas men can at most be called philo-sophoi.⁸ Moreover, there are in Plato a good deal of passages in which the supposed clear-cut distinction between *epistêmê* and *doxa* is in various ways undermined.⁹ Finally, it is not clear at all why the definition of *epistêmê* suggested in the *Meno* 97e298a8 (*epistêmê* is right opinion justified by a surplus of reasoning – λογισμός – which connects it to the cause), which in fact seems very suitable for overcoming the shortcomings of the *doxa*, is ultimately refuted in the *Theaetetus*.

⁷ Xenophon, *Mem.* IV,2,10; *Symp.* 3.6. In both passages the rhapsode is described as "silly" (ἄλιθιος).

⁸ *Lys.* 218a, *Symp.* 204a, *Phaedr.* 278d.

⁹ See for instance the passages of the *Meno* and the *Symposium* quoted and summarized many times in this book (pp. 23–24, 68–69, 82–83, 280–282).

I believe the passage of the *Theaetetus* examined here, among others, can shed some light on the problem at hand. Although Socrates is speaking here of ὀρθῆ δόξα, his statement, insofar as his aim is precisely to show that such a *doxa* cannot fulfil the requirements of *epistêmê*, also applies to the notion of *doxa* as a whole. I am referring in particular to the connection between “opining” (δόξαι) and “persuading” (πείσαι). Socrates’ purpose is clearly to show that when we are dealing with a communication aiming to persuade, the successful outcome of such a communication can at best generate a *doxa* in the listener. Conversely, the basis for a *doxa* to come into being cannot be teaching, but persuasion, because otherwise it would not be *doxa* but *epistêmê*. Then, regardless of whether the *doxa* is ἀληθής or not, whenever we have *doxa* our epistemological status is unavoidably concerned with persuasion. The problem, now, is to establish to what extent Plato believes that human cognitive faculties can actually leave (ὀρθαί) δόξαι and persuasion behind, in favour of knowledge, *epistêmê* and teaching.

3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT “ONLY EYEWITNESSES EVER ACHIEVE KNOWLEDGE”

In order to solve this problem it is very useful to read the passage of the *Theaetetus* already quoted in the first chapter, where Socrates argues that at the very moment the soul talks to itself, saying “yes” or “no”, thereby expressing its truth-judgment about an assertion, a *doxa* arises (189e6–190a6). This brings forth a very different notion of *doxa* from the traditional Platonic one, namely the kind of cognition that relates to sensible things. Whenever our cognition relies on an assent of the soul, which says ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a proposition, we are invariably dealing with a *doxa*.¹⁰ And it is plain that such a *doxa* cannot be contained within the field of sense-perception, as shown also in several passages where Plato uses words like *doxa* or δοξάζειν to signify intellectual understanding.¹¹

But δοξάζειν, as we have seen, has a strict connection with πείσαι (persuading). As a matter of fact, the soul decides to give its assent or denial to a proposition precisely when it is persuaded of its truth or falsehood. As Socrates says in the passage of the *Theaetetus* we have just quoted (190a2–4), when the soul “has

¹⁰ See ch. 1.

¹¹ *Resp.* 413a7–8. ¹² See, for instance, *Phaed.* 66b1–2. However expressions of this kind occur very often in the dialogues. Gail Fine quotes *Resp.* 506c, where Socrates “claims to have beliefs, but not knowledge, about the form of good” (Fine 2003, p. 66). For a general reading of this passage, together with others akin to it, see Trabattoni (1994), pp. 140–148.

reached a definition” and affirms the same thing without still being unsure, this is what we call its belief (*doxa*).¹² Thus, intellective cognition appears to be strictly connected not only with *doxa*, but with persuasion too.

It would be hardly acceptable, however, if such a way of knowing, so deeply involved in *doxa* and persuasion, were the only kind of intellectual cognition Plato allowed. In fact, we find many references in the dialogues to a pure intellectual insight capable of grasping the forms directly, without the assistance of *logos*, *doxa* or persuasion. Much of my general reading of Platonic philosophy (see points P1–P6 listed above) indicates that Plato did not think such knowledge could actually be available to humans in their mortal condition (as shown by both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, as well as by the recollection theory). If I am right, then, we must conclude that human knowledge, no matter how great its degree of truthfulness, is still a species of the genus *doxa*.

In the light of the general hypothesis I have just outlined, Socrates’ claim that only an eyewitness can reach true knowledge of the facts ceases to appear problematic. Let us suppose that Socrates is hinting here at the direct insight into forms available to the disembodied soul. In that case, he is establishing the difference between the two kinds of intellectual cognition mentioned above, the weaker of which cannot but make use of *logoi*, and therefore is in some way affected by persuasion and *doxa*. Indeed, the situation sketched out in 189a6–190a6 is as follows: the soul’s act of saying “yes” or “no” is clearly connected with a proposition (or *logos*). For instance, I can ask (someone else or myself, as the text¹³ openly says) whether the proper definition of justice is “to settle debts” or not. Now, I will come to a decision at the very moment I have been persuaded, no matter how long it may take (this possibility is also mentioned in the passage).¹⁴ The fact that persuasion has occurred is expressed in a truth-judgment, along the lines of “it is true (not true) that *s* (justice) is *p*”. Though such a judgment may possibly come very close to the truth, it still involves a kind of cognition, which is weaker than the one I would attain if I could see ‘justice’ through the ‘eyes’ of my mind in the very same way I can see a tree outside my window. In that case my knowledge would not begin with *logos* but with a direct insight into the object itself. I would not need time to think, nor would my final knowledge take the form of a truth-judgment: I would have direct and fully satisfactory knowledge of true reality, which would not be affected by persuasion nor be contained within the lower field of *doxa*.

¹² See also the passage of the *Philebus* quoted in ch. 1, n. 5: when a *doxa* is verbally expressed, then it becomes *logos*.

¹³ *Theaet.* 189e8–190a2. See also *Soph.* 263e3–9.

¹⁴ *Theaet.* 190a2–3.

As a matter of fact, Plato's model of science or *epistêmê*, as is clearly shown by a number of passages of the dialogues, is, precisely, a perfect and complete grasp of the forms effected by the eyes of the mind.¹⁵ There is nothing awkward, then, in thinking that every kind of cognition differing from it – and especially cognition relying on the soul's assent to a proposition, and thus on persuasion – is, strictly speaking, not knowledge at all. Nor can the historical counter-examples Burnyeat brings up be deemed problematic. On the one hand, these examples are misleading, for the reason that Plato claims philosophical inquiry to be a far more complicated matter than answering questions such as “Who did mutilate the Hermae?” It involves a deep understanding of things and their reasons. Moreover, the sort of goals it strives for are very badly exemplified by particular and historical events, since Plato was actually concerned with the true reality of very general things such as justice, beauty, good, and so forth. Thus, if it can hardly be admissible that we fail to know (to have knowledge) that Socrates died in 399 BC, it is far more understandable that we do not know *what justice is precisely*. For we are not eyewitnesses to something like ‘justice’, and therefore we can only base our cognition of it on the *logoi* that describe it and on the persuasion they can exert on us.

On the other hand, Burnyeat's examples are quite suitable for showing the real nature of the problem at hand (though they are not counter-examples at all). Once Platonic *epistêmê* (science) has been elevated to the higher level outlined above, the case of historical knowledge can be regarded as a very convenient instance of cognition which cannot fulfil the condition required by scientific inquiry. It is a truism to say that I cannot be as sure of the trueness of actions involving a past event as I am about an event I see unfolding before me, nor – to give another example – as I know the answer to an unquestionable arithmetic problem like $2 + 2$. Besides, the statement that the epistemological status of so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* is far weaker than that of *Naturwissenschaften* is very common throughout Western thought, from Aristotle through Dilthey to later thinkers. The problem we must then confront is to establish how much knowledge and truth can be gained by philosophy, which, like history, is committed to topics that lack evidence and a scientific-like method of inquiry. Bearing in mind that Plato was almost exclusively concerned with questions such as “what are justice, beauty, good precisely?” and the like, it is hardly surprising that he granted men only true belief, and not definitive and perfect knowledge (at least for as long as they live on earth).

¹⁵ See, for example, *Phaed.* 66d–e. However the most clues are to be found in *Resp.* 476b4–11, 486c4–d2, 500b8–c7, 501b1–7, 519c10, 524c6–8, 536e1.

The interpretation I have put forward also helps to solve another problem confronting us in the *Theaetetus* passage. If only eyewitnesses ever achieve knowledge, “the distinction between teaching and persuasion” appears to be undermined “because those who would be taught would only be learning about events by hearing”.¹⁶ Now, my point is exactly that no teaching can exist in Plato’s epistemology which, at the same time, is not an act of persuading, for the very reason that whoever strives to teach someone something is seeking to persuade him or her of it. As Socrates says to Gorgias in the dialogue bearing his name – when seeking to refute the sophist’s claim that there is a science of persuasion in itself – even mathematicians (i.e. the supposed holders of a highly impersonal science) aim at persuasion (453e). Strictly speaking, then, there is no teaching at all, insofar as understanding (to quote Burnyeat again) needs “proof or explanation”, and this is “something one must work at for oneself”. This very much amounts to saying that teaching is nothing but self-teaching, and thus dependent on persuasion. So, when Plato draws a distinction between teaching and persuasion, as in the *Phaedrus* passage above (277e8–9) or in *Tim.* 51e, the real difference lies between the fleeting persuasion achieved by orators, poets, and sophists, and the far more lasting persuasion aroused by the philosopher.¹⁷

4. THE MEANINGS OF *DOXA* AND THE “TWO WORLDS THEORY”

The role inevitably played by persuasion with respect to philosophical knowledge is evidently connected to the fact that according to Plato – as we have seen in the previous chapters – there is a form of *doxa* which cannot be reduced

¹⁶ Thus Polanski (1992), p. 206. Polanski rightly points out that “the necessity of eye-witnessing for knowledge makes two evident contributions”, namely, to explain “how the person engaged in teaching or persuading come to know initially” and give the guarantee that “the jurors who are being persuaded in court do not gain knowledge but only opinion” (see also Bostock 1988, p. 200). No less than Burnyeat, however, he limits these conditions to “the case of events such as Socrates refers to”, overlooking the rather evident link with the recollection theory: this theory seeks to show that “only an eyewitness can know” also – and possibly at most – as far as the knowledge of forms is concerned. No further proposals of explanation can be drawn from Sedley’s (2004) and Chappell’s (2004) recent monographs on *Theaetetus*. The former considers the jury passage as ironic (150–151), whereas the latter plainly admits that “a neat solution of this problem is not forthcoming” (p. 196).

¹⁷ I have stressed the importance of persuasion in Plato’s epistemology especially in Trabattoni (1994) and (2005, pp. 67–101).

to sensible knowledge but which is instead closely connected to *logos*. In the first part of the *Theaetetus* Socrates clearly conceives *doxa* as the “knowledge of sensible reality”, since only a *doxa* understood in these terms will always be true. Therefore, only in this case can Socrates identify Thaetetus’ thesis that knowledge is sense-perception with Protagoras’ position, according to which the person who opines (*doxazei*) always opines the truth (167a). In both the second and the third parts of the dialogue, however, *doxa* is often used to denote the soul’s internal assent to a proposition (as we have seen in the crucial passage 189a6–190a6), which instead may be either true or false; hence, its use goes far beyond sense-perception. As M. Narcy writes:

Doxazein is a synonym of *krinein* that in its turn is a clarification of *dianoieisthai*; from an epistemological point of view, *doxa* means *dianoia*, if and only if the difference between their respective objects is suppressed.¹⁸

If this is so, however, serious objections to the so-called Two Worlds Theory (TW) could be raised: if *doxa* can mean something like ‘thought’, the difference between ‘opinion’ and ‘thought’ is removed; and consequently, the difference between the objects of ‘opinion’ (sensible things) and the objects of ‘thought’ (forms) is removed as well. It follows that we have no more than one world, or – in Narcy’s own words – that “Plato himself gets rid of the Platonism of the *Republic* in the very moment in which he frees Theaetetus from Protagoras and Heraclitus” (p. 21). It is exactly such an ontological and epistemological turn that allowed some scholars and philosophers “to welcome Plato into the centre of current philosophical discussion”:¹⁹ once the awkward presence of a metaphysical theory as cumbersome as the TW had been removed, Plato’s philosophy is left with the very same linguistic and logical problems engaging modern thinkers such as Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein.²⁰

Yet Narcy is unwilling to draw this conclusion. Indeed, in his view, Socrates did not think of *doxazein* as a “synonym of *krinein* or *dianoieisthai*”, but regarded Theaetetus’ use of such a term as evidence that he failed to realize the new notion of truth Socrates himself was attempting to show (p. 23). This hypothesis is hardly feasible, though, as it rests on the assumption that the link between *doxa* and *dianoia* is admitted by Theaetetus only (cf. p. 13). In fact, this is scarcely compatible with 189e6–190a6, where Socrates himself draws a clear connection between

¹⁸ Narcy (2002), pp. 20–21.

¹⁹ Burnyeat (1990), p. 19.

²⁰ Narcy (2002), p. 19.

the inner act of thinking and *doxazein*. Rather, it is highly questionable whether Socrates could admit such a connection only by getting rid of the Platonism of the *Republic*.²¹

Let us examine the problem more closely. If *doxa* can mean judgment and only eyewitnesses can have knowledge (see *Theaet.* 201b–c), it follows that “the metaphysical thesis that the sensible world is the province of opinion, not of knowledge” is ruled out, “for it implies that the eyewitness can know mundane empirical facts.”²² Such a conclusion troubles the traditional picture of Plato’s epistemology, according to which “one can have knowledge, but not beliefs, about forms, and beliefs, but not knowledge, about sensibles.” This is a quotation from Gail Fine,²³ who then immediately adds that we “call this the Two Worlds Theory (TW)”. As a result, Fine claims that the difference between belief and knowledge at an epistemological level implies a corresponding difference between sensibles and forms at an ontological one, and vice versa. True enough, Fine’s aim is to exploit such an implication to endorse an interpretation of Plato’s epistemology and metaphysics that is diametrically opposed to the traditional one: since Plato, as several passages in the dialogues show, “clearly allows knowledge and belief about the same objects ... and he may also there allow knowledge of sensibles,”²⁴ it is TW that must be rejected.

Although Fine has argued this reading in a number of interesting papers, and although her ‘coherentist’ interpretation of Plato’s epistemology is also compelling,²⁵ her main thesis is far from convincing. Indeed, it is grounded on the unproven assumption that Plato’s ontology and epistemology are wholly symmetrical. Actually, our textual evidence goes further than to confirm a supposed inconsistency between passages in which belief and knowledge are clearly distinguished, and passages in which the two notions look as if they are interchangeable in several ways. We must also consider that, deep down, there is only one kind of knowledge (*epistêmê*) for Plato: namely, the direct mental insight into the forms, achieved by the eyes of the soul, and only available to it when it is completely detached from the body. If the hallmark of knowledge (*epistêmê*) that sets it apart from belief or opinion (*doxa*) lies in the fact that the former is infallible while the latter is not (see *Resp.* 477e6), then knowledge has to be the above-mentioned mental insight, since no other ways of knowing possess such a quality. It is clear, then, that all kinds of weaker cognition, however close they may come to the

²¹ Thus *ibid.*, p. 21. This explains why Nancy prefers to reject it.

²² Burnyeat (1990) p. 127.

²³ Fine (2003), p. 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ See the papers collected in Fine (2003), plus Fine (2004).

truth, are species of the genus *doxa*. Indeed, as argued above, Plato uses the term *doxa* to encompass all sorts of understanding which, in various ways, are not as infallible and exhaustive as the mental insight into forms. This is the very reason why *logos* and *dialegesthai* in the *Theaetetus* are connected with *doxa*, and why Plato generally has no qualms about employing terms such as *doxa* or *doxazein* to mean intellectual cognition: for such cognition cannot be anything but *doxa*, inasmuch as it fails to reach the highest level of mental insight.

It consequently follows that a careful interpretation of both Plato's ontology and epistemology not only does not rule $\tau\omega$ out but rather, on the contrary, requires it, since only in a world of purely immaterial souls and forms, completely different from the one we all live in, may the very high standards required by the Platonic true notion of knowledge be fulfilled. Surely, it is obvious that $\tau\omega$ cannot be understood along the same lines as does Fine. According to her, believing in $\tau\omega$ amounts to thinking that at present humans have two different kinds of objects (sensibles and forms) at their disposal, and that they can turn their eyes (of body and mind, respectively) to both at will. Yet in that case there would not be two worlds, but rather two hemispheres of the same world, and $\tau\omega$ would be scaled down to $\omega\omega$ (One World Theory). Unless the valid existence is established of a 'World Two,' inaccessible to men in their mortal life, there is no reason to speak of $\tau\omega$.

On the basis of such metaphysical considerations, the "third way" between 'foundationalist' (à la Vlastos) and 'coherentist' (à la Fine), recently heralded by Nicholas Smith, must be also rejected.²⁶ Like Fine, Smith is both worried about "the absurdity of the 'two worlds' epistemology" (p. 152) and struck by several passages in which such an epistemology seems to have been dropped (such as the cases mentioned above, where *doxa* about forms and *epistêmê* about sensibles are allowed). However, he cannot do away with the fact that the two worlds epistemology relies on some fairly conclusive evidence in Plato's

²⁶ Smith (2000). Smith's main point is that the difference between *epistêmê* and *doxa*, expounded by Plato in *Resp.* 477c6–d5, is not to be understood "in terms of our cognition-of/about-object relationship", but rather in terms of the difference between "cognitive states ... produced in us by different cognitive powers" (pp. 150–151). According to Smith, it is precisely by assuming that *doxa* and *epistêmê* are "powers" that "cognitive cross-over" (as having *doxai* about forms) and "mixed content cognitions" (as having knowledge about sensibles and forms at the same time) can be accounted for. It is enough to think that, although the power of *epistêmê* "is naturally related (only) to forms", the products of its activity are not (or not always) forms. Yet, the natural relation to forms affords the power of *epistêmê* a clear advantage over the power of *doxa*, also when the former deals with the natural objects of the latter (i.e. sensibles). Smith, then, can claim that Plato was a "causal reliabilist".

dialogues, such as the well-known *Republic* passage in which Socrates says that *epistêmê* is infallible while *doxa* is not (476e). So, on the one hand, he is compelled to undertake the hopeless task of working out, for those passages where the activities and objects of *doxa* and *epistêmê* are clearly mixed, an account that is consistent with the clear-cut difference supposedly existing between the two; while, on the other hand, explaining how it can be that, though *epistêmê* is infallible, “our cognition of sensibles ... – even those produced by *epistêmê*” (p. 161) is not. The latter enterprise appears, if truth be told, just as hopeless as the former.

However all these problems could be overcome by taking into account the fact that Plato was neither an epistemologist nor a twentieth-century philosopher like Frege, Russell or Wittgenstein. If we allow the dialogues to speak for themselves, we will simply find that humans in their lifetime are not endowed with infallible knowledge, and that, accordingly, all tools of knowledge actually available to them, no matter what we call them – *αἴσθησις*, *δόξα*, *ὀρθὴ δόξα*, *λόγος*, *διάνοια*, *διαλέγεσθαι* etc. – are more or less fallible. As a matter of fact, such an account is neither arbitrary nor unPlatonic: not only it is backed by several passages in the dialogues (from the *Phaedo* all the way to the *Phaedrus*), but it also provides the theoretical framework that led Plato to introduce the recollection theory.²⁷

Ultimately, on the one hand we have knowledge in the proper sense of the term but only permissible to disembodied souls; and on the other various examples of *doxa*, where the main distinction lies between the knowledge of sensible things (*doxa_s*) and the act through which the soul gains a persuasion about proposition concerning forms (*doxa_f*): in fact, both belong to the genus of defective knowledge, as perfect knowledge requires direct insight (condition 1) into the forms (condition 2). The shortcomings of *doxa_s* and *doxa_f* are exactly the opposite: *doxa_s* can fulfil condition 1, as it is a direct and non-propositional kind of knowledge, but not condition 2, as it concerns the sensible world; *doxa_f*, in turn, can fulfil condition 2, as its objects are ideal entities like justice, beauty or good in themselves, but not condition 1, as it must settle for propositional judgments ruled by persuasion.

The framework sketched above is well displayed in the *δεύτερος πλοῦς* (“second sailing”) passage of the *Phaedo* (99c–100a). Here Socrates first points out that intellectual cognition, needed to explain the very causes of coming-to-be and

²⁷ The main problem is that several scholars are seeking to show that Plato’s philosophy is still relevant for contemporary culture, while the strong, metaphysical claims Plato advances in dialogues like the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus* (but also in *Republic* x) are clearly not thought to be so.

passing away, can do no better than make use of *logoi*: as the two metaphors of δεύτερος πλοῦς²⁸ and of the mirror of water used to watch solar eclipses both show, “the flight towards the *logoi*” (99e5) is clearly an indirect way of knowing. So, it cannot fulfil condition 1, and therefore, according to *Theaetetus*, 189a6–190a6, it is quite admissible to classify it as a kind of *doxa*. However, Socrates notices that such a method of inquiry is by no means worse than the one developing through sense-perception (99e6–100a2): for the former, unlike the latter, can fulfil condition 2, inasmuch as it is aimed at knowing the forms.

In both cases, the relative weakness of δεύτερος πλοῦς is emphasized by its implicit subjectivism.²⁹ This is clear with regard to *doxa_b*, where a judgment of the soul is involved. Yet, somehow, subjectivism is also at work in sense-perception (*doxa_a*). When the soul is attempting to grasp the beauty in beautiful sensible things, its efforts are thwarted by the materiality of both the object and the subject. The Heraclitean nature of the material world ensures that cognition achieved through sense-perception can grasp nothing but objects which are unstable and never identical to themselves, while the hallmark of such a thing as “the beautiful itself” is that it is only beautiful, and beautiful for ever in the same way.³⁰ In short: humans have two distinct ways at their disposal of attaining knowledge of forms, namely of the one and only object Plato deemed worth knowing by human understanding. They can try either to grasp the forms by looking at their instances in the sensible world, or to find propositions (or definitions) that describe them as correctly as possible. However they are unable to see the forms directly through the eyes of the soul. It follows, then, that both ways of knowing are affected by subjectivism: the former because the fluidity of matter constantly changes the data of the problem; the latter because propositions need judgment, and judgments cannot avoid being subjective.

²⁸ For a very careful and, for me, definitive inquiry into the true meaning of the metaphor (as describing a more difficult and toilsome method, not a safer one), see Shipton (1979) and Martinelli Tempesta (2003). For the political reading of this metaphor (which, as is widely known, is also featured in the *Philebus* (19c) and *Statesman* (300c), always as illustrating a “second best”), see Ausland (2002).

²⁹ From an etymological point of view *doxa* is linked with the verb δέκ(χ)ομαι and with the root δέκ/δέχ. It means, thus, something that is inasmuch as it is received, accepted, or allowed (by someone). On this subject, cf. Trabattoni (1998bis).

³⁰ See the standard expression ὡσαύτως ἀεὶ ... κατὰ ταῦτά (*Phaed.* 78d2–3), *et similia*: *Crat.* 439e, *Soph.* 248a, 252a, *Polit.* 269d, *Phil.* 59c, *Resp.* 479a, 484b, *Tim.* 29a.

5. THE “JURY” PASSAGE AS A CONTRACTED EXPOSITION OF THE MEANING ON THE DIALOGUE

But let us now come back to the *Theaetetus* passage. I hope it has at least been proved that there is a way to expound propositions T₃ and T₄ (see above) so that they appear consistent with the overall framework of Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology. I will now turn to propositions T₁ and T₂. The main feature of Plato’s epistemology consists in positing a clear-cut gap between the direct and perfect insight into the forms (*epistēmē*), available only to the gods or to disembodied human souls, and all the other defective – albeit in different ways – sorts of cognition (each and every one of them being an instance of *doxa*). Therefore, given that the latter is the only kind of intellectual cognition humans are involved in, they are not truly interested in a qualitative difference between ‘knowledge’ and an ‘understanding’ of sorts: in fact, they are committed only to quantitative differences between varying degrees of *doxa*, ranging from the lowest level of *doxa* as simple sense-perception to the ἀληθείς δόξαι thoroughly supported by *logoi*.

As for the inconsistency between E₁ and E₂ that Burnyeat singled out, the interpretation we have suggested helps to solve the problem in this case too. Just as the water-clock in the Greek courts of law prevents witnesses from successfully persuading juries, it could be inferred that such an aim could be reached if they had enough time. This conclusion, however, seems to be inconsistent with the “eyewitnesses explanation” (i.e. E₂). Still, if we leave the Greek court of law behind, and examine our passage from the metaphysical point of view we have adopted so far, things look very different. Plato sets the direct knowledge of forms in a conjectural timeless condition, in that their main feature is precisely that of being devoid of any involvement in becoming whatsoever. Thus, the lack of time in the law court may be regarded as a metaphor for the condition of human understanding, which on the one hand cannot attain the perfect knowledge of forms provided only by direct mental insight into them, and on the other could eventually reach this goal only thanks to unlimited time at its disposal: of course, this is also unfeasible.³¹ Roughly speaking, a timeless insight into forms can be construed as expounding the very same ‘regulating’ (to put it in Kantian terms) and unreal condition as enjoying unlimited time to pursue the inquiry. As Brice Wachterhauser has rightly pointed out in his book on the Gadamerian Plato,³² since men cannot attain “a changeless contemplation of

³¹ See ch. 2, p. 30, n. 34, where I collected some passages of the dialogues in which we find clear allusions to the infinity of the research.

³² Wachterhauser (1999).

the Good” (p. 92), “contemplation may remain the goal of the philosopher’s search but dialectic is the path she must tread” (p. 93). Furthermore, the path of dialectic can never come to an end because we are “finite knowers [who] know only some propositions and have only a very limited and fallible view of the logical relationships that obtain between them” (p. 107). Such a gap could be bridged only by overcoming the limits imposed by the human condition, i.e. supposing that dialectical inquiry could last for ever.

6. ACTUALIZING PLATO

Finally, let us say a few words on the theoretical meaning of the Two Worlds Theory. Several scholars have attempted to show that Plato’s philosophy is still relevant for contemporary culture, and the strong metaphysical claims made in dialogues like the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus* (but also in *Republic* x) are thought to be hardly supporting this objective. As Nicholas Smith has rightly pointed out, “few contemporary philosophers find Plato’s theory of forms at all plausible as a metaphysical doctrine”. This is the main reason why most scholars have focused their attention on Plato’s epistemology, since, says Smith, it seems easier to find an account of it “far less dismissive of Plato’s contribution”: indeed, an account that “includes elements of all the major contemporary accounts, and even better, provides a way to see how and why these elements are there and how they fit together”³³.

Such an attitude, though, is not devoid of dangers, since the aim of incorporating Plato’s texts into contemporary philosophical debate could lead the scholar to read the dialogues from a prejudiced point of view.³⁴ It could be worth bearing in mind that the main concern of anyone studying a philosophical text is to understand what its author meant in writing it: only once this is achieved can one truly establish whether contemporary philosophers might actually implement the text at hand. As far as Plato is concerned, though, I am convinced that his work fully satisfies our expectations, and provides plenty of food for contemporary thought. But if we follow the method described above, both historical and philological, we will discover that the modernity of Plato’s thought bears a much stronger connection with the hermeneutical than with the analytical tradition. If we pay due consideration to the overall metaphysical framework permeating his thought, we will realize that Plato was not concerned with logical arguments, nor was he trying to shape an infallible method of inquiry as a feasible background for

³³ Smith (2000), p. 163.

³⁴ On this topics see the very good remarks of E. Schiappa (2003), esp. pp. 64–69.

the development of sciences. If they want to find some reason of interest in such a metaphysics, contemporary philosophers need not take the Two World Theory at face value, nor believe in the soul's immortality or in any such thing. They need only take into account the image of the human condition these theories imply. Human life is a search for wisdom and happiness, which can never come to an end, since human beings are not as perfect as the gods. Therefore, on the one hand it is unrealistic to seek a method of inquiry capable of stopping us from doing wrong, while, on the other, the task of philosophy is to provide guidance not for the sciences but for life. As for their life, human beings must follow the lead of reason which is anything but scientific and infallible, and try to gain as much wisdom as is available to them despite the many hindrances in their path. If philosophy can provide us with truth but not with certainty, as Plato holds, this would be a problem for philosophy only if it were thought of as a transcendental guarantee of scientific enterprise. If, instead, the main task of philosophy consists in shedding some light on the relationship between human beings and the world, then Plato's approach to philosophy is, even today, far from devoid of interest.

CHAPTER 4
FOUNDATIONALISM OR COHERENTISM?
On the Third Definition of Epistēmē in the Theaetetus

1. FOUNDATIONALISM

In an essay on Donald Davidson, Mario De Caro writes:

According to a classic definition, knowledge is a “true belief that is justified”¹

It is easy to see that this definition is a rather faithful rendition of the last definition of ἐπιστήμη analysed (and refuted) in the *Theaetetus* (201c9–d1):

knowledge is true opinion accompanied by *logos* (τήν ... μετὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀληθῆ δόξαν ἐπιστήμη εἶναι).

This definition closely resembles what Plato had written in the *Meno*, where Socrates states that opinions (*doxai*) only grow firm through reasoning about the cause (which is how I believe the *iunctura αιτίας λογισμῶ* may be translated).² One might observe that Plato is not really saying the same thing in the two passages, given that the *Theaetetus* makes no mention of any cause. In my view, however, this is not a crucial difference. What matters, I believe, is that in both cases the supplement required to change *doxa* into ἐπιστήμη has to do with something like reason or reasoning. Indeed, λογισμός is a term Plato often uses precisely to describe reasoning, not least given the fact that the word first of all means “reckoning” and that mathematical reckoning for Plato is a pre-eminent model for the correct way of reasoning.³ Furthermore, the verb λογίζομαι also means “to take into account”, in the sense of “to take into consideration”, so that the *Meno*’s definition might also be understood to mean that ἐπιστήμη goes beyond ἀληθῆς δόξα (“right opinion”) since it takes into consideration the cause of the state of affair it is correctly describing as well. And clearly, only the *logos* can illustrate causal connections: if in order to illustrate or just mention two events *a* and *b* the *logos* may not be required, it is certainly required in order to show that there is a connection of causal

¹ “Secondo una definizione classica la conoscenza è una ‘credenza vera giustificata’”, De Caro (1998), p. 132.

² *Men.* 98a3–4.

³ On the meaning of λογισμός for Plato, see Fine (2004), pp. 57–58; (cf. ch. 2, p. 20).

dependence between them. I therefore agree with Gail Fine that in the final section of the *Theaetetus* Plato “returns to the *Meno*’s claim that knowledge is true belief with an account.”⁴

Having established the essential identity between the two definitions, let us return to discuss the possible similarities between Plato’s position and modern approaches to the question. According to Nicholas White, one may trace these approaches back to none other than Descartes, and in particular his *Second Meditation*.⁵ Actually, this reference does not seem correct to me, since all that we can infer from this text is that according to Descartes sense-perception only becomes reliable if it is supported by the exercising of reason.⁶ Still, it is a very interesting mistake for the sake of the argument I here wish to present. Descartes’ observations are certainly related in a way to what Socrates states as a follow up to the first definition of knowledge Theaetetus provides in the dialogue, where he shows that what is really responsible for sensory knowledge is the soul, not the senses themselves.⁷ As we already know, although Plato often uses the term *doxa* to refer to sensory knowledge, the same word has a very different meaning in the second section of the dialogue.⁸ In other words, it cannot be argued that the third definition of *doxa*, namely “true opinion accompanied by *logos*”, is equivalent to “true perception accompanied by *logos*”. If this is how were to understand the *doxa* discussed here (as well as that mentioned in the second definition), the whole meaning of the dialogue would be distorted. For only the first section is intended to show that *epistēmē* cannot coincide with αἴσθησις (“sense-perception”), whereas the other two analyse the notion of *epistēmē* once this misunderstanding has been cleared. And if the term *doxa* also appears in the second and third sections of the *Theaetetus*, this means it is used in a different way; nor is there any need to engage in complicated deductive reasoning to establish this point, since Plato himself makes it quite clear (as we shall later see).

So let us leave Descartes. What is more interesting to note is the reference to a book by R. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*,⁹ which is quoted by all three authors I have mentioned so far, namely De Caro, Fine and White. In this book, the classic definition of knowledge is expressed more or less in the following terms (for the sake of simplicity, I have chosen the formulation provided by Fine):

⁴ Fine (1979), p. 227.

⁵ White (1976), p. 176.

⁶ See e.g. §32: “Atque ita id quod putabam me videre oculis, sola iudicandi facultate, quae in mente mea est, comprehendo.”

⁷ 184b–185e.

⁸ See ch. 2, §2; ch. 3, §4.

⁹ Chisholm (1966).

s knows that p if and only if p is true, s believes that p, and s has adequate justification or grounds for believing that p.¹⁰

The problem this definition leaves often, of course, is that of establishing what a justification consists in, and in particular of determining a criterion through which it is possible to claim that a justification is adequate. But let us continue to follow De Caro:

The traditional approach to the problem of “justifying” our beliefs about the empirical world is *foundationalism*. [...]. According to the foundationalistic program the justification of our beliefs about the external world must be accomplished by reducing them to the beliefs about our mental states, which, as immune from doubt, are *immediately* justified; thus beliefs about the external world can be justified only *indirectly*.¹¹

The notion of empirical world, or external world, here used by De Caro ought not mislead us into believing that we have not yet moved beyond the first phase of the *Theaetetus*, as already noted with regard to Descartes’ *Second Meditation*. For every belief has to do with something that may be described as the external world. So what is at play here is knowledge in general, not just empirical knowledge. The foundationalist programme, according to De Caro’s reconstruction, is therefore to ensure knowledge by drawing upon what are often called Incorrigible Conceptual States (ICS) in analytic jargon. Still, one must be careful here – and I am again partly following De Caro’s reasoning – not to slip into a vicious circle or infinite regress. Let us suppose that the belief to be justified is of the sort: “s believes that p is true”. In this case, the belief (*doxa*) is expressed through a proposition (*logos*). Now, if the justification of this belief were in turn a *logos*, this *logos* ought to be justified by another *logos*, and in such a way we would necessarily meet one of the two above-mentioned stumbling blocks: either a circular reasoning (whereby at the end of our analysis *logos a* will be found to justify *logos b*) or infinite regress.

Precisely for this reason, many scholars of Plato, in search of a foundationalist solution to the dilemma of the *Theaetetus* (where no reliable definition of the

¹⁰ Fine (1979), p. 225.

¹¹ “L’approccio tradizionale alla questione della “giustificazione” delle nostre credenze sul mondo empirico è quello del *fondazionalismo*. [...]. Secondo il programma fondazionalistico la giustificazione delle credenze sul mondo esterno va compiuta riducendole alle credenze sui nostri stati mentali che, in quanto immuni dal dubbio, sono *immediatamente* giustificate; in tal modo le credenze sul mondo esterno possono essere giustificate solo *mediatamente*”, De Caro (1998), p. 133.

concept of *epistêmê* is to be found), have ascribed to Plato the idea that purely intuitive, non-propositional ICS are available to man. The apparent failure of the *Theaetetus* would thus be due to the fact that the dialogue never frees itself from the yoke of the *logos*. Indeed, Plato's intention would be to show – in a dialectic, negative way – that if we take as our starting point the existence of an *epistêmê* with the particular features he attributes to it, starting from infallibility, then we are left with no other way out but to postulate ICS for the nature in question. As Fine puts it, we must first of all relinquish the idea that “all knowledge requires a *logos* or account (κλ),”¹² and then – despite the exceptions that may be found – accept the principle according to which all possible “knowledge by description” is ultimately justified on the level of “knowledge by acquaintance”.¹³

A very subtle version of this thesis was put forth by White, who noted that when attempting to explain what knowledge is, Plato

has in view, in the first instance, a notion of knowledge which figures, not in statements of the form “s knows that p”, but in statements of the form “s knows x”, where “x” does not stand in for a sentence or proposition.¹⁴

According to White, this does not change the fact that Plato is very much inclined to believe that the ability to provide a justification (a *logos*) is a necessary condition for knowledge. Still – and this is the overall meaning of the *Theaetetus* in his view – Plato finds no way of upholding this thesis in full. Plato only reaches a kind of solution at the end of a long intellectual journey, and to be more precise in the *Seventh Letter*:

one last and valiant effort to salvage the situation by appealing to some means of explaining knowledge which will be free of the troubles arising from language and naming.¹⁵

Against White, Fine has first of all noted that:

Knowledge of things, for Plato, is description-dependent, not description-independent. Second, Plato tends to speak interchangeably of knowing x and of knowing what x is (see e.g. *Meno* 79c8–9, *Theaet.* 147B2–5) [...] Hence, even

¹² Fine (1979), p. 226.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 227 and n. 5. Cf. Trabattoni (2006).

¹⁴ White (1976), p. 177.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

if Plato's primary concern is knowledge of objects, this concern can readily be phrased in the modern idiom as knowledge that a particular proposition is true.¹⁶

In my view, there is something right and something wrong in both these opposite perspectives. White is right in noting that Plato was perfectly aware of the structural incapacity of language to produce *epistêmê*. But he is wrong insofar as he maintains that Plato repeatedly attempted to circumvent these limits, as if he had been sure to succeed in this task sooner or later, when in fact these limits are imposed on man by the metaphysical structure of reality. Conversely, Fine is right to argue that Plato consciously frames knowledge within linguistic structures, but wrong in failing to realise that he makes this choice precisely because he is aware of the natural incapacity to know which White talks about, and which is once again determined by the metaphysical structure of reality I have just mentioned. Plato, in other words, is not a thinker who is interested in the analysis of language, as a contemporary philosopher might be; he is rather a metaphysical thinker who focuses on the analysis of language because he is aware of the fact that there is no direct – which is to say non-linguistic – way of approaching the objects he wishes to know.

Having said that, an approach such as the one adopted by Fine is far more promising. Intuitionist foundationalism, in my view, not only has no real textual basis, but provides a picture of Plato's philosophy which is wrong in all respects: I mean a picture that not only overlooks its metaphysical dimension, but also attributes an epistemological dogmatism to it that is utterly foreign to its nature. If foundationalism rests on ICs, and if these are understood as the "knowledge by acquaintance" of universal objects such as the ideas, then what follows is that Plato is not a foundationalist. Nor do we find ICs invoked as a justification for beliefs. In other words, nowhere in Plato's dialogues do we come across a situation where a given *doxa* is translated into *epistêmê* by resorting to non-propositional intuition. The only factor responsible for a present or missing justification will always be an available or desirable *logos*. As for intuition, we don't even find any desire for it (by contrast to how White would have it).

2. COHERENTISM

Let us turn to discuss coherentism, then, which is to say the theory of justification rival to foundationalism. I shall here quote a classic formulation provided by

¹⁶ Fine (1979), pp. 225–226.

Quine. Faced with what strikes us as the crucial philosophical question “How much of our knowledge is simply due to language and how much of it is a genuine reflection of reality?”, we find ourselves in a tight spot:

for to answer the question we must talk about the world as well as about language, and to talk about the world we must already impose upon the world some conceptual scheme peculiar to our own special language.¹⁷

In other words, what is triggered is precisely that circularity or infinite regress I have mentioned above. Still, Quine rejects the possible pessimistic outcomes of this circularity:

Yet we must not leap to the fatalistic conclusion that we are stuck with the conceptual scheme that we grew up in. We can change it bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher’s task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea.¹⁸

Enunciated here, in a succinct form, is the idea of “virtuous circularity” that – within the “linguistic turn” so characteristic of much 20th-century philosophy – constitutes a thematic node leading to significant convergences between the continental hermeneutic tradition (Nietzsche, Heidegger,¹⁹ Gadamer) and part of the analytical tradition (Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, etc.).²⁰ Besides, this idea of virtuous circularity is closely related to non-foundationalist, and hence coherentist, theories of justification. It is precisely from this coherentist perspective that Gail Fine interprets the *Theaetetus*, to the point of arguing that “[Plato’s] account of knowledge leads to problems which also confront the modern one.”²¹ As Th. Chappell has observed, Fine suggests we read the *Theaetetus* in the light of an “interrelation model of knowledge, and this model is not foundationalist in structure but holist or coherentist (or, if you prefer, circular).”²² What does this “interrelation model of knowledge” consist in? The essential failure of the third

¹⁷ Quine (1953), p. 78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

¹⁹ See §32 of *Being and Time*.

²⁰ These two currents of thought were combined in a very unique way in Richard Rorty’s postmodern philosophy.

²¹ Fine (1979), p. 226.

²² Chappell (2004), p. 233.

section of the *Theaetetus*, due to the fact that it fails to identify a foundational principle of knowledge external to the *logos* and its uses, does not imply the overall failure of the endeavour undertaken by Plato in the dialogue. For the criticism levelled against the third definition of *epistêmê* merely concerns the fact that

knowledge involves true beliefs with several accounts, explaining the interrelations among the elements of a discipline.²³

On these basis, Fine can argue therefore that:

In defending the interrelation model of knowledge, Plato [...] endorses the view that there is no basic terminus towards which our justifications or explanations converge, no basis consisting of objects themselves knowable without appeal to further justification or explanation. Justification or explanation instead proceeds circularly, within a particular discipline or field.²⁴

The acknowledgement of this circularity however, just as in Quine's case, does not lead to the negative outcome one might naively expect:

I agree that this sort of circularity results from Plato's interrelation model. But it is not an unfortunate problem. Rather, it is one of Plato's significant contributions to epistemology to have seen that we do not possess bits of knowledge in isolated, fragmented segments.²⁵

I agree on this last point. It is true that nothing is explicitly stated in *Theaetetus* with regard to this. But the point is proven dialectically, so to speak – especially in the last definition, which shows how the *logos* cannot be transcended (and is therefore circular). Moreover, as Fine herself has noted, the “interrelation model of knowledge” is by far the most widely applied method in dialogues such as the *Sophist*, *Philebus* and *Statesman*.²⁶ On my part, I would like to be even more drastic: I would argue that in general the reciprocal interaction between concepts, understood as the dialectical analysis of meanings, is the royal path for any kind of research undertaken in Plato's texts. I have few qualms in arguing, therefore, that the coherentist model is more faithful to the letter and spirit

²³ Fine (1979), p. 228.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

of Plato's text than the foundationalist model I have examined above. And in particular, to make things even clearer: as I have already stated, I see no instances in Plato's writing in which a given *doxa* is justified by introducing a kind of non-predicative knowledge, whereas justifications usually unfold within the framework of linguistic-propositional relations. This being the case, I believe that Plato may be regarded as a distant forerunner both of the linguistic turn and of the hermeneutic one. I nonetheless wish to distance myself from Fine when it comes to two specific points, which for the time being I shall only enunciate as follows:

1. Fine takes Plato's coherentism as a starting point, but in such a way completely overlooks the metaphysical structures constituting its necessary precondition (besides, this is a shortcoming also common to foundationalists, as already mentioned above);
2. the circularity of knowledge comes across as a second best in Plato, and this is indeed an "unfortunate problem".

3. THE RIDDLE OF THE THIRD DEFINITION OF *EPISTÊMĒ* IN THE *THEAETETUS* AND ITS ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

Before discussing these objections, let me briefly examine the third section of the *Theaetetus*.

The third definition of knowledge, in its complete form, reads as follows (201c9–d2):

it is true judgement with an account, that is knowledge; true judgement without an account falls outside of knowledge. And ... the things of which there is no account are not knowable [...], while those which have an account are knowable (τὴν μὲν μετὰ λόγου δόξαν ἐπιστήμην εἶναι, τὴν δὲ ἄλογον ἐκτός ἐπιστήμης· καὶ ὧν μὴ ἔστι λόγος, οὐκ ἐπιστητὰ εἶναι ... ἃ δ' ἔχει, ἐπιστητὰ).

Note the perfect reciprocal correspondence expressed by the latter half of the sentence: the identity between what is scientifically knowable and that for which *logos* is given is not partial but complete: in other words, it corresponds to a perfect coincidence. What is enunciated here, therefore, is precisely the aforementioned principle, which – with Fine – we shall continue to call κλ. Given the aporetic outcome of the dialogue, the problem we face is to establish the reason why no means are found in the *Theaetetus* to distinguish knowledge (*epistēmē*) thus defined from opinion, which is to say: why the *logos* fails to add anything truly significant to it. If we accept the idea of this aporetic outcome, and maintain

that Plato had complete faith in KL, the only possible conclusion is that in his view there cannot be any form of human knowledge qualitatively superior to *doxa*. But before verifying this possibility (which, as we know, represents precisely the thesis I wish to uphold), let us briefly sum up the rest of the argument.

In order to verify the definition of *epistêmê* just proposed, Socrates examines three different meanings of the term *logos*:

- 1) “to express one’s thought through speech, with verbs and names” (206d12);
- 2) the enumeration of the elements of which a thing is made up (206e7–207a1);
- 3) “to be able to tell some feature by which the object in question differs from all others” (208c7–8);

Socrates, however, demolishes all three definitions:

- 1) the first, because expressing one’s thought through speech is something anyone can do, even if he or she does not possess knowledge (206d–e);
- 2) the second, because if reason is understood as the enumeration of elements, it does not go beyond *doxa* (208b);
- 3) the third, because the ability to distinguish one thing from another is already a characteristic of right opinion, for else the latter would not be right at all (208c–209e).

Different paths have been taken in the attempt to solve this quandary. Before taking them into consideration, however, it is worth noting that all these attempts rest on one assumption, which is always the same regardless of how different the suggested solutions may be. This assumption is that Plato’s philosophy is such that there must be a way of clearly distinguishing *epistêmê* from *doxa*. In other words, it is held a priori that the aporetic outcome of the dialogue cannot be taken at face value, but that some way must be found – within it or outside it – to avoid this outcome. There would be no need of stressing just how irrational this way of reasoning is, were it not that it has been followed by most readers and commentators of the *Theaetetus*. Actually, what the dialogue clearly shows is precisely the persistence of *doxa* in all possible attempts to grasp the nature of *epistêmê*; and I truly see no reason why this fact should not be taken into account as it is. But let us now turn to the various kinds of suggested solutions.

The first is one we have already partly considered: it consists in denying KL. This clearly means that according to Plato *epistêmê* has an essentially intuitive character. I have already noted how this kind of justification plays no role in Plato’s work. I shall add that, more generally, there are no good reasons to count Plato among the intuitionists. I shall not dwell on this point, since it will be

discussed at length in ch. 8.²⁷ For the time being, let me simply draw attention to the fact that the linguistic nature of thought is clearly emphasised in a passage from the *Theaetetus* itself (189e–190a), which finds a perfect parallel in another passage from the *Sophist* (263e–264a).²⁸

A second possibility is to argue that the aporetic outcome of the dialogues is due to the fact that it nowhere mentions the correct meaning of *logos*, which alone might have solved the problem of *epistêmê* in a conveniently Platonic way. The chief spokesman for this thesis, who has spawned its many variations, is F.M. Cornford. When commenting the third definition of knowledge, the British scholar writes:

Various possible sense of ‘account’ are distinguished and considered, and the suggestion is finally rejected. It will appear, however, that no one of these senses is the sense which ‘account’ bears in the *Meno* and the *Timaeus*.²⁹

In other words, according to Cornford there is one meaning of ‘account’ (i.e. *logos*) which interpreters of Plato should favour (the one which may supposedly be inferred from the *Meno* and *Timaeus*), so as to then reject the hypothesis that the *logos* at work in the *Theaetetus* corresponds to Plato’s own idea of this concept. From a methodological perspective, this is undoubtedly a wrong procedure. Even provided that the two meanings in question are genuinely different, interpreters of Plato interested in learning about “the Platonic doctrine of the *logos*” should take both into consideration, or at most attempt to develop a synthesis – certainly not accept one a priori and reject the other. But let us hear Cornford again. Which meaning of ‘account’ is missing from the *Theaetetus*? In his view, the *logos* discussed here fails to grasp the meaning of this notion for Plato because

the only things to be known are concrete individual things, and that knowledge accordingly must consist in giving some account of such things.³⁰

According to Cornford, in other words, in the *Theaetetus* the *logos* misses the mark of establishing itself as *epistêmê* because it is not used to refer – as would be correct in Platonic terms – to the knowledge of the ideas, but rather to the knowledge of individual, sensible objects, of which it should represent the justifi-

²⁷ See also Trabattoni (2006).

²⁸ Cf. *Pol.* 277e–278e. See too Casertano (2007), p. 217.

²⁹ Cornford (1935), p. 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

cation. And since according to Plato there is no scientific explanation for these realities, it is easy to understand why the dialogue reaches an aporetic outcome.

While founded on pieces of textual evidence from various sections of the dialogue, this hypothesis completely misses the latter's meaning. According to Cornford, the overall aim of the *Theaetetus* would be to enquire whether *epistêmê* may be separated from the world of concrete, natural objects. Cornford thus extends the meaning of the first section of the dialogue – whose aim is precisely to show that *epistêmê* cannot coincide with perception – to the second and third sections as well. The second and third sections of the *Theaetetus*, however, take the conclusion reached by the first (i.e. that *epistêmê* is not perception) for granted and move on to attempt to establish what *epistêmê* is, based on other hypothesis. Particularly revealing, in this respect, is the treatment of the notion of error within the discussion pertaining to the second definition. If errors were always due to flawed communication between the senses and the intellect (as in the example of the wax block), the problem could be easily solved. But the fact is that errors also occur within purely intellectual knowledge (as in the example of the aviary); and what this shows is precisely that already in this section – and even more so in the third – what is at issue is knowledge in general, not just sensory knowledge.

As I have already partly mentioned above, the misunderstanding Cornford made is chiefly due to an incorrect evaluation of the concept of *doxa* and its meanings in the *Theaetetus*. Since in the first section *doxa* means perception, and since *doxa* also plays a crucial role in the second and third sections, a sort of “dragging effect” occurs, whereby it is assumed that sensory knowledge is what obstructs Plato's research in all three sections of the dialogue. However, as we already know, starting from the second section of the *Theaetetus* Plato clearly presents the notion of *doxa* as the judgement/assent given by the soul concerning certain propositions, whether on the basis of inner or spoken arguments. And in the crucial passage in which such judgement is called “the *doxa* of the soul” (δόξαν ταύτην τίθεμεν αὐτῆς, 190a3–4) there is no textual or philosophical reason to argue that this *doxa* only refers to sensory knowledge. On the contrary, it seems necessary to suppose that Plato chiefly has intellectual knowledge in mind here. As the Academic Arcesilaus was to note much later in his polemic against the Stoics, assent/judgement is given concerning propositions, not perceptions.³¹

³¹ See Sext. Emp. *adv. math.* 7.154.

4. DEVELOPMENTS OF THE COHERENTIST MODEL

If what I have argued so far is correct, we can't hope to solve the riddle of the *Theaetetus* adopting Cornford's approach, nor the different versions of it advanced by his contemporary followers.³² The only way we can understand the *Theaetetus*, instead, seems to consist in endorsing a coherentist approach *à la* Fine. But may it be argued, therefore, that coherentism has the last decisive word with regard to Platonic epistemology (as Fine maintains)? As already partly anticipated, I believe that this would be going too far, since Fine herself actually provides a picture of Plato which is at least partially diminished.

First of all, we have good reasons to believe that Plato does not regard the coherence of a description as a sufficient criterion for truth. When in the *Cratylus* the character by the same name attempts to show that ordinary language must be correct, since otherwise it would lack the kind of agreement between its parts that we actually find, Socrates retorts that this is not a good argument: for it is possible to envisage a group of mutually coherent elements that is itself incorrect because it is based on an initial error which all subsequent operations conform to (436c–e). Socrates here gives the example of geometry, and the case of non-euclidean geometries immediately springs to mind: by variously modifying the fifth postulate, what we get are perfectly coherent systems that nonetheless describe space in very different ways. How are we to determine which is the correct description and which are the incorrect? Even without assigning too much weight to the passage just mentioned, I believe it is quite legitimate to argue that according to Plato the coherence of a system may well mean nothing at all as far as its truth is concerned.

Secondly, the lack of a strong foundationalism in Plato does not imply that he rejected weaker forms of foundationalism. As we have seen above, ICS may indicate the “knowledge by acquaintance” of given noetic objects, as in the case of when we say that there is a form of intellectual intuition capable of grasping the nature of the equal. As already noted, there are no such mental states for Plato (as may be confirmed by turning to the *Phaedo* and *Seventh Letter*). What do exist, however, are ICS of a different sort, the nature of which I would like to clarify by quoting Terry Penner:

with *thought* of the equal (or equals or equality) – whatever those objects of thought may turn out to be – we will never confuse the equal with the unequal.³³

³² See for instance Sedley's and Ferrari's interpretations, discussed respectively in ch. 5 and 6.

³³ Penner (1987), p. 75.

A Platonic ICs, therefore, does not denote the mental state whereby a person infallibly knows what the equal is (note the clause “whatever those object of thought may turn out to be” in the sentence quoted); rather it denotes a mental state whereby a person infallibly knows that what he or she identifies as (the) equal cannot be (the) unequal. In the first chapter I have endeavoured to show that the need to affirm this principle is one of the factors that help make sense of the difficult section of the *Theaetetus* discussing *allogoxia* (189e4–190a6). Now I only briefly wish to recall the particular kind of foundationalism it presupposes.³⁴ This foundationalism is not enough in itself to provide scientific justifications concerning our beliefs about the external world. Certain knowledge of the fact that the circle is not the square, for instance, is of no help in the attempt to rationally justify a given belief of the sort: “the circle is x”. Still, to the extent that it expresses something which can never be mistaken for what is not a circle, the word “circle” – however conventional it may be (in the light of what the *Seventh Letter* states)³⁵ – indicates a universal invariance, showing that in his experience of language-based knowledge-acquisition man operates on the level of universality right from the start.

These conclusions find further confirmation in the particular ways in which Socratic questioning is conducted in the dialogues. As is well known, the Socratic question usually takes the form: “What is x?” Sometimes, however, this question follows – or is replaced by – another and even more radical one, which we may describe as the question of existence: “Do you believe that x (where “x” stands for a certain universal notion) is something or nothing at all?”³⁶ Normally, Plato is believed to employ the Socratic question to launch an enquiry the aim of which is to come up with a definition of what is under discussion. But if this were so, we would be forced to conclude that Plato’s philosophical quest is a complete failure, since in no dialogue do we find any idea being defined in any conclusive way.³⁷ Now, if we combine all these different elements (the question of existence, the Socratic question, and the failure to reach any definition), we shall soon realise that Plato’s aim is not so much to come up with conclusive definitions, as to show that right from the start – as I have noted above – his investigation operates on the level of universality; and that this is even the case – or indeed especially the case – if no definitions can be found. However limited and devoid of content this knowledge may appear, once we realise this it is already too late for

³⁴ I summarize here the thesis I have expounded more in detail in ch. 1 of this book.

³⁵ 343b.

³⁶ On “questions of existence” in Plato, ch. 13, pp. 247–252.

³⁷ This even applies to the definition of justice provided in the *Republic*, since Socrates himself describes this definition as a sort of trace or image (443c).

us to be sceptical. Scepticism, by contrast, is precisely the risk involved in purely coherentist approaches such as the one adopted by Fine (or indeed Gadamer, on a different level): a risk, that is, not in general, but for anyone wishing to correctly interpret Plato, who was certainly not a sceptic (at any rate, if by this term we mean someone who strictly denies the existence of any criterion for knowledge).

Besides, Plato's anti-sceptical position rests on a metaphysical foundation, which in his view constitutes the essential framework for Socratic questioning. By showing that man has a degree of familiarity with universal entities (as he acknowledges their existence and even formulates approximate descriptions of them), yet is incapable of finding their definitions, Socratic questioning leads us to search for the conditions of possibility for this peculiar state of affairs. These conditions are suggested by the *rw* and the doctrine of reminiscence connected to it: if human beings are incapable of attaining the kind complete knowledge of the ideas which ought to be expressed through definition, this is because they do not know the ideas in their present life; and the reason why they only have approximate knowledge of the ideas is that they somehow knew them in another time and in another dimension. This, then, is the true aim of Socratic questioning: to refute nominalism, scepticism and relativism by at the same time highlighting the metaphysical conditions of possibility for this refutation. But in order for all this to work, it is necessary to understand the exact meaning of the doctrine of recollection.

5. ANAMNESIS

A common idea in Platonic scholarship – which may or may not be openly expressed – is that the doctrine in question was gradually replaced by the exercising of dialectics, as Plato came to increasingly develop a scientific method of enquiry independent of the religious sensibility of his teacher. In other words, the doctrine of reminiscence is believed to play no decisive role in Plato's dialectics, which is therefore examined without taking any account of this metaphysical assumption (an assumption to be rejected, of course, precisely because it is markedly metaphysical in nature, and hence not sober enough to be included as part of an epistemological doctrine worthy of this name). Now, I instead agree with Cornford that “there is no ground for supposing that Plato ever abandoned the theory of Anamnesis” (one need only consider the *Phaedrus*, for instance).³⁸ Still, it is clear that the doctrine of reminiscence must be taken for what it actually is, namely a means to justify learning (according to the reasons

³⁸ Cornford (1935), p. 28. See too p. 129.

why it is introduced in the *Meno*), and not as a method for acquiring knowledge (as D. Scott has vigorously argued³⁹); and if it is to serve as a means towards this goal, then its structural aim must be to identify an intermediate state between absolute knowledge and absolute ignorance. Consequently, the doctrine cannot be used to assign a strong functionalist foundation to Platonic epistemology. To put it differently, if the act of recollecting were strong enough to identify a *logos* and *nous* capable of gaining perfect knowledge of ideal objects, not only would this undermine the coherentist paradigm (something foundationalists would no doubt be very happy about), but it would also undermine the need for dialogue – and the exercising of dialectics itself would become useless (which, conversely, would be rather worrying for all interpreters of Plato). Why struggle with the complex exercise of dialectics and the study of the relations between objects, if knowledge has a reliable source at its disposal (i.e. memory) that can approach objects directly? It is hardly surprising, therefore, that interpreters who stress the method of dialectics in Plato see a contradiction between it and reminiscence, with the result of necessarily having to choose between one of the two. This usually happens, however, because reminiscence is envisaged not as a metaphysical doctrine, but as an epistemological theory; and in this case, it is bound to clash with dialectics.⁴⁰

What do I mean by stating that the doctrine of reminiscence has a metaphysical rather than epistemological character? I mean that it does not occupy the same theoretical space as dialectics, but rather defines the metaphysical conditions that make the latter possible. In other words, this doctrine provides the guiding thread by which dialectical enquiries can aspire to reach the level of truth with a certain degree of confidence, despite the fact that the method they adopt is inevitably a circular one, so that no guarantee may be found from within the system itself. With its distinctively intermediate quality, the doctrine of reminiscence furnishes dialectical enquiry with an external benchmark which on the one hand is solid enough to rule out the possibility that the only criterion of truth for a system is the coherence of its interrelations (a factor that is far from decisive, as we have seen); but on the other hand is not solid enough to enable human knowledge to access a source of knowledge so clear and distinct as to turn the exercising of dialectics, with its typical interrelations, into something useless. In this respect, it may be argued that Plato is at the same

³⁹ See Scott (2006).

⁴⁰ A very recent example is Vegetti (2015). He rightly points out that according to Plato the method of inquiry is not recollection but dialectic; but he wrongly infers from it that if it is the case both recollection and immortality of the soul become epistemologically useless.

time a foundationalist and a coherentist: he is a foundationalist in the weak sense and a coherentist in the strong sense. Yet in order for this to be possible without leading to self-contradiction, one must acknowledge that Plato did not limit his enquiry to the question of what the most reliable epistemology might be (e.g. the Protagorean, the one exemplified by dialectics, the one based on reminiscence, etc.), but rather deemed it necessary to tie this question to external (i.e. metaphysical) foundations, without which – in his view – no epistemology can make a claim to truth.

Let us see what this actually means through a concrete example. Let us suppose that we were to enquire whether the brave man is necessarily also just (an issue addressed in the *Protagoras*⁴¹). In order to answer this question, we can only enquire about the nature of justice and bravery in general in order to establish (on the basis of the dialectical procedure illustrated in the *Sophist*) to what extent the two concepts participate of one another. If we stick to the pure interrelation between concepts, however, it is easy to realise that it is possible to establish two perfectly coherent systems where in the one case bravery does not necessarily participate of justice (let us call this system “Homeric-epic ethics”), and in the other it necessarily does (let us call this system “Socratic-Platonic ethics”). Consequently, if we were to rigorously abide by the coherentist view, we would have no criterion of truth through which to establish which of the two systems is truer, given that according to this perspective both are coherent and no other criterion exists apart from coherence itself. This being the case, we would be forced to accept the Protagorean position.

This, however, is where the doctrine of reminiscence comes into play. What it states – in very concrete terms – is that all human souls before birth have seen the idea of justice and the idea of bravery in their clear essence (even though once embodied souls are no longer capable of seeing them, and must confine themselves to the more or less faded memories they have of these ideas). These memories, of course, do not offer the embodied soul a form of knowledge perfectly equivalent to the one it possessed before descending into the body, but only traces to be recomposed with some effort. This is precisely the reason why we may rule out the possibility that the doctrine of reminiscence stands for a strong foundationalism in Plato. Besides, what proves that this is the case is the fact that when the characters in Plato’s dialogues enquire about the nature of a given notion, they inevitably apply the dialogical-dialectic method based on the interrelation of concepts – not the direct, solipsistic one of concentrating on their own intellectual intuitions. This implies that the aid provided by reminiscence is not strong enough to furnish the soul with a form of knowledge that would make

⁴¹ On this topics see ch. 13.

the exercise of dialectics superfluous: the method we are forced to adopt, if we wish to gain knowledge of something, is still that of Neurath and Quine, namely fixing the boat from on board.

On the whole, however, the situation is not quite the same. In the case of the doctrine of reminiscence, Plato's "mariners" – unlike those of Neurath and Quine – know that there is land out there, that the boat was once moored in the harbour, and that they were able to spot it from the outside. This means that their knowledge of the boat is not limited to what they can learn about it now, from on board. Consequently, their present task, to repair it from on board, is not a circular one. While it is true that at present they are not able to lead the boat back to the harbour and make it to the shore, it is also true that in their current task they are guided by the memories they retain of the former situation, which is to say of the time in which they could freely gaze at the ship from the outside. Hence, while "Plato's mariners" cannot attain a non-circular definition of justice (to return to the aforementioned example), they still know that the systems called "Homeric-epic ethics" and "Socratic-Platonic ethics" cannot both be true. For in these two systems the notions of justice and bravery are assigned different contents, whereas the doctrine of reminiscence certifies that justice and bravery only exist in a single exemplar. And on the basis of the doctrine of reminiscence they also know that the anamnestic traces latent in their souls have the implicit function of leading their enquiries in the right direction, albeit in a difficult and non-linear way.

CHAPTER 5
WHAT IS THE MEANING OF PLATO'S *THEAETETUS*?
*Some Remarks on a New Annotated Translation of the Dialogue*¹

1. FOLLOWING CORNFORD'S APPROACH

In an attempt to define the overall meaning of the *Theaetetus*, and especially explain its aporetic outcome, Ferrari draws upon the old thesis suggested by Cornford:² that no definition of *epistêmê* may be provided without referring to the ideas; and since the ideas are never mentioned in the dialogue, an aporetic outcome seems like a natural and in a way inevitable conclusion. More in particular, according to Ferrari the *Theaetetus* does not reach any conclusions since it – at least apparently – draws a link between *epistêmê* and *doxa*. According to Ferrari, the problem may be solved, however, by turning to other dialogues, such the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Meno* and *Timaeus*, in which this dichotomy is either enunciated or at any rate assumed. The implicit premise to this thesis is a particular reading of Plato's dialogic approach (inspired by Szlezák and Erler): the fact that Plato has written dialogues and not philosophical treatises disproves the assumption that the beliefs and the philosophical convictions of the author are to be found in each of these works (p. 140 n. 49).

First of all, let us note that this premise is a double-edged sword. Since the above-mentioned texts are also dialogues, it is legitimate to doubt that they may reflect “the beliefs and the philosophical conviction of the author” any more than the *Theaetetus* does. But even if it were the case – which it is not, as we shall later see – that the aforementioned dialogues and the *Theaetetus* present two substantially contrasting perspectives, what reasons do we have for arguing that the *Republic*, for instance, reflects Plato's beliefs whereas the *Theaetetus* does not? Is it because in the former dialogue Socrates is speaking? So is Socrates Plato's spokesman? But what reasons do we have for claiming that the Socrates of the *Republic* is Plato's spokesman but the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is not?

The methodological principle according to which Plato's dialogues might not reflect “the knowledges and the philosophical conviction of the author” may in fact only be upheld on the basis of the “new hermeneutic paradigm” suggested by scholars of the so-called Tübingen-Milan school, according to which Plato's true beliefs are those recorded by the indirect tradition. This would certainly give

¹ Ferrari (2011).

² Cornford (1935).

us a fixed point of reference for judging when Plato is stating his own beliefs in his dialogues and when he is not; it would also help explain why Plato appears so reticent at times. Outside of this framework however (which Ferrari himself does not accept), neither point holds. Why should Plato have written texts expounding doctrines other than those he personally subscribed to? And what criterion do we have for ascertaining in what dialogues this might be the case? Aside from the esoteric paradigm, the only acceptable methodological criterion is to suppose that in all of his texts Plato sought to convey to his readers something which he held to be true at the time of writing. As we shall later see, this does not mean that we should expect to find all of Plato's doctrines in all of his dialogues; nor does it mean that the problems raised by a given dialogue may not be solved by turning to other works. These are all reasonable assumptions. What is less reasonable is to interpret certain dialogues as texts in which Plato is expounding opinions he does not share. What reasons would he have for doing so? Why should Plato wish to gloss over the theses he subscribes to in the *Theaetetus*, when he knows that these would help solve the problem he is addressing, thus condemning to failure the research conducted in the dialogue?

2. IS THE *THEAETETUS* ONLY A "ZETETIC" DIALOGUE?

Ferrari's answer is to say that the *Theaetetus* is a peirastic and zetetic dialogue, i.e. an "investigative" one, marked by the polemic against "protagorean relativism", "heraclitean infallibilism", "sophistic" in general (p. 141). In other words, the *Theaetetus* would be essentially pursuing a polemical goal in opposition to those who claim that becoming alone exists, and who are thus incapable of moving beyond the concept of *doxa* and the relativism it entails in their definition of knowledge. In the *Theaetetus*, in other words, Plato would not be seeking to directly answer the question of what *epistêmê* is, but would rather simply be stating what *epistêmê* is not (the assumption being that wise readers should be able to correctly solve the problem on their own, based on the cues scattered throughout the dialogue and what is presented in the *Republic* and other Platonic texts). In itself, this constitutes no objection to Ferrari's thesis, since the Platonic corpus is replete with dialogues focusing exclusively on the *pars destruens* (although this leads us to wonder, then, why Plato might have chosen to revamp the Socratic method of aporetic refutation at this stage of his writing career).³ The fact is that Ferrari's description of the dialogue (as a polemic directed against followers of Heraclitus, materialists, Sophists and relativists) only fits the first

³ As far as David Sedley's answer to this problem is concerned, see ch. 6.

part of the *Theaetetus*, namely the one discussing the hypothesis that knowledge consists in sense-perception. By contrast, it hardly fits Plato's discussion of the two other definitions (right opinion and right opinion accompanied by *logos*). The investigation here turns away from all the aforementioned polemical targets and moves on to discuss two definitions of knowledge that not only have no connection to Heraclitean mobilism, but also include (among other things) knowledge of the intellectual sort.⁴

Unambiguous proof for what has just been argued is provided by the passage linking the discussion of the first definition of knowledge to the introductory remarks regarding the second definition (186e–187a). Here Socrates claims that even though we have not discovered what *epistêmê* is, at least we have established that it cannot be found in *aisthesis*, but only

in some function of the soul, whatever name is given to it when it alone and by itself is engaged directly with realities (*αὐτὴ καθ'αὐτὴν πραγματεύεται περὶ τὰ ὄντα*, 187a5–6; transl. Fowler).

This undoubtedly raises some problems for Ferrari's interpretation. While it is understandable that Plato may have wished not to provide any correct description of *epistêmê* to go with his *pars destruens*, why should he wish to present a weak notion of intellectual knowledge (a weak one, that is, since it is mixed with *doxa*), unless this notion really reflected his own philosophical beliefs? What would Plato's polemical target be in the third part of the dialogue? Whom would he be arguing against when apparently rejecting a definition of *epistêmê* (as right opinion accompanied by *logos*) very similar to the one he appears to have accepted in the *Meno*?⁵ Since these questions are destined to remain unanswered, we can only conclude that the second and third section of the *Theaetetus* can hardly be seen to reflect any zetetic and peirastic aim. We must therefore continue our enquiry elsewhere.

⁴ See ch. 3, pp. 35–36.

⁵ *Men.* 98a. The idea that the two definitions are extremely similar, if not identical, is supported both by Fine (1979) and by myself (Cf. ch. 2, p. 20; ch. 4, pp. 47–48). F. Ferrari (2011), pp. 124–125, while acknowledging that the definitions are not perfectly identical, regards them as essentially analogous, except in one respect which we shall later consider (see p. 139).

3. WHAT KIND OF “KNOWLEDGE” IS SOCRATES AFTER IN THE *THEAETETUS*?

In order to do so, I shall depart very little from the assumptions presented by Ferrari himself. While it is true – as stated in a passage of the *Republic* (477e) – that *epistêmê* and *doxa* may be distinguished because the former is infallible, it is equally true that this is not a very informative statement: for no genuine description of infallible knowledge (or *epistêmê*) is yet provided here, explaining what it is, how it operates, and how it may be attained. In the *Theaetetus*, then, Plato starts from scratch. What I wish to suggest is that in this dialogue the author sets out from a definition of *epistêmê* as infallible knowledge (i.e. knowledge in no way contaminated by *doxa*), in order to raise questions such as: What does this type of knowledge actually consist in? Is it really included among human faculties and possibilities?

The fact that the focus of research in the *Theaetetus* is *epistêmê* conceived not as generic but as infallible knowledge is evidenced by three passages in the first section of the dialogue. In the first of these (145d–e), Socrates has Theaetetus grant the identity between *epistêmê* and *sophia*. Now, attentive readers of Plato will certainly recall that passage of the *Symposium* (see above, pp. 23–24) in which it is stated that only the gods may be called *sophoi*, since man can at most be called *philo-sophos* (203e–204a). So if the dialogue is seeking to establish what form of knowledge *sophia* corresponds to, it is hardly surprising that it fails in this goal – or at any rate that it fails to find a form of human knowledge having the same quality as this *sophia*. For whereas *sophia* is the privilege of the gods, human knowledge, as *philo-sophia*, occupies an intermediate position between wisdom and ignorance, which in the *Symposium* itself is identified with right opinion. Since *eros* stands halfway between wisdom and ignorance (203e5),

It follows that Love must be lover of wisdom and, as such, is in between wise and being ignorant (φιλόσοφον δὲ ὄντα μεταξύ εἶναι σοφοῦ καὶ ἀμαθοῦ, 204b4–5).

Given that previously the intermediate state between ignorance and wisdom had been identified precisely as right opinion (see 202a9, where “correct judgement” – ὀρθὴ δόξα – is “in between understanding and ignorance” – μεταξύ φρονήσεως καὶ ἀμαθίας) and that the intermediateness of right opinion had been mentioned precisely in order to illustrate what the intermediateness of *eros* (and hence philosophy) consists in, the philosopher must necessarily be set in relation to right opinion (indeed, it seems that this is precisely what Plato

wished to suggest). As we shall see, in this respect the epistemology of the *Symposium* and that of the *Theaetetus* perfectly agree.⁶

The second passage (152c) is part of the section in which Socrates stresses the analogy between the definition of knowledge as perception and Protagoras' theory. Since to each person things seem to be exactly as he or she perceives them, it may be inferred that "perception, then, is always of what is, and unerring". Socrates then adds that perception is infallible "since it is *epistêmê*". Some commentators believe these words to be a gloss.⁷ It may well be that a reader of the text could not stand the fact that through Socrates perception was here declared to be infallible, when it is clear that what is infallible according to Plato is *epistêmê*, not *aisthesis*. This reader would then have sought to explain that perception is only said to be infallible because, by way of hypothesis, Theaetetus has assimilated it to *epistêmê*. Yet, this does not mean – as White suggests – that a gloss of this kind would be detrimental to the meaning of the passage.⁸ For while it is true that in Socrates' words perception becomes infallible in itself if it is viewed according to Protagoras' doctrine (and hence that there would be no need to present it as infallible through its assimilation to *epistêmê*),⁹ this does not rule out the fact that infallibility is a necessary prerequisite for the definition of *epistêmê* which is being sought here. The definition of *epistêmê* Theaetetus puts forth may seem adequate for the enquiry conducted in the dialogue precisely because perception is infallible (cf. 179c). In other words, there is no compelling reason to regard these words as a gloss: albeit implicitly, Plato here is simply informing his readers that what the *Theaetetus* is discussing is infallible knowledge.

Finally, the above view is confirmed by the third passage, 160d. After showing that if perception is true for those experiencing it, then each person (as Protagoras argues) is the judge (κριτής) of what exists for him or her, of the existence or non-existence of things, Socrates stresses the equivalence between this form of knowledge and *epistêmê*:

⁶ Ferrari (2011, p. 124, n. 128) quotes *Symp.* 202a5–9 as the most significant instance in which Plato illustrates the difference between *epistêmê* and *doxa*. Actually, it is rather pointless to view this passage in isolation, since it is part of an argument seeking to show that right opinion, *eros* and philosophy all belong to the same intermediate level between ignorance and knowledge; and hence that philosophy is radically different from *epistêmê* understood as *sophia* (i.e. infallible knowledge).

⁷ See esp. White (1972).

⁸ Ferrari (2011) p. 248 n. 63.

⁹ From what has been stated so far it should be clear that I accept the "infallibilist" interpretation of perception proposed by G. Fine (see F. Ferrari 2011, p. 42 n. 47).

How, then, if I am infallible (*ἀψευδής*) and never stumble in my thought (*διανόια*), can I fail to know (*ἐπιστήμων*) that which I perceive with regard to the things that are or that become?

I have chosen to provide a rather literal translation of this passage because it is necessary to pay close attention to what Socrates is trying to say here. That is: by setting out from the hypothesis that knowledge is perception, he reaches the conclusion that knowledge is infallible, since perception is infallible. In other words, Socrates disregards the possibility that knowledge might have to do with thought: for in this case, if thought were to stumble, it would make knowledge fallible in some way. Once this possibility has been ruled out and knowledge has been reduced to perception, we find that since the latter is infallible, the person having perception coincides with the person possessing *epistêmê* (literally, is *ἐπιστήμων*). Once again, then, perception would seem to be a good candidate for *epistêmê* precisely because it is infallible – which is to say that, by way of hypothesis, the *epistêmê* sought for in the dialogue is infallible. This passage is also interesting, however, because it would appear to suggest – at least as a possibility – that while *epistêmê* is certainly infallible, thought (*dianoia*) might not be.¹⁰

All three passages, then, provide significant insight into the *Theaetetus*, enabling us to interpret the dialogue in a way that is consistent with Platonic epistemology as a whole. If the dialogue has an aporetic outcome, this does not mean that Plato was denying the possibility of acquiring knowledge (or indeed *epistêmê*, understood in a general sense), and that he was therefore a sceptic. Rather, it means that he denied man access to *sophia*, which is to say infallible knowledge (or *epistêmê*). This, as we already know from the *Symposium* and shall see in more detail later on, in no way contrasts with what Plato writes elsewhere.

4. WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE FIRST PART OF THE DIALOGUE?

If, as I have suggested, the *Theaetetus* only constitutes an enquiry into the nature of infallible knowledge and the possibility for man to acquire it, the first part of the dialogue would seem rather redundant. Since perception is a form of *doxa*, it would seem superfluous to examine whether it might coincide with *epistêmê*

¹⁰ I believe it would be difficult to provide any plausible speculation on the exact meaning that Plato assigns to *dianoia* – as opposed to *noesis* – in the final section of Book 6 of the *Republic*: for Plato usually employs the term *dianoia* to mean “thought” in general (on this, see ch. 8 and 9 in the present book).

(besides, Plato's readers have already been extensively informed with regard to this point by what is written concerning sense-perception in the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and other dialogues). However, we find at least three new elements that make the enquiry conducted in the first part of the *Theaetetus* not just useful, but indeed necessary. First of all, it is not so obvious that perception and *doxa* coincide, given that in the *Theaetetus* Socrates himself grants that perception is infallible. It is therefore necessary to prove that while perception may be infallible, it is not *epistêmê*. Secondly, it will be useful to show on the one hand that perception does not operate autonomously, but depends on the noetic activity of the soul; and on the other, that our cognitive experience includes operations that are independent from perception (e.g. the ability to grasp so-called *koina*). Finally – and this is the most crucial point – the first part of the *Theaetetus* is intended to illustrate the need for a certain kind of intellectual knowledge, different from perception, not merely by drawing a contrast between the two on the basis of general considerations, but by proving that the existence of the former is made dialectically necessary by the contradictions inevitably inherent in the latter. In other words, whereas Plato elsewhere simply contrasts – on the basis of specific arguments – his own thesis with that of his opponents, in the *Theaetetus* he shows that his thesis is unavoidable, since its contradiction is unacceptable.¹¹

In line with the programme of the *Republic*, the first part of the *Theaetetus* thus shows that if we wish to find *epistêmê* (i.e. infallible knowledge free from *doxa*), we cannot confine ourselves to perception (albeit infallible). The only option is to switch from perception to thought (not least because thought, as we have seen, directs perception itself) and see whether we can find what we are looking for there (cf. 186b–c).

5. “THOUGHT” DEPENDS UPON “DOXA”

Let us follow Plato's reasoning step by step, by paraphrasing what in my view is the key passage in the dialogue. Let us start from thought. Now, what is thought? If thought were a kind of direct apprehension or mental grasp, we might hope to find infallibility in what have been termed Intelligible Conceptual States (ICP). Regrettably, things are not so (and I shall not dwell on the intuitionist hypothesis, since I have already discussed it at length elsewhere¹² and it is has also been

¹¹ On the typical platonic method of sustaining his own position by arguing *ad hominem* against the opponents, I agree with Annas (2002), pp. 4–6.

¹² See Trabattoni (2006), ch. 8 and 9 in the present book.

rejected by Ferrari himself).¹³ As we know from *Theaetetus*, 189e4–190a7, thought is *logos*, as much as that which is uttered (even though it is voiceless); or rather: it is an inner dialogue of the soul, which necessarily thinks by posing questions and then answering either yes or no. Moreover, this act of affirming or denying, which takes place the very moment the soul has ended its enquiry, is called *doxa*.

A perfectly analogous reasoning is provided by the Eleatic Visitor in the *Sophist* (263e10–264a3):

Visitor: And the again we know that speech contains ...

Theaetetus: What?

Visitor: Affirmation and denial.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Visitor: So when affirmation or denial occurs as silent thought inside the soul, wouldn't you call that belief.

Theaetetus: Of course.

In these passages “opinion” naturally translates *doxa*. It is all too clear, however, that *doxa* here has a meaning other than “sensitive knowledge”, which is what it indicates both in the first part of the dialogue and in the metaphor of the line in the *Republic*: *doxa* here necessarily means “judgement”. Besides, this is clearly confirmed by what Socrates and Theaetetus ultimately agree upon in their discussion of the definition of *epistêmê* as perception: when Socrates observes that henceforth *epistêmê* must be sought “in some function of the soul, whatever name is given to it when it alone and by itself is engaged directly with realities (περὶ τὰ ὄντα)”;¹⁴ Theaetetus replies that in his view this engagement should be called *δοξάζειν*, a conclusion which Socrates unreservedly approves (*ὀρθῶς γὰρ οἶεῖ*, 187a9).

The idea – upheld both by Nancy and by Ferrari himself (who here follows Nancy: see pp. 418–419 and n. 258) – that the opinion Theaetetus presents in this passage is still a Protagorean one cannot be accepted. Contrary evidence is first of all to be found in the very structure of this passage, in which Socrates on the one hand declares that the “Protagorean” section of the discussion has come to a definite close (cf. 187b1: *πάντα τὰ πρόσθεν ἐξάλειψας*, “wipe out all that we have said hitherto”) and on the other hand unreservedly approves Theaetetus’ thesis. Secondly, it would only be reasonable to call into question the Platonic nature of this position if it were found exclusively in the *Theaetetus*. Yet this is not the case, as is shown by the passage from the *Sophist* just quoted and by a

¹³ Ferrari (2006), (2011, pp. 132–134).

¹⁴ 187a5–6. Note the perfect correspondence with *Theaet.* 189e–190a.

passage of the *Republic* (413a7–8) we shall later return to, in which Socrates states that ἀληθεύειν (“tell the truth”) coincides with τὸ τὰ ὄντα δοξάζειν (“to believe the things that are”): the analogy between this passage and *Theaet.* 187a5–8 is flagged by the presence of the verb δοξάζειν in both and by their reference to ὄντα.

Certainly, opinion and judgement have something in common, which justifies the use of the term *doxa* for both. This common element is the subjective and particular nature of the knowledge conveyed by opinion and judgement, which prevents them from attaining the kind of truth that is universally evident and hence applies to all (see p. 43). If *doxa* means knowledge pertaining to the sensible sphere, even if we grant this knowledge to be infallible (which in my view we should, based on the *Theaetetus*), its partial, limited and subjective nature is all too clear: the truth it expresses only holds for the perceiving subject the moment he or she experiences perception. As for thought, its subjective conditioning is emphasised precisely by the passages from the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* I have just quoted. Both thought and *doxa*, the Eleatic Stranger explains in the *Sophist* (264a–b), may be either true or false.

Let us suppose that thought is seeking to describe a given state of affairs, by stating for instance that “justice is the advantage of those in power”. *Doxa* here would be the subjective judgement that accompanies thought: “yes, it is true (I believe that) justice is the advantage of those in power”. It is clear, however, that this judgement might also be false (since judgement is a form of *doxa*, in principle it is fallible). Yet without this affirming or denying judgement, thought cannot state or assert anything. Thought may hope to grasp the truth the moment it turns into an assertion, which is to say the moment a given subject asserts his or her own truth. But the very moment this occurs, the possibility that the thought in question may be false will also automatically, necessarily and invariably emerge. This eventuality is only avoided if the thought formulated is of an intuitive and non-descriptive sort. If the thought is descriptive in character, which is to say dianoetic, the question will always emerge of whether the description provided corresponds to the object described – i.e. of whether a given *doxa*, which will always be the particular *doxa* of a certain subject, corresponds to the objective and universal nature of the reality examined. This correspondence is never guaranteed a priori. To sum up:

- if truth can only be grasped by thought;
- if thought is dianoetic rather than intuitive in character;
- if thought can attain the level of truth only when it turns into an assertion;
- if thought only turns into an assertion when it comes with a judgement (*doxa*);
- if this judgement (*doxa*) will attach itself to thought through an act of choosing on the part of the subject, who will decide whether to affirm or deny;

if it is always possible for this decision to be wrong, and hence for this judgement to be false,

it follows that thought (which is to say *logos*, which is structurally identical to it) is contaminated in its very essence by a doxastic element that may never be completely removed, not even when the factual evidence would appear to be uncontroversial (less still in the cases provided by Plato, such as the definition of moral concepts, which are far from self-evident).

Ultimately, then, *doxa* understood as sensitive knowledge, while infallible, is nonetheless subjective since it invariably expresses only a limited and circumscribed point of view on the world; *doxa* understood as judgement is instead subjective because, although it refers to intelligible and universal objects, it can never express anything other than the fallible evaluation made by a given subject.

6. PROPOSITIONAL THOUGHT AS INTRINSICALLY FALLIBLE

It cannot be argued – as Ferrari does – that these theses presented in the *Theaetetus* are contrary to what Plato claims elsewhere; nor can they be said to appear unexpectedly, as an anomaly (something which would suggest that Plato is not actually expressing his own views in this dialogue). The reader of the *Theaetetus* has not only already been fully informed about the dualistic nature of Plato's ontology and epistemology, but he or she will also be aware of the fact that the loftiest form of thought available to man is the dianoetic, dialectical and discursive one. First of all, the famous passage from the *Phaedo* in which Socrates introduces the idea of the so-called “second sailing” (99c–100a), understood as the necessary step which enables man to grasp the true causes of the existence and transformation of things, shows that this method of knowledge consists in “having recourse to *logoi*”, which is to say: in dialectical and propositional thought. Secondly, the fact that the loftiest form of thought open to man is one of this sort may clearly be discerned through a careful analysis of the metaphor of the line provided in the *Republic*, which suggests in particular that *noesis* too is dialogic and dialectical in nature (see 511b15).¹⁵ Moreover, readers will also have learned from the *Phaedo* (and other texts) that the essence of ideal reality consists in the fact that the ideas are always self-identical, which is to say changeless. The

¹⁵ On this, see ch. 8 ad 9 in the present book and Ferrari 2006.

Phaedo, in particular, has also established that only the disembodied soul can have full knowledge of the ideas (66e),¹⁶ whereas the highest level of knowledge that may be attained in this life is that of recollection (as attested by the doctrine of *anamnesis*). All this may further be inferred from the *Phaedrus*, whatever its date of composition may be. Let us add to this the claim made in the *Republic* that *epistêmê* is infallible, whereas *doxa* is not. Finally, in the *Symposium* Diotima declares that philosophy, like *eros*, is an intermediate faculty that is contaminated in a way by *doxa*, and hence is qualitatively different from *sophia*, which is the exclusive privilege of the gods.

This is precisely where the *Theaetetus* comes into play: for it elucidates the state of affairs just illustrated by explaining how human thought operates. In discussing the section of the dialogue in which Socrates introduces so-called *koina*, for years critics have been arguing whether these should be regarded as ideas or not – and the question still remains open. The main reason why not everyone agrees that *koina* are ideas is because Socrates repeatedly assigns these common notions to the sensible sphere (see 185b7: *περὶ αὐτοῖν* 185c6–7: *περὶ αὐτῶν*, 185e1: *περὶ πάντων*, 186c2: *περὶ τούτων*), whereas ideas are supposed to be utterly removed and hence graspable by thought alone, without any need to draw upon the senses. Yet in the *Phaedo* too Socrates states much the same thing (see 74c6–7; 75a1–3; 75e2–5), namely that it is only through sensory stimuli that the soul is led back to the forms (it is the vision of sensible equals, for instance, that brings the notion of “the equal” in itself to mind). Hence the question of whether *koina* are ideas or not is largely pointless. *Koina* represent the way in which universals appear to thought when it attempts to acquire knowledge through sensible objects: in thinking of hard things, for instance, one will also think of the hardness these things share in common. This knowledge of the universal, however, is structurally imprecise, since within human experience universals never manifest themselves in a pure form, but only as attributes or qualities of sensible objects. To put it in the same terms as the *Seventh Letter* (342e–343c), human thought is capable of grasping only the “which” (i.e. of determining that s has the quality of being ρ), never the “what” (i.e. of determining the thing in itself, in its very essence).

When thought instead attempts to independently grasp these universal notions, understood as entities removed from the sensible sphere (and hence without any reference to the object they are attributed to), the kind of thought that

¹⁶ In these passages of the *Phaedo* Socrates is very careful in stressing that what is unavoidable to human soul in his embodied condition is not so much a generic knowledge of forms, as the full “possession” of it: see the repeated use of verb *κτάομαι* and its cognates (See Trabattoni 2011, pp. xxiii–xxvii, and Trabattoni 2014).

is at work here does not have the character of direct and immediate intuition, but rather that of dianoetic and discursive description. This is precisely what makes it structurally removed from the degree of infallibility required by the definition of *epistêmê*. For whereas in the case of intuition the immediacy of knowledge removes the possibility of error, in the case of human thought the truth of what is claimed is not ensured a priori, but rather depends on the correspondence or lack of correspondence between the description of a concept and its actual content. This helps explain why *doxa* understood as pure perception, which does not describe anything and does not provide any description, is infallible by nature, whereas *doxa* understood as judgement (describing and referring to something) is fallible by nature.

The passage of the *Theaetetus* I have been discussing is rather explicit about the mobile nature of human thought, which is dialogical and dianoetic. In the act of thinking, thought is in a state of motion, consisting precisely in the dialogical dynamism which enables it to evaluate thesis after thesis without reaching any conclusion for as long as it is operating. A conclusion is instead reached when the soul (which is to say the thinking subject) stops wavering and fixes its opinion by giving judgement on (or assent to) a given thesis. It is at this point that *doxa* comes into play. The act of stopping which brings dialectical/dianoetic thought to a halt when it has reached some specific knowledge is always an arbitrary one to some extent, since – as has already been noted – the process of *dialegethai* is by its very nature endless.¹⁷

This being the case, it is – once again – hardly surprising that the *Theaetetus* reaches an aporetic conclusion. In setting off in earnest pursuit of *epistêmê*, which is to say of infallible knowledge, the first part of the dialogue shows that this knowledge does not consist in perception (i.e. opinion understood as perception). The second and third parts of the dialogue instead prove that this infallible knowledge cannot be found even within the faculty of thought currently at man's

¹⁷ Enquiry might come to an utter and complete stop only if dianoetic thought were to turn into pure intuition, but this is impossible, since human thought can only be dianoetic. It is worth noting that this step was openly taken by Plotinus, precisely in order to remove the last trace of uncertainty characterising human thought according to Plato. Plotinus necessarily agrees with Plato that the intellectual faculty of the soul coincides with *dianoia* (indeed, he sometimes goes so far as to argue that the soul *is dianoia*). Plotinus, however, also identifies a possible way of removing this limit, by – again, necessarily – drawing upon the non-Platonic doctrine of the undescended soul, according to which in exceptional circumstances the soul can acquire some of the distinctive features of the *nous* (such as self-knowledge). As regards the possibility for man of transcending the level of *dianoia*, see esp. v 3 [49]; on the theory of the “undescended soul”, which is often mentioned in the *Enneads*, see esp. iv 8 [6]. See Trabattoni (2013 bis).

disposal, since this kind of thought is discursive rather than intuitive in character; as such, while free from *doxa* understood as the knowledge of sensible reality, it is contaminated by *doxa* understood as an act of judgement on the subject's part, which is always at least partly arbitrary.

7. THE MEANING OF *DOXA* AND THE THIRD DEFINITION OF *EPISTÊMÊ*

It would be reasonable to ask why, if the above analysis is correct, the *Theaetetus* does not state things openly and explicitly. Why is the interconnection between thought, *logos* and *doxa* stressed when examining the second definition of *epistêmê* no longer invoked when Socrates discusses (and refutes) the third definition of knowledge (in which *logos* instead comes directly into play)? Would it not have been easier and more straightforward for Socrates to reject the third definition of *epistêmê* by simply referring to what had been already stated, namely that since thought takes the same form as *logos*, it cannot free itself from *doxa* – which is the final stage of *logos* – and hence from the fallibility *doxa* inevitably entails? If Socrates does not do so, this might be – as many believe – because none of the meanings of *logos* taken into account in the final part of the dialogue corresponds to Plato's notion of it. If this were the case, the third definition (which is in fact very similar to the one offered – and not refuted – in the *Meno*) might indeed hold: for if the notion of *logos* is correctly understood (as referring to the knowledge of ideas), the *Theaetetus* may be seen to reach no conclusion simply because Plato chose not to provide any.

As a preliminary consideration, I would once again like to note that commentators who uphold a thesis of this sort must also explain why Plato, while knowing the answer to the problem he had posed, chose to keep it to himself. But let us suppose that a reason for this may be found, and continue our enquiry. What I would briefly like to argue now is that the way in which Socrates refutes the third definition rests on exactly the same premises – and reasons – that had previously led him to regard *doxa* as an integral (and hence inevitable) part of thought and *logos*.

By far the most important of the three definitions of *logos* examined by Socrates – indeed, the most crucial one (which Socrates actually presents as the leading hypothesis) – is the last: that according to which *logos* is capable of identifying the characteristic that distinguishes a given thing from all others (208c). Socrates demolishes this definition by observing that opinion too, if true, is capable of grasping this distinguishing characteristic – else, it would not be true. Theaetetus is here taken as an example: if Socrates has a true opinion about Theaetetus' physical appearance, this is because the distinguishing traits of the latter are already impressed upon Socrates' memory. This means that the

recognition of a distinguishing characteristic is a precondition for the engendering of true opinion; as such, it cannot be what is added to true opinion – according to the third definition – in order to turn it into *epistēmê* (i.e. infallible knowledge). The linchpin of Socrates' argument is the idea that what identifies this specific difference is *doxa* – when true, of course – not *logos*; indeed, if it were the function of *logos* to grasp this difference, *logos* would ultimately coincide with right opinion:

Socrates: Then what more might this 'adding a *logos* to correct judgement' be? If, on the one hand, it means that we must make another judgement about the way in which a thing differs from the rest of things, we are being required to do something very absurd.

Theaetetus: How's that?

Socrates: Because we already have a correct judgement about the way a thing differs from other things; and we are then directed to add a correct judgement about the way it differs from other things. (209d4–10).

Right opinion has a rather broad field of application, since it grasps the element common to all kinds of knowledge. In the case of the knowledge of a being that may be perceived through the senses such as Theaetetus, true *doxa* is capable of identifying the peculiarities that distinguish this person from all others (for instance, a nose of a certain kind, eyes of a certain kind, and so on: see 209b–c). But let us instead take the case of an object of knowledge that cannot be grasped through the senses. If someone has a correct *doxa* regarding an object of this sort, he may have acquired it with or without the use of *logos*, which is to say by having either first reasoned and argued about the problem or not. In the latter case – and this is precisely the difference formalised in the *Meno* – one might say that the man in question has either simply guessed right,¹⁸ or is possibly repeating what others have told him. In other words – as the *Meno* also suggests – this man cannot adduce any reason to justify his opinion. But even if the individual has reasoned and argued carefully before taking a stand, and can justify his thesis in detail, it is still the case that *doxa*, understood as judgement, follows rather than precedes the argument. For if I am in the process of evaluating the truth of a given thesis by means of *logos*, in order to establish whether it is true or not, the thesis is not yet my *doxa*; it only becomes such when the soul approaches the work of *logos* and halts its development by recognising that a given assertion is its own *doxa*.

¹⁸ It is in this sense that Plato speaks of *θεία μοῖρα* or *θεία δύναμις* in the *Meno* and other dialogues. See Trabattini (1985) e (2000).

This whole argument may be framed in the exact terms of the passage from the *Theaetetus* we are discussing. Let us suppose that we are seeking to determine the nature of an intelligible object such as justice. According to the third definition of *logos*, we should identify the distinguishing trait which would enable us to determine the exact definition of justice once and for all by distinguishing it from all incorrect definitions. In other words, here it is a matter of finding what Aristotle calls the “specific difference”. Now, in this case too, while *logos* (thought, discursive reasoning, etc.) is at work, what is responsible for identifying the specific difference is not *logos*, but *doxa*. The reason for this is the idea of *doxa* as judgement which Socrates has put forth in the crucial passage of the *Theaetetus* often quoted in this book (190a). *Logos*, understood as the inner dialogue the soul has with itself, will come up with different definitions, compare them, argue in favour of one or the other, and so on. Yet what ultimately says (on the basis of the arguments advanced) which of the suggested definitions actually contains the specific difference, distinguishing the object sought for from all others, is the soul’s judgement: that is to say, the *doxa* through which the soul ceases to reason and argue for and against in order to state that the definition sought for is this rather than that, precisely because in this definition it has grasped the distinguishing characteristic sufficient to engender knowledge. And if this is necessarily how human thought operates, any claim to infallible knowledge becomes utterly unrealistic.

8. SUPPORT FROM ARISTOTLE

The fact that the Platonic way of arguing lacks crucial safeguards against the possibility of error, and hence is incapable of producing compelling demonstrations, is clearly revealed by Aristotle’s criticism. What is interesting, however, is that this criticism entails an interpretation of Platonic epistemology very similar to the one I am outlining here. In Book 2, Chapter 5 of *Posterior Analytics* (91b12ff.) we find one of the passages in which Aristotle criticises the Platonic method of *diairesis* (or division). The method of division, Aristotle writes, is not syllogistic (i.e. demonstrative); and this, for the following reason:

There is never any necessity that the thing to be defined should be exactly what it is stated to be because the other terms of the division are so; and the method of division is even less demonstrative than induction. One ought not to ask that the conclusion should be admitted, nor ought it to be held to be true as a concession (τῷ δούναι), but it must necessarily be true if those particular premises are true, even though our companion refuses to accept it.

The definer asks ‘Is man animal or inanimate?’ and then assumes (ἐλαβε) that man is animal and does not infer it (οὐ συλλελογίσται).

The *diairesis* Aristotle refers to here is simply a more technical and precise way of defining Socratic questioning: since it usually compels the interlocutor to give a closed answer (“Yes” or “No”), it implicitly divides the field of possible replies into two constitutive subgroups (hence, it is by nature “diairetic”). Nor is it difficult to find in Aristotle’s description precisely the kind of dialogical thinking, based on questions and answers, which Plato describes in *Theaetetus* 189e–190a. According to Aristotle, the flaw of the diairetic method (and hence of the method of questioning typical of Plato’s Socrates) consists in the fact that it allows the interlocutor to answer as he pleases; this method does not proceed through rigorous demonstration (of the “if ... then” sort), but rather by resting on the concessions of the person formulating his own opinion, which is to say on mere assumptions.

The Platonic method, in other words, is not demonstrative, since the truth it seeks to attain does not spring from the structure of the argument itself (which is to say from the interweaving of premises), but rather hangs on questioning, concession, choices made by affirming and denying, and the assumptions established by the interlocutors by mutual agreement. As Aristotle succinctly notes, if the claim “man is a living being” is held to be true as a premise to the argument simply because the replier grants his assent to it by rejecting its contradiction, then we have no syllogism (i.e. no demonstration).

The scenario outlined by Aristotle, then, is both diairetic and dialogical, since thought examines two antithetical propositions in order to establish which is true and which is false. Yet the object of this criticism is not the dialogical scenario as such, but the very structure of thought according to Plato: for – as we have seen – according to him a crucial role is played here, even in the case of single individuals, by dialogue, by the process of answering and replying, by the subject’s granting that a given proposition is true or false – in other words, by assumption, assent and *homologia*. Both the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, as we know, call it *doxa*.

The same conclusions are suggested by the revealing analogy drawn by Aristotle between Platonic *diairesis* and induction (based on the fact that neither of these is demonstrative). Under what conditions could induction turn into demonstration? It could turn into demonstration if it were complete, which is to say if it listed and took into account all possible cases (*APr.* II, 23). But clearly this is impossible, since the number of possible cases is infinite (or, rather, indefinite). So anyone using induction must choose to end his research at a certain point. And he or she can only do so through a concession or assent, which is to say an act of will or judgement. Yet, once again, this concession, judgement or assent, even

when supported by the examination of a good number of cases or arguments, will always have the arbitrary, fallible, provisional and approximate nature of *doxa*.

9. *EPISTÊMÊ* AND ITS DEGREES

With this, I do not wish to argue – as some readers may think – that according to Plato the criterion of truth is provided by *homologia* or consent, hence by opinion. This is the stance which in the *Theaetetus* Plato assigns to Protagoras, precisely with the aim of refuting it: a sufficient condition for speaking of truth consists in arguing that this will appear true to some people. As may clearly be discerned from the *Theaetetus*, the consequence of this thesis is that all opinions, *qua* opinions, are true, and hence that there is no way of distinguishing true assertions from false ones. Plato, however, does not share this view at all, since he certainly believes that assertions are intrinsically true or false. The problem is that the truth or falsehood of assertions is recognised through the *doxa* of the soul, and that this act of recognition is never fully safeguarded against the possibility of error. In other words, Plato does not deny that men may have access to genuine truth (as opposed to falsehood); what he denies is that men may be certain to have acquired this in an incontrovertible and absolute fashion.¹⁹

It will be useful here to get back to Ferrari's approach to the matter. Ferrari refers to a passage from the *Republic* (413a7–8) I have repeatedly quoted myself (including above, p. 73): the one stating that *aletheuein* (i.e. finding oneself in a condition of truth) consists in opining (*doxazein*) what is indeed the case. He notes that this does not remove the difference between *doxa* and *epistêmê*, since “knowledge possesses a foundational component that is instead absent in the *doxa*” (p. 129).²⁰ This foundational component, according to Ferrari, is what enables the transition from truth (which is also found in right *doxa*) “to the

¹⁹ See ch. 4 in the present book.

²⁰ In passing, I would like to note that Ferrari here seems willing to admit that from Plato's point of view even the kind of thinking which grasps truth may be referred to as *δοξάζειν*. But if this is admissible, why should we see a vestige of Protagoreanism in Theaetetus' claim – approved by Socrates (a 187a7–8) – concerning the identity between the inner work of the soul, which is perfectly distinct from perception, and *δοξάζειν*? And why not apply the same reasoning also to the following passage (189e–190a), in which Socrates makes the same point? Ferrari here only makes a fleeting reference to the above-mentioned passage from the *Sophist* in a footnote; as I have already observed, however, this analogy is enough in itself to rule out Nancy's hypothesis, which Ferrari had previously accepted.

certainty of this truth”, by operating “an epistemic transition²¹ from *aletheuein* to *gignoskein*” (p. 127). In other words, knowledge understood as genuine knowledge does not come about “through the simple possession of the truth but through the availability of a foundational procedure able to make a statement infallible and irrefutable” (p. 129).

Now, I certainly do not wish to deny that *logos* – i.e. the kind of knowledge whereby right *doxa* is supported by reasoning (as suggested by the *Meno*) – possesses a foundational component. Indeed, it would be absurd to deny this, since Plato makes it quite clear that the correct method for attaining knowledge consists not in formulating opinions in a casual and thoughtless manner in the hope that these might be true, but in exercising dialectics, reasoning, and argumentation. Rather, what I would deny is that this foundational component provides any irrefutable and infallible knowledge – in other words, to quote Ferrari, that it enables a transition from truth to the certainty of truth. For Plato, this is impossible: for an assertion must be true in order to be infallible; yet because the act manifesting the truth of an assertion is performed by *doxa* – as the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* clearly state – and because *doxa*, by its very nature, may also be false, no assertion can ever be intrinsically irrefutable or infallible. Ferrari’s hypothesis could only be confirmed if it were possible to attain certainty without passing through truth, which is to say without passing through *doxa* which, according to Plato, is the only function capable of formulating true assertions (as suggested by the aforementioned passage of the *Republic*, *aletheuein* is a form of *doxazein*). If there existed “a foundational procedure able to make a statement infallible and irrefutable”, this procedure would of course have to be provided by *logos*, the moment it is added to true opinion. The *Theaetetus*, however, when stating that the addition of *logos* to true opinion would simply mean the addition of right opinion to true opinion, correctly points out that no procedure of this sort actually exists.

One might object that the interpretation I am suggesting is rejected both in the *Meno* and in the *Symposium*, since these dialogues claim that if *logos* (or, more accurately, *logon didonai*) is added to right opinion, the latter turns into a science (leaving aside here Plato’s well known penchant for terminological variation). Against this objection, however, let us simply recall what has already been stated above. What distinguishes knowledge from right opinion is precisely the fact that it consists in right opinion accompanied by *logos* (or supported – as we read in the *Meno* – by reasoning concerning causes). From a general point of view, then, right opinion is unfounded knowledge (which as such remains nothing but *doxa*),

²¹ See Ferrari (2007).

whereas genuine knowledge is opinion founded upon reasoning; hence, it may also be referred to as *epistêmê*, precisely to emphasise the difference between it and unfounded *doxa*.

Clearly, there is nothing that prevents man from possessing *epistêmê*, if by this we simply mean the possession of well argued true opinions. But if we take *epistêmê* to mean infallible knowledge, capable of purifying itself from all *doxastic* elements (as in the *Theaetetus*), then this *epistêmê* proves unattainable, since it coincides with *sophia*, which is the exclusive privilege of the gods (as we read in the *Symposium*). As has been noted a number of times by now, it seems that man could only reach this goal if he could attain a kind of knowledge completely different from *doxa*. But knowledge, as it is described in both the *Meno* and the *Symposium*, stems from the addition *doxa* + *logos* (*logon didonai*):²² it is clear, therefore, that in the final outcome *doxa*, with all the weaknesses it entails, is not removed but rather preserved. When in the final section of the *Theaetetus* Plato attacks the definition of *epistêmê* as “true opinion accompanied by *logos*”, he is not refuting an incorrect definition: what he is doing is showing that if we accept this definition as describing the highest degree of knowledge attainable by man (as he himself does in the *Meno* and *Symposium*), we must realise that the *doxastic* component remains nonetheless present within it – inevitably and decisively so.

If we keep these premises in mind, it is easy to see that no real discrepancy exists between the *Meno* (which states the need for true *doxa* to be connected

²² According to Ferrari in the *Meno* we do not find the additive model of knowledge (knowledge = opinion + something else). It is true that in the definition of *epistêmê* provided in this dialogue – unlike in the last definition discussed in the *Theaetetus* – “it is not said that knowledge is opinion” (p. 139). Yet in the *Meno* Socrates claims that opinions (which in themselves are as elusive as Daedalus’ statues), “once they are fastened, in the first place they turn into knowledge, and in the second, into stable knowledge” (98a6–7). What this necessarily means, however, is that right opinion coincides with unstable opinion, *epistêmê* with stable opinion. In other words, as showed by Fine’s conclusive refutation of Sedley’s opposite (and quite uncommon) opinion, in the passage at issue “knowledge is a species of belief” (Sedley 1996, p. 93; Fine 2004, p. 52). Moreover, the *Symposium* suggests much the same thing: knowledge is right *opinion* accompanied by the capacity to give reasons (202a5–6); as such, it is still a form of *opinion*. From neither of the two passages, then, can we infer that the addition of *logos* turns opinion into something completely different. And this is perfectly consistent with what is said about *logos* in the *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, *Symposium*, and *Seventh Letter*. What is at issue here is not the existence of infallible knowledge, but the possibility for the knowledge to be engendered by *logos*. Hence the reference to reminiscence, which according to Ferrari would be further evidence for the distinction between the euporia of the *Meno* and the aporia of the *Theaetetus* (p. 139), may actually be taken as evidence in support of the very opposite argument – as we shall later see in more detail.

to and supported by *logos*) and the *Theaetetus* (which states that *logos* cannot achieve anything more than *doxa*), since their claims are simply two sides of the same coin. In arguing that true *doxa* must come with *logos*, the *Meno* is not intended to suggest that *logos* will turn the fallibility of *doxa* into the infallibility of *epistêmê*; rather, it means that unless right opinion is supported by *logos*, it will only be casual, occasional, volatile and unpredictable, whereas *logos* is capable of producing a far greater number of far more consistent (albeit not infallible) true opinions. In arguing that *logos* cannot achieve anything more than true *doxa*, the *Theaetetus* is not intended to suggest that relying on *doxa* devoid of *logos* is the same thing as relying on *logos*; rather, it means that while the use of *logos* is far more effective than that of unreflected opinion for attaining truth, still we cannot expect *logos* to take the form of infallible *epistêmê*, since the truth it attains will always have the nature of true opinion.

The superiority of *logos* over right opinion (or right judgement), therefore, is not due to the degree of truth attained, since the two terms are not homogeneous. The aim of enquiry is always to produce true opinions. On the one hand, *logos* is the best means for man to reach this goal (see *Phaed.* 85c–d; 89c–91d); on the other, truth has no degrees. When thought – as in the case of human beings – is dianoetic in character, opinion and judgement, if true, simply coincide with truth.

10. COHERENTISM VS. INFALLIBILISM

Some indirect confirmation of what I have been arguing is provided by Ferrari himself, since he shows a certain partiality for the coherentist interpretation of Platonic epistemology (the kind illustrated by Gail Fine's Interrelational Model of Knowledge²³). The reason for this partiality lies in the fact that it represents a "serious and basically winning challenge" against the intuitionistic interpretation of Plato's epistemology (p. 132): which, as we know, he firmly rejects. Actually, the coherentist model represents an alternative not so much or not just to intuitionism, but more generally to foundationalism, whether this is understood in intuitionistic terms (knowledge by acquaintance) or in propositional terms (knowledge by description). Coherentism, in other words, offers an interrelational model of knowledge whereby the meaning of a term is clarified through a circular procedure, which is to say through its relation to all other terms, precisely because it denies that knowledge may be attained through any final definition

²³ On Fine's interpretation of Plato's epistemology, see ch. 3 and 4.

of the essence of a thing, i.e. by means of irrefutable and infallible assertions. Coherentism, in this sense, is precisely intended to make room for a kind of knowledge that is propositional in nature, yet neither irrefutable nor infallible, as definitional assertions are intended to be: for the interrelational method is still a circular and indirect one; and while the circle it creates is not bound to be a vicious one, it is intrinsically non-conclusive, and hence weaker than the straight and direct route provided by definition. So anyone who, like Ferrari, believes that according to Plato knowledge rests on irrefutable and infallible assertions shows that he or she is trusting an epistemological model which is far stronger than the interrelational one, namely that ultimately resting on definition: for what else could an irrefutable and infallible assertion be if not a definition? And yet, where in Plato do we find assertions of this kind? If we rule out simply analytical propositions,²⁴ it is easy to see that there are no such assertions in Plato's dialogues.²⁵ And this is precisely the reason why, once we rule out intuitionism, the only alternative we have to avoid scepticism is the coherentist model.²⁶

To switch from exegesis to evaluation, I really cannot agree with Ferrari that the "epistemic transition" from truth to irrefutable and infallible certainty is "one of the most brilliant and prophetic insights of Plato's epistemology" (p. 130). In my view, this is far from being a brilliant thesis, still less a prophetic one: for not only philosophy but even science has long stopped purporting to offer infallible or irrefutable assertions. Not to mention the undesirable ethical and political implications of this thesis: Popper's totalitarian Plato follows as a direct

²⁴ Here is an example directly pertaining to our argument: once we have established by definition that *epistêmê* is infallible whereas *doxa* is not (*Resp.* 477 e), it is clear that the assertion according to which there is an unbridgeable gap between *epistêmê* and *doxa* automatically becomes an incontrovertible certainty (cf. *Men.* 98b). Obviously, however, this certainty for us does not mean that we possess genuine knowledge.

²⁵ On definitions in Plato see ch. 8 and 10.

²⁶ I am aware that my reading of Plato has sometimes been taken to suggest that I wish to make a sceptic of him. Yet ever since my first book I have sought to make it clear that this is not my intention at all (Trabattoni, 1994, 2002). Rather, I believe that Plato's aim is to avoid the kind of scepticism that might arise from an acknowledgement of the fact that human thought is not and cannot be infallible. It would be a meagre satisfaction indeed to claim that human knowledge is infallible when it is not. Scepticism is the necessary outcome of the idea that the only way of forestalling this risk is to affirm the infallibility of human thought: for once we realize that this infallibility is nowhere to be found (since *logos* is mobile by nature and we cannot rule out the possibility that our assertions will be refuted by other interlocutors through arguments we have not yet thought of, or simply in the future), scepticism is unavoidable.

consequence on the political level of the dogmatic interpretation of Plato on the epistemological one.²⁷ Plato's truly brilliant and prophetic idea was rather that of paving a new path for human thought, a difficult yet possible one, founded on the careful use of *logos*, of dialectics, and of critical reasoning: a path as removed from scepticism, which deprives man even of the capacity to attain knowledge he actually possesses, as it is from dogmatism, which harbours the illusion of being able to attain certain and infallible knowledge. While granting *logos* a foundational character with respect to truth and knowledge (in the sense that knowledge and truth are seen as being "founded" and attained through the use of dialectical reasoning), Plato does away with the dangerous illusion that makes *logos* infallible (and hence with the undesirable ethical and political implications of this view); in doing so, he makes man once again responsible for his own choices, decisions, and judgements.

11. PLATO'S EPISTEMOLOGY: A COHERENT PICTURE

What has been argued so far is enough to provide a rather clear idea of the essential agreement between the epistemology outlined in the *Theaetetus* and that presented in other dialogues. For further evidence, I would refer to what I have argued elsewhere.²⁸ In what follows, I only wish to offer some general considerations and a few new suggestions.

With regard to the problem of knowledge, Plato adopts two points of view which are not antithetical but complementary: on the one hand, on several occasions, he claims that in point of principle knowledge, if it is genuine, must be certain and infallible; on the other, when he must switch from the definition of principles to the identification of the highest form of knowledge accessible to man, Plato restricts his claims by resorting to a wide range of conceptual and linguistic tools. At times, as in the *Phaedrus* and especially the *Phaedo*, this difference is more or less explicitly connected to the metaphysical dualism that stands at the heart of Platonic ontology: perfect and infallible knowledge, which has the ideas as its object, is only available to the disembodied soul; the knowledge available to man, by contrast, is of the indirect, dianoetic and discursive sort, and as such cannot be infallible. Yet even in those cases in which a dualist ontology is not explicitly introduced, the declaration of principle concerning the nature of knowledge as such always comes with a warning that this kind of knowledge may

²⁷ See Trabattoni (2010).

²⁸ On the *Republic*, see Trabattoni (1994), pp. 149–166; ch. 8 in this book; on the *Symposium*, Trabattoni (2006); on the *Phaedo*, Trabattoni (2011).

only partially be attained and drawn upon by man, including philosophers (as in the case of the *Meno*, *Symposium* and *Republic*, for instance).

This does not mean, however, that the declarations of principle are useless. On the contrary, according to a rule constantly applied by Plato, it is absolutely necessary for a perfect model to exist in order for us to be able to approach it and imitate it. In the case of knowledge, this need is perfectly illustrated by the doctrine of *anamnesis*: in order for it to be possible to set out on a quest to attain even partial and approximate knowledge of the truth through discursive thought (the only kind of thought available to man), some previous (yet lost) knowledge must exist beforehand that is both certain and irrefutable – for what makes approximation possible is precisely the existence of a model. So when Plato assigns knowledge as such absolute qualities, this should not be taken to mean that man can draw upon such knowledge; but neither should it be taken to mean that, if this is not the case, it makes Plato's claims pointless or unjustified.

Clearly, this arrangement is not to be found in all Platonic texts addressing epistemological issues. On the one hand, however, it serves as an underlying point of reference for all dialogues, helping solve a range of problems that would otherwise prove extremely embarrassing (above all, the apparent ambiguity of Plato's treatment of thought, which is described in both discursive and intuitive terms);²⁹ on the other hand, there is no Platonic passage that openly refutes it (i.e. that suggests it is wrong, when it is not explicitly introduced). Upon closer inspection, it seems that it is no coincidence that the same analysis of thought (also covering its necessary relation to *doxa*) as is provided in the *Theaetetus* is also found in the *Sophist*. By showing that infallible *epistêmê* could only be attained by the human soul if thought were not *dianoetic* (and dialectical) in nature, the *Theaetetus* implicitly suggests that dialectics, fallible as it may be, is nonetheless the only means at man's disposal for thinking about the intelligible. The description of the dialectical method is in fact one of the central

²⁹ Intuitive thought is typical of the disembodied soul, discursive thought of the soul in its mortal state. It is rather curious that this simple distinction (confirmed by Plotinus, who attributes discursive thought to the soul and intuitive thought to the *nous* – while introducing significant changes, as mentioned in n. 17) is practically never taken into account (see ch. 11 and 12 in the present book); and this, despite the clear textual intimations offered by Plato (in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*). Let us add that this hypothesis helps easily refute the accusation sometimes levelled against the doctrine of reminiscence that it leads to an endless stream of references: for – so the argument goes – if all present knowledge implies pre-existing knowledge, should this not also apply to the knowledge possessed by the disembodied soul? Actually, the answer is no, if reference to something else is only implicit in discursive rather than intuitive thought. See Trabattoni (2006) p. 705; Id. (2011), pp. xxxviii and n. 43.

themes of the *Sophist*. Yet there is more to it: for in the *Sophist* we also find the famous and controversial statement according to which the notion that ideal reality might be devoid of movement and life is utterly inadmissible (248e–249a). The embarrassing aspect of this thesis lies in the fact that in previous dialogues Plato had argued that the only possible way to define ideal reality is to say that it is what always remains the same and identical to itself (and hence is immovable).

Still, this is no reason to believe that Plato is being inconsistent. The mobility of the ideas discussed in the *Sophist* ultimately boils down to the mobility they possess on account of the fact that they may be known (248e). It is not mobility *quoad ideas*, but *quoad nos*. It is the human soul that, by virtue of possessing discursive thought, is required to understand the ideas – to the extent that these may indeed be understood – thus introducing mobility within that world. And the soul does so simply by establishing relations between ideas, based on both participation and predication; so it is not a matter of grasping ideas directly, in their bare essence (as might be the case with intuitive thought or definitions), but rather of setting ideas in relation to one another by predication (of the “s is p” sort). It goes without saying that predication, which is to say assertion, here will only prove true or false if it is accompanied by judgement (i.e. *doxa*). If thought cannot but be dialectical, this means that it cannot in any way free itself from *doxa*. As Aristotle clearly realised, in order to make the transition from the fallibility of Plato’s argument to the certainty of demonstration, it is necessary to abandon *diairesis*, dialectics and dialogue in favour of definition and demonstration.³⁰

Much has already been said about the *Phaedo*. Here, however, a few clarifications are in order.³¹ As previously mentioned, early on in the dialogue Socrates claims that “either knowledge cannot be acquired at all or only after death; for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body, but not before” (66e). This claim is often taken to mean that Socrates is simply promoting the superiority of intellectual knowledge – through which the soul strives to free itself from the body – over the knowledge acquired through the senses or in some way affected by physical needs. But actually this cannot be all that Socrates means. For indeed his argument is intended to justify before his friends not just his serene acceptance of looming death but also the principle according to which philosophy is nothing but a way of training and preparing oneself for death. Now,

³⁰ For a comparison between Plato’s position and Aristotle’s, Trabattoni (2005), pp. 139–151.

³¹ I am here summarising what I have more extensively argued in Trabattoni (2011), pp. xxiii–xxvii, and (2014).

in order for this demonstration to make any sense, it is absolutely necessary to posit that Socrates expected to attain the goal to which he had devoted his whole life, namely acquiring knowledge of reality in itself (i.e. ideas), *only after his death*. But if this is the case, then it is just as necessary to assume that this goal *cannot be attained during our mortal life*.

Much the same applies to reminiscence. While this doctrine is explicitly invoked by Ferrari, also with reference to the *Meno* (p. 139),³² it actually proves the exact opposite of what he wishes to argue. In the *Phaedo* Plato introduces it to show that the soul must necessarily exist even before becoming embodied. In support of this claim, he shows that within the soul traces may be found of a form of knowledge (the knowledge of ideas) that it cannot have acquired in its present life. In order for this argument to work, it is therefore absolutely necessary to assume that the soul cannot achieve full knowledge of ideas in its mundane state; otherwise, the presence of such traces could be explained on the basis of experiences made by the soul in its present life, which would make the whole argument pointless as a way of showing that the soul must have made – i.e. cannot not have made – these experiences before becoming embodied. Unless the above premise holds, the demonstration proves nothing at all.

In this respect, the doctrine of reminiscence is fully consistent with the secondary place assigned to *logos* through the notion of a “second sailing” and with the idea of the intrinsic fallibility of *logos* put forth in the *Theaetetus*. Ultimately, this doctrine presents itself not as a method for regaining full (and hence infallible) knowledge of ideas, but rather as a way of representing the unbridgeable gap between the full knowledge of ideas available to the disembodied soul and the merely approximate knowledge of it which the soul may acquire in its mortal state. For while ideas can only be an object of recollection, meaning that no immediate and direct knowledge of them may be acquired, man’s knowledge of ideas necessary takes the form of propositional thought, which consists in the description of these memories. This is indeed the typically human way of thinking – subject to *doxa* – which Socrates talks about in the *Theaetetus*. The notion of an antenatal knowledge of ideas implied by the doctrine of *anamnesis*, then, not only in no way contributes to showing that the knowledge produced by *logos* is infallible, but actually proves the opposite.

³² Ferrari (2011), p. 139.

12. ON THE *TIMAEUS* AND MORE

I believe it is possible to show that in the *Timaeus* too (a dialogue which – unlike Ferrari – I have focused on very little so far) the same epistemological and metaphysical picture may be found as that I have just illustrated; and this particularly with regard to the complementary presence of a strong epistemology for principles and a relatively weak one with respect to the human level.

As regards the former epistemology, suffice it to mention the beginning of Timaeus' cosmogonic account (27e–28a), where a neat distinction is drawn between sensible reality and intelligible reality, and between the two cognitive faculties corresponding to them (*noesis* accompanied by *logos*; *doxa* accompanied by perception). A first hint of the fact that this account only applies on a very theoretical level is already found in Timaeus' own words, where he states that this (strong) distinction is based on his own opinion (*doxa*, which is clearly weak).³³ I believe it cannot be objected that Plato here paid little attention to the words he was using: for as far as the running dialogue between author and reader goes, he was rather seeking to highlight the fact that while this metaphysical difference is being enunciated in clear-cut and explicit terms, like all forms of human knowledge it is nonetheless subject to the inexorable yoke of *doxa*.

Evidently, however, there is more to it. A few pages later, Timaeus states the rule according to which accounts must agree with the objects they refer to:

accounts (*logoi*) which deal with what is stable and firm and discernible by the aid of thought will be stable and unshakable; and in so far as it is possible and fitting for accounts to be unrefuted and undefeated, and they must in no way fall short thereof. (29b)

This passage illustrates precisely what we already know from the *Phaedo*, namely that the intellectual knowledge available to man unfolds through *logoi*, and that the duty of man when resorting to them in an attempt to grasp motionless and intelligible reality is to endeavour to make the *logoi* as similar to their object as possible, i.e. as immune from refutation and the chance of being overturned by opposite accounts as possible. What man can and must do is ensure that he overlooks nothing in this endeavour. Yet at the same time, this means that human accounts cannot attain the kind of absolute firmness and solidity (coinciding with infallibility on the epistemological level) that constitutes the very nature of their object.

³³ See 27e5: “according to my opinion” (κατ’ ἐμῆν δόξαν). See too Bonazzi (2003), p. 134.

Finally, let us consider what Timaeus states at 68d:

But should any inquirer make an experimental test of these facts [issues related to the theory of perception – which makes no difference, however, since the following are perfectly general statements], he would evince his ignorance of the difference between human and divine nature, for whereas the godhead is sufficiently wise and powerful to blend the many into one and to dissolve again the one into many, there exists not now, nor ever will exist hereafter, a man capable of doing either of these things.

It is clear that the gods are here assigned – and men denied (in a most emphatic manner that leaves no hope for the future) – a certain kind of *epistêmê* (the verb used by Timaeus is *epistamai*). The context, then, is the one we are familiar with – indeed, the parallels with the *Symposium* are almost self-evident. As Fronterotta observes in a note to his translation, this seems rather curious, given that in the dialectical dialogues dialectics is not at all denied to man, but rather presented as the art of philosophers.

However, a detailed analysis of the nature of dialectics, as it emerges from some of the passages in the dialogues focusing on it,³⁴ actually leads the whole question back to the exact point that was made earlier on in this chapter. Dialectics, which is to say the Platonic expression of the Interrelational Model of Knowledge, is a potentially endless process (as is induction according to the enlightening comparison drawn by Aristotle), since in order to attain exhaustive results, it would have to identify all positive and negative relations between all things (where “things” also includes parts of larger objects).³⁵ If knowledge is explicitly identified with dialectics, this is precisely where the difference between human and divine knowledge comes into play: for only the gods – not men – are capable of carrying out the endless task of dialectics in a really exhaustive manner. Once again, this suggests that a distinction can and must be drawn between a model of divine knowledge (here identified with a kind of exhaustive dialectics: i.e., as illustrated by the *Meno* and *Sophist*, a kind of definitive *logon didonai* capable of fully covering all arguments) that can produce infallible results, and an approximate form of knowledge that is incapable of identifying infallible and irrefutable assertions.³⁶

³⁴ See ch. 2, p. 30, n. 35.

³⁵ See *Parm.* 136b.

³⁶ Here too the excursus of the *Seventh Letter* proves highly revealing, since it states (343c–d) that the philosophical search for the “fifth” (which is to say the essence of things, which answers the question “What is it?”) is always exposed to the danger of being

I have strewn my account with a few casual references to the philosophical excursus of the *Seventh Letter*. I shall proceed no further in this direction, since many scholars (including Ferrari, I believe) consider the epistle to be a spurious text. I only wish to make one observation. Both the congruences I have noted and the central theses upheld in the excursus (the structural weakness of *logoi*, the discursive nature of the *nous*, and hence the incapacity of thought thus conceived to grasp the essence of things) clearly show that this text perfectly fits the picture of Platonic epistemology we get from the dialogues. The idea of discrepancies on the theoretical level, therefore, cannot be invoked to support the athetesis of the letter.

13. CONCLUSION

If the picture of Platonic epistemology I have presented is a plausible one, there is no reason to argue that the *Theaetetus* reflects a perspective which was not shared by its author. On the contrary, the epistemology of the *Theaetetus* fits the rather organic and consistent underlying framework that is outlined in the previous dialogues and further developed in the later ones; indeed, it illustrates and stresses certain aspects of this framework that are largely sidestepped elsewhere. Besides, I believe that this is the overall structure of Plato's oeuvre: we find a background common to all his writings, which is nonetheless not explicitly presented in each one of them. Yet below this grid, the dialogues each emphasise a specific theme in turn, something which should be viewed not in terms of inconsistency or contrast, but of dialectical complementarity. Epistemology offers an effective example of this. The common background here might be defined as follows. According to Plato, the human soul has three ways of learning things about the external world:

- a) perception, which is infallible yet insufficient, both because it depends on intellectual knowledge and because the appropriate object of knowledge is not the sensible but the intelligible;
- b) discursive knowledge (which man must confine himself to in his embodied condition), which is superior to perception because it (also) has the intelligible

refuted (necessarily forcing us to repeat the practice of *logon didonai* over and over again) not because of any accidental deficiency on the part of the interlocutors, but because of the structural weakness of man's means of acquiring knowledge (namely "the four", which according to Plato include *logos*, *epistêmê* and *nous*, as well as right opinion).

- as its object, yet fallible because it is dependent on *doxa* understood as the judgement of the soul;
- c) intuitive thought (only available to the disembodied soul), which is superior to both because it is directed towards the intelligible but is also infallible, since it is independent from *logos*, assertion and judgement (and hence in no way contaminated by *doxa*).³⁷

When it comes to the notion of *epistêmê*, Plato employs it in a rather generic and vague manner. If by *epistêmê* we mean final and infallible knowledge, then only c) is *epistêmê*; if by *epistêmê* we mean a form of knowledge which is not purely *doxastic* and accidental, one resting on some kind of foundation, then the term *epistêmê* may be applied not just to knowledge b), but also to knowledge a), which has the sensible as its object.³⁸

This said, the different intentions underlying the various dialogues produce different nuances that often risk becoming actual omissions. For instance, while the explicit consolatory purpose of the *Phaedo* leads Plato to mostly emphasise c) – which is to say the fact that man can only attain full knowledge after death – the political aim of the *Republic* calls for a certain reticence on the matter: it suggests that the difference between human knowledge (philosophy) and divine knowledge (*sophia*) should be pushed into the background in order to stress the superiority of philosophers' knowledge, and hence of thought in general, over the mundane knowledge represented by *doxa*. According to this picture, Plato clearly has no wish to stress the fact that judgement is still a form of *doxa* in the *Republic* (as he does in the *Theaetetus*), and thus emphasise the *doxastic* nature of philosophy (as he does in the *Symposium*). In the *Republic*, therefore, *doxa* is chiefly defined as weak knowledge that has the sensible as its object. And yet, as we have seen, in the *Republic* we also find plenty of hints as to the fact that the themes which Plato does not stress much – for the reasons just outlined – are nonetheless present in the background.

³⁷ To avoid possible misunderstandings, I should point out that this taxonomy is not inferred on the basis of the differences between human beings and gods, or between embodied and disembodied souls. The three kinds of knowledge exist in a natural and independent way, and in parallel there exist faculties that are suitable or unsuitable for them, and beings that possess or lack them.

³⁸ This topic is too complex to be discussed here. For an overview, I would refer to G. Fine's studies (most of which have been collected in Fine 2003): Fine argues that just as there is *doxa* concerning the intelligible, so there is *epistêmê* concerning the sensible. With regard to the more specifically Platonic use of the word *epistêmê* in this sense, I shall only refer here to *Phaed.* 73c, where the term is clearly applied to the sensible sphere.

A similar argument might be made for more or less all other dialogues. For once we establish what Plato wishes to emphasise and why in a text, we will find that what does not lie in the foreground is not *ipso facto* being ruled out or denied: either it will be present to a lesser degree, or it will be present implicitly; or if it is omitted completely, it will still be possible to integrate it within the argument of the dialogue without any contradiction. This is the case, for instance, in the *Theaetetus*: while the text contains no explicit reference to reminiscence,³⁹ and hence to the idea expounded in the *Phaedo* according to which genuine knowledge is intuitive and only available to the disembodied soul (c), not only is this idea not all in contrast to what is stated in the *Theaetetus*, but it can harmoniously be integrated within the argument of the dialogue. Doing so actually helps grasp the overall meaning of the *Theaetetus*: it helps understand why the attempt to find within the human faculties a form of knowledge that is infallible and free from any contamination with *doxa* is destined to fail.

³⁹ This is not to say that likely allusions to the doctrine are nowhere to be found in the dialogue: one might possibly be identified in the passage where Socrates uses the example of a law court to illustrate the difference between direct perception and testimony based on recollection (200d–201c, on which ch. 3); another allusion might be found in the above-mentioned passage in which Socrates' right opinion about Theaetetus is said to be based on recollection (209c: the possible allusion being to the fact that when men's opinions are true, they are generally connected to this pre-existing knowledge).

CHAPTER 6

DAVID SEDLEY'S *THEAETETUS*

1. THE PUZZLE OF THE *THEAETETUS* AND SEDLEY'S SOLUTION

The *Theaetetus* has always represented a difficult problem to solve for Plato's readers, starting from the earliest interpreters. As was already perfectly clear to the author of an ancient commentary (partially preserved on papyrus),¹ the *Theaetetus* would appear to be adding marked traces of scepticism to a thought, such as that of Plato, that is meant to possess a conclusive character. What makes the matter even worse is the fact that this scepticism seems to concern the very issue of epistemology: for the dialogue provides a series of attempts to define knowledge that ultimately lead to no definite outcome. In the light of the above view of Platonic thought as conclusive and anti-sceptical in character, it thus becomes necessary to find a way to neutralise this threat by showing that the dialogue is only apparently inconclusive. The work by David Sedley I shall here be discussing is precisely one of this sort.² Now, since the present is simply a critical note, it is first necessary for me to make one important premise. In order to focus on the more controversial aspects of the book, I will be glossing over many points with regard to which I share the author's conclusions to varying degrees. The critical tone of this note is chiefly due to the fact that Sedley has adopted as the guiding thread of his book a methodological hypothesis concerning the relations between Plato and his character Socrates that in certain ways is the exact opposite of the one I personally favour;³ the consequence of this is a reversal of perspectives that engenders further disagreement even in those cases where I would otherwise agree with Sedley's analysis.

The endeavour of saving the *Theaetetus* from the charge of scepticism has been taken up countless times by contemporary scholars, and in many different ways. The most classical and influential application of this method, as we know – and as Sedley himself recalls at the beginning of his work – is provided by F.M. Cornford.⁴ The question “why does the *Theaetetus* not reach any definition of the nature of knowledge?” is answered by Cornford by arguing that no mention is made in this dialogue of the doctrine of the ideas, by which the problem could easily have been solved (although I would like to note right from the start that

¹ *Commentarium in Platonis Theaetetum* (Bastianini – Sedley 1995).

² Sedley (2004).

³ See esp. Trabattoni (1996).

⁴ Cornford (1935).

this is not really an answer, since it does not explain why Plato avoids speaking about the ideas in the *Theaetetus*). Sedley's suggested reading (which, as the author himself points out, is indebted to Cornford's)⁵ is an original variation on this approach. The linchpin of his interpretation is the famous interlude in which Socrates – for the first and only time in the dialogues – compares himself to a barren midwife of others' thoughts. According to Sedley, there is nothing casual in this comparison, since Plato in the dialogue is deliberately presenting a “re-created” version of the historical or semi-historical Socrates from the aporetic dialogues (p. 8). In such a way, after having established his main doctrines of his later dialogues, and before developing his dialectical dialogues, Plato would here be illustrating to what extent Socrates' teaching constitutes an antecedent to these doctrines and a premise to the investigations carried out in his own later works. With the *Theaetetus*, in other words, Plato would be seeking to shed light on his own dependence upon Socrates. Most significantly, however, this operation has one drawback. The fact that the semi-historical Socrates discussed here ignores Plato's most important metaphysical doctrines and their consequences on the epistemological level explains why the *Theaetetus* fails to effectively solve the problems it raises: the speaker in the dialogue is Socrates, not Plato (and a clear distinction must be drawn between the two, according to Sedley); and it is Plato, not Socrates, who knows the answers. At most, Socrates can somehow anticipate these answers, thus taking on the role of “midwife of Platonism” mentioned in the title of Sedley's book.

2. SOCRATES IN PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY

The sheer fact that so many different readings have been offered, all pointing in the same direction, should make us wonder. For it is clear that every new attempt springs from dissatisfaction with previous ones. Might it not be the case that this dissatisfaction is due to the fact that we have been setting out from a wrong premise? In order to correctly understand the *Theaetetus*, might it not be necessary to free ourselves from all prejudices as to what Plato's philosophy is in general, and to simply interpret the dialogue as one part of this philosophy? To put it differently, why should the *Theaetetus* constitute a problem, if not in the light of what is believed to be the dominant character of Platonic thought, with which the dialogue inevitably appears to be entering into contrast? Why not read this dialogue too as a work that contributes to shaping this very image, along with

⁵ p. 6.

all others? From a methodological perspective, what is the point of setting out to interpret a text with the explicit intention of explaining why it “lacks” something?

If we accept the traditional chronology for the dialogues, it actually seems perfectly reasonable to ask ourselves – as Sedley does at the beginning of his book (p. 1) – why Plato chose to revert with the *Theaetetus* to the kind of aporetic dialectics typical of his first phase. The *Theaetetus*, however, is not the only non-conclusive dialogue we find among Plato's later works (we should at least add the *Parmenides*). Moreover, this question seems to assume on the one hand that no doctrines whatsoever are to be found in the aporetic dialogues, and on the other that the conclusive dialogues are in no way aporetic. But this, as I have attempted to show in some of my works⁶ – in agreement with most contemporary interpreters – is far from correct. If we acknowledge – as I believe we ought to – that conclusive and aporetic elements are dotted throughout Plato's dialogues, then the need to justify the allegedly exceptional nature of the *Theaetetus* becomes far less pressing.

An even more serious cause for concern is the fact that, in agreement with an old notion that was endorsed by Gregory Vlastos several years ago,⁷ the aporetic/conclusive dichotomy is still associated with the Socrates/Plato distinction: where, in Plato's writing, an argument is aporetic, Socrates is to be taken as Socrates; where an argument is conclusive, Socrates is to be taken as Plato. In the light of the recent research on Plato's Socrates, however, and more generally on the dialogical structure of his writing, I believe that a similar thesis can no longer be accepted.

Those who uphold this rigid division between Socrates and Plato in Plato's writing are bound of course to take account of the fact that in most cases the aporetic Socrates and the dogmatic Plato are represented by the same character, namely Socrates. Now, even provided we could establish for sure in what cases Socrates is simply a mask for Plato (p. 6), we should still ask ourselves who the other Socrates, differing from Plato, may be who appears elsewhere. Sedley describes this character as “the historical or semi-historical figure of that name familiar by Plato's early dialogues” (p. 8). It is rather difficult (if not impossible) to ascertain whether this figure might be the historical Socrates; and indeed it is worth recalling that Xenophon's Socrates, which we are in any case forced to take into account, is far less aporetic than the one featured in Plato's early dialogues. A reasonable hypothesis would be to argue that while Plato stripped this figure of much of its historical aspects, he emphasised some of its traits more than

⁶ For the sake of brevity, I shall only refer here to my general study Trabattoni (1998).

⁷ Vlastos (1991). See my review in Trabattoni (1993).

others,⁸ in such a way as to come up with the semi-historical image Sedley talks about. But even so, this would still be *a creation of Plato's* – which raises some important objections to Sedley's proposal.

First of all, according to the author, Plato had already developed “a major metaphysical doctrine” by the time he started writing the *Theaetetus*, one of which his spokesman in this work is “almost entirely innocent” (p. 7). Where, then, had Plato developed this metaphysics? Clearly, in the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. The leading speaker in these dialogues, however, is Socrates, just as in the *Theaetetus*. On what grounds, then, may it be argued that the Socrates of the *Republic* (for instance) is Plato, whereas the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is not? And why should this be argued in the first place? Is it not the case that behind all this there lies a methodologically incorrect and biased procedure, whereby Plato's philosophy is identified with what Socrates (or other speakers) say in certain dialogues, and everything else is then judged to be Platonic or non-Platonic in the light of it?

What further aggravates the problem, in this specific instance, is that the above method is used not only to solve possible contradictions between one Socrates and the other, but also in those cases where the only counterpart to be found is silence: as in the *Theaetetus* Socrates makes no reference to metaphysical dualism, the doctrine of the ideas or recollection, he cannot be Plato's spokesman. In relation to the passage of the *Theaetetus* about maieutics, Sedley goes so far as to draw two lists of topics: the first includes everything which is compatible with the representation Socrates gives of himself (as a “barren midwife”) and the second features those distinctly Platonic motifs that the “re-created” Socrates of the *Theaetetus* precisely appears to ignore. The latter include: transcendence (i.e. that of the ideas), psychic complexity, recollection, and physics (pp. 33–35). Now, it is clear that this method, if systematically applied, would have devastating effects. Should we argue that the *Phaedo* too features a “re-created” Socrates, given that we find no trace of the idea of psychic complexity within it?

And what about recollection? In the footsteps of the ancient commentator, Sedley suggests we should understand Socratic maieutics as a method for triggering (Platonic) recollection. But why, then, does Plato's Socrates not speak about this? Because – Sedley answers – the “re-created” Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is more similar to the Socrates of the *Apology* than that of the *Phaedo*, and hence knows nothing of this doctrine (p. 29). So what are we to make of the Socrates of the *Symposium*, who (albeit through Diotima) illustrates a path leading to the knowledge of the ideas without ever mentioning recollection? Should this Socrates be seen as a spokesman for Plato's later doctrines or not? Or

⁸ On this topics see Trabattoni (2014 bis).

are we to assume – by applying the same method as Sedley – that the Platonic character of the Socrates of the *Symposium* is ensured by the fact that the above doctrine of knowledge which ignores anamnesis is expounded by Diotima rather than Socrates himself? But who, then, is Diotima? And on whose behalf is she speaking? It is easy to see that if we follow this path we shall soon find ourselves in a blind alley.

A blind alley is more generally where one will end up through any attempt to draw interesting data on Plato's philosophy by analytically deciphering the masks of his characters, minutely speculating on who says what – in other words, approaching the theoretical contents of a text by examining the historical and psychological consistency of its speakers. A couple of examples will be in order here. Towards the beginning of the dialogue we find a section (147c7–148d7) which discusses mathematics in a way that might be taken to suggest (as already the anonymous commentator believed) that an allusion is being made to the *curriculum studiorum* for the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic*. Yet, as Sedley notes, only a fleeting reference is made here to this theme, which is moreover made explicit by Theaetetus, not Socrates. In Sedley's view, this is due to the fact that Plato only discovered the role of mathematics in his later dialogues (and especially the *Republic*), which is why the "re-created" Socrates of the *Theaetetus* couldn't have explicitly addressed the issue. On his part, this Socrates merely gives his assent, since he clearly ignores the deeper philosophical significance of mathematics in the eyes of readers well acquainted with Plato's philosophy (pp. 27–28). Is all this plausible? I think not. In the *Republic*, the educational role of mathematics is always illustrated by Socrates. If Plato had in general intended to neatly distinguish his own theses from those of Socrates – as he does in the *Theaetetus* according to Sedley – then it is unlikely that he would have chosen to expound these theses again elsewhere through Socrates (for indeed we know that Plato had few qualms in choosing other leading speakers when he deemed it appropriate). So again: why Theaetetus? In the dialogue by the same name, can Theaetetus be shown to be more Platonic than Socrates?

As is well known, in his digression on the nature of the philosopher Socrates describes this figure as someone who does not even know what street leads to the forum. As Sedley observes, the last page of the dialogue informs the reader that the protagonist actually knows the way to the forum perfectly well, since he heads off in that direction; hence, Sedley concludes, the philosopher portrayed in the digression cannot coincide with Socrates himself (p. 67). The digression, however, also speaks of a philosopher who – amongst other things – is not sure whether his neighbour is a man or a different animal (174b4), which obviously suggests that this is an intentionally and rhetorically hyperbolic description. It is rather unlikely, therefore, that one can draw from the passage information as precise as that which Sedley purports to be deriving from it. In order to grasp

the meaning of the excursus, we must rather ask ourselves, from a more general perspective, what Plato was trying to tell his reader by offering such an apparently one-sided portrayal: for abstract speculation on single sentences will not get us very far.

So it is either one or the other. Either we choose to adopt the so-called dialogical approach, or we go with the so-called spokesperson theory. In the former case, Plato never fully coincides with any of his characters, hence no claim to distinguish Socrates/Socrates from Socrates/Plato can obviously be made. On the contrary, we will be forced to admit that Plato is the one writing the dialogues, not the one speaking within them. Thus in no way are we forced to claim that an aporetic Socrates reflects an equally aporetic Plato, or that a dogmatic Socrates reflects an equally dogmatic Plato. And if this is the case, in order to understand the content of Plato's philosophy we will have to interpret the dialogues by examining them as a whole, instead of taking the convenient short-cut of selecting a spokesperson among the characters we like the most (e.g. the dogmatic Socrates rather than the sceptical one).

If, conversely, we accept the so-called spokesperson theory (as Sedley ultimately does),⁹ we are forced to credit Plato with everything that the leading speakers of his dialogues say, from the Socrates of his first writings to the Athenian of the *Laws*. But even if we choose this option, the outcome will be exactly the same as in the case of the opposite method: we shall no longer be able to distinguish between (a supposedly sceptical) Socrates/Socrates and (a supposedly dogmatic) Socrates/Plato.

As I have already noted elsewhere,¹⁰ not only is this supposed difference methodologically unjustified, but the very idea that where Plato presents a predominantly sceptical Socrates his aim is to faithfully portray the historical Socrates proves rather weak from an aetiological perspective. It is hardly plausible that Plato's "Socratism" – which plays such a pervasive role in his work (as shown by the sheer fact that he systematically adopts the quasi-oral method of dialogue) – is simply due to extra-philosophical concerns. If Plato perceived the aporetic side of Socrates' teaching, and widely drew upon it in his writings, this must clearly mean that he regarded it as being philosophically relevant – in other words, that it constitutes an integral part of his thought. As for the non-aporetic Socrates (or rather, the less or only slightly aporetic Socrates), who is also featured in the dialogues, Plato clearly did not regard him as being incompatible with the former, probably because he believed that this Socrates was simply presenting more explicitly the kind of solutions that the former Socrates (in Plato's view) had

⁹ p. 6.

¹⁰ Trabattoni (1996), pp. 896–897.

merely implied. If modern readers perceive a certain contrast between scepticism and dogmatism in the figure of Plato's Socrates in general, they should solve this problem *within the framework of Plato's philosophy* (which Socrates in a way exemplifies, as we have seen); they should not remove the aporetic Socrates from Plato's philosophy (by reducing him to the historical or semi-historical Socrates) and then keep only the assertive Socrates as Platonic.

Now, through the systematic use of this procedure – an improper one, in my view – the considerable array of subtle and thoughtful analyses comprising the book systematically reach a conclusion that is the exact opposite of the one which ought to be drawn: Sedley always evaluates Socrates' scepticism in the *Theaetetus* in the light of the dogmatism of Socrates (or other leading speakers) in other dialogues (thus attributing it to the semi-historical Socrates), whereas the reverse operation should also be performed, by making the (supposed) scepticism of the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* react upon the (alleged) dogmatism of Socrates in other dialogues. By doing so, we would realise that the "scepticism" of the *Theaetetus* is no monstrous presence to be exorcised at all costs, since it perfectly agrees with the issues raised by the supposedly dogmatic Plato and helps clarify them in the light of a picture of Plato's philosophy which takes all of its aspects into account.

Behind this problems there lies a more general question, which concerns precisely the overall picture of Plato's philosophy. According to the interpretative approach adopted by Sedley – which I am here discussing – Plato's philosophy can ultimately be identified with a minimum set of frequently recurring doctrines that may be used to judge just how Platonic anything is that appears to have an extemporary or eccentric character. But the fact is that it is difficult to pin down any such core in Plato's thought. Indeed, his work is replete with references to objects and/or concepts that constitute genuine *hapax legomena*: the idea of the good only appears in the *Republic*; that of limit and the unlimited is only discussed in the *Philebus*; the definition of being as *dynamis*, along with "parricide" and the doctrine of the five genera, is only found in the *Sophist*; the one-many relation is technically discussed only in the *Parmenides*; nowhere outside the *Theaetetus* are the definitions of knowledge it provides ever analysed; the cause of mixture is an exclusive feature of the *Philebus*; we only learn of the demiurge from the *Timaeus*; and only in the *Laws* does the issue of the divine really acquire any philosophical depth (besides, this is only a rough list, which might be extended considerably). And even if we wished to regard at least some of these elements as too specific, and to turn to something more general such as the metaphysical dualism between sensible objects and ideas, we would reach a similar conclusion. Where are the ideas – at any rate as they are presented in the *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Republic* – in the *Philebus* or even the *Sophist*? Or, indeed, in the *Laws*? What is left of the doctrine of the ideas

if we accept the teaching of the *Parmenides*? Why, even in the *Timaeus*, which clearly emphasises metaphysical dualism, the ideas play an utterly marginal role?

Nor should we place too much trust in tradition, starting from the most ancient one. First of all, this tradition is far from unambiguous. For Arce-silaus and Carneades, two scholars of the Platonic Academy, neither the doctrine of the ideas nor the metaphysical (and epistemological) dualism connected to it plays a central role in Plato's thought. Secondly, tradition will often wither a heterogeneous and complex philosophy into a small core of doctrines that are then turned into an official doxography and superimposed upon the rich content of the original texts, creating a completely one-sided view of it. The conclusion, then, must always be the same: since we are lucky enough to have all of Plato's writings, we cannot escape the duty of evaluating his philosophy in general, and individual dialogues in particular, by making a clean sweep of all prejudices, including the noblest and most well-established ones. Clearly, the *Theaetetus* too deserves to be studied precisely in this manner.

None of these observations, however, would appear to be decisive, if it were possible to show (as Sedley suggests) that the *Theaetetus* constitutes a unique exception within Plato's corpus, since despite being a later dialogue, it is the only one consciously fashioned upon the model of the early dialogues (in which Socrates allegedly reflects the traits of the historical Socrates). Now, given Plato's efforts in the *Theaetetus* to discuss highly relevant philosophical and epistemological problems (as also illustrated by the flourish of modern studies on the subject), the hypothesis that in this dialogue he strictly limited himself to presenting nothing more than what the historical or semi-historical Socrates might have said appears extremely implausible.

Most importantly, this hypothesis is not even justified in the case of Plato's early dialogues. It is quite possible for some dialogues to be more historically accurate than others; in fact, it is very likely, and it is just as likely that this is the case precisely with the dialogues from the first period. Yet one cannot infer from this that Plato set himself such accuracy as a limit: for as his later dialogues show, he ignores it whenever it suits him to do so. If in some cases Plato more or less respects the traits of the historical Socrates, this simply means that in those instances the historical traits of the Socrates portrayed are precisely the ones Plato needs in order to make use of the character in pursuit of his philosophical aims. Hence, in this case too, what we have is a completely constructed character, and this construction is partly based precisely on the choice of including certain historical aspects. Thus the historicity (or semi-historicity) that Socrates sometimes displays in Plato's writing always depends on Plato's own choices; consequently, it cannot be assumed as a criterion limiting the author's freedom

(by forcing him to have his character state certain things rather than others), or as a means by which the reader can explain the presence or absence of certain elements in a text.

3. FURTHER EXAMPLES OF SEDLEY'S METHOD

In the previous pages I have analysed some examples of the method systematically adopted by Sedley; here are some others:

- 1) in the excursus on the nature of the philosopher, the latter's heavenly destination alludes to the Platonic doctrine of the two worlds – the ideal and the sensible – which however is not discussed, since the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* ignores it (p. 71);
- 2) in the same passage, the reference to justice itself is Socratic and does not imply the presence of Platonic metaphysics (p. 73);
- 3) here again, the role of God (a notion compatible with the “re-created” Socrates) finds a counterpart in the role played by the forms in the *Republic* (which the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* cannot discuss, for the aforementioned reasons);¹¹
- 4) in a crucial passage of the dialogue, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* acknowledges a form of reasoning pertaining to *ousia*, but this is not enough for us to argue that he is aware of Plato's metaphysical principles: for Socrates here understands *ousia* as being in relation to sensible affections, whereas from a Platonic perspective the crucial connection is between knowledge and essences (pp. 110–111);
- 5) in the *Theaetetus* Socrates fails to solve the problem of falsehood because his approach is not metaphysical enough (unlike that of the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*);¹²
- 6) with regard to the metaphor of the aviary, Sedley observes that the embryonic list of categories which Socrates draws up here includes concepts such as being, otherness, sameness, oppositeness and similarity, but not change and rest (which are instead among the Greatest Kinds of the *Sophist*); Sedley explains this by arguing that the latter belong “primarily to metaphysical inquiry” (p. 144);
- 7) if in the latter part of the dialogue Socrates translates the question of mistaking 11 for 12 into the error of confusing the knowledge of 11 with the knowledge of 12, this may be explained on the grounds that the Socrates in question still

¹¹ p. 77.

¹² p. 134.

ignores the (Platonic) metaphysical distinction between numbers and the cognitive states through which they are grasped (p. 148);

- 8) with regard to the passage on “dreams”, Sedley notes that while Socrates is not yet a metaphysician, he is already capable of refuting pre-Socratic materialism (pp. 160–161).

The solution Sedley offers to all these problems (namely that what we have here is a “re-created” Socrates) predictably always leads to the same conclusion: that the *Theaetetus* has nothing interesting to say about Plato’s philosophical doctrine, since it always – and only imperfectly – recalls what may be read on the one hand in Plato’s later dialogues and on the other in his dialectical ones. The *Theaetetus* may therefore be useful for readers who wish to learn about Plato’s own stance with regard to his relation with Socrates, but not for readers who wish to learn about Plato’s actual philosophy (for which it is clearly better to turn elsewhere). But if we reverse this perspective, as I have suggested above, and approach the *Theaetetus*, like all other dialogues, as a part of Plato’s philosophy, we reach extremely interesting conclusions, which enable us to significantly enrich and complicate the picture we have of this philosophy (besides, it is far more productive to think that each Platonic dialogue has something interesting to say of its own than to believe that some dialogues are merely a censored counterpart to what is clearly stated elsewhere). Let us briefly return to the points listed above and newly examine them in this light, which is to say by attempting to identify what information about Plato’s philosophy might be drawn from them:

- 1) and 3) it is perfectly possible to conceive of metaphysical dualism without making any reference to the ideas (as is after all the case in Book x of the *Laws*);
- 4) in distinguishing between sensible knowledge and intellectual knowledge, Plato clarifies that the latter does not have a different source from the former, but always develops as a reflection on sense data;¹³
- 6) the list of categories provided in the *Sophist* is a purely approximate one and should not be regarded as a part of Plato’s doctrine that should never be subjected to discussion (and which may be used as a fixed criterion for evaluating other texts);
- 8) the need for metaphysics dialectically stems from the necessary refutation of pre-Socratic materialism. If the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* develops this refutation without discussing the ideas, this depends on the fact that Plato – the only subject it makes sense to talk about –

¹³ Cf. Trabattoni (1998), p. 112.

wishes to show that his metaphysics is required by the failure of opposite views (see p. 71). Consequently, if Plato were seeking to refute pre-Socratic materialism simply through his doctrine of the ideas, he would merely be countering one thesis by means of another, and thus we could not regard his view as proven. This – not his character's alleged ignorance – is the real reason why Plato in the *Theaetetus* has Socrates refute the materialism of the pre-Socratics without ever mentioning the ideas.

When it comes to the other points, things become rather more complicated. Let us start from 2). Adumbrated here is the problem of whether or not Plato in the *Theaetetus* might be speaking about the ideas (and hence whether the universals which are sometimes mentioned – as in the well-known case of the *koinà* – correspond to the Platonic ideas). Sedley's answer is obviously a negative one, consistently with his overall interpretation (p. 115). From a general point of view, one might observe that the amount of effort that has been spent in the critical literature in the attempt to trace the exact point in Plato's writing where we should stop speaking of Socrates' universals and start speaking of Plato's forms is quite disproportionate, considering the futility of the question. This endeavour rests on the assumption that in Plato's writing we find entities *x* that may be described as "Socratic universals" and entities *y* that may be described as "Plato's ideas", as well as on the rather naïve hypothesis that countermarks may be found to clearly distinguish the two. On the contrary, it is clear that everything *Plato's* Socrates says about universals, from the first dialogue to the last, is an integral part of the *Platonic doctrine of the ideas*. Indeed, for Plato "Socratic" universals already *are* the ideas, insofar as he believes that the precondition allowing Socrates – or anyone else – to enquire about universals is the fact that the latter exist as entities possessing the characteristics he assigns to them. Unless we wish to suggest that the ideas only come into play where Plato explicitly mentions universals in association with the attribute of separateness (a procedure that projects the interpreter's pedantry upon the author he is studying), we are forced to admit that the universals discussed in the dialogues always refer to Plato's ideas, even when they lack any countermarks, for the simple reason that the ideas are separate universals according to Plato, and that he deductively reached this conclusion precisely through the Socratic method of enquiry.

Points 5) and 7) have to do with the relation between the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. Sedley accepts the very traditional hypothesis according to which the *aporias* raised in the *Theaetetus* would find a solution in the following dialogue. If we then ask ourselves why a solution is not provided directly in the *Theaetetus*, the answer we get from Sedley is the usual one: because Plato's spokesperson in the *Theaetetus* is a Socrates who ignores his metaphysics, whereas the same cannot

be said of the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*. As a preliminary consideration, one might ask why, if the assumption that Plato had Socrates expound his own doctrines in the *Republic* and in the *Philebus* is correct, the Eleatic Stranger should be seen as being more Platonic than the Socrates of the *Theaetetus*.¹⁴ But I do not wish to dwell on this point. The real problem, in my view, is that the *Sophist* cannot be seen as providing any answer to the problem of falsehood raised in the *Theaetetus*, because the two dialogues tackle two different issues. The *Sophist* certainly indicates what conditions make it possible for someone to state the false (namely the existence of non-being as otherness), whereas the *Theaetetus* – if we accept the conclusions reached in *Theaet.* 185de – asks how it is possible for souls to give false judgements. Hence, with regard to point 7) in particular, it is easy to understand why Socrates in the *Theaetetus* translates the question of mistaking 11 for 12 into the error of confusing the *knowledge* of 11 with the *knowledge* of 12: the *Sophist* exhaustively illustrates the mechanism which is at work when one mistakes 11 for 12, whereas the *Theaetetus* asks how this can happen when a person *knows* both 11 and 12. In other words, the *Sophist* clarifies how it is possible for someone to be mistaken, if we acknowledge that this might indeed happen; the *Theaetetus* suggests that this cannot actually occur, if we acknowledge that the soul knows the intelligibles. This is precisely where we find the distinctive “part” of Plato’s doctrine offered by this passage: the notion that it is impossible for man to acquire full and perfect knowledge of intelligible entities, for else there would be no way of accounting for errors of judgement, whose *de facto* existence cannot be denied. That is to say: x (man perfectly knows the intelligibles) implies y (there are no errors of judgement), but since y is false, x must also be false.

As I have endeavoured to show in the first chapter, it is only against this background that we can understand the difficult passage about *allodoxia*. Sedley offers a very detailed reading of it, which may be summed up as follows: the *Theaetetus* translates negative predicates into a judgement of existence (whereby anyone who makes a false judgement is mistaking something that is for something else that is), the consequence being that falsehood becomes impossible (for a thing that is cannot be said not to be). On the contrary, falsehood in the *Sophist* does not coincide with the negation of a thing’s being, but with the negation of something that belongs to the subject in question, and which as such is not non-being but something other than the subject itself (p. 133). Upon closer scrutiny, however, we find that this hypothesis does not explain much at all, since it merely counters the *aporia* raised in the *Theaetetus* with the solution provided by the *Sophist*, without taking into account that two different issues

¹⁴ On this, see Gonzalez (2000).

are at stake in the two dialogues. In the *Sophist*, falsehood is clearly explained as the attribution to subjects of predicates that do not apply to them. In the *Theaetetus* this explanation is not enunciated, and the problem of falsehood is translated into the problem of how it is possible to mistake one noetic content for another in one's mind. What is the purpose of this move? It represents a transition from the epistemological level to the psychological one. The solution provided by the *Sophist* is not enunciated in the *Theaetetus* because actually it is not the appropriate answer to the problem raised: for the question is not "what happens when one formulates a false opinion?", as in the the *Sophist*, but rather "how is it possible to formulate a false opinion?" The *Theaetetus* offers the following answer to this question: if a person has false opinions – if, for instance, he considers an unjust action just – one possible explanation is that in his own mind he is confusing the notions of "just" and "unjust". Yet, in turn, how can this happen? In *Theaet.* 190a5–d2 Socrates actually observes that the person who within his souls grasps (ἐφαπτόμενος ... τῆ ψυχῆ) two intelligible contents (x) cannot reasonably claim nor opine that one is the other (y). But if this is the case, then x must be false. In other words: if false opinion stems from the fact that a person has an erroneous or imprecise knowledge of the notions he is applying to given subjects (such as "justice" the moment this is applied to the case "serving the advantage of the more powerful"), it must be assumed that the occurrence of false opinions implies precisely this erroneous or imprecise knowledge. The problem raised in this section of the *Theaetetus*, therefore, finds no solution in the doctrine of "otherness" enunciated in the *Sophist*. On the contrary, this doctrine may even be regarded as implicit to the *Theaetetus*: assuming, as the *Sophist* suggests, that formulating false opinions means predicating of a given subject a notion that does not apply to it, the *Theaetetus* asks how this can occur if the notion in question has been fully grasped and apprehended by the soul (the use of ἐφάπτομαι is precisely meant to stress this supposed state of "fullness"). Hence, it once again turns out that the *Theaetetus* provides an important part of Platonic epistemology which has nothing to do with what is stated in the *Sophist*, namely: the notion that the – empirically proven – persistence of false opinions implies that man cannot have any full and complete (ἐφαπτόμενος) access to intelligible notions. And should this appear to stand in contradiction to other parts of Plato's teachings (which in my view it should not), the interpreter's duty will still be to develop a reconciling model *within the framework of Plato's philosophy*: for it is far too easy to brush the *Theaetetus* aside by simply attributing it to a "re-created" Socrates.

4. DOXA

I shall now turn to examine – as succinctly as possible – a few other problems raised by Sedley’s work, starting from the question of *doxa*. When discussing the passage about the “wax tablet”, Sedley asks why Socrates rejects this metaphor even when it might effectively be applied to sensible knowledge. His answer is that the “re-created” Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is still searching for a unified model of judgemental processes, while ignoring the theories developed in the *Republic* (and later confirmed in the *Timaeus*) through which Plato “limits the operation of judgement (*doxa*, there better translated ‘opinion’) to the empirical realm” (p. 139). Let us note first of all that Sedley appears to ignore a considerable number of recent studies on the subject (and what I have in mind here are especially Gail Fine’s works)¹⁵ that show how in the *Republic* itself (not to mention the *Theaetetus*) *doxa* and *epistêmê* overlap in various ways. As Fine has observed (in order to then refute the idea that Plato may be credited with the so-called Two Worlds Theory), intelligible entities too are subject to opinion.¹⁶ But aside from this, with respect to *doxa* and the verb *doxazein* Sedley does not appear to assign any importance to the distinction between their meaning as “opinion/to opine” and their meaning as “judgement/to judge”.¹⁷ This is quite clear from the casual manner in which Sedley notes that *doxa* in the *Republic* is best translated as “opinion” rather than “judgement”. Now, the latter meaning is not only variously implied by Plato’s use of the term (e.g. in the above-mentioned passage from the *Republic*), but is also made explicit in the *Theaetetus* (190a) and *Sophist* (264a1–2). Let us leave the *Theaetetus* aside, to avoid any *petitio principii*. The *Sophist* provides good enough evidence in itself: “And when this (*viz.* affirmation and negation) is silently brought about in the soul, in the form of thought, can it properly be called anything but *doxa*” (a term which Fronterotta, in his recent translation of the dialogue, naturally renders as “giudizio”, or “judgement”)¹⁸

Thus reads the *Sophist*. But wasn’t the *Sophist* one of the texts in which Plato, according to Sedley, develops those metaphysical principles the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* utterly ignores? Should we not argue, then, that far from playing that role of expounder of Plato’s mature doctrines which Socrates is denied in the *Theaetetus*, the Eleatic Stranger is still caught up here with the problem of attempting to provide a unified model of knowledge, without taking into account

¹⁵ See esp. Fine (1978) and (1990).

¹⁶ Fine (2003), pp. 66, 85.

¹⁷ See ch. 3 and 4.

¹⁸ Fronterotta (2007).

the metaphysical dualism at work in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*? All this suggests that the matter is far more unsettled and complex than Sedley wishes to prove through his clear-cut distinctions.

Finally, in moving towards a conclusion, let me address a question pertaining (yet not exclusively) to philology. In the famous anti-sceptical argument which Socrates addresses against Protagoras in *Theaet.* 170c–171a, scholars have long identified one logical error. Socrates claims that if according to Protagoras it is true that all opinions are true, then the opinion must also be true according to which it is not true that all opinions are true. If, however, as Sedley observes, Protagoras' thesis implies that each subject exists in his own private world, then no refutation can transitively pass from one subject to another. Indeed, in order for the refutation to work, it is necessary to specify that it is Protagoras' own opinion that many people believe there to be false opinions. In this case, since Protagoras too maintains that according to many people not all opinions are true, and since he himself believes all opinions to be true, he must admit that the opinion of those people according to whom not all opinions are true must also be true, thus falling into self-contradiction. For Sedley, in order to rescue the argument we must therefore infer from the text that Protagoras accepts the thesis according to which there are some people for whom it is not true that all opinions are true. To support this argument, at line 170c2 Sedley favours the reading of **b** (τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ, "to Protagoras") over the reading attested in τω – and accepted both by Burnet and by the editors of the new OCT edition of the first and second tetralogy¹⁹ – namely ὦ Πρωταγόρα ("O Protagoras!", pp. 57–58). Now, what weighs against this suggestion is first of all the analogy with ὦ Πρωταγόρα at 170a6, whereas the supposed analogy with αὐτῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ ("to Protagoras itself") at 170e7 (which Sedley invokes in support of his reading: p. 59) rather helps explain the error of **b** at line 170c2 (as noted by Campbell).²⁰ Moreover, the resulting text (Τί οὖν τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ χρῆσόμεθα τῷ λόγῳ) is not only rather difficult, but can hardly be translated as Sedley suggests, namely "How then shall we run the argument for Protagoras?": for χρῆσόμεθα τῷ λόγῳ cannot be rendered too differently from "what shall we make of the argument?"; and even if we were to read τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ, this *junctura* could hardly mean "for Protagoras", but must also depend on the verb χρῆσόμεθα. So we could at most take the sentence to mean more or less "what, then, shall we make of Protagoras with

¹⁹ E.A. Duke, W.F. Hicken, W.S.M. Nicoll, D.B. Robinson, J.C.G. Stracham, *Platonis Opera*, vol. 1, Oxford 1995.

²⁰ "Bodl. Vat. pr. Ven. II have τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ. But the Bodleian has ω in the margin by an ancient hand. The reading τῷ may have been suggested by τὶ δὲ αὐτῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ infra E [i.e. 170e]" (See Campbell 1883, p. 105).

his argument?” – and certainly not what Sedley suggests (in other words, the reference to Protagoras would here be pointing to what came before, not what is to follow).

But even if we were to leave this philological issue aside, do such intricate explanations really contribute to our understanding of Plato's texts? As I shall never tire of saying, Plato's philosophy has much more to do with rhetoric than logic. Unlike what many contemporary interpreters would suggest, I do not believe that Plato's intention here is to construct logically unassailable arguments (even assuming that the rules governing such arguments were clear to him). As may be inferred from 171a, Plato is already thinking here of the dialectical (or, if we prefer, rhetorical) move of arguing that Protagoras' thesis is *de facto* heavily weakened by the widespread presence of opinions different from his own – something which would have been enough in itself to cause much embarrassment to a staunch upholder of opinion as the only criterion of truth. I cannot judge to what extent this argument holds from a logical standpoint. Yet I am quite confident that in this passage of the *Theaetetus* Plato has nothing more persuasive to offer. On this point, it will be worth quoting something Hans Georg Gadamer wrote twenty-five years ago: “For all my admiration of the rigorous accuracy of the logically inclined Platonic criticism issuing from Britain and America, I feel it amounts to much wasted effort, for it notes the lack of conclusive arguments on some points or introduces them *ex novo* on others, where in fact a very different objective is at play, namely to prove convincing through the use of persuasive arguments stemming from the immediacy of dialogue.”²¹

²¹ Gadamer (1991), pp. 274–275. The translation is my own.

CHAPTER 7
THE “VIRTUOUS CIRCLE” OF LANGUAGE
On the Meaning of Plato’s Cratylus

1. A “THREE TERMS” EPISTEMOLOGY: THE UNAVOIDABLE MEDIATION OF LOGOS

The analysis I intend to carry out here rests on the general presuppositions I have already expounded and relied on in the previous chapters, and which I shall be concisely listing below (starting from the most obvious and unanimously shared ones, for which no specific remarks are required).

- 1) According to Plato, knowledge¹ may be divided into sensory knowledge and intellectual knowledge.
- 2) Only intellectual knowledge has any philosophical value and may therefore be described as knowledge in the proper sense of the term.
- 3) The object of intellectual knowledge are not sensible objects, which are often characterised in the dialogues through formulas such as *ὡσαύτως αἰεὶ ἔχει κατὰ ταυτά* (“are they ever the same and in the same state”).²

The above principles have been accepted by the vast majority of interpreters. What is far more controversial, instead, is the issue of establishing the nature of the knowledge man has of intelligible realities and the degree of certainty (or approximation) this knowledge can attain.

With regard to the first of these two issues, we are essentially faced with two alternatives:

- a) an epistemology based on two terms, so to speak: soul \Rightarrow thing (idea). In this case, the knowledge which the soul has of the ideas is direct/intuitive;
- b) an epistemology based on three terms: soul \Rightarrow *logos* (true/false) \Rightarrow thing (idea). In this case, the knowledge which the soul has of the ideas is indirect/discursive.

¹ Here I am using the term “knowledge” in a very generic sense, to mean “any information acquired about something”.

² *Phaed.* 78d2–3. Similar expressions frequently occur in *Phaed.* 78c–80b. Phrases of this kind, however, are often used – positively to describe intelligible reality and negatively to describe sensible reality – in other dialogues as well. See *Crat.* 439e, *Soph.* 248a, 252a, *Polit.* 269d, *Phil.* 59c, *Resp.* 479a, 484b, *Tim.* 29a.

The solution I offer for such a dilemma depends upon these further general assumptions (which the reader will already be familiar with): Plato accepts both these epistemological models (which, to use Russell's terminology, may respectively be described as "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description"), while assigning them two separate and mutually exclusive spheres: model a) is at work with the disembodied soul, and more generally serves as an ideal theoretical structure which is *de facto* unattainable by man in his time-bound, bodily condition; model b) is at work instead with the embodied soul, and constitutes the only way in which the soul may gain whatever knowledge of ideal reality is granted to it while still conjoined with a body. The relation between the two epistemological models, moreover, is a hierarchical one, since the indirect knowledge of the ideas, mediated by the *logos*, is only ensured by antenatal intuition. According to Plato, this relation is based on the doctrine of recollection, which on the one hand places the direct/intuitive knowledge of the ideas in a past that is currently out of reach, but on the other opens up the possibility of acquiring indirect/discursive knowledge of the ideas through a partial recovery of the memories implanted within the soul: the questioning of the soul, the examining of its *doxai* and the critical assessment of the assertions (*logoi*) through which it attempts to describe the content of its memories constitute the exercising of philosophy for Plato, and the only real path by which to recover some knowledge of those ideal and always self-identical realities that may no longer be directly grasped through intellectual intuition.

According to the hypothesis just outlined, direct/intuitive knowledge represents the transcendent precondition, so to speak, for the only intellectual knowledge that is genuinely available, namely indirect/discursive knowledge. This hypothesis might be regarded as proven if the latter kind of knowledge were found to be the one actually advocated and practised in the dialogues, with the former only being present in the background. Indeed, the evidence pointing in this direction is quite strong: on the one hand in certain crucial passages of Plato's corpus we learn that intellectual knowledge develops through *logoi*; on the other, when it is a matter of describing this kind of knowledge, we find plenty of expressions that have directly to do with the *logos*, dialogical-discursive procedures (λόγος, δοῦναι καὶ ἀποδέχεσθαι λόγον, λόγον διδόναι, λογισμός, λογιστικόν, λογίζεσθαι, διαλέγεσθαι), the dialectical practice of asking and answering (ἐρωτᾶν τε καὶ ἀποκρίνεσθαι, ἐρωτήσεις καὶ ἀποκρίσεις), and so forth.³ Let us consider a few examples (which, unsurprisingly, for the most part occur in the *Phaedo* and the

³ On this topics, see also the evidence collected in ch. 8, esp. pp. 152–153.

Republic – and partly the *Parmenides* as well – since these are the only dialogues to discuss ever self-identical realities and the theme of their knowability at any real length).

Concerning the need for intellectual knowledge to pass through the *logos*, see in particular:

- a) *Phaedo* 99e4–6: “So I thought I must take refuge in *logoi* and investigate the truth of things (τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν) by means of words”. Note the expression “the truth of things”: to know what things are actually like, it is necessary to turn to *logoi*. Much the same is suggested by *Phaedo* 90d5–7, which states that those who out of mistrust forego *logoi* and spend the rest of their lives hating and reviling them are actually depriving themselves “of truth and knowledge of reality” (τῶν δὲ ὄντων τῆς ἀληθείας τε καὶ ἐπιστήμης).
- b) *Statesman* 286a5–7: “For the things that are without body, which are finest and greatest, are shown clearly only by verbal means (λόγῳ μόνον) and by nothing else”. The phrase “which are finest and greatest” clearly refers to the ideas, and the exclusivity implied by the assertion is striking: the ideas may *only* be grasped through the *logos* – in *no instance* by any other means.

Turning to the above-mentioned expressions, here too let us consider a few revealing examples:

- λόγος: *Cratylus* 436d4–6: Socrates speaks of the “great *logos*” and of the “lengthy investigation” that is needed in order to know “the first principle on any thing”; *Republic* 529d4: the ideas are identified as those things that are grasped “by *logos* and thought” (λόγῳ ... καὶ διανοίᾳ); 534b3–4: a dialectician is said to be someone able “to give an account of the being (τόν λόγον ... τῆς οὐσίας) of each thing”; 534b9–c1: “... distinguishing with an account (τῷ λόγῳ) the forms of the good ...”;
- λογιῶσθαι: *Phaedo* 65c2–3: “Is not in reasoning (λογιῶσθαι:) if anywhere that any reality becomes clear to the soul?”
- λογισμός: *Phaedo* 66a1, 79a3, 84a7. In the *Republic*, which in several sections discusses the mathematical arts, the term λογισμός often acquires the specific meaning of “calculation”; still, we also find various instances in which the term is used with the more general meaning of “reasoning”: 524b4 (where it is associated with *noesis*), 586d2 (associated with *nous*), 603a4 (where it essentially denotes the rational part of the soul – cf. λογιστικόν), 611c3 (where it means “reason” in general), *Parmenides* 130a2 (where a clear asymmetry exists between sensory knowledge, whose objects are grasped directly – ὁρώμενοι – and intellectual knowledge, whose objects are “grasped by reasoning”

(λαμβάνόμενοι λογισμῶ); *Sophist* 248a10: “We deal with real being by our souls and through reasoning (διὰ λογισμοῦ)”; *Phaedrus* 249c1: here λογισμός is understood as unifying reason and coincides with recollection, which is to say the action aimed at restoring the memory of what the soul has seen when roaming the supra-celestial region with the gods;⁴

- λογιστικόν: in the *Republic*, this term usually indicates the rational part of the soul, and it is significant that this denomination refers to the soul’s reasoning/calculating (as opposed to intuitive) capacity;
- δοῦναι καὶ ἀποδέχεσθαι λόγον (“giving and receiving *logos*”): *Republic* 531d4–5, *Statesman* 286a4–5;
- λόγον διδόναι (“to give an account”): *Republic* 510c7: here λόγον διδόναι is indirectly presented as an attribute of the dialectician, to the extent that it effectively coincides with the task which does not concern “geometers”, who stop at the third segment of the line, 533c2, 534b5;
- ἐρωτᾶν τε καὶ ἀποκρίνεσθαι (“questioning and answering”): *Republic* 538c5, 539a5, a9, d5, d8, 582d14; *Phaedo* 75d2–3, 78d1–3;
- διαλέγεσθαι: *Republic* 511b4, c5, 532d8, 533a8, 537d5, *Parmenides* 135c2: all five of these passages mention the expression δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι (“ability to discuss”), *Republic* 525d6–7, 532a2, a6, d8, 537e1, 539c6. Two things are worth noting with regard to this verb. In the central books of the *Republic*, dialectic (διαλεκτική, sc. τέχνη) is the art (or δύναμις) of διαλέγεσθαι typical of the διαλεκτικός (see e.g. 537c7–8), whereby διαλέγεσθαι never loses its natural connection with dialogue (see e.g. the occurrence of διαλέγεσθαι at 515b4), and this rules out the possibility that “dialectics” – which is to say the highest form of knowledge, typical of philosophers – may find its fulfilment (and hence its essence) in an intuitive/direct apprehension of the ideas. On the contrary, at 531e4–532a2 it is explicitly stated that the *nomos* which διαλέγεσθαι περαίνει (i.e. fulfils) consists in δοῦναι καὶ ἀποδέχεσθαι λόγον. The natural aim of anyone who “gives and receives *logos*”, of course, is to persuade his interlocutor and thus engender *homologhia* – not to develop any kind of inner apprehension.

The prevalence – illustrated above – of what I have described as an epistemology based on three terms, and entailing the mediation of the *logos*, appears fully understandable in the light of the fact that, according to Plato, only the *logos* ensures the variable function true/false. In *Crat.* 385b2ff. Socrates has Hermo-

⁴ Not least in the light of the occurrences mentioned here, it is unclear to me why Rachel Barney (Barney 2001, p. 172) sees a relevant qualitative difference between λόγος and λογισμός. See ch. 2, p. 20; ch. 4, pp. 47–48.

genes grant the existence of such a thing as "speaking the truth" and "speaking a falsehood" (b2–3), and hence acknowledge that a *logos* may be either true or false (b5). Given this, we will have a true *logos* when we state "the thing that are that they are"; and a false *logos* when we state "the thing that are that they are not" (385b7–8). The same principle is then taken up again in the *Sophist*, which argues that each speech has the characteristic of being true and false (263b3), further specifying that a true speech will state things as they are, a false one as different from those that are (263b4–7). Plato therefore establishes that speech naturally structures itself into true and false. But may the attributes true and false be applied only to speech, or also to something else? For the time being, the possibility that one may also speak of true (and truth) in relation to non-discursive forms of knowledge (i.e. ones independent of the *logos*) is left open by Plato, who nonetheless states that the notion of "false" may only be applied to speech. This point is elucidated in the passage from the *Sophist* I have mentioned above, in which "falsehood" is only shown to be possible in the form of *stating* the false, i.e. of speaking of the things that are not, as if they were. (263b9).

From this we may infer that even assuming it is possible to speak of "truth" within the epistemology based on two terms, one certainly cannot speak of "falsehood". For within such a context the only possible alternative is between the direct contact of the soul with a thing and the lack of contact, as things may or may not be mentally grasped; and it is clear that if a thing is not grasped, all we have is "non-knowledge" – not falsehood or error.⁵ All this provides further confirmation of the fact that with regard to the issue of the intellectual knowledge attainable by man in his earthly condition, Plato clearly chose to adopt an epistemology based on three terms (and the mediation of the *logos*). Plato acknowledged the possibility for man to fall into error or state the false not just within the lower domain of sensory knowledge, but also within the higher realm of intellectual knowledge (as suggested by both the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*); and it is only possible to account for this possibility if the knowledge in question has a discursive character.

Let us focus, therefore, on the epistemology based on three terms, which is to say the only one entailing the true/false relation. The elements at play within contexts of knowledge-acquisition that allow for this relation are first of all the thing in question and the speech (*logos*) describing it. This is not enough, however, since we must also add the soul's judgement, which will establish whether the description is correct or not, i.e. whether it is true or false. As we know,

⁵ In the case at hand, as I have already pointed out (ch. 1, p. 9), truth corresponds to what Aristotle describes as *θιγγεῖν* (touching) in a famous passage of *Metaphysics* (Θ, 10.1051b24).

in two passages from the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* (*Theaet.* 189e6–190a6; *Soph.* 263d6–264a2⁶), Plato identifies this judgement with the soul's *doxa*.

The need for there to be truth and falsehood in this case is due to the fact that we are no longer faced here with a sharp alternative between grasping and not-grasping, which requires no judgement (not unlike sense-perception, where a person will either see what is facing him or not, with no need to establish this by resorting to his judgement); rather, what we have is an object and its reproduction, and this requires precisely a form of judgement to come into play in order to establish whether – and to what extent – the reproduction is correct. In such a way a transcendent kind of *doxa* manifests itself, so to speak, which does not refer to a specific class of objects of knowledge (sensible reality), but provides the preconditions for dianoetic-discursive knowledge in general, which culminates with an affirmation or negation coinciding with the *doxa* of the judging subject (remind the already quoted *Rep.* 413a7 in which Socrates argues that “to possess the truth” – ἀληθεύειν – is nothing but “to believe – δοξάζειν – the things that are”). By combining this definition with the passages from the *Sophist* (and *Theaetetus*) quoted above, what we get is a perfectly straightforward and consistent representation of the Platonic conception of knowledge: given a certain state of affairs and one or more propositions describing it, truth takes the form of that *doxa*, or judgement of the soul, which states things as they are, i.e. that gives its assent to those assertions describing reality as it is, and withholds its assent to propositions describing reality as it is not. The philosopher's work, then, fully takes place within the framework of propositional knowledge, and its function is precisely to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

2. THE LIMITS OF LOGOS

As already noted, the epistemological picture just outlined is a clear and coherent one, which ought to be accepted without much hesitation.⁷ Yet, this is not so, since within the theoretical outline of what Plato regards as the highest form of knowledge, a large number of scholars are unwilling to accept the presence of such an apparently foreign and intrusive element as *doxa*; consequently,

⁶ See ch. 1.

⁷ D. Sedley (2003, p. 96) for instance, observes that the “speech capable of truth and falsity” constitutes “the realm of the philosopher, whose understanding must necessarily be developed in discourse, internal or external, and must learn to discriminate truth from falsity”.

they interpret the latter part of the *Theaetetus* in the opposite way from how it correctly ought to be interpreted, as if Plato with this dialogue had sought to illustrate where and how man can find knowledge utterly devoid of *doxa* – and not the exact opposite, namely: that a form of *doxa* exists from which human knowledge cannot free itself.⁸

In any case, even leaving aside Plato's reference to *doxa* and the weakening it engenders (since it draws upon the subjective element of consent),⁹ it is easy to note that within the epistemology based on three terms the notion of knowledge is structurally open to variation by degrees. Whereas within the epistemology based on two terms we only have a stark alternative between "grasping" and "not grasping" (i.e. between "full and complete knowledge" and "no knowledge"), within the epistemology based on three terms the *logos*, whose duty it is to reproduce objects as they are, various degrees of approximation and correctness are acceptable. With regard to Socrates, for example, I might say both that he was a man and that was an Athenian philosopher who mostly lived in the fifth century BC. Both these descriptions (which is to say *logoi*) are true, hence both suggest a *doxa* to the soul inclined towards affirmation; yet, the latter description is more accurate than the former. And while in some cases a description of given facts made through the *logos* may in turn be reduced to a simple alternative between two poles (as in the case "it is false that Theaetetus flies", where "it is true that Theaetetus does not fly"), we will always find the possibility of gradation. If Theaetetus is falling from the tenth floor of a building or running especially fast, the statement "Theaetetus is flying" might be regarded as an *approximately* true description of the facts at hand, even though it is certainly not the *most adequate* (in the former case it would be *more truthful* to say that Theaetetus is "falling", whereas "flying" in the latter is a metaphor for the more appropriate description "running fast").

In other words, if knowledge does not consist in the direct and intuitive grasping of a specific kind of reality, but rather in a certain relation between what is being represented (the thing) and what represents it (the *logos*), then the

⁸ All these points have already been made in the previous chapters.

⁹ The subjective variable introduced by the transcendent meaning of *doxa* coincides with what Barney has observed using different words and in relation to a different context: while it is true that "no *logos* can fully embody, express and transmit knowledge", this cannot be explained through the fact that "knowledge must include some further, mysteriously non-propositional content", but must rather be explained through the fact that knowledge "consists in a particular kind of *command* of the relevant *logoi* [sc. in *doxa* or the soul's consent, according to the terminology I have adopted], a command which cannot itself be guaranteed or exhausted by some further *logoi*" (Barney 2001, pp. 173–174).

problem quite naturally arises of evaluating the nature of this relation (which indeed becomes the fundamental epistemological problem). With regard to this, two opposite alternatives may be given:

- a) the *logos* is perfectly transparent, in such a way as to prove non-influential. While it is true that in order to know what is invisible one must pass through the *logos*, this passage does not put up any resistance that cannot be overcome by resorting to the correct method (dialectics). In this case, the relation based on three terms proves completely equivalent to that based on two terms: the description made through the *logos* acts as a perfect replacement for direct apprehension, so that the alternative between truth and falsehood in judgements and propositions becomes functionally identical to the alternative between grasping and non-grasping the thing in question;
- b) the *logos* has no contact with the thing, which in turn opens up two different possibilities:
 - b1) no relation of knowledge exists between subject and object, between man and the world;
 - b2) the path to knowledge stops at the first stretch, that leading from the soul to the *logos*: what provides the necessary and sufficient guarantee of the truth or falsehood of the *logos* is the soul's judgement, the consequence of this being that truth will come to coincide with what appears (*δοκεῖ, φαίνεται*) to be the case to each person.

Now, whereas b1 represents Gorgias' position, b2 coincides with that of Protagoras, and both are decidedly refuted by Plato. Moreover, this does not mean that Plato accepts alternative "a" (which, as we shall now see, approximatively corresponds to the thesis upheld by Cratylus in the dialogue we are about to examine). On the contrary, Plato chooses a third way: the idea that the *logos* establishes a contact with things, yet can only reproduce them in a partial and approximate manner. I shall now attempt to show how the *Cratylus* further confirms the interpretation of Platonic epistemology I have just put forward.

3. TRUTH OF THE WORDS AND TRUTH OF THE *LOGOI*

Hermogenes believes that *ὀνόματα* ("names", or, better, "words") are merely conventional. Now, given that *ὀνόματα* are the ultimate components of the *logos* (385c7–8; cf. *Theaetetus* 202b4–5: the *logos* is "a complex of names", *συμπλοκὴ τῶν ὀνομάτων*), everything that applies to the whole must also apply to its parts. If *ὀνόματα* are conventional, then so are *logoi*. This means that if *ὀνόματα* have

no intrinsic validity (for *ὀνόματα* can only be more or less appropriate), then *logoi* too have no intrinsic validity (for *logoi*, that is to say propositions, can only be more or less valid). And just as in the case of names appropriateness depends on the judgement of the people assigning them, so in the case of *logoi* (propositions, judgements) it depends on the opinion of those formulating their consent. Hermogenes' position thus represents a translation of Protagoras' on the level of the components of the *logos* (i.e. of *ὀνόματα*).¹⁰

Besides, Socrates himself draws this analogy in 385e, where Protagoras is explicitly mentioned, and throughout the following refutation, which essentially consists in a refutation of Protagoreanism.¹¹ Socrates carries out this refutation of Protagoras in the *Cratylus* by employing a procedure that is basically the same as the far more elaborate one he adopts in the *Theaetetus*:¹² the stability of things is inferred from the ethical differences that men are bound to acknowledge (386d) and from the techniques everyone employs, which reflect a non-conventional

¹⁰ Keller (2000), p. 290, has rightly noted that, strictly speaking, conventionalism with regard to names does not imply relativism with regard to reality. In order to avoid this outcome, it is enough "to distinguish sounds from their meanings". A similar observation is made by Sedley, who maintains that while relativism implies conventionalism, the opposite is not the case, since "one could be relativistic about naming while holding that most other truths are absolute and/or objective" (2003, p. 45). This would be a decisive argument, were it not that in the *Cratylus* the relation between *ὀνόματα* and *λόγοι* is ruled by what Sedley himself describes as the "Principle of Uniformity" ("all correctness of names must operate on one and the same basis, at whatever level of linguistic complexity or simplicity it may occur", p. 126), and R. Barney calls the "Principle of Compositionality" ("for a property to belong [...] to a whole of parts such as a complex linguistic expression, it must belong [...] to those parts individually", Barney 2001, p. 32). If the truth of a proposition depends on the correctness of its elements (e.g. if the truth of the proposition "this wine is sweet" depends on the appropriate use of the word "sweet"), to believe that there is no such thing as an appropriate use of names is to believe that there are no propositions that are intrinsically true or false (a stance which corresponds to Protagorean relativism). More generally, one may at least argue – as Sedley himself acknowledges – that Socrates has good enough reasons to believe that a conventionalist will be inclined to accept a relativistic frame of reference (*ibid.*, pp. 54–55). Barney too denies that Hermogenes' conventionalism ipso facto coincides with relativism and subjectivism, both because it draws a distinction between the (arbitrary) act of naming and the use of names (which is based on convention), and because Hermogenes believes current linguistic conventions to be correct (pp. 30–44). Still, not unlike Sedley, Barney acknowledges that Hermogenes' position finds natural support in Protagorean relativism (p. 39).

¹¹ In showing how Hermogenes denies being a Protagorean, while being fascinated by the sophist's doctrines, Plato is strikingly illustrating just how enticing Protagoreanism is, and how easily one may find oneself in agreement with its unscrupulous theses even when setting out from apparently harmless opinions such as the unconviviality of names.

¹² See Barney (2001), pp. 36, 43–44; Sedley (2003), p. 55.

distinction between what works (i.e. what is appropriate for a given goal) and what doesn't (387a ff.). This amounts to saying that the difference between stating the true and stating the false (i.e. between true and false speeches) is real. Indeed, if there is a real difference between a physician and a layman, this will be reflected in the different degrees of truth of the *logoi* pertaining to medicine that are produced by the two.

Naturally, the parallel between *δνόματα* and *logoi*, based on the hypothesis that the truth of a proposition rests on the truth of its elements (385b2–d1), is far from self-evident; unsurprisingly, it has been criticised in various ways (particularly revealing is Richard Robinson's view¹³). Still, attempts have also been made to find an acceptable meaning in Plato's argument. By way of example, I shall mention the attempts made by Charles Kahn, Michel Fattal and Rachel Barney.¹⁴ According to Kahn, Plato's intention would be to illustrate how the concept of truth (or its opposite) applies to predicative relations understood in semantic terms, where the subject is an extra-linguistic object and the predicate a single *ὄνομα*.¹⁵ Fattal, on his part, sets out from the etymology of "Zeus" proposed by Socrates in 396a, which in his view is clearly establishing the equivalence between *ὄνομα* and *logos*, based on the fact that the name contains a sentence or definition in abbreviated form (hence its descriptive function).¹⁶ The hypothesis that names have a descriptive value is also found in an extended version in Barney's study, in relation to what she refers to as the "project of the strict sense": in many of his dialogues, Plato would be seeking to redefine some fundamental ethical-political notions by making significant corrections to the ways in which given names are assigned (in the *Laches*, for instance, his aim would be to establish what the name "courage" may be assigned to and when).¹⁷

For the purposes of the present argument, however, there is no need to examine this problem in detail. As the *Sophist* suggests (263e), in Plato's view the privileged setting for the alternative between truth and falsehood is the

¹³ Robinson (1956). For further bibliographical references, see pp. 210–211 of Fattal (2001).

¹⁴ For other perspectives, see the concise overview of opinions provided by Baxter (1992), pp. 32–37.

¹⁵ Kahn (1973), esp. pp. 160–161. Kahn's thesis is revealing of the kind of solution many scholars have adopted, and which Baxter sums up as follows: in a proposition such as "Cratylus is seated," "both names have to be 'true of' that state of affairs if the *logos* is to be true, though the converse does not apply" (p. 34).

¹⁶ Fattal (2001), p. 216. Quoting V. Goldschmidt, Fattal further observes that there is no reason to believe that Plato in the *Cratylus* wishes to discuss names outside of the speech they are part of (pp. 116–117).

¹⁷ Barney (2001), pp. 10–17.

logos, which is to say – in more modern terms – propositions. But since each proposition is comprised of *ὀνόματα*, in principle it must be possible to trace the origins of truth and falsehood back to the assignment of names. As for the way in which this relation should concretely be envisaged, Plato provides no answer in either the *Cratylus* or his dialectical dialogues. Yet in my view this does not mean that Plato changed his mind from the *Cratylus* to the *Sophist* (choosing to solve the problem of falsehood by investigating propositions rather than names),¹⁸ or that the *Cratylus* imperfectly foreshadows the epistemology of the *Sophist*.¹⁹ Plato rather undertook an investigation of the presumed truth and falsehood of names only once, without ever getting back to it, because his main concern was to establish the objective truth or falsehood of *logoi*.²⁰ for only on this basis is it possible to safeguard the *logos* (language, judgement, assertion) from Protagorean conventionalism.

If this hypothesis is well-founded, then all the various interpretations which have been brought forth regarding the correctness of names, and the etymological section connected to it, are acceptable to some extent. Most interpreters have regarded this part of the dialogue as being ironic or playful, not wishing to take Socrates' long list of fanciful etymologies seriously. Particularly revealing, in this respect, is Timothy Baxter's view, according to which the general aim of the *Cratylus* would be to show that there is nothing interesting to be drawn from an analysis of names – the etymological section thus serving as "an extended attack on a whole host of Greek thinkers and poets, all of whom indulged in some etymologizing to support their beliefs."²¹ David Sedley has recently taken a stand

¹⁸ See p. 95 of Kahn (1986).

¹⁹ See Fattal (2001), pp. 224–225. See too Baxter (1992), p. 36. In relation to this, Barney has attempted to prove the unfoundedness of the alleged conflict between the *Cratylus* and the *Sophist* (based on the fact that the former dialogue would appear to be situating the notion of truth on the level of *ὀνόματα*, overlooking *λόγοι*, whereas the latter appears to be doing the exact opposite). According to Barney's reading, the semantic analysis provided by the *Sophist* adds nothing to the notion of truth found in the mimetic model already adopted (with an ontological, not semantic, referent) in the *Cratylus* (pp. 177–197). I cannot discuss this issue here. All I wish to note is that in any case the truth inherent in language – whether we speak of *λόγος* or *ὄνομα* – still depends on a subjective condition (or *doxa*): affirmation or negation in the case of the *λόγος*, what Barney calls the "act of assignment" in relation to the *ὄνομα* (p. 194).

²⁰ See Sallis (1996), p. 183.

²¹ Baxter (1992), p. 5. In the chapter of his book seeking to identify the targets of Plato's parody (pp. 107–163), Baxter first of all emphasises the role played by Eutyphro (under whose inspiration Socrates claims to be speaking); he then divides these targets into three large groups (Homer and the philosopher-poets, the followers of Anaxagoras and

against this tendency. Not only has he noted the overall seriousness of Plato's interest in etymology, but through some good arguments he has also shown how anachronistic it would be to mock the etymologies of the *Cratylus* on the basis of modern criteria, illustrating instead what results Plato could expect to achieve through them (namely a reconstruction of the historical – if not philosophical – reasons that had led to the development of the names in question).²² Yet another suggestion had been made a few years earlier by Barney, who – again by invoking some good reasons, in my view – had argued that the etymological section of the *Cratylus* belongs to the “agonal” literary genera which Plato sometimes adopts, for instance in the *Menexenus*, *Phaedrus* (Socrates' first speech) and *Protagoras* (the interpretation of Simonides' poem).²³

It would seem, therefore, that the etymological section is open to various kinds of interpretations, without it being possible to settle on a single explanation. But this probably means that the ambiguity of the text must be preserved – rather than resolved – and that it is necessary to find a criterion to explain the section precisely in its ambiguousness. Now, if we suppose that Plato's chief interest lies in the *logos* rather than in *ὀνόματα*, this might help us identify the criterion we are looking for and understand how the etymological section may simultaneously be serving several purposes that are apparently incompatible with one another. If knowledge is developed through the *logos*, and if the “Principle of Uniformity” (see n. 16) applies, a first useful step would be to show (as Sedley does) that there are no compelling reasons why Plato's analysis of names ought to be regarded as irrelevant. But since there is no reliable method to ensure that this research will yield any unambiguous results,²⁴ the etymological excursus also serves to illustrate what ridiculous or contradictory conclusions we shall reach if we insist in searching for the truth only in names (as Antisthenes does with his “survey on names” – ἐπίσκεψις τῶν ὀνομάτων) as opposed to *logoi*²⁵ – yet without this

Diogenes of Apollonia, and the sophists), approximately corresponding to the three main headings that may be used to classify the etymologies of the *Cratylus* (names of gods, names pertaining to “physical” matters, and the names of virtues and vices).

²² A somewhat similar approach had already been adopted by Rosenmeyer (1998).

²³ Barney (2001), pp. 49–80.

²⁴ As Baxter observes, “etymology is so attractive precisely because it can ‘prove’ almost anything” (Baxter 1992, p. 106).

²⁵ I essentially agree with Ch. Kahn's conclusions here: “La morale du *Cratyle*, c'est qu'il faut abandonner la linguistique pour revenir à la dialectique [...] Platon ne s'intéresse sérieusement aux mots que comme moyen de comprendre et de communiquer la vérité. Le grand problème philosophique, soulevé mais non pas résolu dans le *Cratyle*, c'est le problème du *Sophiste*: comment la langue est-elle capable de formuler un discours vrai et un discours faux” (Kahn 1986, pp. 94–95).

causing any irreparable damage to Plato's investigation (which, as previously noted, concerns the *logos* rather than *ὀνόματα*).²⁶

In my view, this hypothesis is supported by certain sections of the text in which Socrates explicitly illustrates the seamless passage leading from name to *logos*. Take, for instance, 431a8–b6:²⁷ Socrates has just shown that a name may be attributed either correctly or incorrectly, and that the former situation may be described as "tell the truth", the latter as "tell the false". This, then, must also apply to verbs (*ρήματα*, b5); and if it applies to *ὀνόματα* and *ρήματα*, then it must also apply to *logoi* (b6). A largely similar argument is to be found in 432d11–e7: one wrong letter (*γράμμα*) is not enough to make a name into something different; and this will also apply to a name in a *logos* (*ὄνομα ἐν λόγῳ*), and a *logos* in a *logos* (*λόγον ἐν λόγῳ*).²⁸ The topic of the truth or falsehood of names is therefore immediately turned into that of the truth and falsehood of *logoi*; and the very fact that Plato refers to this transition twice might suggest that his interest lies especially in the latter point.

4. THE PRIORITY OF THE (KNOWLEDGE FROM) THINGS OVER THE (KNOWLEDGE FROM) WORDS

In the light of the parallel that may be drawn between *ὀνόματα* and *logoi* (i.e. of the "Principle of Uniformity"), the reason why Socrates rejects Hermogenes' thesis appears quite clear, then: what he is providing is a refutation of Protagoreanism which is fully consistent with the aim enunciated above, and perfectly in line with platonic thought. We shall now attempt to understand why, in the final section of the dialogue, Socrates also takes his distance from Cratylus' thesis. To put it briefly, Cratylus argues that language has nothing to do with truth and falsehood: either you grasp a thing or you don't. For whereas in the case of arts

²⁶ I favour this solution because while I agree with Barney (2001), p. 14, that the correct use of words is of great ethical significance for Plato (cf. *Phaedo* 115e), and more generally that the philosopher's concern lies with the "project of the strict sense" (I have argued along these lines myself by speaking of "speculative propositions" in relation to Plato, after the Hegelian model: see Trabattoni 2004), I am under the impression that what the *Cratylus* presents is a rather different issue, namely: that of investigating names as names, in order to understand how we should envisage their relation to the realities named – and not what the real semantic content of names might be. In the *Cratylus* it is a matter of understanding, for example, whether and why *the name "justice" is suited for grasping what we call "just"* – not whether the name "justice" is used to describe *what is truly and essentially "just"*.

²⁷ Cf. Sedley (2003), p. 135.

²⁸ Cf. Baxter (1992) p. 37.

such as painting and architecture Cratylus acknowledges that there are some artists who do things better than others, in the case of lawgivers and lawmakers this is not possible: as concerns names in particular, either these are attributed correctly or else they are not names at all (429a1–b11).

As Socrates observes, however, this means that it is impossible to “speak falsehood”: (429d1–2). Cratylus admits that this is precisely his own thesis, yet in his view it does not mean that it is impossible to speak falsehood because anyone speaking will always be speaking the truth (this being the position to which Socrates reduces Hermogenes’ thesis). Rather, Cratylus believes that it is impossible to speak (*legein*) falsehood because language (*legein* and *logos*) is not open to the truth/falsehood variable: either we speak something real or we do not speak at all; and it makes no sense to identify the former case as an instance of “speaking the truth”, since truth only acquires meaning in relation to falsehood. Cratylus, in other words, interprets knowledge of the linguistic-propositional sort too in the light of the aforementioned epistemology based on two terms.²⁹ Speaking of a thing is an act perfectly akin to perception; and with perception only two elements come into play, the perceiver and the perceived, so that the only possibilities we have are that the object be perceived or not.

Socrates disagrees, of course. In his view, there is a difference between *perceiving* a thing and *speaking* something *of* a thing. Whereas in the former case we only have two terms, the perceiver and the perceived, in the latter we have three: the speaker, the *logos* and the thing expressed (δηλώσαι: see 423a–b) by the *logos*. In order to make Cratylus acknowledge that it is necessary for the use of language to define a knowledge relation based on three terms, Socrates attempts to find at least one *verbum dicendi* that in Cratylus’ view too may be used for the act of “speaking falsehood” (429d7–430a2). Were this attempt to prove successful, it would lead Cratylus to admit that a *logos* and its object are two separate things: if a *logos* grasps a thing, it is somehow possible to still believe that only two objects are at play, the speaking subject and the thing, since the *logos* in this case would fully coincide with the thing itself; but if we admit the possibility that a *logos* might not grasp a thing, then what we undoubtedly have are three elements, given that the false *logos* and the thing itself can no longer be seen to coincide.

Up to this point, however, Cratylus successfully defends his view, consistently arguing that a *logos* which is inadequate for a thing is neither language nor a name, but merely a sound and noise. Socrates then attacks him on another front, asking him whether the name and the thing named are one and the same

²⁹ See Baxter (1992), p. 166: “It is as though, in Russell’s terminology, names can give us (or at least the select few like Cratylus) knowledge by acquaintance rather than knowledge by description.”

(430a7–8). Cratylus gives a negative answer, thereby sealing his own fate. The matter becomes even clearer with the following step, where Socrates has his interlocutor grant that “a name is an imitation (μίμημα) of a thing”, 430a10–b1).

Besides, this “refutation” inevitably follows from the premises which Cratylus shows to accept throughout the dialogue. He understands the naturalness of names to mean that “a name is a way of expressing a thing” (δήλωμα τοῦ πράγματος, 433d1–2). Hence, he is forced to accept a structure based on three terms: subject, thing, and – between the two – language, which shows the subject the thing. For, “names are spoken in order to give instruction” (διδασκαλίας ... ἔνεκα τὰ ὀνόματα λέγεται, 428e4). The aim of a speaker is to show something to someone (or possibly himself) through language; the latter, therefore, serves as an intermediate term connecting subject and thing.

What Plato wishes to emphasise, then, is that a knowledge relation only includes two terms when it has a non-propositional (i.e. non-linguistic) character, but necessarily includes three if language also comes into play. For this reason, Socrates attempts to prove, against Cratylus’ objections, that language may be seen as a more or less accurate imitation of things, not unlike painting (430a–432d).³⁰ On the other hand, this clearly also implies that knowledge through language tolerates various degrees of correctness and approximation (431c–e). Yet there is more to it. Language, as “imitation” (μίμημα) or “image” (εἰκῶν), can be approximate in two different ways: one accidental (so to speak), the other essential. In the case in which a person using language to reproduce things does not assign a given image (that is, a name) all the characteristics befitting the thing in question, he will indeed be producing an image, only not a good one (431d2–8). But even in the case in which an image were fashioned as it ought to, so as to contain all the elements necessary for it to be a good imitation of the thing in question, it would still be something other than the thing itself.³¹ If a god were to fashion a Cratylus not by copying him as a painter would do but by perfectly reproducing all his characteristics, the outcome would not be an image of Cratylus, but a second Cratylus (432b4–c5). Indeed, the correctness of an image is not to be found in the reproduction of an identical copy, for else the image would lose its nature *qua* image (432d1–3).

³⁰ With Barney (2001), and in contrast to other interpreters, I believe that Plato quite seriously accepts the idea that both language and names (given the “principle of compositionality”) constitute an imitation (or at any rate an attempted imitation), which is to say an image of the realities they seek to describe (see esp. pp. 81–98, 106–109).

³¹ See Gorgias, ap. Sext. Emp., *Adv. math.* 7.84 (= 82B3 D.-K.); Ps. Arist., *de Mel., Xen. et Gorg.* 21 (= 82B3a).

What has been argued with regard to images clearly also applies to language (which is the image εικόν, μίμημα, δῆλωμα) of a thing (πράγμα). One structural feature of the *logos*, therefore, is that it differs from things, and that it remains different and other from things even when it does not accidentally lack the elements necessary to produce a good imitation. But once we have established this, we have also established (against Hermogenes and Protagoras) not only that a world of things (πράγματα) exists which is different from the world of names and *logoi*, but also that names and *logoi* are not self-standing, since the norms for their use – along with their truth or falsehood – come not from the subject himself, but from the things of which they are “way of expressing” (δηλώματα) and “images” (εικόνες).

The appearance of these πράγματα, however, has the effect of undermining Cratylus’ position as well. For the latter does not realise that now, after what has been acknowledged, the thesis according to which in order to know things we only need to know their name (435d–436) has also become untenable. If the truth or falsehood of names and the *logos* depends on the way in which things – that find in names and the *logos* their δηλώματα – actually are, then, at least in principle, there must be a way of apprehending the reality of things by directly approaching it, without passing through language (438e2–3). Consequently, it may be argued that by one and the same theoretical move Socrates refutes both Hermogenes’ position and that of Cratylus: for if the function of language is to describe a given reality, one cannot admit that language is purely arbitrary (since it must have some connection to reality), nor that it simply coincides with the thing named (since, as just noted, language and reality have been found to be two different things). The *logos* is thus structurally open to the alternative between truth and falsehood precisely because on the one hand it has a non-conventional connection to the thing it seeks to describe (and for this reason may be true), while on the other it does not coincide with the thing itself, and hence cannot be regarded as correct a priori (and for this reason may be false). If this is the case, the need emerges to verify the degree of precision of linguistic descriptions; and this can only be done by referring to a source of knowledge other than language itself (438d2–8). Only in such a way will it be possible to ascertain “the truth of the things” (τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῶν ὄντων, d7–8).

There are therefore two different ways to apprehend things: with names and without. Clearly, the second way will be better and clearer inasmuch as it is better to apprehend the level of adequacy of an image, and the truth it is an image of, from the truth itself rather than from its image (439a5–b2). Now, what is Plato’s aim in having Socrates refute Cratylus in the way just illustrated? There are two possibilities here. According to the first, in support of which Baxter offers various arguments, Socrates (against Cratylus’ naïve naturalistic interpretation,

which makes dialectics impossible)³² would be seeking to promote a kind of "philosophically ideal or logically perfect language"³³ in the manner of Russell.³⁴ But if the fate of this hypothetical formalised language is bound to coincide with that of dialectics, it is clear that it must inherit the distinguishing features of Plato's dialectics, which in turn are connected to his anthropology. Baxter himself seems to realise as much when he writes that "one cannot have an ideal language save where souls, released from their bodily incarceration, can freely interact, namely in Hades."³⁵

A necessary consequence of this is that "even the best possible language is a 'copy'."³⁶ But if this is the case, then it becomes difficult to uphold the hypothesis that Plato in the *Cratylus* is seeking to promote a "philosophically ideal and logically perfect" language, since even the best of languages will be a copy, and hence infinitely removed from any "ideal" and "perfection". It is obvious that according to Plato the use of language entails differences of degree, and that the linguistic competence of the dialectician is far greater than that (say) of the orator, sophist or ordinary man. Yet the very fact that the *Cratylus* affirms the existence of a form of knowledge higher than linguistic knowledge in principle rules out the hypothesis that a perfect language may exist: since if the "philosophical and logical" perfection of a language depends on its capacity to ensure an exhaustive and complete knowledge of the objects it refers to, the existence of a knowledge higher than linguistic knowledge prevents language from ever attaining this level. And if the refutation of Hermogenes and the etymological section may be taken to suggest that Plato's aim is indeed the one Baxter suggests, this hypothesis becomes untenable in the light of the refutation of *Cratylus*, where Socrates shows that he does not at all wish to replace an inadequate propositional epistemology with an adequate propositional epistemology, but rather wishes to argue in favour of a non-propositional epistemology. In this section of the dialogue, therefore, Plato would appear to have no intention of clarifying the nature of a strong conception of *logos*, his aim being rather to show that the

³² Baxter (1992), pp. 13–15.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, *cit.*, *passim*. As regards the specific reference to Russell, see pp. 53–55. One corollary of this thesis is the principle according to which, in order to understand the *Cratylus*, it is necessary to distinguish prescriptive theories of language (as upheld by Socrates) from descriptive analyses (such as those of the etymological section), and even more so from conceptions such as that of *Cratylus*, which tend to blur the distinction between the two.

³⁵ Baxter (1992), *cit.*, p. 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

logos represents a “second sailing” compared to the direct grasping of things (*Phaedo*), i.e. that it is intrinsically weak (*Seventh Letter*).³⁷

5. THE LANGUAGE AS A “SECOND SAILING”

It might seem, therefore, as though the refutation of Cratylus reflects a diametrically opposite intention for the one we have just examined, namely: to establish the intuitive and non-propositional nature of knowledge by correcting Cratylus’ erroneous conception of the two-term epistemology (knowledge by acquaintance) not through a three-term epistemology (knowledge by description), but rather through a correct conception of the former; knowledge by acquaintance leaves no room for language, and knowledge may only be envisaged as the intuitive contact between the subject and reality.

Still, it is easy to realise that this interpretation too raises some thorny questions; so much so, that it seems practically untenable. First of all, what weigh against it from a general point of view are the many pieces of textual evidence mentioned at the beginning of this article, and which suggest that according to Plato knowledge of the ideas is acquired through the *logos*, in its various modes as “discursive reasoning”. Secondly, when it comes to the *Cratylus* in particular, the interpretation in question clearly conflicts with the fact that Socrates has also refuted Hermogenes’ conception, according to which language is purely conventional, and hence perfectly useless as a way of putting man in touch with the real nature of things. When viewed in this light, the refutations of Hermogenes and Cratylus would seem to be peculiarly contradictory. If Socrates has refuted Hermogenes with the aim of showing that language is not arbitrary, but is in fact the means which man must resort to in order to grasp reality, why then is he now showing Cratylus that a means to knowledge exists which is prior and superior to language? And if, conversely, Socrates is refuting Cratylus precisely with this objective in mind, namely to show that the true way of knowing reality has an intuitive rather than linguistic character, why then did he insist on trying to convince Hermogenes that language establishes an actual contact with the essence of things and is capable of expressing it?³⁸

³⁷ Barney too reaches the conclusion that one of the aims of the *Cratylus* is to illustrate the structural incapacity of language (not merely of *ὀνόματα*, but *λογοί* as well, based on the “Principle of Uniformity/Compositionality”) to know reality (and especially the ideas), since it presents the same flaws as all mimetic structures (Barney 2001, pp. 133–134).

³⁸ An ingenious way of solving this contradiction has been suggested by A. Silverman (2002), according to whom Plato in the *Cratylus* would be seeking to show that “the same name can be used naturally or conventionally” (p. 65), and in particular that “a natural

We can only overcome this quandary by taking a middle path, whereby language will appear to be a kind of "second sailing", to quote the *Phaedo* – that is to say: the only real means at man's disposal for attaining intellectual knowledge, given that the direct intuition of the ideas (the "first sailing") is no longer available, for it is confined to the prenatal time in which the soul is detached from the body.³⁹ In his mortal life, man only retains a memory of that vision, which may

name is a combination of sounds used by a speaker to refer to an entity precisely in virtue of what the entity is" (*ibid.*). This entity, according to Silverman, is an idea, and hence "only the dialectician, who knows the forms, can use the name naturally, because he alone does not confuse that form with anything else" (*ibid.*). Conversely, the conventional use of names is typical of ordinary speakers, who refer them to different things (other than the ideas themselves). Silverman's suggestion (which finds a close parallel in the interpretation of the *Cratylus* proposed by Ackrill 1994) does not strike me as convincing for two reasons: firstly, it reads the *Cratylus* in the light of a problem – the synonymy/eponymy of ideas and sensible objects – that is not explicitly mentioned in the dialogue (as Silverman himself readily acknowledges: p. 26) and which more generally seems hardly relevant to Plato's critique; and secondly, because it assumes a frame of reference whereby Plato would be admitting that the ideas are fully knowable by dialectical philosophers through the use of definition (in line with the "epistemological optimism" and anti-dualist approach which I shall be referring to in the two following footnotes) – an idea that in my view is utterly unfounded. See ch. 4, and Trabattoni (2001), Trabattoni (2004 bis).

³⁹ This issue (on which, as we have seen, Baxter would also seem to agree: Baxter 1992, pp. 84–85) is the main point of contention between my own interpretation and Sedley's. I agree with Sedley (2003, p. 162) that in 438e Socrates does not intend to suggest "a non linguistic mode of understanding" that "the predicational model of truth, elaborated in the *Sophist*, is operative in the *Cratylus* too" (p. 164), and that a parallel exists between the *Phaedo* and *Cratylus* which is particularly significant because in the *Phaedo* "Forms have to be constructed as transcendent entities, to which souls can expect to have full cognitive access only once they have altogether left behind the sensible world" (p. 167). In my view, however, these elements suggest that the clear difference in value between the knowledge developed through an analysis of names and non-propositional knowledge, established by Socrates in 438e–439a, does not depend merely on Plato's intention to show the weakness of knowledge through names (p. 162), but also – in the light of the "Principle of Uniformity" – on his intention to prove the relative weakness (as a "second voyage") of propositional knowledge in general as well (in agreement with the conclusions Barney has reached). While it is true that the *Cratylus* in no way undermines Plato's "philosophical rationalism", where "linguistic acts of naming and predication [...] remain vitally instrumental to the study of reality" (*ibid.*), it is equally true that as "souls can expect to have full cognitive access [to forms] only once they have altogether left behind the sensible world", this means too must be regarded as structurally imperfect, and that Plato may be seeking precisely to emphasise this imperfection in some of his writing. This acknowledgement first of all implies a drastic toning down of the epistemological optimism which is so widespread especially among interpreters with an analytical background, according to whom Plato is quite confident that language is capable of grasping and

be expressed through propositions, *doxai* and judgements. Language, therefore, comes second, yet man's knowledge must necessarily pass through it, since it is only by means of this "second sailing" that men can now regain some knowledge of their "first sailing". In other words, in order to access the "the truth of the things" it is necessary to pass through "the truth (i.e. correctness) of the *logoi*".⁴⁰

These conclusions may also be quite clearly inferred, in my view, from the sentence of Socrates that immediately follows the section of the dialogue we are now discussing. Socrates has just illustrated the nature of the "first sailing", that is to say the route which leads directly to truth without passing through names/words and *logoi*; and he has also stated that learning about things "through them" is a better and clearer way than knowing them "through names". Cratylus, of course, cannot but agree with him. At this point, however, instead of celebrating his triumph, Socrates comes up with a peculiarly restrictive statement, which must be quoted in full (439b4–8):

defining the ultimate structures of reality; secondly, it implies a complete reassessment of the metaphysical – as opposed to merely epistemological – character of Platonic philosophy.

⁴⁰ In another work of his devoted to the *Cratylus* (2001), A. Silverman has sought to demonstrate, on the basis of the final section of the dialogue, that holistic-propositional interpretations of Platonic epistemology (such as those of J. Annas and G. Fine) are inadequate. These readings assume that according to Plato language (understood as the ability to "given an account" with regard not to single ideas but to the relations between them: pp. 41–42) is a necessary and sufficient condition for attaining knowledge. In Silverman's view, on the contrary, the medium of language is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one (since, in the light of the *Cratylus*, there must be "a way of knowing the *onta* prior to and independent of language": p. 41). Thus far I agree with Silverman (see too Barney 2001, p. 173, who criticises precisely Fine's idea that "*in some sense* the possession of *logos* is fully constitutive of knowledge for the later Plato"). But the picture remains incomplete until we clarify just what this intuitive knowledge consists in, as well as how and when it is attained. For if it were realistically achievable by man, intuitive knowledge would represent the sufficient condition for knowledge, while propositional knowledge would no longer even be a necessary condition. As in countless similar cases, it is easy to see here what dire consequences are produced by ignoring the metaphysical (or openly dualistic) motivations behind Plato's thought. By overlooking this metaphysical dimension, the propositionalists fail to appreciate that language is a "second sailing" and thus search for a way of understanding the *logos* that may fully and exhaustively reproduce the structure of ideal reality (holism); this however (as Silverman himself clearly shows: p. 41) will prove to be impossible and contradictory. Conversely, through the same negligence the intuitionists are forced to argue that intellectual intuition is available to man in his earthly condition (the only one they acknowledge), so that they no longer are capable of explaining why the use of the *logos* for Plato is a necessary condition for intellectual knowledge.

Moreover,⁴¹ to know the way in which one must learn or discover entities is perhaps too great a thing for you and me to determine. We must be satisfied (*ἀγαπητέον*) with having reached an agreement on this, namely on the fact that one must not set out from words, but must comprehend and investigate entities in themselves rather than through words.⁴²

Socrates, then, does not tell Cratylus: "Alright, I see you have understood, so let us investigate things themselves without passing through language"; on the contrary, what he tells him is that knowing this way of learning or discovering is perhaps a task which lies beyond the strength of either Cratylus or Socrates. Why, even of Socrates?⁴³ How are we to take this confession on Socrates' part, that he will probably never be able to discover the direct mode of knowledge, which does not pass through language? The following sentence explains it by stressing just what Plato is seeking to establish by having Socrates speak in this way. What makes everything quite clear is the verbal adjective *ἀγαπητέον* ("we must be satisfied"). It is as though Plato were saying: I am not so much interested in arguing that the direct path is actually accessible; rather, it is enough for me that we agree (*ὁμολογήσασθαι*) as to the fact that language is not the final destination of knowledge, since behind it lies the truth it is meant to reveal, and which it safeguards without being its source and origin.

In such a way, Plato promotes a metaphysical agenda, on the one hand against Protagoras and on the other against Socratics such as Antisthenes. Against Protagoras, he argues that the truth of language does not lie in the subjects formulating judgements. As for Antisthenes, according to what used to be a very common thesis, the *Cratylus* as a whole, and its etymological section in particular, are to be regarded as a polemic directed by Plato against the other great disciple of Socrates who had remained active in Athens after the master's

⁴¹ I am translating the Greek *τοῖνυν* with "moreover". Taking the particle in a conclusive sense seems quite unacceptable to me, since Socrates' statement does not represent the logically necessary outcome of the previous one, but rather introduces a new point. And *τοῖνυν* can indeed also have this meaning. See Denniston (1954), p. 575.

⁴² Own translation.

⁴³ Socrates' withdrawal before the boundaries of the purely intuitive knowledge of ideas is substantially equivalent to the warning Diotima gives Socrates himself when, in the *Symposium*, he sets out to lead his speech on love to the very limits of a direct vision of the ideas: "Into these love-matters even you, Socrates, might be initiated; but I doubt you could approach the rites and revelations to which these are the avenue for those following the right path" (209e5–210a2). In my view, this exclusion of Socrates is one of the ways in which Plato – in theoretical arguments where he must show that the highest form of knowledge is the intuitive one – once again stresses the fact that the philosopher (unlike the *sophos*) stops one step short, at knowledge developed through *λόγοι*.

death.⁴⁴ This verdict has now lost considerable ground.⁴⁵ Still, I find it difficult to deny that the *Cratylus* may be targeting Antisthenes at least from other points of view. First of all, we know from Diogenes Laertius that Antisthenes had defined the *logos* as “what shows (δηλών) what it was and what it is”⁴⁶ while a quote by Epictetus credits the Socratic philosopher with the claim that “the investigation about the names is the principle of education” (ἀρχὴ παιδείσεως ἡ τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐπίσκεψις).⁴⁷ And if it is true, as Aldo Brancacci maintains not without good reasons, that this ἐπίσκεψις, understood as an analysis “of the terms with the aim of determining the meaning of each”, was the interpretation “which Antisthenes himself gave of Socratic ἐξετάζειν”,⁴⁸ then Plato’s polemic against Antisthenes in the *Cratylus* is no longer as arbitrary as it may appear at first sight. The idea that the source of knowledge is to be found in *logoi* and their analysis is a view shared by both Antisthenes and Plato, and which no doubt stems from their common Socratic background. Antisthenes, however, understood the investigation of *logoi* simply as an analysis of their linguistic meaning, and in such a way overlooked the souls of the speakers and the values they conveyed.

According to Plato, in other words, Antisthenes had provided a one-dimensional and short-sighted interpretation of Socratism, whereby ethics is reduced to a pure and simple asceticism ignorant of the values that characterise the spiritual and metaphysical dimension of the soul, and epistemology entails no higher ontological dimension beyond language. Indeed, Socrates’ teaching is only valid for Plato if a metaphysical dimension exists that is different from the bodily one and governs both ethics and the doctrine of knowledge: ascetic practices are only meaningful if the foregoing of material goods is aimed at the attainment of goods of a completely different sort;⁴⁹ and likewise the analysis of *logoi* can only be of some value if this enquiry is not limited to the level of language but helps reveal – however partially and approximately – the non-material and eternal reality behind it. In both cases, the mediating element that ensures this

⁴⁴ See Giannantoni (1990), vol. 1, pp. 359–360.

⁴⁵ See Baxter (1992), p. 161. It is noteworthy that Barney’s and Sedley’s monographs do not even mention the name of Antisthenes. Baxter himself, who nonetheless interprets the etymological section as a parodistic and polemical attack against a host of figures and cultural tendencies of the period, completely forgets to include Antisthenes among these targets.

⁴⁶ Fr. 45 D.C. (= Giannantoni v A151).

⁴⁷ Fr. 38 D.C. (= Giannantoni v A160).

⁴⁸ Brancacci (1990), p. 127.

⁴⁹ I have sought to adduce some arguments in favour of the idea that Plato might be engaging in a polemic of this kind against Antisthenes in Trabattoni (2004), pp. 162–171 and Trabattoni (2008).

metaphysical opening, and hence an effective outcome for both ethics and the quest for knowledge, is the soul, which unsurprisingly Antisthenes reduces to its physio-intellectual dimension.⁵⁰

In the *Cratylus*, Plato thus objects to Antisthenes that in order to refute Protagoras, it is useless to transfer truth from subjects to language, since the truth of language depends on the nature of the state of affairs it describes. In this way, Plato shows that only the picture of Socrates he has provided, in the light of significant metaphysical assumptions, is capable of sparing Socrates and his teaching from contamination with sophism, whereas the picture provided by Antisthenes completely misses this mark. For if all that may be known is language (which is the case for Antisthenes and Plato as much as for Gadamer),⁵¹ then we are faced with the following alternative: either there is no truth, so that all differences between truth and falsehood vanish (and sophistry triumphs); or truth has a metalinguistic (and metaphysical) origin: we can only see its effects, and reason about them.

According to Plato, the existence of a metaphysical reality, corresponding to the world of the ideas (and hence to the level of being that always remains identical to itself), may be demonstrated on the basis of arguments refuting Protagoreanism (which are chiefly presented in the *Theaetetus*, but also repeated through the refutation of Hermogenes in the *Cratylus*), as well as on the basis of the reasoning which in the *Phaedo* leads to an acknowledgement of the necessary existence of the ideas in an extra-temporal dimension (72e–76a).⁵² We thus have things, language – which describes them – and the judgement of the soul which expresses its assent/dissent to propositions. But what is the soul's assent based on? On what basis can the soul lend assent to the specific image of genuine reality that is provided by *logoi*?

The concept of image is actually intrinsically contradictory: for an image should enable one to know the thing it is an image of, yet without knowing the

⁵⁰ See fr. 57 D.C. (= Giannantoni 193), and Xenophon's portrayal of Antisthenes in the *Symposium* (fr. D.C. 107, 117 = Giannantoni V A 13, V A 81).

⁵¹ Gadamer (1960/1990), p. 478.

⁵² I do not agree with Kahn (1973) p. 169, according to whom in the Platonic dialogues, and especially the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, there are no arguments demonstrating the existence of the ideas, since the latter is already assumed by way of hypothesis. As concerns the *Phaedo* in particular, as P. Dimas has rightly noted (Dimas 2003) it is not the existence of the ideas that constitutes the starting hypothesis for the doctrine of reminiscence, but on the contrary the doctrine of reminiscence that serves as an assumption for establishing the existence of the ideas. For my interpretation of recollection see Trabattoni (2011), pp. xxxiv–xlvi and 69–97. I instead agree with Kahn that the final pages of the *Cratylus* (439d–440b) may themselves be regarded as an "argument" for the Forms" (pp. 169–171).

thing itself independently of the image it is impossible to understand whether the image is adequate for the thing in question or not; hence, images in themselves would appear to be *ineffective* means of knowledge. If, vice versa, things are known directly, it is unclear why one should attempt to know them through images, which in this case would simply be *useless*.⁵³ This alternative may be seen as a particular version of the eristic paradox that Plato introduces in the *Meno*; and indeed the only solution Plato can offer is the one presented in this dialogue, namely the doctrine of reminiscence. An image (i.e. the *logos*) will be *effective* as a means of knowing a thing to the extent that it bears traces of the thing itself as it was perceived when the soul was still disembodied; and it will be *useful* (or indeed indispensable) precisely because direct engagement with the thing in question is no longer an option.

6. THE MEANING OF THE *CRATYLUS*

I believe the picture just outlined finds clear support in the final section of the dialogue (439b10–440b7). Critics have found these pages rather baffling. Some have viewed the section as an appendix that does not easily fit with what comes before in the text, and what's more is also problematic in its argument and aporetic in its conclusions – to say nothing of the endless discussions surrounding the state of the “theory of the ideas” the section alludes to (according to many commentators, still an embryonic and incomplete stage compared to the dialogues from the middle period).⁵⁴ In my view, these are actually false problems that are all due to a mistaken understanding of the real nature of Plato's metaphysics. I believe there can be no doubt that Socrates is referring to the ideas here, since the entities he is discussing are described as possessing the very characteristics Plato usually regards as necessary and sufficient conditions for entities to be described as ideas: they are things such as the beautiful itself or good itself (439c8: *αὐτὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν*), which serve as the unity of the multiple beings referring to them (c8–9: *ἐν ἑκάστων τῶν ὄντων*) and which differ from the latter insofar as they always remain self-identical (e3–4: *ἀεὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχει καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστὶ*).⁵⁵ As for

⁵³ This point has been strongly stressed by S. Rosen his book on the *Sophist* (1983). See also Barney (2001), pp. 105–106; 147.

⁵⁴ For a concise overview of scholars' various stances, with bibliographical references, see Baxter (1992), pp. 176–183.

⁵⁵ In my view, this does not change the fact that Barney (2001) pp. 248ff. is right in noting that Socrates introduces the ideas in this section of the *Cratylus* in the least compromising possible way, namely as fixed points of reference the existence of which could hardly be denied (without making certain operations ordinarily performed by men

the fact that Socrates here introduces the ideas through the verb *ὄνειρόττειν* (to dream), this will only surprise those who overlook the realistic meaning of Plato's dualism and metaphysics, and hence believe that the ideas are objects the mind's eye can see in the same way as sensible objects are seen through the eyes. If, on the contrary, the ideas are "posited" because of the need to justify the existence of the *logos* and of *διαλέγεσθαι* (the act of discussing, which – as the *Cratylus* itself states – could not exist without an underlying point of reference),⁵⁶ then the image of a "dream" is easy enough to explain: it stresses precisely the fact that the ideas are not "seen" in the same way as sensible things are.⁵⁷

In the light of all this, the impression that the last pages of the *Cratylus* are a kind of largely irrelevant appendix also vanishes. Indeed, Plato cannot end his argument after having shown that a form of knowledge higher than the propositional exists; and this, for two good reasons: 1) one would still need to explain how this knowledge is attained; 2) one would have to explain why, despite this possibility, the *logos* (i.e. dialectics) remains the only means of philosophical knowledge effectively available to man. Plato therefore carries on by showing that the errors in which linguistic-propositional epistemology gets caught up derive from the fact that those who assigned names did not notice the existence of realities (the ideas) not subject to flux and always self-identical, the existence of which is a precondition for any sort of knowledge, and for linguistic-propositional knowledge in particular.⁵⁸ This does not mean, however, that the object of this

incomprehensible). For it is indeed the case that according to Plato "commonsense views, if their presuppositions and ramifications are properly understood, *do* turn out to entail much of 'the Theory of Forms'" (p. 152). Actually, in my view, there is not much more than this to the so-called "Platonic theory of the ideas" in general, which is to say the simple stressing of the need to accept certain assumptions (see Trabattini 1998, pp. 119–125), so that the presentation of this "theory" in the *Cratylus* does not strike me as being very different from that provided (for instance) in the *Phaedo* (if not for the different length at which it is discussed).

⁵⁶ On this point, see ch. 10, 11, 12.

⁵⁷ On the theme of "dreaming", see Barney (2001), pp. 148–151. Barney, in particular, believes that the image of a dream is intended to show that "the ideas presented here should not be presumed to have any rational authority" (p. 150). This may be going too far, however; rather, I would say that the ideas are presented here as hypotheses that may *reasonably* be accepted, even though they are not grasped directly (and hence are dreamed of in a way), for the same reason adduced by Parmenides in the dialogue by the same name: for else, it would be impossible to explain the *δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι* men actually possess (*Parm.* 135b–c).

⁵⁸ See Barney: "If we are to engage in making statements, or if we aspire to knowledge, we must trust in the existence of appropriate objects of speech and knowledge; these, Plato argues, must be stable; and this provides naturalism with all the starting-points it needs" (Barney 2001, p. 159). Still, Barney does not draw the necessary metaphysical implications

knowledge is to be found in the ideas themselves. Socrates does not claim that if those who assigned names had done their work well, they ought to have used them to name/know changeless realities. Rather, he argues that these people ought to have used names while *bearing in mind* (διανοηθέντες, 439c2) that reality is changeless, and not eternally in flux. Changeless realities are therefore *an object the existence of which is the precondition for the assigning of names* (and hence for the effectiveness of propositional knowledge); as already argued, they are not *the objects named*. What we have, then, is a possible situation in which the only philosophical knowledge at man's disposal is the dialectical-propositional one, even though in principle there exists a higher form of knowledge: the ideas are at the same time the object of intuitive knowledge (i.e. knowledge by acquaintance) and the precondition for propositional knowledge (i.e. knowledge by description). What Plato wishes to show in the *Cratylus*, if needs be against rivals such as Antisthenes, is that the precondition for linguistic-dialectical-propositional knowledge is the metaphysical assumption that there exist changeless objects other than the sensible ones, with a form of intellectual intuition suited to them – even though this does not mean that human knowledge can *de facto* do without propositional structures.

Plato's preference for a three-term epistemology, and the centrality of language which follows from it, thus paint a broadly hermeneutic picture of truth and knowledge. Through a direct comparison between things and the language imitating or representing them, it would be possible to verify the correctness of representations; at the same time, however, this would make language itself perfectly useless (the availability of the "first sailing", that is, would make the "second" superfluous). Yet, language remains the only available path for attaining

from this view (for instance, she does not mention the doctrine of reminiscence), so that her reading of the *Cratylus* ultimately attributes a sort of epistemological pessimism with no way out to Plato (Barney often refers to this in her book). With this, we have a complete overview of the interpretations of Platonic epistemology based on a priori anti-metaphysical assumptions (cf. ns. 40–41): once we have established – through this anti-metaphysical presupposition – that neither the epistemological optimism of the intuitionists is justified (whereby, if there is no such thing as another world, man has no access to intellectual intuition), nor that of the propositionalists (whereby, if the best means of knowledge at man's disposal is the earthly one of the logos, it becomes impossible to overcome the latter's structural inadequacy), we can only relinquish optimism in favour of pessimism (and Plato runs a strong risk of coming across as a sceptic). The hypothesis that Plato's epistemology is an optimistic one precisely – and only – because it anchors the imperfection of human knowledge to a metaphysical dimension which ensures the possibility of turning towards what is real, is not even taken into consideration; yet, whether we moderns like it or not, it would seem that this was exactly Plato's view.

intellectual knowledge precisely because this comparison is no longer possible. A verification, therefore, cannot be made on the level of the relation between the *logos* and a given thing, but only on the level of the mutual relation between *logoi* – which ultimately is the level of the soul's questioning, of the examination of its *doxai* in the search for agreement (*ὁμολογία*). This restriction of knowledge to the field of language certainly has a circular nature, and thus always runs a strong risk of slipping into sophism, i.e. of turning into a vicious circle.⁵⁹ Plato avoids this pitfall, as we know from the chapters devoted to the *Theaetetus*, through the metaphysical move of asserting the notion of the ideas and the doctrine of reminiscence connected to it. In his view, since it is possible to prove that a univocal and ever self-identical reality exists, and that the soul of each man once had access to the knowledge of this reality, the comparison between *logoi* is not bound to go round in circles, but – if accurately carried out – may also reveal an underlying, progressive consistency and convergence. In other words, there are good reasons to believe that the process of dialectics and the extension of *ὁμολογίαι* are not simply the artificial development of a field of arbitrary meanings based on convention (as Hermogenes maintains), but rather constitute a progressive elucidation of reality, capable of leading knowledge closer and closer to the true nature of things.

It is precisely in this sense that – as we have seen – Plato in the *Cratylus* identifies the existence of perfectly changeless realities (i.e. of fixed points of reference) as the necessary condition for the attainment of knowledge in general (for else, the *logos* would be circular). In this dialogue, Plato proves to be rejecting both Hermogenes' thesis (according to which language has no connection to reality) and that of Cratylus (according to which no form of extra-linguistic knowledge exists); yet he does so without claiming that language is capable of fully and perfectly grasping reality (a thesis which is the mirror opposite

⁵⁹ As may be inferred precisely from a passage of the *Cratylus* I have already quoted above (436c–e, ch. 4, p. 58), in general the internal consistency of a linguistic system will not guarantee its correctness. On the contrary, as Socrates notes, it is necessary for each man to carefully reason about the starting point for each thing, to see whether the consequences deriving from it are correct (δεῖ δὴ περὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς παντὸς πράγματος παντὶ ἀνδρὶ τὸν πολὺν λόγον εἶναι καὶ τὴν πολλὴν σκέψις εἴτε ὀρθῶς εἴτε μὴ ὑπόκειται). Adumbrated here is the method of hypotheses which Plato was to discuss more at length in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. Without delving into this difficult problem here (that concerns the possible agreement/disagreement between the ways in which this method is presented in the two dialogues), it is reasonable to envisage a framework of reference of the following sort: the consistency of a system may be perfectly illusionary in itself, if its development is not based on a connection with an objective reality serving as a non-circular starting point.

of Hermogenes'), or that man still has genuine access to a kind of intellectual knowledge which allows him to do without language (a thesis which is the mirror opposite of Cratylus').

CHAPTER 8 THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE PHILOSOPHER

1. INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE OR PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE?

Faced with the objection Glaucon raises at the beginning of Book 5 concerning the sharing of women and children, Socrates is forced to embark on a lengthy and complex speech that follows three strands of reasoning. The discussion concerning the third strand, the one we shall now be focusing on, begins in the final section of Book 5 (473c) and extends practically until the end of Book 7. Its aim is to prove the well-known hypothesis according to which there can be no happiness, whether private or public, unless philosophers become rulers or rulers become philosophers (473c11–d5). The length of the discussion in itself shows what a challenge Socrates has here set himself. In order to successfully meet this challenge, he must refute common prejudices and errors by explaining who philosophers really are, since only in this way can the necessary – yet far from self-evident – link between politics and philosophy be illustrated.

Among the many factors that contribute to the picture of the philosopher-politicians that Plato has in mind, a central role is of course assigned to knowledge. On the one hand, the philosopher is a lover of wisdom; on the other, politics is a science according to Plato, meaning that it can only be exercised by those who possess a certain kind of knowledge. Now, what kind of knowledge does the philosopher possess? Does it have a specific object or does it focus on the same things which others – non-philosophers – also know or wish to know? (1) If we answer in the affirmative, then to what degree can this knowledge be attained? (2) And finally: how is this knowledge developed? (3)

Clearly, these questions have already been answered in many different ways. All differences aside, however, a kind of general reading may be defined that is accepted by most scholars in most cases. The answer to (1) seems rather obvious. There can be little doubt that philosophical knowledge has a specific object, if only on the basis of the well-known distinction between “philodoxes” (φιλόδοξοι) and philosophers illustrated in Book 5 (480a): philosophers seek to know not the sensible and ever-changing world, but rather the changeless world of things that are always self-identical. This clearly consists in the ideas, first of all, and secondly in the idea of the good. The answer to question (2) is less self-evident, but here too a kind of *communis opinio* has taken root among scholars. Platonic thought developed from a Socratic phase, tinged partly with scepticism and partly with Orphic religious sensibility, to a markedly more mature phase in which on the one hand Plato paid less attention to the religious background (with its emphasis on mystery and the weakness of human knowledge compared

to divine knowledge), and on the other transcended Socrates' scepticism in favour of constructive investigations and non-aporetic knowledge. The early dialogues thus almost invariably end without having reached any real conclusion: a well-known passage of the *Phaedo*, for instance, states that man can only attain full knowledge of the ideas after his death (66b–67b). In the *Republic* by contrast (and in the *Symposium* before that), Plato argues that if men are philosophers, they can attain a perfectly complete knowledge of intelligible reality, with no traces of *aporia*.¹ What the persistence of such traces instead indicates is simply that the correct method of enquiry is yet to be found.

With regard to question (3), two different opinions have been formulated. By assuming the validity of the answer given to question (2) above – including the evolutionary framework which serves as its background – some scholars maintain that in the central books of the *Republic* full knowledge of the ideas is to be understood as a form of intellectual intuition, which is to say a form of non-discursive knowledge;² other scholars instead believe that this is a form of propositional knowledge, which is to say a quest for definition. Halfway between these two stances lies that of scholars who assign the idea of intellectual intuition only to the *Symposium* and *Republic*, viewing the quest for definition as a further phase of development in Plato's thought (illustrated by his dialectical dialogues).

I think that none of the above-mentioned answers is correct. First of all, the evolutionary hypothesis is inadequate.³ But most importantly, as I have attempted to show in the previous chapters, it is not true that according to Plato man can attain complete knowledge of ideal reality. And if this is not the case, both answers to question (3) which we have just mentioned no longer hold: for both intuition and definition possess the features of perfect, complete and exhaustive knowledge. Likewise, on these bases it is no longer that easy to answer question (1), since the hypothesis that man may really acquire knowledge of a

¹ Exemplary use of this hypothesis has been made, for instance, in Chen (1992).

² A broad overview of scholars who regard intellectual intuition as part of Plato's epistemology may be found in Stemmer (1992), pp. 214–215 (with notes). It is also worth mentioning the position adopted by K. Sayre, who initially denied the presence of intellectual intuition within Plato's philosophy (Sayre 1983), but who came to accept it as the highpoint of dialectics in a later work, largely based on a reading of the philosophical excursus of the *Seventh Letter* (Sayre 1995). The origins of the contemporary critical debate on this topic may be traced back to the controversy between R.C. Cross and R.S. Bluck in the early 1950s (an overview of the debate is provided by Allen 1967): the former scholar upheld the idea of propositional knowledge, the latter of intuitive knowledge (what was particularly at issue in this controversy were Plato's dialectical dialogues). On this, see Lafrance, (1981), pp. 215–225.

³ I have argued at length against such an hypothesis in Trabattoni (2013).

reality other than the sensible one becomes more uncertain as the way in which this reality is known grows weaker. In the following pages I shall attempt to show that far from disproving these conclusions, the central books of the *Republic* actually confirm them.

2. PLATO'S OPTICAL METAPHORS

The notion that in the *Republic* Plato affirms the full knowability of the ideas, at least for philosophers, largely rests on the hypothesis that this knowledge is intuitive and non-propositional in nature⁴ (the opposite hypothesis is more flexible, since it does not require propositional knowledge to crystallise into definition). On the other hand, the greatest support for this notion would appear to be provided precisely by the central books of the *Republic*, which are strewn with optical metaphors and, more generally, expressions that seem to suggest a full and complete access to the world of ideas on the philosopher's part.

We shall start from the optical metaphors, then, by providing a few significant examples:

- 5.476b4–11: Socrates explains to Glaucon that the non-philosophers are those whose thought is incapable of seeing (ιδεῖν) the nature of the beautiful in itself (αὐτοῦ τοῦ καλοῦ), whereas the philosophers are the few capable of seeing (ὄραν) αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν ... καθ' αὐτό.
- 6.484c6–d2: Socrates here speaks of those “who are really deprived of the knowledge of each thing that is”: they “have no clear model (παράδειγμα) in their souls and they so cannot – in the manner of painters – look (ἀποβλέποντες) to what is most true, make constant reference to it, and observing (θεώμενοι) it as exactly as possible”.
- 6.500c2–5: the philosophers “looking at and observing (ὄρωντας καὶ θεωμένους) things that are organized and are always the same”, seek to imitate them and increasingly fashion himself in their likeness.
- 6.501b1–7: here we read about turning one's gaze (ἀποβλέπειν) “towards what is by nature just, beautiful, moderate and so on”.
- 7.517b8–c5: the allegory of the cave is of course entirely based on an optical metaphor, but the following is probably the most crucial passage for the sake of our argument: “In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen (ὄρασθαι), and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it (ὀφθεῖσα), however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is

⁴ See Sorabji (1982).

correct and beautiful in anything ... so that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must see it (ιδεῖν)."

- 7.519c10: "see (ιδεῖν) the good".
- 7.524c6–8: "understanding was compelled to see (ιδεῖν) the big and the small, non as mixed up together, but as separate – the opposite way from sight"
- 7.526e1: geometry facilitates "the seeing (κατιδεῖν) of the idea of the good".

The above, of course, are only some revealing examples. Now, what might these passages mean, if not that there exists a kind of intellectual seeing of ideas?

Conversely, one may object: what reasons have we to believe that according to Plato *verba videndi* possess a second meaning aside from that of sensible vision, that with reference to things other than this vision they are not being used simply in a metaphorical sense, to denote intellectual knowledge in general? Why should we believe that these verbs are employed in a literal way by Plato even when they apply to things that cannot be seen?

A first observation springs to mind here. In Books 6 and 7 of the *Republic*, we often find a dichotomy between what is visible and what is thinkable. In 507b9–10, for instance, we read: "And we say that the many manifold things and the rest are visible (ὁράσθαι) but non intelligible (νοεῖσθαι), while the forms are intelligible but not visible." Elsewhere, Socrates simply draws a contrast between "visible", ὁρατόν, and "intelligible", νοητόν (509d1–4; 524c13), or, in a more articulate way, between visible region (ἔδρα) and intelligible place (τόπος 517a8–b7). All these passages, and especially the first, clearly suggest that the ideas are not visible, but thinkable.⁵ It is evident, therefore, that when Plato speaks of "seeing" the ideas, he is using the verb in a metaphorical sense.

It is further worth noting that *verba videndi* possess a metaphorical meaning even when they refer to sensible things: for sensible reality can not only be seen, but also touched, heard, tasted and smelled. Are we to believe that what Plato means when he describes sensible reality as ὁρατόν is that it can only be seen, rather than smelled and heard as well? Or is it not rather the case that the verb ὁρᾶν is being used here as a metaphor (or, to be more accurate, as a metonymy) to denote sensible knowledge? Why should the same verb, once applied to invisible things, suddenly acquire a purely literal meaning? Are we to believe that Plato also envisaged intellectual senses of smell, touch and hearing? Is it not far more logical to conclude that just as Plato's optical expressions metaphorically indicate sensible knowledge in general when referring to sensible things, so they metaphorically indicate intellectual knowledge in general when referring to intelligible things?

⁵ See Stemmer (1992), pp. 215–216.

The metaphorical value of the optical expressions in the central books of the *Republic* has rightly been stressed – by invoking a number of supporting arguments – by P. Stemmer in an important chapter of his book on Plato's dialectics.⁶ In particular, Stemmer maintains that in the metaphor of the line and allegory of the cave the word νοῦς (intellect) may correctly be translated using the German term *Einsicht*, without this in any way entailing the need to conceive intellectual knowledge as a kind of vision. The same may be argued with respect to the verb εἰδέναι (to know) in its various forms:

It is believed [...] that εἰδέναι is an expression of the visual sort and that it properly means “to have seen”. Obviously it is no chance that this very word, with this linguistic root, is used to express the concept of knowledge; but the fact that this determination of a linguistic sort did not come about by chance does not force us to accept a given conception of knowledge or of the way in which this knowledge is attained. The notion of spiritual vision is not even implied by the analogies, drawn in the myth of the cave, between ἀγαθόν (good) and ἥλιος (sun), νοῦς (intellect) and ὄψις (sight), νοούμενα (intelligible) and ὁρώμενα (visible). What the analogy precisely states is: just as the good behaves with respect to the νοῦς and the objects of the νοῦς, so the sun behaves with respect to vision and the objects of vision.⁷ What are being compared here are certain *relations*, and not the elements connected through these relations. The *relation* between the idea of the good and the νοῦς and its objects is compared to the *relation* between the sun, vision and the objects of vision. The only assertion we have, then, is the following: just as seeing and being seen are only possible in association with a third element, viz. the sun (which provides light), so the νοῦς and being known are only possible in association with a third element, viz. the idea of the good. Any other conclusion, including the one according to which intelligible objects are known through spiritual vision, since sensible objects are known through sensible vision, finds no support in the analogy.⁸

If the above reasoning is correct, we must admit then that neither the expression “see the ideas” nor the stock of metaphors accompanying the allegory of the cave in themselves reveal what kind of knowledge is at stake here.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 214–215.

⁷ See *Resp.* 6.509b13–c2.

⁸ Stemmer (1992), p. 219 (the translation is my own).

3. *DIANOIA* AND *NOESIS*

Nothing prevents us from supposing that while using optical expressions to describe the knowledge of the intelligible, Plato has a kind of propositional knowledge in mind. Or at any rate, it must be admitted that it is not the optical expressions as such that rule out this possibility, and that in order to solve the question we must turn elsewhere. Now, it seems to me that even a summary analysis of the metaphor of the line offers the necessary elements to establish that Plato envisages intellectual knowledge primarily as discursive knowledge.⁹ The textbook reading according to which *dianoia*, that is the kind of knowledge that forms the third segment of the line, would be discursive and propositional thought, while *noesis*, corresponding to the fourth segment, would be intuitive and non-propositional thought,¹⁰ finds no support in the text.

I shall start by noting that the term *dianoia* is also used in the *Republic* to refer to the knowledge of ideal entities. In a passage of Book 5 (476b4–8), Socrates states with regard to lovers of sounds and colours (φιλήκοοι καὶ φιλοθεάμονες) that “their thought (διάνοια) is unable to see (ιδεῖν) and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself”. Exactly the same use of *dianoia* is to be found in the metaphor of the divided line itself (511a1), where Socrates mentions geometers as people incapable of seeing things that “one cannot see (ἰδοῖ) except by means of thought (διανόια)”. Thus, as we can see, the reading *dianoia* = discursive thought/*noesis* = intuitive thought falls through right from the start, since *dianoia* too “sees” the ideas, i.e. does what according to this reading only *noesis* would be capable of doing.¹¹

The common way of approaching this argument is to claim that since the “technical” distinction between *dianoia* and *noesis* is introduced after the passages just mentioned (511d2–e4), nothing prevents us from assuming that *dianoia* possesses both a general meaning (“thought”) and a more specific one (“discursive thought”), and that the above distinction is only drawn by Plato at a later stage.¹² Now, it is certainly true that the distinction between *dianoia* and

⁹ As is widely known, the critical literature on the metaphor of the line is vast. For studies published up to 1984, it will be useful to refer to the select bibliography drawn up by Lafrance (1987). Also worth mentioning is the detailed analysis of the passage provided by the same author in Lafrance (1994). For an overview of more recent publications and an updated discussion of the issue, see Smith (1996).

¹⁰ See, among the most recent contributions, Quarch (1998), p. 50 (although Quarch’s interpretation of the object of *noesis* is an interesting and far from conventional one).

¹¹ On this point, see Dixsaut (1999).

¹² This argument is advanced, for instance, by Boyle (1973), see esp. p. 9, n. 16. Actually, as we shall soon see, *dianoia* only has the general meaning of “thought”. What denotes a specific kind of thought is rather *noesis*.

noesis is introduced later on, but the criterion on which this distinction rests has nothing to do with the difference between discursive thought and intuitive thought.

In 510b2, Socrates sets out to describe the second and uppermost section of the line, and in particular to expound the difference between the cognitive modes corresponding to the third and fourth segments (which are not yet defined as *dianoia* and *noesis*). As is well known, the issue of precisely what kind of knowledge Plato may be referring to with the third segment, and in what respect this may be deficient compared to the knowledge at work in the fourth, is a much debated problem and one extremely difficult to solve.¹³ We shall only be examining it to the extent necessary to show that there is nothing in the text to suggest that the distinguishing feature of this knowledge is its propositional/discursive quality. From Socrates' words we learn that the knowledge at work in the third segment employs as images the things imitated in the section of *doxa*/sensible reality, that it progresses towards the end rather than the beginning, and that it makes use of hypotheses (510b4–9). We might also add that this knowledge typologically resembles that of mathematicians. However, we should not assign too much importance to this last element, nor use it as a privileged vantage point in order to understand the third segment. Indeed, mathematics is only introduced to clarify what Socrates had stated at the beginning, in 510b4–9, so we may infer that this passage already contains everything that is essential for the sake of the argument.¹⁴

It is easy to see that none of the characteristics of the knowledge pertaining to the third segment listed in this passage has anything to do with discursive thought. Not only that, but the elements distinguishing that knowledge and marking its deficiency compared to the knowledge corresponding to the fourth segment actually point in the opposite direction: its distinguishing characteristic is rather that it is not discursive enough, since it is still bound to figures and images borrowed from the sensible world. Besides, this is made quite clear by the very example of mathematicians, whose method of enquiry is connected to the construction of figures and models, i.e. to something which possesses the opaque

¹³ A broad overview of the interpretations that have been provided may be found in J. Boyle (1973), pp. 215–225, and in Smith (1996), p. 32.

¹⁴ By far the most widespread opinion among commentators is that the third segment of the line has to do exclusively with mathematical entities and the mathematical sciences. See, for instance, Boyle, who considers the opposite thesis from the one I have accepted (“that mathematics is merely a convenient illustration of *dianoia*”) to be “wholly without foundation” (Boyle 1973, p. 8, n. 5). This view derives from an incorrect interpretative method, which takes no account of the dialogical structure of Plato's text. I will refer the reader to next chapter, where this problem is discussed in detail.

characteristics of sensible reality, as opposed to the perfect transparency of the *logos*. After all, why should the use of discursive thought be a salient feature of geometers and mathematicians?

The description of the third segment, therefore, appears to be setting the stage for a higher level consisting not in a form of knowledge that is *no longer* dialectical and discursive, but rather in the very opposite: a form of knowledge that is *only* dialectical and discursive, and finally free from assumptions that cannot be dialectically examined (and hence must be accepted as hypotheses without “give an account of them”: λόγον ... περι αὐτῶν διδόναι, 510c7), such as shapes and models. Indeed, when Socrates sets out to discuss the second segment of the intelligible, the description he provides could hardly be any clearer: “what the *logos* itself grasp by the capacity of discussing” (ἄπτεται τῇ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δυνάμει 511b4).

First of all, let us note the presence of the verb ἄπτομαι (to grasp), which is often regarded as one of the indicators of direct, non-mediated knowledge. Take, for instance, the beginning of Book 6, where philosophers are described as “those who are able to grasp (ἐφάπτεσθαι) what is always the same in all respect” (484b4–5). The tactile metaphor, in this case, would be equivalent to the optical one, since it would indicate the instantaneous punctuality of knowledge which is not mediated by the *logos*, by the durative and descriptive structure of language. As a comparison with 511b4 indicates, however, the tactile metaphor is no less suited than optical ones for expressing knowledge of the discursive sort: the faculty which grasps the objects pertaining to the fourth segment of the line, therefore, is not intellectual vision or intuition, but *logos* understood in its capacity to *dialegesthai*, which is to say reason dialectically. This confirms the fact that the extension of patterns typical of sensible knowledge to intellectual knowledge has a metaphorical value, and hence that the use of these metaphors says nothing crucial about the nature of such knowledge.

It is worth briefly adding that the δύνναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι consists in the universalising capacity of the *logos*, which serves as a tool for the relation and movement between the particular and the universal, the multiple and the one. Indeed, this is what dialectics does. Besides, just as it is difficult to understand why the geometer should employ discursive thought, it is hard to understand why the dialectician should have intellectual intuitions. To understand that the opposite should in fact be the case, all we need is some common sense.

What we have called the textbook reading, therefore, bizarrely inverts the actual relation between *dianoia* and *noesis*. It is evident, however, that there must be some reason why this interpretation has become so widespread and well-established. I believe that at least three interfering elements come into play here:

- 1) First of all there is the intrusion of the visual vocabulary that has been discussed above, and which carries with it a natural temptation to extend the optical model to the intelligible as well.
- 2) To this let us add the existence of a long tradition of “Platonists” who – from Middle Platonism down to Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus – concurred that in the *nous* there is no *διέξοδος* (course), since it grasps its objects in a punctual manner, without the kind of passage and movement typical of *dialegethai*, which would make the difference between *dianoia* and *noesis*.¹⁵ With regard to this point it should be noted that ancient Platonists could also claim to find some support in certain passages from Aristotle (especially *APo.* 2.19.100b5–17).
- 3) Finally, we should mention the fact that both in the metaphor of the line and in the sketchy reference to it in 533e7–534a8, it is difficult to understand just what Plato means by *dianoia* and where the difference lies between *dianoia* and *noesis*.

The last of these is the problem I shall now be focusing on, in order to bring my brief discussion of the metaphor of the line to a close. The knowledge at work in the fourth segment of the line is a “capacity of discussing” (*δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι*, 511b4) that, in agreement with what had been previously anticipated, does not set hypotheses as principles, but only approaches these as cues for defining the real principle, which is unhypothetical, and then proceed down to the lowest point, yet without ever establishing any contact with the sensible, but rather operating through ideas alone (511b3–c2). This conclusion is actually only an extended reflection of what Socrates had already argued in 510b6–9, but in a too concise and abstract manner for Glaucon to understand him.

What are we to make of this description? First of all, let us say a few words on hypotheses. As previously noted, mistaking hypotheses for principles is tantamount to believing that they require no justification, i.e. that there is no need to deduce them (to use a Kantian expression) through discursive reasoning. The difference between an hypothesis and what is unhypothetical lies precisely in this, namely the fact that the unhypothetical carries its *raison d’être* within itself and is not posited merely as a premise that is not justified, or only justified by the fact of wishing to develop certain arguments. In my view, the unhypothetical is such

¹⁵ See Alc. *Didaskalikos* 156, 5–10 (Whittaker 7, 18–23). For similar assertions on the part of Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus, see Whittaker, p. 86, n. 66. The notion of *διέξοδος* incorporates the difference between “intuitive” and “discursive” within that between “punctual” and “articulated into several passages”, thus making it possible to regard even geometry as a form of “discursive thought”.

because it must necessarily be posited, whereas an hypothesis is such because it may or may not be posited.¹⁶ Having said this, an hypothesis and what is unhypothetical may even coincide at times: the difference between the two lies in the procedure adopted, since in one case it is simply a question of method, while in the other necessity comes into play. In this sense, I believe it is possible to argue that the unhypothetical is to be found in the ideas and especially in the idea of the good. Unlike sensible images, which are only useful insofar as they help formulate certain demonstrations, the ideas (and the idea of the good) are the principle that must necessarily be posited in order to explain and comprehend reality. Still, knowledge does not consist in the direct apprehension of the unhypothetical, but rather in a dialectical and discursive process that unfolds from the particular to the universal, from the multiple to the one and vice versa, within the eidetic framework that has been defined. Ideas are unhypothetical because it is necessary to posit the unity of the multiple, yet the knowledge of ideas is not the punctual, intuitive knowledge of the one; rather, it consists in the progressive, endless gathering of the many into the one and the dividing of the one into the many.

For Plato, the operation just described constitutes the activity of thought in the most eminent sense. It is clear, however, that this is not the only kind of thought that exists and hence that Plato, when identifying it, must stress the difference between this kind of thought and less lofty and philosophical modes of thinking. Through Glaucon's sharp comment, he here reveals the mystery of the splitting of the "bisection of the intelligible" (τμήμα τοῦ νοητοῦ, 511b3) into *dianoia* and *noesis*. Those who make use of the method of inquiry described in the third segment of the line are forced to observe (θεᾶσθαι) the reality (αὐτά) they observe (θεώμενοι) by means of thought (διανοία) rather than sense-perception; however, because they do not go back to a first principle, but proceed by means of hypotheses, they do not understand that reality (νοῦν οὐκ ἴσχειν περὶ αὐτά), even though, with a principle, it is intelligible (νοητῶν ὄντων) (511c6–d2).

¹⁶ D.C. Baltzly (1996), has suggested that an unhypothetical principle is to be understood as the starting point which is reached "by examining the exhaustive set of alternatives to the principle and showing through argument how they are self-refuting or, at least, involve some kind of contradiction or untenable conclusions" (p. 156). When envisaged in these terms, recourse to an unhypothetical principle closely resembles dialectic demonstration (what is achieved by refuting theses alternative to the correct one) in Aristotle (see *EE* 1.3.1215a3–7). I find this an interesting suggestion. I believe that Plato regarded his principles as "unhypothetical" because they represent the only valid solution to problems of a certain kind. The fact remains, as Baltzly himself acknowledges (pp. 157–159), that this formula may only be applied to the idea of the good in a rather vague manner which does not enable us to clearly pin down the content and structure of the argument: for there is no evident contradiction in thinking that the idea of the good does not exist, nor is it obvious how this idea should be conceived.

First of all, let us note once more how the use made of *verba videndi* here stands in contrast to their standard interpretation, since these verbs refer to lower intellectual knowledge. There are also other reasons, however, why this is an interesting passage. Those who possess modes of knowledge pertaining to the third segment are indeed (μέν) also forced to know what they know through thought (*dianoia*), yet this is not a kind of thinking of first choice. The need arises, then, to introduce *noesis*: not in order to identify a kind of thought other than *dianoia* or objects of a new sort, but in order to mark out – within what may be described as thought (*dianoia*) in all its various aspects – a particular kind of thought, possessing a specific method of its own. Paraphrasing Heraclitus, we might say that thought is common to all; what only belongs to a few, by contrast, is the kind of thought which proceeds towards a principle, which only considers valid that procedure which demonstrates the need for everything it posits.

The objects of *dianoia* and those of *noesis*, moreover, clearly coincide.¹⁷ This may easily be inferred from the passage that has just been quoted. To Socrates – Glaucon states – it seems that about the things (αὐτά) known by those possessing general thought (*dianoia*) these people have no intelligence (νοῦν οὐκ ἴσχειν περὶ αὐτά), even though such things are knowable (νοητῶν ὄντων). After all, this is obvious: the objects are the same because *dianoia* is still a form of thought, and thought refers to intelligible things, as opposed to sense, which refers to sensible ones. Non-noetic thought, however, is a kind of thought contaminated by

¹⁷ As already noted, this issue has been made the object of the most various interpretations. According to an extremely common one, what Plato has in mind are mathematical entities, possibly situated at an intermediate level between sensible things and ideas (in agreement with Aristotle's testimony). A few years ago the view that what is at play here are mathematical propositions also gained some consensus (see Smith 1996, p. 32). In general, these interpretative attempts fall short because of the prejudice according to which *dianoia* only concerns mathematical thought. In my view, the suggestion that what is being presented in the *Republic* is the doctrine of intermediary entities stems from the prejudice that *dianoia* and *noesis* have different objects, combined with a need to explain expressions such as “the square itself and the diagonal itself” (510d7–8). The idea that *dianoia* has to do with propositions such as geometrical axioms instead rests on the prejudice that the use of propositions is precisely what marks the difference between *noesis* and *dianoia*. Smith, however, has shown that it not possible to reach this conclusion based on the text, and that passage 510c2–d1 actually rules it out (1996, p. 33). As far as I am concerned, I agree with the interpretation Smith first expounded in Smith (1981), and later further developed in Smith (1996). The objects of *dianoia* are sensible things used as images of the intelligible. A person exercising *dianoia*, in other words, in a way performs a hybrid activity, since he or she thinks of intelligible things through mental representations drawn from the sensible. For further details, see Ch. 9.

sense-perception, by something that creeps into one's reasoning simply because it exists and strikes one's senses, although it is not justified by any evident logical necessity.

The difference between *dianoia* and *noesis*, therefore, lies in their methods rather than objects. The two kinds of thought do not constitute two separate domains, but rather stand in relation to one another as genus and species: *noesis* too, as thought, is *dianoia*, yet not every kind of *dianoia* is *noesis*.¹⁸ This explains why, several pages after the metaphor of the line has been introduced (529d4–5), Socrates states that ideal entities “must be grasped by reason (λόγος) and thought (διάνοια)”, without specifying however that in this case he is speaking of *noesis* rather than *dianoia*. Indeed, Glaucon's comment in 511c2–d5 makes it quite clear that *dianoia* is not a specific mode of thinking, but a general term for thought; as such, there is nothing to prevent one from also applying it to modes of thinking that are not strictly philosophical. By contrast, *noesis* describes a specific kind of thought; but just as *dianoia* is not discursive thought, so the specificity which Plato wishes to grasp through *noesis* is not intuitive thought. On the contrary, based on what is stated in 511b4, the opposite should rather be the case.¹⁹

4. PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND DEFINITION: THE SELF-REFERENTIALITY OF PHILOSOPHY

If philosophical thought of the higher level, that focusing on ideas, possesses a propositional character, are we to believe that Plato regarded definition as its ultimate aim? If this were the case, the act of turning to ideal models in order to then reproduce what one has seen within mundane reality (486c6–d3) would consist not in a kind of inner vision but in resorting to definition. The philosopher, then, would first of all be he who is capable of finding the exact definition of the good. In such a way, intellectual vision would be replaced by a cognitive

¹⁸ In line with Smith's interpretation, it would be correct to say that the objects of the third segment are in a sense the same as those of the second (those grasped by belief, i.e. πίστις), and in another sense the same as those of the fourth (those grasped by *noesis*). In the former case we are referring to sensible things employed as images in order to know the ideas, while in the latter case we are referring to the ideas themselves, which are the real target of this kind of knowledge. Besides, this is what Socrates expressly states in 510d5–511a (see Smith 1996, 129–130; 135). In any case, it is evident that the interpretation suggested here rests on the assumption that Plato conceives of *dianoia* in two ways, namely as the kind of thought that stands in contrast to *noesis* and as thought in general.

¹⁹ A view which for the most part analogous to the one I have just presented may be found in Dixsaut (1999), pp. 15–16.

tool just as powerful, namely the capacity to promote a complete and definitive intelligence about ideal reality. The replacement of non-propositional thought with propositional thought, in other words, would not lead to any weakening of the cognitive faculties of man, and hence would in no way alter the image of Plato's philosophy as a strong, peremptory and exhaustive kind of thought.

But are we in fact sure that Plato conceived of the propositional knowledge of ideas as definition? Do we find this view in the dialogues, and especially the *Republic*? I believe the answer to this question must be a negative one. In particular, I believe we may rule out the possibility that according to Plato one's enquiry within a given domain ends the moment an exact, final and self-sufficient defining proposition is identified.

If we compare this to what actually takes place in Plato's dialogues – both aporetic and conclusive – we find that no scenario of this sort ever presents itself. This is not the case, for instance, with the ending of the *Sophist*: for on the one hand it would be difficult to claim that an idea of the sophist exists (not to say of the fisherman with a line) and that the search for a sophist represents a proper model for the knowledge of the ideas; and secondly, because the definition provided in the text presupposes the enquiries that have previously been carried out on being and non-being, so that the definition in itself cannot be regarded as either exhaustive or self-sufficient.²⁰ The same applies to the “definition” of justice provided in Book 4 of the *Republic*, as “the doing of one's own things” (433c–e). The reader is bound to notice that this definition is very similar to that of *sophrosyne* ascribed to Critias in the *Charmides*, which Socrates had refuted, arguing it is empty (163d ff.).²¹ Indeed, the expression “doing of one's own things” is meaningless, unless we know what “one's own” means. A few pages later in Book 4, Socrates then speaks of justice thus defined as an “image of justice” (εἰδωλόν τι τῆς δικαιοσύνης, 443c4).²² In this case too, then, definition appears to be an approximate and in no way exhaustive form of knowledge: it hardly seems plausible that Plato wished to illustrate such an important goal as the knowledge of ideas through sentences of this kind.

Besides, we cannot ignore the fact that the “definition” of justice in the *Republic* stems from the cognitive efforts of Socrates and Glaucon; and nowhere does the dialogue suggest that Socrates and Glaucon may be numbered among those men

²⁰ Cf. Rosen (1983), pp. 47–48.

²¹ Properly speaking, Charmides defines *sophrosyne* as “minding one's own business” (τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν, 161b6). It is Critias who introduces the concept of “one's own” (οἰκεῖον, 163c5) when he reveals that he is the author of the definition, in order to argue that one's own things are beautiful and useful.

²² See Cooper (1966).

capable of fully knowing the ideas: on the contrary, Socrates himself repeatedly claims, at least with regard to the idea of the good, that all he can offer is his personal opinion (506d–e, 517b, 533a).²³ The knowledge of principles, which is to say of the ideas and the good, is instead unambiguously attributed to the philosopher-rulers of the ideal state which Socrates is constructing with his interlocutors. In no way can it be inferred from the dialogue that this knowledge possesses the characteristics of definition. On the contrary, Books 6 and 7 repeatedly state that the science which philosophers practice consists in the dynamic act of *dialegesthai*: something very different from the definite and complete possession of any definition.

The textual evidence for this last point is truly overwhelming. In 511b4, as we have seen, Socrates speaks of *logos* and δύνάμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι. But the clues pointing in this direction grow particularly numerous over the course of Book 7, with the presentation of the scientific curriculum ending with dialectics:

- 524e5–6: the soul would be compelled to “to be at a loss and to inquire, by arousing thought in itself, and to ask, whatever then is the one as such,”²⁴ (ἀπορεῖν καὶ ζητεῖν, κινουσα ἐν ἑαυτῇ τὴν ἔννοιαν, καὶ ἀνερωτᾶν τί ποτέ ἐστιν αὐτὸ τὸ ἓν κτλ.)
- 525d6–7: here too the soul is forced to *dialegesthai*.
- 531d7–e5: having ended his investigation of scientific disciplines, Socrates moves on to discuss “the dialecticians”. There are few of these, as Glaucon rightly observes. Socrates explains that “those who can neither give nor follow an account” (μὴ δυνατοὶ οἵτινες δοῦναι τε καὶ ἀποδέξασθαι λόγον) will not know what we believe they ought to know. A dialectician, in other words, is someone who is good at delivering and receiving arguments and engaging in the dynamic activity of *dialegesthai* – not someone who knows how to pin down definitions.
- 532a6: *dialegesthai* is once again discussed, and it is significant that the verb occurs far more frequently than the substantivized adjective (*dialektikè*).
- 532d8: τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δυνάμεως. Clearly, the noun *dynamis* is also dynamic in character.
- 533c2: the non-dialectical arts are “those who cannot give an account” (μὴ δυνάμεναι λόγον δίδοναι). Again, a verb, δίδοναι, is used to describe the act of giving reasons.
- 534b3–6: the dialectician is presented as he who knows how to grasp the *logos* of the οὐσία (real being) of each thing. This, however, does not coincide with

²³ See Trabattani (1994), pp. 140–148.

²⁴ Translation Shorey.

its definition. For we might say that a person does not have cognizance (*nous*) of a given thing precisely to the extent that he or she “is unable to give an account of something, either to himself or to another” (ἀν μὴ ἔχη λόγον αὐτῷ τε καὶ ἄλλῳ διδόναι). In 510c6–6 this incapacity to give reasons both to oneself and to others is also attributed to those who, according to the formula of the line, fail to attain *noesis*. By contrast, therefore, *noesis* is bound to coincide with “give an account” (λόγον διδόναι). This ties in with the idea that thought is always dialogical in nature, even when it is not outwardly expressed.²⁵ It is therefore crucial for someone else, even an *alter ego*, to come into play in order for there to be *dialegethai*, in order for the *logos* to grasp reality. In other words, by its very nature the *logos* necessarily contains a dialogical aspect, so that it always presents itself as a form of λόγον διδόναι and *dialegethai*, as the delivering and receiving of arguments;²⁶ as such, it can never be exhausted through definition.

- 534d8–10: the lawgivers will impose an education for dialecticians that will make them as good as possible at questioning and answering (ἐροτᾶν τε καὶ ἀποκρίνεσθαι).

It is worth presenting a third set of considerations. It is far from clear whether anything equivalent to the concept of “definition” is to be found in Plato’s philosophical vocabulary. The technical term which Aristotle employs for this purpose, *horismos* (ὀρισμός) occurs dozens of times in the Aristotelian corpus, but not once in the Platonic one. Plato instead very often uses the term *διορίζω* (including several times in the *Republic*); according to Des Places’ *Lexicon*, the term also means “to define”. Actually, in Plato’s writing this verb means not so much “to define” as “to distinguish, delimit, separate”. As we will see in ch. 10, “definition” is the act by which a given object is delimited and assigned a specific individuality that is either explicitly or implicitly determined based on the difference between the object and other objects or groups it might be confused with. It is evident that the person who “defines” an object in this way must possess a more or less approximate description of it, for otherwise he or she would not have the minimum conditions to “define” the object as a self-standing thing, separate from others. It is clear, however, that definition thus understood, namely as “separation”, does not at all coincide with this description, nor imply that the

²⁵ See Dixsaut (1999) pp. 4–5; and esp.: “It is not at all, I would suggest, spoken, outward dialogue which acts as paradigm of thought, but quite the opposite. Spoken dialogue is but the sensible image of true dialogue, and true dialogue is thought.”

²⁶ See Dixsaut (1999), p. 6: “The exchange of question and answer, the movement to and from, is what is essential to *dialegethai*”.

person applying it possesses a kind of definition understood as the complete and exhaustive description of the object in question. We might have good reasons to claim that Japan exists as an independent and separate thing (from China, for instance), without possessing an exhaustive description of what Japan is.

As already noted, Plato makes frequent use of *διορίζω* (or, more rarely, *ὀρίζω*) in the above sense of “to distinguish/discriminate”. Here are a few examples from the *Republic*. In 346b, Socrates suspects that Thrasymachus, in his speech, is ultimately mixing up all the various arts. He then employs the verb *διορίζω* to refer to the need to avoid this confusion. It is clear that it is a matter here of “defining” things chiefly by distinguishing or separating things that might get confused. In 477c, the shape and colour of objects are identified as those features on the basis of which Socrates distinguishes things one from another (*πρὸς ἃ ἀποβλέπων ἔνια διορίζομαι παρ’ ἑμαυτῶ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα εἶναι, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα*). Even when it is not stated in respect to what a given thing is being distinguished (as in 345c2, where it is a matter of *ὀρίζεσθαι* the true physician), the term of comparison is clearly implicit (a distinction is been made between the true physician and the false one). And when the distinction drawn comes with a description (as in 524d5, where Socrates distinguishes phenomena that stimulate thought from phenomena that do not), this description is in any case functional to the distinction. Thus *ὀρίζειν* always primarily means “to separate”. The verb acquires this meaning, in particular, in the famous passage in which Socrates speaks of separating through the *logos* (*διορίσασα τῷ λόγῳ*) the idea of the good by marking it out from all others (534b8–c3).²⁷ So it is not a matter here of grasping the idea of the good through a definition, but rather of realising that it must be regarded as a reality which is separate from all others.²⁸

In conclusion, the verb *diorizo/diorizomai* indicates the act by which we affirm the existence of a given thing because we recognise that the characteristics it possesses are sufficient for it to be regarded as a self-standing entity which is independent and separate from all others. This affirmation of existence is made through the *logos*; not, however, because the *logos* represents the body of the definition, but rather because only the *logos* – and not the senses – can enable man to formulate statements of this kind. In order to affirm the existence of Socrates as someone distinct from Theaetetus or Glaucon, I do not need the *logos*. I do need it, instead, when I wish to affirm the existence of universal realities,

²⁷ See ch. 10, pp. 189–192.

²⁸ In my interpretation of this passage, I am drawing upon the observations rightly made by P. Stemmer (1992, p. 194, n. 12) and M. Vegetti (1993, pp. 221–223 and n. 7). For a more detailed analysis, see Trabattoni (1994), pp. 152–155.

which I can only define as separate and individual entities based on reasoning:²⁹ the reasoning which reveals the necessary dependence of particulars from the universal, of the multiple from the one, and which Plato has expressed through the use of terms such as *logos* and *dialegesthai*.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that affirmations of existence such as those expressed by the verb *diorizo/diorizomai* are formally identical to the affirmations of existence that Plato uses to posit the existence of the ideas. As we will see in Ch. 10, in the *Parmenides* there are some instances in which this verb (or its form without the preposition) is used precisely for this purpose.³⁰ Yet it is not essential to find the very same terms used, since it is rather evident that the procedure adopted is always the same. Let us take, for instance, this passage from the *Republic*:

This much premised, let him tell me, I will say, let him answer me, that good fellow who does not think there is a beautiful in itself or any idea of beauty in itself always remaining the same and unchanged, but who instead believes in many beautiful things – the lover of spectacles, I mean, who cannot endure to hear anybody say that the beautiful is one and the just one, and so on: “My good fellow, is there any one of these many beautiful things that will not also appear ugly and base? And of the just things, that will not seem unjust? And of the pious things, that will not seem impious?” (478e7–479a8).

The philodox Plato is speaking of here is he who will not admit that it is possible to make affirmations of existence concerning the ideas; the philosopher, by contrast, is he who does admit this, i.e. he who states that the ideas exist as something distinct and separate from all other things.³¹ It is obvious that in order to make this claim, the philosopher must possess some sort of information regarding the realities he is separating from others, namely the ideas. In our case, this information simply consists in knowing that beautiful things are never perfectly beautiful, etc.; it does not consist in the fact that the philosopher sees the ideas through intellectual intuition or is capable of fully describing them through definition. The philosopher, therefore, is someone who employs the *logos* as a means to affirm the existence of separate ideas, not someone who is capable, by means of the *logos*, to provide a full and exhaustive definition of them. The most pressing problem the philosopher must address, not least to defend himself

²⁹ See *Phil.* 15a–b and the commentary on this passage in Trabattoni (1994), pp. 287–290, and Trabattoni (2001), pp. 20–23; see also cap. 13, p. 252.

³⁰ See for instance 135a2–3, 135b7–c1, 135c8–9.

³¹ See too 476a5–7, 476c1–2, 476c9–d1.

against the “philodoxia” of others, is not stating what the ideas are, but rather stating that something like the ideas, i.e. like the unity of the multiple, truly does exist, and finding an argumentative route to persuade even the philodox. The real discriminating factor, then, is the affirmation of existence.³²

On the basis of what has been argued so far, we may newly turn to examine the use of *verba videndi* in relation to purely intellectual knowledge and consider what kind of knowledge these verbs are intended to express. We have argued that this is neither an intellectual vision nor a form of propositional knowledge understood as definition. Some insight is provided by the fact that, even in the central books of the *Republic*, Plato very frequently employs *verba videndi* outside the framework of the epistemological dichotomy between sensible knowledge and intellectual knowledge. What is particularly significant is the metaphorical use of these verbs, which are used to mean “apprehend that”, “(re)cognise that”, “realise that”, “take into consideration”, and so on. A great number of examples may be found, but I shall only mention here the first four that meet the eye at the beginning of Book 6:

- 488a2: in introducing the simile of the ship, Socrates urges Glaucon to clearly grasp this image, so that he may see (ἰδῆς) how fitting it is. Obviously, the *verbum videndi* here does not refer to any content to be seen or known, but indicates the act of realising and apprehending *that* a given thing is such and such.
- 494a11: Socrates asks Glaucon whether he sees (ὁρᾷς) any salvation for he who is a philosopher by nature. Here too there is nothing to know or see: it is simply a matter of believing or not believing *that* a given thing exists.
- 495a4: Socrates tells Glaucon: “Do you see (ὁρᾷς) then that we were not wrong ...” Ὅρᾷς here clearly means “do you realise *that*”.
- 495c8: “little men” see (καθορῶντες) that the place of philosophy has been left empty. Καθορῶντες here has the same meaning as ὁρᾷς in the previous passage (“realising that”).

Let us stop here with the examples (as already noted, countless others could be provided). Given that the *verba videndi* primarily possess the general and metaphorical meaning just illustrated, it is possible to envisage a scenario of the following sort. If referred to sensible reality, the *verba videndi* create a kind of metonymy, since they refer to the whole by one of its parts: in this respect, they denote a kind of immediate and direct knowledge that may be extended to man’s five senses as a whole. By contrast, if these verbs are used to indicate intellectual

³² For a more thorough discussion of this point, see below, Ch. 11.

knowledge, they denote a kind of knowledge or apprehension which does not consist in a direct and immediate vision similar to the sensible one, but is rather engendered through the *logos* (the “second sailing”).

Intellectual knowledge, therefore, is attained through the interplay of that kind of knowledge described by the general use of *verba videndi* (“apprehend that, realise that”, “affirm the existence of”) and the *logos*; or rather: by the act of delivering and receiving arguments, the *δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι*. Now, what is the relation between knowledge thus defined and the use of the *logos*? Based on what has just been stated, we may rule out the possibility that the use of the *logos* is a stage which is subordinate and chronologically subsequent to the affirmation of existence. Indeed, what is at stake when it comes to intellectual knowledge is first of all the existence of a given object; hence it cannot be maintained that the *logos* comes into play at a later stage, simply as a way of describing or defining ideas. This would imply the possibility of “seeing”, “separating” (*διορίζειν*) and “affirming the existence of” ideas prior to and independently from the use of the *logos*. But this is impossible for Plato, since he claims that the ideas are known – in every sense of the word – only through the *logos*.³³

We may therefore be tempted to adopt the opposite solution, by hypothesising that the *logos* only provides the groundwork necessary for attaining a “vision” of the ideas, as previously defined – namely, as the ascertaining of their existence. In this case, the highest goal which Plato’s philosophy could aspire would be to affirm that the ideas exist, yet without furnishing any additional information with regard to them. But this too is impossible: for if the ideas can only be grasped through the *logos* – which is to say through the propositional knowledge ensured by the act of *dialegesthai* – then there is no other way of affirming their existence, and their distinction and separation from manifold and ever-changing reality, than to describe them only as far as is required to make this separation necessary. Initially this operation will be a chiefly negative one. As we read in the passage from the *Republic* just quoted (478e7–479a8), the existence of the ideas is inferred by contrast to sensible objects;³⁴ and this inference already constitutes an approximate description. Since it cannot be granted that in actual reality only beautiful things exist that are also ugly, it is necessary to posit the existence of a reality which is always exclusively beautiful; and this in itself constitutes a propositional knowledge of the ideas (albeit it on a basic level, quite distant from that of definition).

³³ The *Republic* is replete with textual evidence for this. I have already pointed to some of this evidence in ch. 7, pp. 113–114 and here above, when listing passages concerning the act of *dialegesthai*.

³⁴ See ch. 11.

It seems necessary to conclude, therefore, that in the case of intellectual knowledge the affirmation of the existence of intellectual objects and their description through the *logos* are closely intertwined, as two inseparable operations that imply and justify one another. Unless the *logos* begins to state – however negatively, vaguely or impartially – what the ideas are, it is impossible to state that they exist. It is clear, moreover, that the two operations reinforce one another: the more persuasive the *logos* proves in positing the ideas, the more solid the affirmation of their existence becomes, thereby increasing the possibility for the *logos* to further enrich its descriptions. My thesis is that the procedure illustrated so far is precisely what Plato had in mind when speaking of dialectics or *dialegethai*, and that is to say: a form of knowledge that can only be attained through the *logos*, since its objects are intellectual realities and the intellect possesses no faculty other than the *logos*.

Clearly, the interpretation of dialectics I have just put forward presupposes that intellectual knowledge is a dynamic and ever-developing process (*dynamis*) which cannot attain any complete and final results. This outcome would be possible in the case of one of the two modes I have examined above: either by defining intellectual knowledge, or at any rate its loftiest aspect, as intellectual intuition; or by positing that sooner or later this knowledge will turn into an exhaustive propositional knowledge, of the sort expressed by definition. But, as we have seen, neither of these hypotheses is compatible with the underlying principles of Plato's philosophy.³⁵ The first hypothesis is incompatible because according to Plato there is no intellection apart from the *logos*; the second one, because the *logos* also has the function of demonstrating the existence of its objects, and because definition subsists only if the existence of the object to be defined has been ascertained by other means. Plato, I believe, had clearly understood that if we limit the domain and scope of philosophy to the knowledge of forms, this inevitably makes philosophy self-referential. And a self-referential discipline cannot "demonstrate" anything, nor reach any definitive results.

³⁵ Partly following Friedländer, Vegetti has observed that "the visual-intuitive character which the knowledge of formal/ideal objects [...] acquires helps explain the difficulty of defining them" (Vegetti 2000, p. 35). This might mean that Plato failed to adequately coordinate two different and contrasting tendencies of his epistemology: the one directed towards intellectual vision and the one leading to definition. This difficulty may be overcome, however, by positing that Plato, while resorting to certain expressions, had neither intellectual intuition nor definition in mind. In the light of this hypothesis, it is possible to appreciate how optical metaphors and the idea of propositional knowledge coexist without any contrast (as I have indeed sought to demonstrate). By contrast, if we understand the optical metaphors as referring to intellectual intuition and boil *dialegethai* down to definition, we create a conflict that is certainly difficult to solve.

The scenario just outlined enables us to better understand the reason why the exercise of dialectics takes an essentially dialogical form in Plato's writing, i.e. why, as the aforementioned passages from the *Republic* suggest, it consists in the "delivering and receiving of arguments" on the part of at least two subjects (or, in the case on inner *logos*, a single subject in dialogue with himself). If philosophy, unlike all other sciences, is also intended to show the existence of its own object, it is then necessary for philosophers to elicit and arouse consensus. Zoologists, for instance, do not have the same need to resort to these means, since all people happily acknowledge the existence of animals (and by and large agree when it comes to their description). The same, however, cannot be said of the existence of the ideas: for it rests entirely on the consensus which men grant (or do not grant) one another concerning such existence, and on the strength (or weakness) of the *logoi* which the philosopher is capable of coming up with to create this consensus. Consequently, the *logos* takes the form of *dia-logos*, de-monstration of persuasion.³⁶

5. WEAK THOUGHT (BUT NOT TOO WEAK)

If my argument so far is a plausible one, we must conclude that Plato attributed an underlying weakness to philosophical knowledge, a substantially problematic quality that prevents it from establishing itself as *epistêmê*.³⁷ This view, however, not only finds few supporters among modern interpreters of Plato,³⁸ but

³⁶ See Trabattoni (2005), pp. 98–101.

³⁷ See my interpretation of *Theaetetus* widely expounded in the previous chapters. But it is important to stress that the epistemology of the *Republic* is not inconsistent with it. It is probably not a coincidence that Plato in this dialogue describes *epistêmê* only through images. See Cooper (1966) who argues that "our state of mind towards the form of Knowledge in the *Republic* is [...] one of *dianoia*" (p. 68). Largely similar considerations may be found in Gallop (1965): by drawing upon the images of the sun, a line and the cave, the *Republic* "confines itself to the level of *dianoia*" (p. 119).

³⁸ It would be worth recalling, however, that for a long time there existed a Platonic academy of sceptical orientation and that problematic elements (if not exactly sceptical ones) are to be found in various areas of ancient Platonism or even Neoplatonism. As concerns modern interpretations, we find some significant exceptions, particularly in more recent studies. See, for instance, Dixsaut (1985); Hyland (1995), esp. p. 79 and Ch. 7 on the ideas and the idea of the good (the ideas, Hyland argues, are "in principle intelligible"; yet this does not mean that they are "in fact completely or comprehensively intelligible"; p. 177); Watson (1995); Casertano (1996). The general interpretative approach I subscribe to is the one according to which Plato believes the achievement of philosophical truth to never be final in character, yet without falling back into scepticism; this

would indeed appear to be refuted in the very books of the *Republic* we are here focusing on: for the idea of philosophical knowledge that emerges from these texts is not at all a weak and problematic one (it is little wonder that these books are the source most often invoked by those endorsing a strong view of Plato's philosophy).

The following epistemological picture seems to emerge from the central books of the *Republic*: a very clear-cut distinction exists between science and opinion, and only the former can know the truth. This knowledge takes the form of an adequate knowledge of the ideas, and especially of the idea of the good; in turn, this knowledge serves as the necessary condition for governing and fruitfully directing the ethical and political conduct of individuals and communities, so as to enable them to attain the well-being they aspire to by nature. Particularly significant, in this respect, are certain passages from Book 7. In 517c it is stated that the idea of the good is the cause of all just and beautiful things, and that those who wish to act wisely in private or public affairs must see it (δεῖ ταύτην ἰδεῖν). In 519d Socrates claims that it is the lawgivers' duty to compel those of a philosophical bent to make the ascent toward the idea of the good, until they can adequately see it (ικανῶς ἰδῶσι). A similar argument may be found in 526d–e. The primary purpose of geometry and mathematics, Socrates explains, is to enable one to more clearly see the idea of the good (κατιδεῖν ῥᾶον τῆν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ιδέαν). This is the goal, he adds, in pursuit of which the soul is forced to turn towards the place where the most blessed of all beings resides, and which the soul must somehow behold (ὁ δὲ αὐτὴν παντὶ τρόπῳ ἰδεῖν).

In order to clarify the problem, we must briefly consider the argumentative structure of the *Republic* and examine Books 6 and 7 (as well as the final pages of Book 5) within the framework of the overall argument they are part of (something which regrettably is not always done). The main aim which Plato sets himself with the epistemological, ontological and metaphysical enquiries launched in Books 5–7 of the *Republic* consists in demonstrating – against the prevailing opinion – that philosophers must rule, and hence in describing the figure of the philosopher and his knowledge in such a way as to make them appear fully suited to this aim. Unsurprisingly, much of Book 6 is intended to refute widespread prejudices regarding philosophy and philosophers, and to expose spurious views.

is why the expression “third way” is used (see in particular Gonzalez 1995) to refer to Plato as a philosopher who is neither dogmatic nor sceptic (see Trabattoni 2000 and Chs. 10–11 of this book). I believe that this is a particularly fruitful strand of research which was chiefly sparked by H.G. Gadamer's studies on Plato (for instance, Gadamer 1985).

In order to structure this demonstration, Plato adopts an argumentative procedure typical of his way of philosophising that consists in drawing prescriptions about reality based on an ideal model. Socrates explains this procedure in Book 5, before introducing the allegory of the sun and the metaphor of the line (472c–d): a model is set up not in the belief that it is possible to fully achieve it, but rather in order to find a criterion by which to evaluate reality. What matters, then, is not that this model is fully achievable, but that it is a genuine model, i.e. a perfect one.

In order to achieve this goal, Socrates describes the philosopher-rulers of his ideal city as possessing full and effective knowledge regarding the idea of the good. The fact that this city is not actually achievable, moreover, is suggested in various passages of the *Republic*, for instance at the end of Book 9, where Socrates claims that the state just constructed may exist in the heavens, and that in any case its possible concrete existence is not of decisive importance on the theoretical level (592b).³⁹

This, however, is not to say that the model is useless. On the contrary, by showing that the *perfect* condition of life would be the one in which both individuals and society are governed through functions capable of *perfectly* knowing the good, the claim is made that the life of men and society will be *all the better, the more* the governing functions will seek to know the good and approach the actual knowledge of it. The passages in which Socrates states that he who wishes to live well must know the good do not mean, then, that where there is no perfect knowledge of the good men live badly. The model is not intended to indicate the only thing good, i.e. the only aim worth accomplishing, but is rather intended to identify a valid criterion for evaluating – as far as this is possible – the relative goodness which can in fact be accomplished.⁴⁰

These conclusions, I believe, are clearly supported by the curious reference to philodoxes made in the final pages of Book 5. If a neat distinction exists between

³⁹ I hope to have made it clear (Trabattoni 2000 bis, pp. 103–105; Trabattoni 2010) in what sense I believe the state described in the *Republic* to be both accomplishable (since the ideal model is a realistic object of imitation) and unaccomplishable (since the model may only be reproduced in an approximate way). I essentially agree here with Vegetti (2000 bis), esp. pp. 119–121; 141–142. The relative feasibility of the utopia which Plato presents in the *Republic* had already been emphasised in an influential article by M. Burnyeat (1992). Unlike Burnyeat, however, I believe that Plato's *kallipolis* is impossible to achieve not just for historical reasons but also for metaphysical ones. As the case of the ideas suggests, even a metaphysically separate reality may be imitated. By this I do not mean to say that the *kallipolis* is an idea, but rather that it is concretely unachievable for the same main reason why any idea is unachievable, namely: the prerequisite that it never changes but remains ever the same.

⁴⁰ See Stemmer (1992) p. 224. On this set of problems see ch. 14 and Trabattoni (2010).

doxa and *epistêmê*, between the unstable knowledge of becoming and the certain knowledge of being, why not simply divide men between those who possess only *doxa* (non-philosophers) on the one hand and those who possess *epistêmê* (philosophers) on the other? The problem is that a difference also exists between *philo-sophoi* and *sophoi*, since the latter perfectly know those realities that are the object of *epistêmê*, whereas the former find themselves in the weaker condition of aspiring to this knowledge. The reference to *philodoxes*, therefore, primarily reflects the need for symmetry, i.e. the need to draw a contrast between homogeneous categories. Indeed, the terms “philosopher” and “philodox” are defined differently than the term *sophos* (and its hypothetical counterpart referring to sensible reality). It is a matter here of denoting not the knowledge of a given reality, but the intentional aspect of knowledge, the aspiration and desire to turn towards things of a certain kind.

There is one thing worth noting that helps appreciate the importance of establishing a contrast based on the above criterion. If a genuine divide exists between *sophoi* and *philo-sophoi*, which is to say between those who possess knowledge and those who merely aspire to knowledge, and if we acknowledge – as repeatedly suggested by Plato⁴¹ – that men can only be *philo-sophoi* (since only the gods are *sophoi*), there is a concrete risk that the philosopher will not sufficiently distinguish himself from all other men. To the extent that the philosopher *aspires* to know, to that extent he *does not know*; hence, it becomes difficult to assign him the right to govern, which according to Plato rests precisely on knowledge. This is where the figure of the philodox becomes useful. Despite his relative ignorance, marked by the prefix *philo-*, the philosopher still distinguishes himself from other men since he aspires to acquire true knowledge (and not the false knowledge represented by *doxa*) and does all he can to attain it to the highest possible degree. The philosopher, unlike the philodox who only “sees” sensible reality and directs his desire for knowledge towards it, “sees” the ideas, i.e. acknowledges the existence of universal and unitary principles, making these the focus of his research.⁴² Clearly, however, this is very different from claiming that the philosopher “sees” the ideas in a clear and distinct way by means of intellectual intuition, or that he exhaustively knows them through definitions.

⁴¹ *Lys.* 218a, *Symp.* 204A, *Phaedr.* 278d. An alternative reading of these passages might be that a philosopher can attain knowledge but that in order to keep it forever he must continue to practice philosophy. In my view, however, the passages from the *Symposium* examined thus far do not warrant this hypothesis: for the dialogue does not state that the philosopher possesses only partial knowledge but rather that he does not possess it at all.

⁴² Unsurprisingly, the expressions describing the philosopher as he who affirms the existence of the ideas (476a5–7, 476c1–2, 476c9–d1, 478e7–479a5) are used precisely as a criterion to distinguish the philosopher from the philodox.

The difference in *aspirations* between the philosopher and the philodox make up for the difference in *knowledge* between the philosopher and other men, a difference which always runs the risk of being blurred, precisely since men can at most be *philo-sophoi*, not *sophoi*.

It is true that the *Republic* contains no explicit allusion to the difference between *philo-sophoi* and *sophoi*. The reason for this, however, is not difficult to grasp: a text intended to show that only philosophers possess the knowledge necessary to rule, it is only natural for Plato to stress the relative knowledge (*sophia*) of the philosopher more than his relative ignorance (*philo-*). Hence, there is nothing strange in the fact that a stronger image of the philosopher emerges in the central books of the *Republic* compared to other sections of Plato's corpus, in which it is not as essential for him to illustrate the connection between knowledge, politics and philosophy.⁴³ Nor is it enough to suggest that the *Republic* belongs to a different stage in the development of Plato's thought. Certainly, even in this dialogue clear indications may be found of the fact that according to Plato the philosopher is still primarily someone who *aspires* to knowledge. The philosopher-ruler of the *Republic*, who possesses a perfect dialectical method enabling him to attain full knowledge of the good, remains an ideal model that real-life philosophers can only strive to imitate. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the passages concerning the knowledge of the philosopher-rulers often come with restricting formulas.⁴⁴ Finally, it may be observed that expressions related to love are certainly not missing from the dialogue: this is particularly the case in the last pages of Book 5, where it is precisely a matter of stressing the difference between philosophers and philodoxes.⁴⁵

⁴³ This helps explain why, in the central books of the *Republic*, *epistēmē* is distinguished from *technē* and assigned "il valore forte di un sapere immutabilmente e stabilmente vero" (Vegetti 2000, p. 30); much the same conclusions are also reached, through an extremely detailed analysis, by A. Balansard (Balansard 2001), pp. 106–113. It also helps explain why, in dialogues written after the *Republic*, this emphasis is toned down (pp. 113–117): because Plato's aim is no longer that of defining the normative criterion for perfect knowledge. On the different approaches Plato adopts according to the aim of each dialogue, see ch. 5, p. 93.

⁴⁴ Here are a few examples: 481d1: "as exactly as possible" (ὡς οἶόν τε ἀκριβέστατα); 498e4: "But the figure of a man 'equilibrated' and 'assimilated' to virtue's self perfectly, so far as may be (μέχρι τοῦ δυνατοῦ τελέως), in word and deed, and holding rule in a city of like quality, that is a thing they have never seen" (Translation Shorey); 500d1: "as a human being can" (εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπων); 501c1: "as much as possible" (ὅτι μάλιστα εἰς ὅσον ἐνδέχεται); 502c9: "with toil and pain" (μόγισ); 517b9–c1: it "seems" (φαίνεται) to Socrates that at the peak of knowledge the idea of the good is "very difficult to see" (μόγισ ὀρᾶσθαι).

⁴⁵ See, for instance, 475b8–9, where the philosopher is "whisful of wisdom" (σοφίας ... ἐπιθυμητής); 475c2 and 485d3, where the philosopher is "lover of learning" (φιλομαθής) and

The *Republic* does not even make any references to the doctrine of recollection that Plato had discussed in the *Phaedo* and was later to discuss in the *Phaedrus*. Still, it would not be difficult to link the two representations of philosophical knowledge provided by Plato. The pre-existing knowledge of the ideal world corresponds to the perfect knowledge of ideas which is only possessed by the ideal model of the philosopher, not in concrete reality.⁴⁶ The souls that “see” the ideas after death (*Phaedo*) or in the supra-celestial region (*Phaedrus*) are certainly human souls; but they are not “human beings”, as human beings are made up of soul and body. I believe it must be left to each interpreter to ascertain whether the lack of perfect knowledge in mundane experience is due to the fact that according to Plato this knowledge is merely the *ideal* vanishing point towards which human knowledge converges in the only world in existence, or whether it is instead due to the fact that this knowledge represents a *real* place – albeit one belonging to a different world – which each man knows before his birth and reaches again after his death.

6. CONCLUSIONS

I shall now attempt to sum up the conclusions of my argument. There are no grounds to claim that in the central books of the *Republic* Plato conceives of the highest form of knowledge as kind of intellectual intuition – nor may his optical or tactile metaphors be invoked in support of this idea. By contrast, there are good reasons to believe that what Plato had in mind was a propositional kind of knowledge. This knowledge, however, does not find its fulfilment and completion in any form of definition; rather, the *Republic* speaks of *dialegethai*, which is to say a dynamic activity which constantly connects the particular to the universal and vice versa. This activity has the purpose of both describing given objects and of demonstrating their existence; it does so through an indissoluble and methodical intertwining that never lends priority to one aspect over the other. Philosophy, therefore, takes the form of a self-referential discipline, so that its epistemological status appears significantly weaker than that of sciences which can rely on incontrovertible assumptions. This feature, however, does

“striving” (ὀρέγεσθαι) is his distinguishing feature); 475c6–8; 476a7–8 and 479a10–480a1 (use of the verb ἀσπάζεσθαι, that can be translated as “to follow eagerly”). An interpretation of Plato’s conception of knowledge analogous to the one presented here may be found in Stemmer (1992), pp. 221–225.

⁴⁶ This connection between the epistemology of the *Republic* and the doctrine of recollection is very different from the one suggested by in Mohr (1984), according to whom recollection only serves as an epistemological model.

not irreparably weaken the ethical and political application of philosophical wisdom. The exhaustive knowledge of ideas, and especially of the idea of the good, remains valid as an ideal model to which human knowledge must aspire. In particular, it is useful as a way of identifying the figure of the philosopher, who while not possessing the divine knowledge of the *sophos*, nonetheless possesses enough human knowledge to make him stand out from ordinary men and to suggest that he should be entrusted with ruling the city.

CHAPTER 9
WHAT ROLE DO THE MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES
PLAY IN THE METAPHOR OF THE LINE?

1. LINE, PART II

It is no exaggeration to state that the critical debate surrounding the metaphor of the divided line, featured in Book 6 of the *Republic*, has spawned an endless secondary literature on the subject. Fortunately, we can here draw upon a significant and valuable bibliographical resource, which provides an analytical survey of the one hundred and eighty years of research on the topic (1804–1984).¹ Given that I cannot review even just a fair share of these contributions in the present article, I shall refer readers searching for a broader overview of the various suggested interpretations to the book in question. Here I shall only mention and discuss some of the most recent studies.

As a preliminary assumption for our investigation, let us consider a vertical line divided into four segments, conventionally referred to as A, B, C and D, and corresponding to the four epistemological levels of *eikasia* (A), *pistis* (B), *dianoia* (C) and *noesis* (D) – each associated to one of the four ontological levels: A corresponds to shadows and reflections, B to sense objects; the counterparts to C and D are among the objects of the present enquiry.

2. THE MEANING OF LINES 510B4–9

Let us start by examining 510b4–9, the passage in which Socrates briefly describes segments C and D, at lines 4–6 and 6–9 respectively:

Socrates

- b4 ἦι τὸ μὲν αὐτοῦ τοῖς τότε μιμηθεῖσιν ὡς εἰκόσιν χρωμένῃ
b5 ψυχῇ ζητεῖν ἀναγκάζεται ἐξ ὑποθέσεων, οὐκ ἐπ' ἀρχὴν
b6 πορευομένη ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τελευτῇ, τὸ δ' αὖ ἕτερον [τὸ] ἐπ'
b7 ἀρχὴν ἀνυπόθετον ἐξ ὑποθέσεως ἰούσα καὶ ἀνευ τῶν περὶ
b8 ἐκείνο εἰκόνων, αὐτοῖς εἶδεσι δι' αὐτῶν τὴν μέθοδον ποιου-
b9 μένη.

¹ Lafrance (1987).

In the following way: the soul is compelled to investigate one of the two segments by employing as images the things imitated there, proceeding from the assumptions not to the first principle but to the conclusion; the other, conversely, [is compelled to investigate by] advancing from an assumption to a first principle which transcends assumption, and without the images it employed in the previous segment, conducting its investigation with the forms themselves and through them.²

First of all, let us note that Burnet's Greek is slightly different from that of Slings (whom I am following): Burnet keeps the second τό at line 7 and sets the sentence introduced by this article (τὸ ἐπ' ἀρχὴν ἀνυπόθετον) between dashes, taking it to be an aside. The second τό at line 7 is found in manuscripts A (Parisinus gr. 1807) and F (Vindobonensis suppl. gr. 39), but may also be ascribed to D³ (Marcianus gr. 185). The presence of this word, however, was called into question by philologists as early as the 19th century (starting from Ast, followed by Bekker and Stallbaum) and it is often ignored by translators. By contrast, it is retained by Burnet and Chambry, as well as Lafrance.⁴ As we shall now see, the reading I am about to suggest works better if the article is expunged; yet I also hope to show that this is not crucial. In any case, it is obvious that if the τό is expunged, the dashes inserted by Burnet become unnecessary (indeed, they do not appear in Slings' edition).

Even so, the lines under discussion present a few problems:

- 1) the sentence ἤι τὸ μὲν ... ἐξ ὑποθέσεων is somewhat redundant: for it mentions a procedure (although the grammatical subject is actually τομῆ) which a) employs certain things as images, b) sets out from assumptions and c) proceeds up to the conclusion rather than the first principle; moreover, setting out from hypotheses is not a peculiar feature of C, since it is also found in D (see 510b7).
- 2) There is only one finite verb in the whole clause (ἀναγκάζεται), which in turn governs an infinitive (ζητεῖν), whereas the other clauses are subordinate clauses with a participle verb (χρωμένη, πορευομένη, ἰούσα, ποιουμένη). If we take the *iunctura* ἀναγκάζεται ζητεῖν to apply only to the third segment of the line (C), so as to make sense of the rest of the sentence we must turn one or more of the participles into a finite mood verb. See, for instance, the translation of Grube and Reeve:

² The translation of all this section of the *Republic* is mine.

³ Since D is missing some folios (including the ones which presumably included the passage under scrutiny), Slings has reconstructed these gaps by using three apographs, marking them as D (Slings 2001, p. x).

⁴ See the overview of the debate provided by Y. Lafrance (1994), pp. 307–308.

In one subsection, the soul, using as images the things that were imitated before, is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle but to a conclusion. In the other subsection, however, it makes its way to a first principle that is *not* a hypothesis, proceeding from a hypothesis but without the images used in the previous subsection, using forms themselves and making its investigation through them.

In order to solve the problems noted above, let us first of all make a small correction to the text by removing the comma after *ὑποθέσεων* at line b5 and inserting one after *ἀναγκάζεται* (again at line b5). This would give the following translation for lines 4–6:

one of the two segments [or, following Grube-Reeve, “in one subsection”] the soul is compelled to investigate by employing as images the things which there [in the other segment] were imitated, proceeding from hypothesis not to the first principle but to the conclusion.

The correction just proposed presents the following advantages. First of all, it normalises the difficulties listed under point 1 above: *ἐξ ὑποθέσεων* at line b5 no longer makes the previous sentence redundant, but is connected to the sentence which follows, as a prepositional phrase that expresses motion away from and finds in this second clause a verb of motion and prepositional phrase indicating movement towards (*οὐκ ἐπ’ ἀρχὴν πορευομένη ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τελευτῆν*). This would further agree with the use of *ἐξ ὑποθέσεως* at line b7, which is also connected to a verb of motion and prepositional phrase indicating movement towards (*ἐπ’ ἀρχὴν ἀνυπόθετον ἰούσα*). More generally, only two features are now attributed to the faculty posited in C, namely that of employing images and of setting out from hypothesis not to the first principle but to the conclusion; the obvious consequence of this is that “starting from hypothesis” is no more an attribute in its own right, so that it no longer appears as proper of C (as is the case in Grube-Reeve’s translation, which follows the conventional punctuation), by contrast to what is stated shortly afterwards (b7, where the use of hypothesis is ascribed also to D). The use of hypothesis, indeed, is common to both C and D, whereas the difference between the two consists in the way they employ them, given that they follow opposite paths. Let us note, moreover, that from a syntactic standpoint the sentence is now formed by a main clause (“is compelled to investigate”) governing two subordinate clauses (expressed by the infinitives “employing” and “proceeding” respectively).

Secondly, the new punctuation makes the main clause “is compelled to investigate” implicitly govern the second part of the passage, in which there are no finite verbs (which again forces Grube-Reeve to turn at least one of the two

following participles, *ιοῦσα* and *ποιουμένη*, into a finite verb: his choice falls on the latter, but the former would have been an equally plausible option). The resulting translation is:

the other, conversely, [is compelled to investigate by] advancing from an hypothesis to a first principle which transcends hypothesis, and without the images it employed in the previous segment, conducting its investigation with the forms themselves and through them.

Understood in these terms, the sentence becomes much clearer: it presents a limpid symmetrical and chiasmic structure, with both sides of the alternative being governed by the same main clause, *ἀναγκάζεται ζητεῖν*. Socrates describes the two segments separately by listing, in order, the following features:

c) (τὸ μὲν):

- (a) it employs images drawn from sensible reality (τοῖς τότε μιμηθεῖσιν ὡς εἰκόσιν χρωμένη);
- (b) it sets out from hypothesis (ἐξ ὑποθέσεων ... πορευομένη);
- (c) it advances to the conclusion and not to the first principle (οὐκ ἐπ' ἀρχὴν ... ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τελευτῆν);

d) (τὸ δέ):

- (a) it advances to the first principle (ἐπ' ἀρχὴν ἀνυπόθετον)
- (b) starting from hypothesis (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως ἰοῦσα)
- (c) without employing images (ἄνευ τῶν περὶ ἐκεῖνο εἰκόνων)

The chiasmic arrangement, based on three elements, would thus be *abcba*.

It is easier to adopt the above reading, of course, if we expunge the second τὸ at line b6. However, it might be kept, if we take it to be a demonstrative pronoun also serving as the object of the implied phrase *ψυχὴ ζητεῖν ἀναγκάζεται*. In this case, the translation would run as follows:

one of the two segments the soul is compelled to investigate by employing as images the things which there [in the other segment] were imitated, proceeding from assumptions not to the first principle but to the conclusion; the other, conversely, *is what* (τὸ) [the soul is compelled to investigate by] advancing from an assumption to a first principle which transcends assumption, etc.

I am aware that this would make the Greek somewhat difficult, and that it would be more natural to read ζ, in agreement with Ast's translation. The use of the relative pronoun, however, would introduce an unwanted indefinite nuance: what

we are speaking of here is not that thing – whatever it may be – which advances to a first principle transcending assumption, but of a very specific thing, namely D.

Be that as it may, I believe that even without expunging τὸ, the most plausible translation and interpretation of the text is the one I have suggested. On the other hand, the meaning of these lines is not significantly altered, compared to the traditional reading, except with regard to one point: now, while ἀναγκάζεται ζητεῖν governs both clauses, the procedure of *noesis* too is subject to necessity; and this would appear to add a negative nuance. For it may be seen to suggest that the relative weakness of *dianoia* consists precisely in the fact that it is a kind of thought which is constrained and confined within procedures and limits extrinsic to it (the use of images and subordination to assumptions, if true), whereas the strength of *noesis* lies in the fact that it is a kind of thought which is unconditioned, free and self-sufficient.⁵ Actually, this is not a real problem at all, in my view. For the necessity expressed by the word ἀνάγκη and the verb ἀναγκάζειν is not bound to possess a negative meaning.⁶ In our case, in particular, it only denotes the implicit consequences of a given kind of method: the necessity to which *noesis* is subject (like *dianoia*, on the other hand) is merely the necessary development of what is implicit in its nature.⁷

3. 510B10–D4: MATHEMATICAL OBJECTS ARE JUST EXAMPLES

Glaucon

b10 ταῦτ', ἔφη, ἂν λέγεις, οὐχ ἰκανῶς ἔμαθον.

Socrates

c1 ἀλλ' αἰθις, ἦν δ' ἐγώ: ῥᾶον γὰρ τούτων προειρημένων

c2 μαθήσει. οἶμαι γὰρ σε εἰδέναι ὅτι οἱ περὶ τὰς γεωμετρίας

⁵ T. Griffith's translation (Griffith 2000) manages to introduce no less than five full stops in a single Greek sentence (there is a significant divide, of course, between the syntactic complexity of Greek and the conciseness of English; yet one should be careful not to push things too far, lest the meaning of the text be irreparably altered). However, his translation would appear to stress precisely the distinction in question: "In the second part, by contrast, it goes from an assumption to an origin or first principle which is free from assumptions."

⁶ As erroneously maintained by Aronadio (2002), p. 217: "nella terza sezione si descrive uno stato di costrizione dell'anima (ἀναγκαζομένην) determinato da un limite della facoltà qui all'opera (οὐ δυναμένην)".

⁷ For a similar use of the verb ἀναγκάζειν (i.e. a methodological use, hence one devoid of negative resonances), cf. Plat. *Resp.* 525D6 and Franco Repellini (2003), esp. pp. 367–369.

- c3 τε καὶ λογισμοὺς καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα πραγματευόμενοι, ὑποθέμενοι
 c4 τό τε περιττὸν καὶ τὸ ἄρτιον καὶ τὰ σχήματα καὶ γωνιῶν
 c5 τριττὰ εἶδη καὶ ἄλλα τούτων ἀδελφὰ καθ' ἑκάστην μέθοδον,
 c6 ταῦτα μὲν ὡς εἰδότες, ποιησάμενοι ὑποθέσεις αὐτά, οὐδένα
 c7 λόγον οὔτε αὐτοῖς οὔτε ἄλλοις ἔτι ἀξιούσι περὶ αὐτῶν διδόναι
 d1 ὡς παντὶ φανερωῶν, ἐκ τούτων δ' ἀρχόμενοι τὰ λοιπὰ ἤδη
 d2 διεξιόντες τελευτῶσιν ὁμολογουμένως ἐπὶ τοῦτο οὐ ἂν ἐπὶ
 d3 σκέψιν ὀρμήσωσι.

Glaucon

- d4 πάνν μὲν οὖν, ἔφη, τοῦτό γε οἶδα.

- G. I have not quite understood the things you said.
 S. Well, let us try again – said I: you will certainly understand them better once I will have said the following things.
 I believe you know that those who study geometry, reckoning and such sciences, after postulating the odd and even, and the various figures and the three kinds of angles and other things akin to these according to [the rules of] each discipline, regarding these things as assumptions [for their practice] as though they knew them, do not believe it is then necessary to render any account for them [talk about them], either to themselves or to others, as though they were known to everybody; instead, taking their lead from them and immediately moving on through all the following steps, they reach a state of agreement concerning that on account of which they embarked on their investigation.
 G. This I know well, he said.

Before examining the content of the passage, let us note one important point. After Socrates' first exposition (510b4–9), Glaucon answers by stating that he has not adequately understood things (511b10: οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἔμαθον). Answers of this sort on the part of Socrates' interlocutors are rather frequent in the dialogues. This is especially true of the formula οὐ μανθάνω. When discussing this expression in *Phaedo* 93a13, W.F. Hicken rightly observes: "The point is really obscure, and οὐ μανθάνω is regularly followed in the dialogues by a restatement of an idea in more specific terms, often coupled with an illustration, not by a new point which leads to the same conclusion".⁸ This observation also perfectly applies to the passage of the *Republic* we are examining. The fact that

⁸ Hicken (1954), p. 19.

Socrates' argument is indeed obscure may easily be appreciated by considering the endless range of different interpretations it has been made the object of in the critical literature. But the most interesting thing is the fact that in the dialogues – as Hicken emphasises – formulas expressing ignorance on the part of Socrates' interlocutors are usually followed not by the introduction of new arguments, but by the restatement of the same point, possibly enriched by some new examples.

If this is the case, some interesting conclusions may be inferred. In the text which follows this section, down to 511b2, Socrates and Glaucon constantly refer to the mathematical sciences and the procedures they employ. In the light of this, a fair number of scholars maintain that the kind of knowledge described in c is precisely mathematical knowledge; some have even interpreted these passages as a manifest allusion to the doctrine of intermediate mathematical entities (attested through the so-called "unwritten Plato" and in the debate on first principles which took hold within the ancient Academy). But if lines 510c1–511a8 only constitute a further explanation of what Socrates has stated in 510b4–9, where no mention at all is made of mathematics, then it is clear that the opinions just described – popular as they may be – must be reconsidered. When Socrates sets out to explain to Glaucon how the second section of the line is to be divided, he makes no reference to mathematics. If instead of stating that he has not quite understood things, Glaucon had declared himself satisfied with Socrates' initial explanation, the latter would no doubt have moved on to illustrating the last segment (D), without talking about geometers and geometry.

The observations just made, I believe, should provide the minimum 'dialogical approach' on which all interpreters ought to converge by now, whatever their specific perspective. Otherwise, one risks losing sight of what ought to be the main objective of every exegetical study, namely to identify the purpose for which an author wrote certain things (and wrote them the way he did). The fact that the chief aim of the leading speaker in Plato's dialogues is to persuade his interlocutor cannot be overemphasised. It is only natural, therefore, that when the latter claims not to have understood things, the leading speaker endeavours to newly explain what he has already stated by drawing upon terms or concepts that are part of the intellectual background of his interlocutor – precisely in such a way as to allow him to grasp the argument.

This procedure is also given a theoretical formulation in the dialogues – to be more precise, in a frequently quoted passage of the *Meno* (74c–d). In a conversation among friends wishing to engage in mutual dialogue (*ἀλλήλοις διαλέγεσθαι*), one does not merely state what one holds to be true, but rather provides gentler and more dialectical answers: "The more dialectical way, I suppose, is not merely to answer what is true, but also to make use of those points

which the questioned person acknowledges he knows.” (75d)⁹ This is precisely the case in the passage we are examining. Glaucon has stated that he has not quite understood what Socrates said. In his reply, Socrates attempts to identify an area which his interlocutor acknowledges to know, in order to newly explain the same thing by taking this area as an example. Socrates thus introduces his argument on geometers and geometry with the words: “I believe you know that ...”

It is possible to argue with a fair degree of confidence, therefore, that the mathematical sciences do not constitute the epistemological subject matter of *c*, but rather an example by which Socrates can explain to Glaucon that there exists a kind of imperfect and impure intellection, which is precisely the one employed by those engaged in geometry.¹⁰ Nor can it be argued, then, that Plato here is somehow theorising typically mathematical practices. Furthermore, it would be incorrect to view these passages in the light of the lengthy exposition of the sciences of the quadrivium – propaedeutic to dialectic – illustrated in Book 7.¹¹ In Book 7 Plato explains how the mathematical sciences are to be conceived by the dialectician in order to aid his process of abstraction. In Book 6 Plato instead discusses mathematics as he believes they are practised in his own day (510c2–3),¹² showing that they amount to intellection of a low level, connected to sensible images, which actually draws one’s investigation downwards rather than upwards.

The consequences of all this are also interesting for our understanding of the passages we have translated. If the explanations which follow Glaucon’s acknowledgement of his lack of understanding essentially add nothing new, then it is clear that the first formulation becomes very important in order to grasp the meaning of what Socrates is arguing. If Glaucon fails to understand, the same is not necessarily true of the reader. More importantly: the correct procedure in order to understand the passage is not to leave the first obscure

⁹ The passage just quoted introduces what is commonly referred to as the ‘dialectical requirement’ (DR), following a Gail Fine’s well-known article (Fine 1990), p. 87. See too Franklin (2001), pp. 413–439; Silverman (2002), pp. 45–46; Scott (2006), pp. 56–59.

¹⁰ The same point is made by Ferrari (2006), p. 429. We can therefore easily dismiss the scathing verdict of Boyle (1973), according to whom the hypothesis I accept (namely that mathematics is merely a convenient illustration of *dianoia*) is “wholly without foundation” (p. 8, n. 5). What utterly lacks any textual foundation, as we have seen, is actually Boyle’s own thesis. Nor is it difficult to grasp the origins of this error: it stems from the tendency to completely ignore the literary and dialogical structure of Plato’s texts, which for years – fortunately bygone ones – constituted the exegetical malpractice of many interpreters.

¹¹ Franco Repellini (2003).

¹² Netz (2003). The claim made in this article is that the example of mathematics introduced by Plato through his metaphor of the line is based on the way in which mathematics was actually practised at the time.

proposition aside and focus on what follows in the rest of the exposition, but rather to employ the latter part of the exposition – according to Socrates' own intention – in order to understand the difficult point we have set off from. The example – if indeed it is an example – may be used for teaching purposes, but must not play an essential part in illustrating what one has set out to explain. In other words, it must be possible to discover the meaning of what Socrates wishes to say – i.e. the meaning of c – by only focusing on lines 510b4–9, albeit by drawing upon the external resources which Socrates has put at our disposal. This also implies that no explanation of the passage can be correct if it cannot do without the mathematical example.¹³

4. THINKING THROUGH IMAGES

Having said this, let us move on to the actual analysis of the passage, by investigating first of all the nature of the cognitive procedure described in c . This is the procedure by which the mind (the $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$, in Platonic terms) employs images ($\epsilon\iota\kappa\acute{o}\sigma\iota\nu$) of the "things imitated then" ($\tau\omicron\iota\iota\varsigma \tau\acute{o}\tau\epsilon \mu\iota\mu\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\sigma\iota\nu$). The word $\tau\acute{o}\tau\epsilon$ refers to the sum ($A + B$) in which the relation of imitation obviously develops from A to B . The $\epsilon\iota\kappa\acute{o}\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ and $\sigma\kappa\acute{\iota}\omega\iota$ mentioned in 509e1–510a1 are images of natural and man-made things. It is necessary to argue, therefore, that in c the same natural or man-made things (B) are used that are reproduced in A .

The same concept is taken up again in lines 510d5–511a1. Mathematicians, which is to say the people chosen as an example to illustrate the procedure presented in c , employ visible images ($\delta\rho\omega\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota\varsigma \epsilon\acute{\iota}\delta\epsilon\sigma\iota$). However, they do not talk about these images, but about things to which they resemble, namely the square as such and the diagonal as such. In other words, they do not reason about the diagonal they draw, and likewise in all other cases: those things which they mould or draw – of which there are also shadows and reflections in the water – they employ as images, seeking to see with their eyes what can only be seen by thought.

This passage has been ravaged by critics, particularly because it is so difficult to make the 'things' which Socrates mentions here fit within the slots of Platonic ontology. It seems to me that the problem has been exceedingly complicated by the unnecessary formulation of two hypotheses on the part of many scholars:

¹³ If the only flaw with the example of mathematics were the fact that it is not exhaustive, one might still believe that it is indispensable. But the flaw with this example, as with any other, lies in the fact that it could be replaced by a different example or even none at all. Hence it is not necessary.

- 1) what Plato has in mind here are some sort of intermediate mathematical entities, halfway between the ideas and things;
- 2) Plato is here paying special attention to the instruments and figures developed by geometers.

In order to grasp why these hypotheses are not necessary (and more generally in order to explain the meaning of the whole passage), let us start by addressing the following question: what does Socrates mean by *ὄρωμένους εἶδεσι* (henceforth *VI*, or Visible Images)? If we explore the passage in question by keeping to the level of these “forms”, we find the square and the diagonal which geometers trace (*γράφουσιν*) and more generally all the things which they mould or draw (*πλάττουσιν τε καὶ γράφουσιν*). Moreover, these are the very things which in 510e3 are said to be employed as images (*τούτοις*), so the images (*εἰκόνες*) in this case are precisely *VI*. The prevalent opinion is that these are two-dimensional and three-dimensional models created by geometers for the sake of their practice.¹⁴

However, this is an extremely unlikely hypothesis. First of all, it does not agree with the overall structure of the metaphor of the line, and in particular with the section pertaining to the intelligible. As noted above, the reason why Socrates divides the upper part of the line into two segments is to provide the most general possible illustration of the difference between pure intellectual knowledge and impure intellectual knowledge, where the latter is such because it is still bound to the sensible world. It would be very strange, therefore, if Plato wished to limit the extension of impure intellectual knowledge to the class of the geometers and their practice of constructing geometrical models. As previously observed, the mathematical sciences are only invoked as an example to explain something else; hence, nothing which exclusively pertains to the method adopted by mathematicians can be pertinent here.

In the same passage, 510d5–511a1, we find an element which rules out this possibility even more radically. In 510e2–3, Socrates defines the *VI* by stating that shadows and images of them too are to be found in the water. Naturally, geometers’ drawing and models may well produce shadows and reflections¹⁵ (even though it would be rather difficult for a figure drawn on sand to do so). But it is certainly hard to understand what would be the relevance or meaning of discussing shadows and reflections of this sort. As is often the case, a fallacious premiss leads to even more absurd consequences: the hypothesis that Plato is specifically discussing the method of the mathematical sciences suggests that everything else too ought to be interpreted in the light of this hypothesis –

¹⁴ See Adam (1902), pp. 309–310.

¹⁵ Lafrance (1994), pp. 335, 337.

with all the difficulties which this inevitably entails. But actually, the mention of shadows and reflections in 510e23 must apply to the very shadows and reflections to which Socrates had referred only a moment before, in 509e1–510a1, when illustrating the difference between A and B. So if we are searching for the x of which shadows and reflections are to be found, and if in 510a5–6 it is stated that shadows and reflections exist of man-made and artificial entities, we are forced to conclude that the x sought for is precisely these natural and man-made entities, namely the objects of B. Hence, the $\nu\iota$ are nothing but the objects of B.

This simple solution presents certain difficulties. First of all, why does Socrates at 510e2 state that shadows and reflections are *also* (*καί*) to be found of $\nu\iota$? Does this “also” not mean that these are further forms and reflections, different from those discussed in relation to A? The answer is no. “Also” here refers to 510d7, where $\nu\iota$ were seen to resemble (*ἔοικε*) the diagonal as such and the square as such. In 510e2–3 Plato wishes to argue that sensibles (the objects of B), while being copies of higher objects (the ideas) are *themselves* an object of imitation for shadows and reflections. Note that the three-fold division thus obtained perfectly coincides with the one which is taken up in Book x.

Then there is another controversial point. What are the *αὐτὰ μὲν ταῦτα ἃ* [geometers] *πλάττουσιν τε καὶ γράφουσιν*? Such are the things of which shadows and reflections are said to exist. Hence – according to the interpretation that is being suggested here – they ought to stand for the level of sensible things, that is the objects discussed in the second segment of the line (B). This, however, runs against the common view that *αὐτὰ μὲν ταῦτα ἃ* [geometers] *πλάττουσιν τε καὶ γράφουσιν* are actually the drawings and models produced by geometers. Fortunately, this is not the only possible way of interpreting the passage. The text presents a simple linguistic ambiguity, which is clearly detectable in English too. For by asking myself “What does a painter paint?”, I might mean two different things: a) the painting; b) the object depicted in the painting. Scholars tend to favour meaning a), thereby encountering insoluble difficulties the moment they seek to understand the nature of the shadows and images of *αὐτὰ μὲν ταῦτα ἃ* [geometers] *πλάττουσιν τε καὶ γράφουσιν*, and why Socrates mentions them. Everything becomes quite clear, however, if we opt for meaning b): Socrates is discussing the things represented in the drawings, which can only be the natural objects of which we have shadows and reflections, according to what has been established through an analysis of the first section of the line (A + B). The mention of shadows and reflection thus primarily serves as an indicator to reveal that the things which the intellectual process at work in C employs as images are precisely natural objects: C, Socrates argues, uses B as images, which is to say those things of which shadows and reflections have been said to exist (A). The person reading or listening to the passage will therefore clearly understand what happens in C, according to the metaphor of the line that is being outlined. If one

were to insist that the drawings and models produced by geometers must still be ranked among *αὐτὰ μὲν ταῦτα ἃ* [geometers] *πλάττουσιν τε καὶ γράφουσιν*, there would be no reason to object to this. Only a moment before, Socrates had stated that *β* includes *τὸ σκευαστὸν ὄλον γένος* (510a6), and the objects in question are evidently part of it. Still, this is a particular case which cannot have been taken especially into account by Plato, for else he would not have explicitly spoken of shadows and images. The mention of the latter suggests that the process of knowledge-acquisition at work in *γ* consists in an intellectual operation which has sensible things in general as its model.

Besides, the fact that the images which the people employing the process described in *γ* resort to are precisely the objects of *β* is confirmed by the text under scrutiny on two separate occasions. The first time this is stated in 510b4–5, where it is said that such people employ “as images those things which were imitated there [in the other segment]”; hence, the images they use are precisely the objects of *β* – not specifically drawings or models. The same notion is stressed in 511a7–9, where Socrates once again explains that those who resort to *γ* employ “as images the very things which are represented by those below (*εἰκόσι δὲ χρωμένην αὐτοῖς τοῖς ὑπὸ τῶν κάτω ἀπεικασθεῖσιν*)”. There reference to the objects of *β* here is still perfectly evident: if the things below are the objects of *α*, the entities which they represent can only be the objects of *β*.¹⁶

Lines 511a3–8 are particularly interesting for the interpretation I am proposing.

Socrates

- a3 τούτο τοίνυν νοητὸν μὲν τὸ εἶδος ἔλεγον, ὑποθέσει δ’
 a4 ἀναγκαζομένην ψυχὴν χρῆσθαι περὶ τὴν ζήτησιν αὐτοῦ,
 a5 οὐκ ἐπ’ ἀρχὴν ἰοῦσαν, ὡς οὐ δυναμένην τῶν ὑποθέσεων
 a6 ἀνωτέρω ἐκβαίνειν, εἰκόσι δὲ χρωμένην αὐτοῖς τοῖς ὑπὸ τῶν
 a7 κάτω ἀπεικασθεῖσιν καὶ ἐκείνοις πρὸς ἐκεῖνα ὡς ἐναργεῖσι
 a8 δεδοξασμένοις τε καὶ τετιμημένοις.

¹⁶ I have confined my analysis to those passages in which Socrates describes the nature of *γ*, without making any explicit reference to the mathematical sciences. However, N. White (1996) is quite right to state that in the investigation of the upper segment of the line there are many other passages which contain allusions to the fact that *γ* employs visible things as images: aside from the passages I have already mentioned, 510b7–9, 510e1–511a1 (which, as we have seen, are worth discussing in detail), 511c1, and 511c7–8. White’s conclusion too is perfectly reasonable: “in recognizing the originals of the visible realm [...] as the images in the intelligible realm [...], we see one of the most famous features of Plato’s philosophy: sensible participants are really only images of forms” (p. 34).

I was saying, then, that that class is indeed intelligible, but that the soul is compelled to employ assumptions in order to investigate it, not proceeding to the first principle, because it is not capable of rising above the assumptions, and that it employs as images the very things which are represented by those below – things that, in comparison with these latter, are considered clearer and [hence] are better esteemed.

In this passage, Socrates once again explains *c* through a sort of paraphrase – a much broader one – of 510b4–6, that is the part of his first statement referring to *c*. Socrates gets back to discussing the soul: what it is compelled to do and the fact that it does not proceed to the first principle, and that it employs images. This passage is particularly interesting because the nature of *c* is explained in exactly the same terms as in 510b4–6, which is to say without any reference to mathematicians, the mathematical sciences and the procedures they employ. Once again, this shows the soundness of what I have suggested above, namely that the part of this section concerning the mathematical sciences (510c1–511a2) must be regarded as an explanatory digression meant to help Glaucon understand what kind of procedure Socrates was referring to. Once Glaucon has grasped what he needs to grasp, Socrates reverts to his initial formulation, making no further mention of the mathematical sciences. And while Glaucon refers to geometers again later on (511d3), in the passage in question they are only mentioned along with other experts, who behave in the same way (cf. 511c6, which speaks of 'technical disciplines' with no further specification). Once again, this shows that mathematics is only an example (albeit – as we shall see – a most revealing one) of a general approach.

Both in 504b4–6 and in 511a4–9 it seems evident, therefore, that Socrates is seeking to give Glaucon – i.e. that Plato wishes to give the reader – enough cues to correctly identify, within the scheme of the line, the entities which those resorting to *c* employ as images. For if there were any doubts concerning the kind of entities which Socrates is talking about, his further explanations are precisely meant to clear any misunderstanding. It is as though Socrates were saying: if you wish to understand what we are talking about, let us say that it is the objects imitated in the first segment of the line; hence, you are to understand that I am referring to everything I have included under *b*. In general terms, this means all the objects which have the twofold characteristic of being perceivable and of not being mere reflections or images (such are the objects of *a*) – in other words, sensible reality. Consequently, the flaw of *c* lies precisely in the fact that it does not represent a pure mode of thought based on *logoi*, but rather a method of 'reasoning by means of – or with the aid of – sensible images'.

Lines 511a7–8, however, contain a rather tricky statement, which is worth discussing. After stating that those resorting to *c* employ the objects of *b* as

images, Socrates adds: *καὶ ἐκεῖνοι πρὸς ἐκεῖνα ὡς ἐναργέσι δεδοξασμένοις τε καὶ τετιμημένοις* (“things that, in comparison with these latter, are considered clearer and [hence] are better esteemed”). *Ἐκεῖνοι* obviously refers to *τοῖς ... κάτω ἀπεικασθείσιν*, meaning the objects of B, whereas *ἐκεῖνα* refers to those of A.¹⁷ Thus it is natural to assume, based on the structure of the line, that the former are more valuable than the latter (*ὡς ἐναργέσι δεδοξασμένοις τε καὶ τετιμημένοις*). But why state so? And most importantly, how is this relevant to the argument? What is the point of discussing this aspect of the relation between A and B, when we are seeking to clarify the nature of C?

One possible explanation brings the general relation between copy and image into play. If an entity x is the image of an entity y, according to Plato the reality of y (the original) will always be higher than the reality of x (the copy). Clearly, this rule also applies to the relation between the two lower segments of the line, A and B, so that the objects of B – as stated in the passage under discussion – will have a greater value than those of A. By this example, Plato therefore wishes to refer to the general rule and indirectly illustrate one of its consequences on the epistemological level. If the original is more valuable than the image, then a method of reasoning which proceeds through images must be seen as structurally distorting. In other words, Plato is here stressing the fact that sensible things are more valuable than their images in order to bring out the intrinsic flaw of any method which proceeds through images: the lower section of the line shows that anyone wishing to attain real knowledge of a given reality (in this case, sensible objects) must focus on the original, not its images (which by their very nature are distorting); the same principle, therefore, also applies to the intelligible. Besides, in the metaphor of the line it is implicitly assumed that C is in turn the image of something else (D), so it would be superfluous to note that between C and D we find the same value gap which exists between A and B.

5. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *DIANOIA* AND *NOESIS* AS A MATTER OF METHOD

If what I have argued so far is plausible, when presenting his metaphor of the line Plato has no real interest in discussing the mathematical sciences: in particular, his intention is not at all to stigmatise a way of conceiving and practising mathematics which he regards as inadequate and flawed – namely the method based on the creation of drawing and models. This is not to say that Plato had nothing to object to the mathematicians of his day, or that he did not have a clear

¹⁷ See Lafrance (1994) p. 351.

idea of how philosophers ought to study and practise the mathematical sciences (for this clearly emerges in Book 7). What I wish to argue is that the stake in this case is much higher. The point at issue is nothing less than the definition of what 'thinking' means in philosophical terms: what it means – among other things we shall not consider here – is to think in a completely aniconic way, i.e. without the involvement of any images drawn from sensible reality.

However, there is also another way in which the mathematical sciences may be assigned a crucial role in relation to the metaphor of the line. For it is possible to argue that in *c* Plato is at any rate seeking to highlight the existence of a kind of mathematical thought other than purely dialectical thought, one which finds its object in mathematical intelligibles that stand half way between sensible things and genuine ideas – in particular, the square as such and the diagonal as such, introduced in lines 510b7–8. What elements may be seen to support this hypothesis, which has proven highly popular among scholars (starting from Adam in his commentary)?¹⁸ A recent publication illustrates one of the arguments that are typically used:

At 511d, Glaucon describes mathematical thought as “something intermediate between opinion and intellect”. Because mathematical thought does not have quite the clarity of the intellect, the objects of mathematical thought, intelligible though they are, cannot have quite the truth of the objects of intellect (511e). Intellect and mathematical thought must therefore have distinct objects.¹⁹

This reasoning, however, contains an obvious *petitio principii*: for it assumes that there exists an exclusive correspondence between *dianoia* and mathematical entities. But if no such correspondence exists, i.e. if *dianoia* also concerns

¹⁸ See Lafrance (1994), pp. 332–333, which sums up Adam's argument and also offers some counter-arguments, ultimately suggesting that both hypotheses are plausible. For overviews of varying length of scholars' stances in favour or against the existence of intermediate mathematical entities, see – in addition to Lafrance – Brentlinger (1963) and esp. White (1996). The latter provides a long list of articles by grouping the various hypotheses on the nature of the objects of *dianoia* described in *c* into general types, such as mental images, mathematical objects, mathematical entities or sciences, ideas, mathematical entities which are intermediate between sensibles and ideas, axiomatic propositions, figures, and visible originals (p. 32). In the light of all this, it is rather surprising that in his recent study on the metaphor of the line Franco Repellini (2003) basically assumes that the practitioners mentioned in *c* are mathematicians and those in *d* dialecticians, without making any reference at all to the ongoing, century-old debate on the matter.

¹⁹ Denyer (2007), p. 303.

non-mathematical modes of thought, then any inference which moves from the cognitive faculty to corresponding objects would be invalid. And this is precisely the case. Not only, as we have seen, do the mathematical sciences merely constitute an example of a more general way or reasoning within the metaphor of the line, but Glaucon – as we have also noted – assigns to *dianoia* “those disciplines which are called technical”, and which obviously are not limited to the mathematical sciences alone.²⁰ In addition, later on in the same passage Glaucon speaks of *dianoia* as ἕξις ... τὴν τῶν γεωμετρικῶν τε καὶ τὴν τῶν τοιούτων (511d3–4): it is clear, therefore, that mathematicians are not the only ones to reason in dianoetic terms. And it is precisely the reference to technical disciplines which allows us to better understand what Plato has in mind when in this passage he describes the cognitive method practiced in C. Aside from geometry, one may also think here of technical disciplines such as architecture, painting or sculpture, which set out from an archetypal model of an iconic sort (i.e. from mental images): just as the geometer seeks to picture a perfect circle in his mind, an architect or sculptor will seek to mentally envisage (i.e. think of) the ideal figures which he is to render materially. The element which brings together the cognitive procedures practised in C, then, has to do not with the contents of thought (objects of a certain kind, namely mathematical ones), but with the way in which thought develops. If both C and D must have intelligibles as their object, there is no textual or theoretical reason to posit the existence of two different types of intelligibles: with all the clarity we might wish for, the passage explains that what we have here are two different ways of thinking.²¹

Having said that, it is obvious that the presence of terms such as *διανοούμενοι* (510d6) and *διάνοια dianoia* (511e1) in the ‘mathematical’ section of the line is of no significance at all, given that *dianoia* is in no way especially connected with mathematics. Even less convincing, as I have attempted to show in the previous chapter, is the attempt to explain the existence of intermediates based on the hypothesis that *dianoia* represents discursive thought and *noesis* intuitive thought. First of all, on the one hand *dianoia* possesses the general meaning of ‘thought’ (and this also within the metaphor of the line itself, as attested by 511a1); on the other, even where *dianoia* is understood in a specific sense within the metaphor of the line, it is never identified with discursive thought, nor is *noesis* identified with intuitive thought. Secondly, despite the almost heroic efforts of

²⁰ It is true, as Vegetti explains (2007, *ad loc.*), that Plato describes the mathematical disciplines as ‘technical’ elsewhere as well (*Phil.* 56e ff.). But certainly they are not the only technical disciplines he discusses, nor the most representative ones.

²¹ See Karasmanis (1988), pp. 155, 157; the distinction between *dianoia* and *noesis* is methodological, not ontological.

some scholars,²² it is certainly difficult to see why the *dianoia* described in c, whose chief characteristic is the use of images, ought to be regarded as a case study for discursive thought, and *noesis*, which is based on the use of *logoi* and the δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι (511b3), as a case study for intuitive thought.

6. AGAINST INTELLECTUAL INTUITION

It thus seems as though the correct procedure would be to embrace *epoche* with regard to all that one assumed to know on the scholastic distinction between *eikasias*, *pistis*, *dianoia* and *noesis*, and to attempt to explain this difficult section of the dialogue step by step, in a natural way. In the second section of the line Plato is clearly talking about a kind of knowledge which develops not through the senses (as was the case in the first section), but through thought. In this context, however, he also wishes to draw a distinction between two different forms of thought, a lower one (c) and a higher one (d). What, then, is the nature of the knowledge which unfolds in c? This is a kind of knowledge which employs images – visible forms (v1) – and these are found by resorting to the objects of b, namely sensible entities. A distinguishing feature of those who apply this method is the attempt to employ v1 in order to see those things which normally can only be seen through *dianoia*, i.e. thought (510e3–511a1: ζητοῦντες δὲ αὐτὰ ἐκεῖνα ἰδεῖν ἃ

²² Here are a few examples. According to Mansion (1969), who sets out from the assumption that “les entités mathématiques sont des objets typiques de ce qu’il [sc. Platon] appelle la connaissance discursive, la *dianoia*” (p. 367), geometry is a discursive science because it “procède par étapes successives et non pas intuitivement” (p. 369). One may easily argue, however, that what this articulation into different stages implies is a diachronic structure, not the fact that the knowledge thus articulated is discursive. Boyle adopts a rather elusive stance, by crediting mathematicians with the use of some vague “propositional images” (1973, p. 7), whose nature he does not further elucidate. A more sophisticated interpretation is instead provided by Rosen: “Mathematicians [...] study geometrical forms and kindred entities with the discursive intelligence (*dianoia*), because they move toward those forms through images, about which it is necessary to make speeches (*tous logous peri auton poiountai*)” (Rosen 2005, pp. 264–265). Rosen’s argument is hardly compelling: while it is true that images need to be commented upon, it is equally true that a kind of thought which also employs images cannot embody discursive thought *par excellence*; a kind of thought which does without images may certainly more suitably be described as ‘discursive’ than a kind of thought which resorts to them (albeit to a limited extent). On the other hand, White is quite right to note that passages 510c2–d1 and 510d6–b8 completely refute the idea that Plato identifies the hypotheses discussed in c as propositions concerning mathematical entities; rather, what are being presented by way of hypothesis are the mathematical forms themselves (1996, p. 33).

οὐκ ἄν ἄλλως ἴδοι τις ἢ τῇ διανοίᾳ). The higher method (D), by contrast, makes no use of images at all (510b7–8: ἄνευ τῶν περὶ ἐκεῖνο εἰκόνων).

The reference to the objects of B, which Plato uses to describe VI, is intended to highlight the fact that the procedure at work in C is still bound to sensible reality. For all the reasons I have mentioned, the idea that VI are specifically made up of geometrical drawings or models is an implausible one. But neither is it necessary to conclude that VI exclusively coincide with sensible objects. What Plato means by stating that the practitioners mentioned in C employ sensible entities as images is that they seek to acquire knowledge of ideal reality (e.g. of the square as such or the diagonal as such) by resorting to iconic instruments, which preserve the kind of visibility which is typical of sensibles: in other words, the content of their knowledge remains sensible reality. The example of the practitioner of geometry is particularly helpful to illustrate this point. When the geometrician studies the nature and properties of the square, what he has in mind is the purely ideal square (τοῦ τετραγώνου αὐτοῦ), not the square objects occurring in nature. Indeed, it is this ideal square on which the geometrician bases his arguments (λόγους) and conducts his demonstrations. At the same time, the geometrician also believes that he can draw upon an iconic representation of the ideal square, analogous to that which may be seen in existing square objects. He thus mentally pictures the square by attempting to abstract it – as far as possible – from the imperfections of real squares; and he believes that this square is an effective representation of the square as such, understood as a pure object of thought.²³

²³ The idea that the *dianoia* described in C has intermediate entities as its object may spring from the following reasoning: since it seeks to know things such as the square itself and the diagonal itself, and since these things may be known only by *noesis* and not *dianoia*, there must be ideal mathematical entities such as the square itself and the diagonal itself which differ from the ideas as such; for else, the law enunciated at the end of Book 5 of the *Republic* would be infringed – that is, the law according to which to each distinct cognitive faculty there corresponds an equally distinct object (see Brentlinger 1963; but see too Smith 1996, stressing the need for *dianoia* too to have an object). This is hardly a cogent argument, however. First of all, in agreement with Karasmanis 1988, one might observe that the law enunciated at the end of Book 5 does not apply to the quadripartition of the line, since only the distinction between *doxa* and *noesis* requires “ontological different objects”: for “the other two divisions, between *eikasia/pistis* and *dianoia/epistêmê* are secondary ones not involving ontological differences” (p. 157). This observation would allow us to solve the problem that if there were no intermediate elements proper to C, in the line an asymmetry would emerge between the quadripartition of mental states and the tripartition of ontological levels (see Fowley 2008, p. 4). Secondly, while it is true that *dianoia* seeks to know the ideas but never fully grasps them, this does not mean that it is destined to remain without any object at all; rather, it simply means

The geometer, in other words, interprets the ideas along the lines of visible objects, and thought as a sort of vision. Given that a perfect square is nowhere to be seen in nature, and cannot be drawn, for the geometer it is nonetheless true that the idea of the square is akin to the (visible) image of this hypothetical perfect square. It is precisely in this sense that Plato can argue that the practitioners of *c* employ sensible objects as images: for an iconic mental representation maintains its sensible character, even though thought strives to dematerialise it. This is a mistake, however, because the investigated object coincides with purely intelligible entities, which cannot be visually represented. If, therefore, we wish to gain some knowledge of purely intelligible entities, we only have two options: either we can know them directly, without resorting to any images at all, or we must employ non-sensible images (i.e. aniconic ones), such as those provided by *logos* and δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι. In other words, if we truly wish to move from the sensible to the intelligible, the only non-contradictory paths are aniconic intellectual intuition (where available) and the exercise of *logos*. Conversely, any attempt to proceed through images, copies or models of the iconic sort not only brings no progress, but leads exactly in the opposite direction: not towards the intelligible, but towards the sensible.

No textual support is thus to be found for two-fold hypothesis according to which Plato in *c* seeks to illustrate both “discursive thought” from an epistemological perspective and mathematical objects (possibly understood as entities which are intermediate between sensible things and ideas) from an ontological perspective. Indeed, one should speak here not of discursive thought but of

that its object is not the ideas as such, but something which, with respect to them, is a largely superficial (if not downright false) image. One might think here – as White does – simply of sensible objects; or, as I prefer, of mental images developed starting from visible reality – more or less in the same sense in which A. Silverman (2002 bis, p. 75) speaks of these entities as “dematerialized figures”. Another interesting perspective is offered by N. Cooper, “διάνοια uses images to obtain knowledge of the Forms [...] διάνοια differs from ἐπιστήμη only in having an indirect cognitive relationship with its objects and makes use of the objects of a lower class” (1966, p. 67). However, Cooper maintains that according to Plato, both within the line and in general, διάνοια actually represents a privileged – if indirect – path for obtaining knowledge of the ideas (p. 68). I am partial to this thesis, since in my view Plato envisages human knowledge as dianoetic and propositional in character. Yet, I am not quite sure that the argument applies to *dianoia* in the strict sense of the term enunciated within the metaphor of the line (where *noesis* itself – as I have also endeavoured to show elsewhere – has a propositional character). If *noesis* develops through *logos*, and if *logos* itself is a kind of image, then thinking through images may certainly be regarded as a kind of requirement for thought; yet in the case of the *dianoia* described within the metaphor of the line the role of image is played not by *noesis* but by sensible reality; and this is unacceptable for Plato.

imaginative thought, that is a kind of thought which interprets its objects in terms of visual representations, as images or “icons”. As for the role of the mathematical sciences, they have been seen to merely serve as examples. Still, this does not mean that the example they provide was chosen randomly, or that it is weakly connected to the argument Plato is presenting. On the contrary, there are good reasons to believe that the case study of the mathematical sciences constitutes by far the most significant example in order to illustrate the inherent flaws of the nondialectical mode of reasoning in general. Indeed, the most likely origin of the iconic conception of the intelligible is precisely the indiscriminate general application of the procedures en force within the mathematical sciences. If we consider, for instance, the non-mathematical ideas of abstract concepts such as those which many Platonic dialogues focus on – the good, the just, the holy, etc. – it is easy to see how in these cases it is utterly impossible to have an iconic conception of the intelligible. One might imagine that, by analogy with square objects, the intelligible square is a kind of ideal representation which preserves the visible form of the square. But in no way can the same be done with the idea of the just, for which no visible image is to be found.

If this is the case, the ultimate identification in *C* of intellectual knowledge inadequate to the nature of intellection with mathematical procedures represents a warning on Plato’s part not to confuse the philosophical intellection practiced by dialecticians with the intellection of which geometers and mathematicians speak. In seeking to understand what Plato means by intellection or intellectual vision, one might be tempted to use the difference between real and ideal geometrical figures as an example to illustrate the Platonic dualism between the sensible world and the intelligible, or may invoke the difference between the sense-perception of a round object and the mental perception of the circle itself to illustrate the difference between sensible knowledge and intellectual knowledge.²⁴ The point Plato wishes to make in this passage of the *Republic*

²⁴ Here I shall not discuss the well-known Aristotelian passages which testify to the existence within Platonic (and/or Academic) metaphysics of ideal mathematical entities other than the ideas themselves. It is not clear where Aristotle got this information from. The only thing I wish to show is that the metaphor of the line in the *Republic* does not lend support to this theory and that it would be incorrect to retrospectively apply it on the basis of external evidence, such as that from the so-called ‘unwritten doctrines’ (see Brentlinger 1963 pp. 159 ff.). See too Krämer, according to whom the intermediate position of the mathematical sciences described in the metaphor of the line (511d4) does not correspond to the intermediate position which Plato assigned mathematical entities according to Aristotle: “Bei Aristoteles sind diese [sc. the mathematical entities posited by Platonists] dadurch charakterisiert, dass sie im Unterschied zu den Ideen pluralisch, im Unterschied zu en wahrnehmbaren Dingen aber als ewig und unveränderlich auftreten.

is that this is a faulty way of understanding both the ideas and the procedure whereby the ideas may be known.

It may be argued, therefore, that the procedure employed by the mathematical sciences in a way represents a crucial case study to understand the doctrine of the ideas, both in its ontological and in its epistemological aspect: for in the light of these sciences one might be tempted conclude that the ideas are mental icons of some sort, exactly like the ideal mathematical figures. Mathematical ideas represent a particular instance of intelligible objects which, unlike others, may be given an iconic interpretation; the risk, then, is that this interpretation might be extended to intelligible reality as a whole. Plato instead wishes to show that there is also a non-iconic way of conceiving mathematical ideas: the method adopted by geometry experts, which proceeds through images, only apparently transcends sensible reality, since it continues to employ visible images ($\nu\iota$), whereas the study of the intelligible – including mathematical intelligibles – must proceed by utterly different means. One example here might be the definition of a circle through a *logos* which Plato presents in the philosophical excursus of the *Seventh Letter*: “that which has the distance from its circumference to its centre everywhere equal” (342b7–8).

As is widely known, this *excursus* also mentions the difference between the four weak instruments which do not allow one to know things perfectly. The reason for this imperfection lies in the fact that a definition is the weak surrogate – to the extent that *logos* itself is weak – of an intellectual vision that is inaccessible to man. In this respect, *logos* is inferior to pure intellectual vision, yet superior to sensible vision, which is typical of those who seek to see the ideas by resorting to visible images ($\nu\iota$). The procedure which models the knowledge of ideas after the representation of ideal figures on the part of geometers betrays an awareness of the fact that full knowledge of the intelligible may only be attained through intellectual intuition, but also an unwillingness to accept the fact that no such intuition is available. The procedure in question thus seeks to produce this intuition by purifying sensible reality by means of abstraction, i.e. by creating mental images of reality, in the hope of identifying a fully and exclusively intelligible object and thereby of attaining a kind of vision other than the sensible one. In response to these attempts, Plato warns us that a procedure which sets out from the sensible will always remain anchored to it, no matter its level of abstraction; and the same also applies to the vision one attains (or purports

Von diesen einzelnen mathematischen Entitäten ist im Liniengleichnis nirgends die Rede, wohl aber von den zusammenfassenden Grundbegriffen der Mathematik (510c., d), die als Universalien den Status von Ideen haben, aber in Ermangelung einer dialektischen Analyse weder definiert noch verstanden sind” (Krämer, 1997, p. 194).

to attain) by such means. By following this procedure in an attempt to move towards the first principle (i.e. upwards), we actually end up moving towards the conclusion (i.e. downwards), since all intuition at our disposal has a sensible character and hence there no way of interpreting, purifying or modifying this intuition is capable of detaching it from sensible reality. Once again, we are faced with the illusion of “seeking to see those forms in themselves which can only be seen by thought” (511a1).

Conversely, and most importantly, the failure of the cognitive method exemplified by the procedure described in c is also crucial in order to establish that the knowledge of the intelligibles – to the extent to which it is available to man – can only be developed in a non-intuitive way. The pure mental vision of ideal mathematical entities – the object of *dianoia* in the strict sense – represents the highest level of intuition which man can conceive in epistemological terms. If it too is invariably bound to the sensible, it is evident that in order to gain some kind of knowledge of the ideas the only possible path must be provided by *logos* and the δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι: what in the metaphor of the line are described precisely as the essential features of *noesis*.

CHAPTER 10 SOCRATES' ERROR IN THE *PARMENIDES*

1. WHAT DOES “HORIZESTHAI” MEAN?

The part of the *Parmenides* that is regarded as marking a transition from the author's discussion of the doctrine of the ideas to his analysis of the eight (or nine) hypotheses illustrated in the dialogue has chiefly been studied with the aim of understanding the nature of the exercise which Parmenides presents the young Socrates with, sometimes in order to evaluate to what degree the executive part of this project matches the guidelines provided in these pages.¹ What has not been studied as much – at least, judging from the articles and comments I have examined – is the issue of what Socrates' error precisely consist in. In this paper, I aim to provide an answer to this question by examining some sentences Parmenides addresses to Socrates, partly as a reproach.

Let us start from 135c8–d6. Parmenides blames Socrates for having prematurely set out to “mark off something beautiful, and just, and good, ad each of the forms” (ὀρίζεσθαι ... καλόν τέ τι καὶ δίκαιον καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἐν ἑκατον τῶν εἰδῶν). Parmenides had first noticed this when he had heard Socrates speaking with the young Aristotle, not long before. On the other hand, the urge that leads Socrates towards discourses (*logoi*: ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους) is presented as a divine, beautiful thing.

One initial problem is to understand how the verb ὀρίζεσθαι (*horizesthai*) at lines c8–9 is to be translated. Under the entry ὀρίζειν/ὀρίζεσθαι, Des Places' lexicon² gives four different meanings: 1) *séparer*, 2) *distinguer*, 3) *déterminer*, 4) *définir*. Most of the authors I have taken into account translate the verb as “define” or “definition” (see, among others, Acri,³ Zadro,⁴ Cambiano,⁵ Casertano,⁶ Diès,⁷ Cornford,⁸ Miller,⁹ and Migliori.¹⁰ Other scholars instead translate it as

¹ See Casertano (1996), esp. pp. 48–49 ff.

² Des Places (1970).

³ Acri (1979).

⁴ In Giannantoni (1971), vol. 3.

⁵ Cambiano (1981), vol. 2.

⁶ Casertano (1996), p. 30.

⁷ Diès (1923).

⁸ Cornford (1939).

⁹ Miller (1986), p. 72.

¹⁰ Migliori (1994) 1994.

“mark off”, including Sayre,¹¹ Gyll-Ryan,¹² Allen,¹³ and Brisson (who uses the French verb *séparer*).¹⁴

In our attempt to solve the question, let us first of all note a couple of things:

- a) Let us suppose that we were to translate the verb as “define”. At line 135c9 there is a τί that certainly prevents us from translating the sentence as “define the Beautiful, the Just, etc.” (as Migliori would have it). Rather, with Cambiano, we would have to translate “define a beautiful and a just etc.”, or, with Zadro, “the definition of a thing that is beauty, etc.”
- b) The verb ὀρίζεσθαι is used two more times in the dialogue, in both cases shortly before the passage under consideration and with an accusative accompanied by τί.

135a1–3: εἰ ... ὀριεῖται τις αὐτό τι ἕκαστον εἶδος (a person is to mark off each form as ‘something itself’).

135b7–8: μὴδέ [sc. τις] τι ὀριεῖται εἶδος ἐνὸς ἐκάστου (won’t [sc. someone] mark off o fom form each one).

Now, what is the meaning of ὀρίζεσθαι in these sentences? As may be inferred from the context, Parmenides is speaking of someone who assumes that the ideas exist, that is to say: someone who posits a form for each single unity. If by “define” and “definition”, then, we mean the act of describing the essence of a thing through discourse (which is more or less how Aristotle speaks of definition), translating the verb as “define” is incorrect.¹⁵ For it is not a matter here of describing a thing through a discourse, but of determining its existence through an act of separation that will make it independent from other things. The verb ὀρίζεσθαι, therefore, must here be translated as “separate” or “mark off”, in the sense in which Aristotle – for instance – states that forms are separate, since they have their own independent and specific determinateness.¹⁶

In my view, the same applies to ὀρίζεσθαι in 135c8–9. The affinity between the two texts lies not just in their proximity, but in the presence of ἔν at line c9. Here Parmenides is speaking of the act by which a person determines the existence of things such as the beautiful, the just and the good, understood as single,

¹¹ Sayre (1994).

¹² Gill-Ryan (1996).

¹³ Allen (1997).

¹⁴ Brisson (1994).

¹⁵ I add here further considerations to what I have already said in ch. 8, pp. 153–155.

¹⁶ *Metaph. z*, 1029a27–28. See too Sayre (1994), p. 84, pp. 88–89.

unitary objects. In other words, it is not a matter of stating *what* the ideas are, but of acknowledging that they exist, i.e. that there is such a thing as the unity of the multiple. This is further confirmed by other passages of the dialogue in which Parmenides sums up Socrates' thesis. He repeatedly speaks of the thesis of someone *positing* the existence of the ideas/unities – not *defining* them or claiming to know them. For example:

“I suppose [the speaker is Parmenides] you think that each form is one (ἐν ἑκάστων εἶδος οἶσθαι εἶναι, which actually means “you think that each form exists as one”) on the following ground: whenever some number of things seem to you to be large, perhaps there seems to be some one character (μία τις ἴσως δοκεῖ ἰδέα ... εἶναι), the same as you look at them all, and from that you conclude that the large is one.” (132a1–4)

“Then do you see, Socrates”, he said [Parmenides] “how great the difficulty is if one marks things off (διορίζηται) as forms, themselves by themselves?”

“Quite clearly”

“I assure you”, he said, “that you do not yet, if I may put it so, have an inkling of how great the difficulty is if you are going to posit that each idea is one and is something distinct from concrete things” (εἰ ἐν εἶδος ἑκάστων τῶν ὄντων ἀεί τι ἀφορίζόμενος θήσεις¹⁷). (133a8–b2)

“Because I [Parmenides] think that you, Socrates, and anyone else who posits that there is for each thing some being, itself by itself” (αὐτήν τινα καθ' αὐτήν ἑκάστου οὐσία τίθεται εἶναι) ... (133c3–5)

To these passage we may also add *Resp.* 507b2–3, which speaks of διορίζειν τῶ λόγῳ (“to mark off by *logos*”) multiple things but not the ideas. Is it correct to speak of “definition” in relation to individual entities? For in this case the *logos* does not define anything but “separates” ideal unities from multiple things. Furthermore, whereas in the case of mundane objects knowledge can also be based on sense-perception, in the case of the ideas it can only rely on *logos* (cf. *Pol.* 286a6).

Besides, how could Parmenides blame Socrates for having set out to define the beautiful, the just, and the good? Where in the *Parmenides* (or in any other Platonic dialogue) does Socrates ever do so? Rather, Parmenides refers to 130a8ff., which is to say the moment in which, setting out to discuss the doctrine of the

¹⁷ I here follow Fowler's translation, as I believe that the Gill-Ryan one (in Cooper-Hutchinson) is misleading.

ideas suggested by Socrates as a solution to Zeno's *aporias*, he had briefly summed up its content. A clear indication of the agreement between the two passages is the presence, in both, of a praise formulated in exactly the same way:

You are much to be admired for your impulse toward *logoi* (τῆς ὀρμῆς τῆς ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους) (130a8–b1)

The impulse that urge you to *logoi* (ἡ ὀρμὴ ἣν ὀρμᾶς ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους) is beautiful and divine (135d2–3)¹⁸

2. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF SOCRATES' APPROACH TO PHILOSOPHY

The expression “impulse towards *logoi*” recalls *Phaedo* 99e–100a, as Luc Brisson has observed – among others.¹⁹ It is worth exploring this connection in greater detail. The passage of the *Phaedo* in question is the one presenting the idea of a second sailing, which is to say of a flight into *logoi*. At lines 100a2–8 Socrates describes the new approach he has adopted, and to do so employs the very verb ὀρμᾶν (urge on) that is also used in the *Parmenides*. Socrates' approach is an impulse to posit as a hypothesis the discourse (*logos*) ones deems the strongest, and to regard things – causes, as well as everything else – that are in accordance with this discourse as true and things not in accordance with it as false.

What does *logos* mean in this passage of the *Phaedo*? It means, as we already know,²⁰ that the attempt to find causes in sensible objects in a direct way, by means of the senses, ends in failure. The flight into *logoi* is a flight towards argumentation, towards the kind of inferential procedure that in order to solve a given problem will posit the existence of something which cannot be seen. *Logos*, in this case, stands in direct contrast to αἴσθησις (sens perception). As is all too evident, the same is also the case in the *Parmenides*. The problems raised by Zeno cannot be solved through an enquiry limited to the level of sense-perception. The “impulse toward *logoi*” (ὀρμὴ ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους) represents the adoption of an inferential plan that leads one to acknowledge the existence of things that cannot be seen (and hence may only be approached through the *logos*), but

¹⁸ The analogy is erased in Gill-Ryan translation: “you are much to be admired for your keenness for argument!” (130a8–b1); “the impulse you bring to argument is noble and divine” (135d2–3).

¹⁹ Brisson (1994), p. 88 and n. 72.

²⁰ See for instance pp. 42–43, 74, 128–130.

which it is necessary to posit in order to solve the problem. In the passages of the *Parmenides* we are discussing, therefore, ὀρίζειν has exactly the same meaning (“positing”, “hypothesizing”) as ὑποτίθημι in the *Phaedo* (100a2).

Parmenides approves of the ὀρμὴ ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους, something which finds full confirmation in the *Phaedo*. This strikes me as proof of the fact that this ὀρμὴ (impulse) represents an element of continuity which Plato in any case wishes to preserve. What we have here is the impulse which leads one to posit invisible unities that lie beyond the visible multiplicity of things and that bring these things together into homogeneous groups. As Parmenides explains immediately afterwards, this assumption is made necessary by the fact that the δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι (capacity of discussing) would otherwise be lost. Since there, as a matter of fact, is such a thing as διαλέγεσθαι, i.e. since men, when sensibly discussing things, clearly assign a fixed meaning to words, it is necessary to argue that the contradictions Zeno points to no longer hold, and that they will not hold only if one accepts the ideas as invariant unities of meaning (cf. 135b7–c1).

It is clear, however, that the operation performed by Socrates, as it is presented in the *Parmenides*, is also flawed. What the flaw may be can be inferred from 130a–b – namely, absolute separation. Parmenides sums up Socrates' proposal as follows (130b2–3): “have you yourself distinguished, as you say, on the one side (χωρίς) ideas in themselves, and on the other (χωρίς) the things which partake of them?” The stress in this passage is precisely on the idea of separation: this is also clear from the immediately following sentence, in which Parmenides correctly hypothesises that, according to Socrates, there is such a thing as equality itself, separate (χωρίς) from the one we experience.

This, then, is how Parmenides sums up the thoughts that Socrates had expressed in 128e–130a, where he had introduced the ideas in order to solve Zeno's paradoxes. What is particularly significant for the sake of my argument is the sentence opening the explanation. Addressing Zeno, Socrates asks: “don't you acknowledge that there is a form, itself by itself, of likeness etc.” (οὐ νομίζεις εἶναι αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ εἶδος τι ὁμοιότητος κτλ., 128e6–129a1). This way of presenting the problem perfectly corresponds to “to mark off something beautiful, and just and good” (ὀρίζεσθαι ... καλὸν τέ τι καὶ δίκαιον καὶ ἀγαθόν) in *Parmenides'* line in 135c8–9: it is not so much a matter of stating what the ideas are (or of describing them through a definition), but of acknowledging the existence of something (τι) such as ideas in themselves, of which multiple things partake.

3. HYPOTHESIS VS. SEPARATION

One important discrepancy may be noted, however, between Socrates' argument and Parmenides' summaries. Socrates himself, at the beginning of his answer to

Zeno, stresses the fact that the ideas exist *χωρίς* (129d7). The purpose of this claim is to establish the existence of universal unities of which all the various things partake, something which would be enough to explain Zeno's paradoxes – not to thematise separation as such. Socrates' argument, therefore, chiefly focuses on the relation of participation – and hence the connection – between the ideas and things. Parmenides, on the contrary, stresses in particular the separation between the ideas and things, which is to say the main reason for the criticism he directs against the doctrine of the ideas in the first part of the dialogue.

We may therefore posit a scenario of the following sort. The impulse (*ὀρμή*) towards *logoi*, i.e. towards argumentative inferences leading to determine/separate the unity of the multiple, is right and irrepressible: for there are events, such as generation and corruption (*Phaedo*), or Zeno's paradoxes and the *δύναμις τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι*, which could not otherwise be explained. But this work must be carried out very carefully, since there is a risk of distancing the explanatory principle too much from its *explicandum*, thus creating something incomprehensible and useless that will acquire an absurd existence regardless of the reason for which it was introduced. If ideal unities are introduced as prerequisites for multiplicity, but at the same time are regarded as entities utterly separate from things, then there is no longer any *logos*, any argumentative inference, capable of accounting for why they ought to be posited. What Parmenides means to say, in the speech he addresses to Socrates, is that while it is correct to posit an invisible unity alongside visible multiplicity by means of *logoi*, one must also make sure that this unity will continue to stand in relation to the multiple.

This is also the meaning of the exercise Parmenides presents Socrates with. It is not enough to merely mark off the one (i.e. to acknowledge its existence alongside things). It is also necessary to always preserve the relation between the two, which is to say to always speak of the one and the many in their mutual relation and examine what consequences the positing of the one entails for the many, and vice versa. In other words, it is necessary to proceed through hypotheses, and measure the consequences of these hypotheses: namely, to evaluate to what degree a hypothesis helps solve the problems for which it was "posited".

This kind of procedure had already been described in the *Phaedo*. In 100a2–7 Socrates explains that his method consists in positing (*ὑποτίθεσθαι*) in each case the discourse (*logos*) that strikes him as being the strongest, and in regarding consequences that agree with it as true and consequences that do not as false. The *logos* in question here is not an idea as such, but the discourse stating the existence of the ideas. This is quite clear from what Socrates says immediately afterwards (100b3–7): Socrates assume "the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest" (*ὑποθέμενος εἶναι τι καλὸν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ μέγα καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα*, 100b5–7). He then adds: if Cebes will grant

him this assumption (if, that is, he too will regard it as a *logos ἔρρωμένεστατον*, i. e. “strongly compelling”, 100a5), then it might be possible for him to prove that the soul is immortal. In 100b5–7 the “positing” of such a thing (τί) as the ideas is affirmed exactly in the same way as in the sentences from the *Parmenides* we have already examined. The *αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ* represents “separation” in the Platonic sense, which is not absolute separation, but rather something hypothetical, given it is only possible and reasonable to posit these things to the extent that they help explain something else. But if we replace “hypothesis” (*ὑπόθεσις*) with “apart” (*χωρίς*), the separation becomes absolute: for speaking of hypotheses means speaking of principles functional to the *explicandum*.

4. PARMENIDES' ERROR

I might agree, then, with the claim that Socrates, in the *Parmenides*, is expounding a theory of the ideas analogous to the one expounded in the *Phaedo* (and *Republic*). What I cannot accept is the notion that through *Parmenides* Plato is seeking to criticise precisely *that way* of understanding the theory, possibly on account of a development that took place between the *Phaedo* and the dialectical dialogues. What Plato wishes to do, through *Parmenides*, is to show that the theory of the ideas only faces insurmountable problems if we one-sidedly stress separation instead of regarding it as functional to the identification of explicative hypotheses. In the *Parmenides* Plato is ultimately seeking to defend his views against those who interpret the positing of the ideas as the fanciful construction of a realm utterly separate from the one in which man actually lives. He does so by showing how separation must be understood: the ideas are separate if by this we mean that they are universal unities with a distinct determinateness; they are not separate if by this we mean that they have no relation to sensible reality. Indeed, the chief objection raised by *Parmenides* against the theory of the ideas is that absolute separateness would make them utterly unintelligible (133b4), and hence utterly useless for philosophical enquiry.

The exercise proposed by *Parmenides* concerns the one and the many, since in the previous section of the dialogue the ideas – which it is necessary to posit in order to preserve the act of *διαλέγεσθαι* – were precisely regarded as unities of the multiple.²¹ The experiment fails, however, because despite the fact that the testing of given hypotheses takes also into consideration the things that are ‘others’ with respect to the subject of the hypothesis itself, the one and the many

²¹ This first of all emerges from the above-mentioned passages in which every idea is described as *ἕν*. See Sayre (1994), p. 95.

are still treated separately.²² Rather one should start from the fact, defined in *Philebus* 14c7–9 as having “somehow ... an amazing nature” (φύσει πως πεφυκότα θαυμαστόν), whereby “the many are one and the one many” (ἐν γὰρ δὴ τὰ πολλὰ εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἐν πολλὰ). In other words: from a metaphysical perspective, the one is beyond and separate from the many, but this dimension cannot be grasped by discourse; from the point of view of discourse, which is to say of dialectics, it is rather necessary to argue not that the one *and* the many exist, but that the one *is* many and that the many *are* one – however incredible this may seem. Metaphysics and dialectics, then, are in a way separate (and had already been presented as such in the *Republic*, long before the dialectical dialogues). The metaphysical background, the αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ, is the precondition for the fact that *logos*, when operating upon reality, speaks of invisible unities that are not perceptible by the senses and are not subject to generation or corruption. These unities, however, are not knowable or analysable separately, in themselves, for while it is true that in the exercise of *logos* every multiplicity is a unity, it is equally true that every unity is multiple.

In the light of what has just been argued, the position of the character of Parmenides in the dialogue become strangely ambiguous. On the one hand, he suggests the correct method of enquiry to Socrates: Socrates must not simply posit the ideas as unities separate from the multiple, but must also evaluate the effect which the positing of the one has on the many, and vice versa. On the other hand, Parmenides’ attempt to apply this procedure himself ends in failure. Alongside Socrates’ error, then, there is also one made by Parmenides. It consists in wishing to claim that the one/many relation can be explained by considering the one and the many in turn, and analysing them individually. This plan necessarily leads to some unsolvable contradictions, since the one always proves to be at the same time multiple, and the multiple one. This means that the investigation must start from a different assumption, namely (as we have seen in the *Philebus*) that the one is the many, and vice versa. This inevitable co-presence does not rule out the foundational priority of the one (or of the ideas, which are its specification); however, it thwarts the plans of the historical Parmenides to ground the knowledge of reality upon the analysis of a principle preventively separated and marked off from every multiplicity. The Parmenides of Plato’s dialogue, therefore, is a sophisticated product of the author’s imagination which serves to illustrate both (in the first section) the problems arising from a wrong way to understand the “doctrine” of ideas (as I am going to show in the next chapter), and (in the second part) the *aporias* and contradictions one is bound to run up against those who sought to

²² Again, see Sayre (1994), p. 96.

solve these problems through Eleatic procedures (the actual existence of which is illustrated not just by Plato, but also by Gorgias and the so-called Megarics).

For Plato, then, distancing oneself from Eleatism means envisaging the separation of universal unities in such a way that the latter may be used to explain multiplicity. In other words, these unities must be envisaged in such a way as to be able to neutralise the objections raised in the first section of the *Parmenides*, and hence ensure that they will exercise the explanatory function which is the only sufficient reason for positing their existence in the first place. If this does not occur, it means that the operation has not been carried out correctly: for the separation envisaged would not be the kind useful for Plato's philosophy (and the same applies to the kind of separation described in Aristotle's ambiguous representation).

5. ARISTOTLE THE YOUNG OR THE YOUNG ARISTOTLE?

An additional observation may be made, by way of clarification, with regard to the figure of Aristotle in the dialogue. May Plato have chosen this name as an allusion to Aristotle the philosopher? Most scholars rule out this hypothesis.²³ From a chronological standpoint, it would not be utterly impossible. Scholars generally agree that the *Parmenides* was written shortly after 370 BC (although other dates are also plausible), and that Aristotle became a disciple of Plato around 367 BC; so, it is not completely unplausible that Plato was still working on the *Parmenides* when Aristotle was already his pupil. Certainly, Aristotle must have been very young at that time. But it is hardly by chance that explicit mention is made of the young age of the character Aristotle in a section of the dialogue which suggests that he is even younger than Socrates (137c).

There is one further element that must be taken into account. Supposing that at the time of the fictional discussion Socrates was at least twenty years old, the date for the setting of the dialogue would be around 450 BC. Now, from the *Parmenides* itself we know that the character of Aristotle joined the Thirty Tyrants; and Xenophon informs us that he played an active role in the final stages of the Peloponnesian War, accepting some risky responsibilities.²⁴ If in 450 BC this Aristotle was capable of answering Parmenides' questions, he could hardly have been any younger than sixteen. Hence, as Allen suggests, this Aristotle must

²³ See Allen (1997), p. 224, Brisson (1994), p. 20, F. Fronterotta (1998), p. 5. One exception here is Migliori (1990), p. 169, n. 16.

²⁴ See Allen (1997), p. 73.

have been engaging in dangerous military actions at the no longer green age of sixty plus years (Allen also notes that Nicias, the fifty-five year-old commander of the Sicilian Expedition, was regarded an exceptionally old general). All this suggests that the presence of the young Aristotle at the meeting between Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates in 450 BC is a historically rather implausible literary artifice. Given that Plato was already struggling to make the largely incompatible chronologies of Parmenides and Socrates fit together, one is led to wonder why he chose to make things even more difficult for himself by introducing an even younger Aristotle, when he might have chosen a character that would have raised no chronological problems. Might it be that Plato was deliberately seeking to introduce the name of Aristotle?

Moving on to the strictly philosophical level, one might reject the idea that the character of Aristotle has anything to do with the Stagirite by pointing to the fact that the dialogue attributes no personal point of view to the former.²⁵ Actually, this is not quite true, as may be inferred from the passage we have just examined, in which Parmenides accuses the young Aristotle of the same shortcoming as Socrates. Besides, if one accepts the suggestion I have made that Parmenides is reproaching Socrates for one-sidedly stressing the separation (*χωρίς*) of the ideas from things, one must acknowledge that this criticism could very pertinently be addressed to the historical Aristotle. Finally, the invitation to “get training” (*γυμνάσαι*, 135d) in dialectics seems perfectly fitting for a young disciple, and matches quite well what we may reasonably believe to have been the chief pursuit of the historical Aristotle after he joined the Academy, that is: precisely the exercising of dialectics (and the related discipline of rhetoric) – in particular through the investigation of predication, something soon destined to lead Aristotle to develop his doctrine of categories.

²⁵ See, for instance, Brisson (1994), p. 20 and n. 22.

CHAPTER 11
ON THE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES
OF PLATO'S "METAPHYSICS"
(Starting from the *Parmenides*)

1. THE RIDDLE OF THE *PARMENIDES* AND THE "DIALOGICAL APPROACH"

The *Parmenides* is arguably the most difficult and puzzling dialogue in Plato's corpus. This may be the reason why interest in the text on the part of philosophers, including ones chiefly engaged on the theoretical level, has not lapsed but has even gathered momentum in recent years.¹ From a historical and exegetical perspective, it is most tempting to approach the many problems the dialogue raises from new points of view and to present what are at least partly original solutions. This repeated work of analysis concerns both the dialectical can of worms of the second and longer part of the dialogue, and the aporetic discussion on the doctrine of the ideas which unfolds in the first section, as well as all the possible interconnections between the two – the aim being to find a common thread running throughout the work (to say nothing of other, equally thorny issues, such as the role played by the setting of the dialogue, the issue of the spokesman chosen, the degree of historical reliability of the characters portrayed, and the relation between Plato's philosophy and Eleatic thought). In the present study, I set out from the second of the above-mentioned problems, namely the issue of understanding the meaning of Parmenides' criticism of the doctrine of the ideas in the opening section of the dialogue.

Let us take as a starting point a Francesco Fronterotta's book on our topics.² He has sought to demonstrate that all past attempts to solve the *aporias* connected to the ideas by somehow weakening their ontological substantiality or downplaying Plato's epistemological realism are destined to failure. From this it follows not only that the *aporias* in question are for the most part unsolvable, but that Plato himself was aware of the fact – as indeed the *Parmenides* shows. Fronterotta's solution – which strikes me as unlikely, if for no other reason that it unexpectedly crops up in his work like a *deus ex machina* – is to argue that according to Plato "neither demonstration nor rational discourse, but only the evocative

¹ This may easily be inferred by looking at the considerable number of recent monographs, including Miller (1986), Migliori (1990), Meinwald (1991), Sayre (1994), Brisson (1994), Gill – Ryan (1996), Allen (1997), Fronterotta (2001), Scolnicov (2003).

² See the previous note.

capacity and imaginative power of myth are ultimately capable of safeguarding the universal necessity of knowledge and the ‘chains’ of truth” (p. 330).

In such a way, the argumentative value of Plato’s philosophy is reduced to nil – a procedure I find unpersuasive on a number of different levels. However, this is not the issue I wish to discuss. What is more interesting to note is the fact that the conclusions reached by Fronterotta may be seen to constitute a kind of blind alley, which leads us to reopen the enquiry on the basis of different methodological assumptions. For the sake of argument, let us accept his thesis that the *aporias* raised in the first part of the dialogue are truly insoluble and that those scholars who have invested a lot of work and energy to come up with some kind of solution are therefore mistaken. If in order to account for this state of affairs we do not wish to accept the hypothesis that according to Plato philosophy must draw upon the imaginative power of myth, we may consider the possibility that the aim of the *Parmenides* might not be to present the difficulties raised by an alleged Platonic doctrine of the ideas, much less to solve them.

In my view, here it is possible to clearly appreciate the methodological superiority of the so-called “dialogical approach” over the so-called “spokesman theory” in relation to literally and philosophically problematic texts such as the *Parmenides*.³ The traditional methodological perspective, the one Fronterotta adopts in his research, sets out from the following scenario: in the *Parmenides* we have a character (Socrates) who expounds the doctrine of the ideas as the “spokesman” of Plato (possibly, of the young Plato), while another character, also acting in the same role (possibly as the spokesman of a more mature Plato), raises objections concerning the Platonic doctrine of the ideas. The issue at stake, then, is to understand to what extent the doctrine of the ideas which Socrates presents in the dialogue corresponds to the Platonic one; in what way this doctrine may be defended against Parmenides’ criticism, and hence what changes – if any – must be levelled against the doctrine in the light of this criticism; and finally, where in Plato’s philosophy (whether in his dialogues or in his unwritten teaching) adequate solutions may be found to defend the doctrine of the ideas. There is one disturbing element, however, that casts a shadow of doubt over the reliability of this exegetical method. As F. Gonzalez has rightly noted,⁴ these solutions are nowhere to be found in Plato’s writing, just as the alleged theory of the ideas is unattested. And it is certainly striking that the only text in which something of the sort would appear to be present – namely a discussion on matters crucial for the alleged theory such as participation, self-predication and the relation between

³ On the two different approaches, see Press (2000), Tejera – Hart (1997).

⁴ Gonzalez (2003).

the sensible world and the realm of the ideas – is precisely the *Parmenides*: the dialogue in which the doctrine of the ideas is criticised and the problems raised remain utterly unsolved.

If, conversely, we adopt the point of view of the dialogical approach,⁵ we are no longer forced to believe that the true (failed) aim of the dialogue is to clarify that doctrine of the ideas which both Socrates and Parmenides – envisaged as Plato's spokesmen – would appear to be accepting. On the contrary, we may suppose that Plato's own voice only coincides with that of the author, who would thus have written a helplessly aporetic dialogue on the doctrine of the ideas in order to allow the reader to draw some inevitable conclusions: for example, as Gonzalez himself maintains, that there is no "doctrine of the ideas" – and cannot be. This is a hypothesis I find highly plausible, and which I shall be adopting as my starting point for the observations to follow. What distinguishes my own thesis from that of Gonzalez is that whereas the non-existence of the doctrine of the ideas in his view is based on the fact that intellectual knowledge has a non-propositional character according to Plato, I believe that this hypothesis can only be accepted provided it is further qualified, in the light of some important assumptions.

2. QUESTIONS OF EXISTENCE⁶

In order to assess the possibility that a genuine theory of the ideas may have been developed, it is essential to investigate how Plato came to assert their existence: for this alone can provide detailed hints concerning the degree of epistemological "applicability" of the realm of the ideas. The hypothesis that such a thing as a theory of the ideas may exist rests on the following assumptions. Not only is there a stark difference between sensible objects and intelligible objects, which differ from the former and are separate from them, but man is also capable of gaining direct and immediate knowledge of these two forms of reality: the sensible knowledge of material objects is easier to attain, but also far more deceptive; the knowledge of intelligible objects is more difficult to attain, but far more exact and precise. Yet, if we examine the way in which Plato asserts the existence of the ideas in his writing, we find no clear evidence for this assumption.

Let us consider a few examples. In the section of the *Phaedo* devoted to the topic of recollection, after proving that anamnesis may be caused either by

⁵ See Trabattoni (2003 bis).

⁶ I have already introduced this topics in ch. 4. p. 59, and I will come back to it in ch. 13, pp. 246–251.

similarity or dissimilarity, Socrates asks Simmias (74a9–12): “Is there such a thing as the equal – I mean, not in the sense of one piece of wood equal to another, or one stone to another, or anything of that sort, but of something beyond that, the equal itself? Shall we say that it is something or nothing at all?” Having obtained Simmias’ vigorous assent, Socrates goes on to ask: “And do we also know what this thing is?” (74b2). Simmias again gives his assent. Socrates’ second claim would appear to confirm the image of Platonic epistemology I have just called into question, and that is to say: the idea that there exists an ideal reality removed from sensible reality and known by human beings directly. But if this were the case, why should Socrates have first asked Simmias whether he believes that such a thing as the equal itself really exists? Here, as in other cases, Socrates introduces an argument that revolves around the ideas beginning from a question concerning their simple existence;⁷ but it is clear that this “existential” question would be quite meaningless if the objects under consideration were directly accessible to any intellectual faculty. Who in his right mind would ever ask “Do you believe that the Leaning Tower of Pisa is something or nothing at all?”, given that the existence of this object is easily discernible through objective, direct and indubitable knowledge?⁸ It is clear, therefore, that when Socrates and Simmias agree that men do in fact possess knowledge of the equal itself, this knowledge does not correspond to any genuine noetic content – which may be expressed, if necessary – but only amounts to the persuasion that something like perfect equality must exist. In other words, all men know is that the essential feature of this equality is to be perfect, yet they cannot be said to actually perceive an object identifiable as such through their intellect.

Here an interesting analogy may be drawn with one of the proofs of the existence of God formulated by Descartes (what some critics have referred to as the “ideological” proof). Since we possess the idea (in the standard modern philosophical sense of mental representation) of a perfect being, and since this idea cannot have been created by man (precisely because its content is perfection, i.e. a feature which a finite being cannot infer from finite beings), there must exist a being of which this idea is the representation.⁹ Now, it is obvious that even if we were to regard this argument as cogent (and it would be necessary to demonstrate that man truly has the non-contradictory notion of a perfect being in his intellect,

⁷ E.g. *Prot.* 330c1 (“is justice something or nothing?”), *Resp.* 608d13 (“is there a thing which you call good or evil?”). See ch. 13, p. 247.

⁸ The fact that the knowledge of ideal entities is objectively difficult to attain according to Plato does not constitute a valid objection: for there are countless things which it is difficult to know, and yet their existence is never a matter of doubt.

⁹ *Discourse on the Method*. Part IV.

as Leibniz requires in his *New Essays on Human Understanding*),¹⁰ all it would prove is that something like a perfect being must exist: it would not reveal what this being is or how it relates to non-perfect entities. The presence of the idea of a perfect being within the intellect does not constitute a representation of God, since it has no noetic content other than this supposed perfection. And this idea of perfection is of course acquired not through the intellectual perception of something perfect, but through a dialectical reversal of the relative imperfections we find in sensible reality: it is the awareness of these imperfections that leads us to suppose the existence of a perfect reality – not the direct perception of a reality of this sort.

This explains why the argument of the *Phaedo*, while setting out from the hypothesis of the existence and knowability of the ideas, then turns into a genuine ontological argument: for its starting hypothesis is a summary acknowledgement which does not correspond to any form of genuine knowledge. As in the case of the geometers mentioned in the metaphor of the divided line, who based their demonstrations on empirical figures while having ideal ones in mind, the existence of these ideal entities is only a hypothesis for the time being, in need of demonstration (herein lies the difference between the process of *dianoia* and that of *noesis*).¹¹ In the *Phaedo* the demonstration of the existence of the ideas rests on the fact that if the idea of the equal (the perfect equal) did not exist, we would not be able – as we actually are – of realising that the empirical forms of equality we perceive differ from perfect equality (74d–e). The hypothesis that these perfect forms of equality may have been known by the human soul before birth (and may therefore exist in another realm) stems for Platonic thought from the fact that the intellect cannot currently perceive perfect equality. For if it did perceive it, we could describe its characteristics (as we might those of the Leaning Tower of Pisa), the noetic content of the idea describing it would be far more detailed and precise than the vague attribute of perfection, and no ontological question or proof of its existence would be required.

The idea that the passage on recollection in the *Phaedo* constitutes a genuine proof of the existence of the ideas is indirectly confirmed by the way in which Aristotle refutes Plato's so-called "argument from relatives" in favour of forms.¹² Whatever we make of this difficult text, in Aristotle's account Plato's argument rests on the possibility of attributing equality to the imperfect forms of equality

¹⁰ *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Book IV, ch. 10, §§ 7–8.

¹¹ See ch. 8.

¹² See *Metaph.* A 990b15–16 and esp. the broader explanations provided in the *De ideis*, as recorded by Alexander of Aphrodisias (82.11–83.33 = fr. 3 Ross). On this subject see Trabattini (2009 ter).

attested in the empirical world in a synonymic way (that is, in such a way that it will actually refer to something which lacks nothing in terms of being equal – the implication being that a form cannot exist in varying degrees without becoming corrupted). The reference to the *Phaedo* here is all too evident. If G. Fine were right in maintaining that Aristotle regarded this argument as essentially valid (for not only does he never state it is flawed, but ranks it among the “most rigorous” arguments),¹³ we might even say that it reflects one of the most original and foundational stances in Plato’s thought. As we read in an important passage of the *Republic*, the difference between the philosopher and the philodox lies in the fact that the latter “does not think there is a beautiful in itself or any idea of beauty in itself always remaining the same and unchanged, but believes in many beautiful things” and “cannot endure to hear anybody say that the beautiful is one and the just one, and so of other things.” This person does not know how to answer the philosopher who objects to him: “My good fellow, is there any one of these many beautiful things that will not sometimes appear ugly? And of the just things, that will not seem unjust? And of the pious things, that will not seem impious?” (*Resp.* 478e7–479a8). The discriminating factor here lies once again in the acknowledgement of the existence of the object, not in the actual knowledge of it.

3. PLATO’S “THEORY OF IDEAS”: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT CANNOT BE

Nor should we fall into the trap of believing that the direct intuition of the ideas is simply a difficult goal attained by the very few individuals who are genuine philosophers. For on the one hand, the intellectual intuition of the ideas is impossible for everyone.¹⁴ But on the other, anyone who agrees to abandon the unthinking and casual attitude of the *philodox* in order to reason with Socrates will at least be forced to admit that the just, the good and the beautiful do indeed exist.¹⁵ The difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher (or

¹³ Fine (1993), pp. 27, 142–159. According to Aristotle, this argument only constitutes a refutation of Plato’s perspective in an accidental and *ad hominem* way: if the argument were valid, Platonists would be forced to acknowledge the existence of ideas of relatives, which would be inconsistent on their part.

¹⁴ See ch. 8.

¹⁵ S. Kelsey (Kelsey 2000) has rightly noted that recollection in the *Phaedo* is not meant to account just for “the special knowledge characteristic of the true philosopher”, but also – and especially – for “the ordinary cognitive achievements of the man in the street” (p. 94). I adopted the same line of thought (against, for instance, Scott 2006) in Trabattoni (2011), pp. XXXIV–XLVIII and notes *ad loc.*

philodox), therefore, does not consist in the fact that the former, with some effort, ultimately attains direct knowledge of the ideas, whereas the latter never does. According to Plato no one can ever become *sophos*, if by this we mean gaining full, intuitive knowledge of the ideas; yet anyone (albeit at different levels) can become *philosophos*, if only he acknowledges the actual existence of universals and the need to direct his cognitive efforts towards them (whereas the *philodox* is precisely someone who refuses to accept these premises, and thus turns his attention to the world of individual sensible objects).

If what I have argued so far is acceptable, we must infer that according to Plato the knowledge of the ideas has an indirect, provisional and negative-hypothetical character. This does not mean that all we can know about the ideas is that they exist. For once it has been established that perfection must necessarily exist, what has also been established is that a procedure of re-conduction – which is to say, the progressive purification of empirical qualities through increasing degrees of affinity with ideal ones – is indeed possible (what would be not, on the contrary, in the case in which perfect points of reference did not exist). Thus progress can be made in the enquiry by following the path that leads to the identification of a kind of justice that is increasingly just (in such a way as to progressively reduce any contamination from the unjust), of a goodness that is increasingly good, and so on. Evidently, however, we cannot seek to understand what kind of substance this goodness and justice may be, or what their causal relations with other objects consist in, or more generally clarify problems of this sort. In order to do so, it is not enough to work on the degrees of a given quality, which are only partially known through experience (for everyone has seen equal things, good things, just actions, etc.); rather, it would be necessary to have direct knowledge of those sorts of things which lie beyond or outside experience itself.

In other words, there is one kind of enquiry with respect to which a "theory of the ideas", understood as the sheer acknowledgement of the fact that perfect qualities do indeed exist – and this is the theory of the ideas as it emerges from the argument from relatives, which Aristotle himself regarded as "the most rigorous" – not only proves useful, but even constitutes a prerequisite: this is the kind of enquiry which aims to progressively universalise and more rigorously define the notions of just, beautiful or good. By contrast, there is one kind of enquiry with respect to which the theory of the ideas, as just defined, is of no aid at all, since the prerequisite for it is the direct intellectual knowledge of the ideas, understood as objects; and this is the kind of enquiry which, for instance, would seek to explain exactly what relations exist between ideal objects and everyday objects, in what way the former exercise their causality upon the latter, and so on. This kind of enquiry is impossible even for philosophers, since no philosopher possesses the kind of direct intellectual apprehension of ideal objects required to fulfil this task.

My thesis is that Plato conceived the theory of the ideas precisely as an acknowledgement of the existence of perfect qualities because he was interested in the first of the two above-mentioned forms of enquiry (for which the theory of the ideas constitutes a prerequisite); and that in the first section of the *Parmenides* he sought to prove that the theory in question is structurally incapable of tackling the (in his view far less interesting) problems pertaining to the second kind of enquiry. In other words, the field of enquiry which is set by the “theory of the ideas” does not concern the ontological status of the ideas, but the qualities which they represent. The assumption that perfect beauty or justice exists is not enough to launch a kind of enquiry that might answer the question “What are the ideas?”; however, it is sufficient to ensure the possibility of progressively tracing the partial and relative forms of beauty and justice we experience in the sensible world back to a single meaning – even though the ultimate limit whereby ideas are intuitively grasped as specific kinds of objects furnished with specific attributes can never be reached.

On these bases, an attempt can be made to explain the philosophical significance of the first section of the *Parmenides*. In writing this dialogue, Plato probably wished to show – without ever presenting Socrates or Parmenides as his spokesman – that if the discussion concerning the ideas goes beyond the boundaries of what we are given to know based on the hypothetical requirement for which they are posited, this leads to unsolvable and probably not very interesting problems. In other words, Plato wishes to show that the translation of the “hypothesis of the ideas” into a “theory of the ideas” pushes the enquiry on a hopelessly barren terrain, precisely because the ideas are the object of hypotheses, not of any independent knowledge. In structural terms therefore (but in other respects too), the *Parmenides* is actually close to Gorgias’ treatise *On Nature or What-Is-Not*, where the inconclusive antinomies experienced in the exercise of dialectics only confirm the fact that Parmenides’ assumptions are untenable. But we might wish to draw an even bolder comparison, and suggest that the *Parmenides* illustrates what Kant described as transcendental dialectics (besides, Paul Shorey’s claim that Plato does not seek to describe the ideas any more than Kant attempts to describe things in themselves still strikes me as being perfectly valid).¹⁶

4. FURTHER EVIDENCE. THE “THIRD MAN” ARGUMENT

I have always been struck by the relative “banality” of the criticism formulated by Parmenides against the ideas. Let us consider, for instance, the *aporias* pertaining

¹⁶ Shorey (1903), p. 28.

to participation, in which the ideas are treated as objects that may be divided or multiplied. Or take the theme of self-predication, which occurs in several passages of the dialogue, including ones unrelated to the "third man" argument: it is often developed according to a simplistic substantialist perspective, leading to problems of questionable philosophical interest. One does not need to share certain logicistic assumptions of the analytical school to doubt, for example, that Plato actually regarded the idea of greatness as a "great" thing, so as to lead to contradiction in the case in which we have a great thing that is such by participating in a fragment of greatness smaller than greatness itself (131c–d). Nor are we really compelled, in my view, to apply to the "greatest difficulty" the assumption of self-predication literally enough to have Plato state, based on 133d–e, that "the idea of slave is, so to speak, 'slave' of the idea of master, just as the idea of master is 'master' of the idea of slave".¹⁷ At any rate, I believe we ought to first try a different path. And just in case someone were to object that in doing so I am searching for an explanation that will to some extent disprove what "Plato" is literally stating in the text, I should point out that the speaker in these passages of the dialogue is Parmenides, not Plato. The charitable principle which leads the interpreter to make his author's words less banal or contradictory than they might seem constitutes a particularly suitable approach in Plato's case: for in his writing, the letter of the text never coincides with the author's own words; so it is only natural to suppose that what Plato has his characters say must be understood within a framework which transcends them.

The hypothesis of interpreting the *Parmenides* as the expression of a kind of transcendental dialectics provides an interesting perspective for an attempt to clarify some of the most difficult issues discussed in the first section of the dialogue. Self-predication, for instance, will no longer be seen to raise intricate (and unsolvable) onto-epistemological problems, but rather as one of the linguistic means by which Plato sought to grasp the difference between the perfect purity of the ideas and the relative imperfection of sensible things: stating that (only) justice is just, for instance, is simply to state that the partial, relative and transient justice of just things necessarily points to the existence of justice as such, which embodies the qualities of justice in a complete, absolute and everlasting way.¹⁸ Indeed, it is precisely in these terms that the *Protagoras* presents

¹⁷ See Fronterotta (2001), p. 257.

¹⁸ G. Fine (1993 pp. 61–63; but see too p. 52) draws a distinction between "narrow self-predication" (NSP) and "broad self-predication" (BSP). According to the former, the idea of white is itself white, whereas according to the latter the idea of white is white in a different sense in which ordinary white things are said to be white, and that is: when

self-predication.¹⁹ Any further addition is now bound to come across as mere speculation, as an attempt to build an unauthorised “doctrine of the ideas”.

Evidence in support of this hypothesis may be gleaned from the first of the two formulations of the *aporia* of the “third man” (132a–b). Parmenides begins (132a1–4) by describing the route by which Socrates may have reached the hypothesis of the ideas; Socrates confirms that things are indeed so. Socrates believes in the existence of every idea (ἐν ἕκαστον εἶδος οἴεσθαι εἶναι) because while it seems (δόξῃ) to him that many things are great, by gazing (ιδόντι) at all these great things it seems (δοκεῖ) that there exists a single idea behind them (ιδέα ἢ αὐτῇ εἶναι). From this passage one may infer that according to Socrates the ideas are an object of inference, based on sensory seeing: this sensory seeing brings out certain similarities, on the basis of which one can posit the existence of a single idea that may account for them. As may be gathered from Parmenides’ subsequent question, the problem of the “third man” stems from the fact of grouping great things and the idea of greatness within the same set of “great things”. In this case, were the soul to gaze upon this new set as a whole (ἐὰν ὡσαύτως τῇ ψυχῇ ἐπὶ πάντα ἰδῆς), it would be necessary to posit a third kind of greatness, which may account for the similarity between the things belonging to this set (great things + the idea of greatness).

In both passages, therefore, Plato speaks of seeing things. In the second, Parmenides specifies that this seeing is performed by the soul – clearly because the existence of the ideas is not directly evidenced by sense data, but is rather established through reasoning based upon such data. But if this is the case, it obviously cannot amount to actual seeing. According to what is stated in 132a1–4, Socrates believes he has good reasons to affirm the existence (εἶναι) of *something like the ideas*;²⁰ yet this does not at all mean that he believes to be dealing with

we state that the idea of white is white, the idea of white is the explanatory reason for the fact that white things are such. This is an interesting hypothesis, to which there is nothing to object except that the idea of white can only be the cause of the whiteness of other things if it embodies the quality of whiteness to the highest degree. In other words, Plato established the self-predicative nature of the ideas not so much out of a need to establish its explanatory function, but rather in order to argue that the ideas represent the very essence of qualities, which is precisely what ensures their explanatory function. If Plato’s aim were simply to show that the ideas constitute an explanation for the various qualities of things, why would he have chosen to express this concept by such an indirect and ambiguous means as self-predication? What Plato means is that the ideas can be the cause of the presence of x in other things only if they themselves are x to the highest degree (that is, not simply by “being the x” of other things) – hence self-predication.

¹⁹ See ch. 13.

²⁰ In my view, the necessary existence of something like the ideas is the reason why Parmenides – in the section between the first and the second part of the dialogue which

two different kinds of objects (sensible and ideal objects) that can be grasped separately through two different intellectual faculties (physical sight and that of the soul). On the contrary, this passage appears to rule out a similar hypothesis: Socrates admits to possessing knowledge of only one kind of object, namely material objects, on the basis of which he can state that they are great things. As concerns the ideas, all he can do is infer/opine (*δοκεῖ*) that for each set of things that appear to be similar there must be a unity (*ιδέα ἢ αὐτὴ εἶναι ἐπὶ πάντα ἰδόντι*).

What emerges here, therefore, is the misunderstanding on which the "third man" argument rests. Socrates is encouraged to state that there exists an idea of greatness by setting out from the fact that he has direct knowledge of a certain number of great things. Yet the same reasoning does not apply to the set formed by adding the idea of greatness to these great things, for the idea of greatness is not perceivable by human intellection as a great thing in the same way in which sensible things are. The procedure through which the hypothesis of the ideas has taken shape in Socrates' mind does not allow him to state that the difference between the knowledge of the sensible and that of the intelligible corresponds to the difference between two different kinds of vision (sensible vision in the former case, intellectual in the latter). The difference rather consists in the fact that intellectual knowledge is not a form of vision, but rather the outcome of an inference, which is to say an opinion of the soul (*δοκεῖ*) that posits the existence of the ideas (*ἐν ἑκάστων εἶδος οἶεσθαι εἶναι*). Hence, it cannot be a form of knowledge capable of independently enunciating – independently, that is, from what is implicit in the inferential procedure – the characteristics of its object, as with sensible vision. The fact, however, is that the *aporia* of the "third man" only works in this case, namely if the ideas are conceived of as "things seen", along the lines of sensible things. Indeed, what proves crucial for the third man argument is the premise that the soul can objectively ascertain that the idea of greatness is a great *thing* in the same way as the senses can objectively ascertain that a whale, an aircraft carrier or the Palace of Versailles are great things. But clearly this is not the case. Less still, then, will it be possible to state what kind of "things" the ideas are, as is required in order to solve the *aporias* related to participation.

takes his name, 135b–c – does not advise Socrates to simply abandon the concept. On the one hand, Socrates expounds the "Platonic doctrine of the ideas" but is not capable of defending it; on the other, Parmenides provides a staunch criticism of it but does not believe that it must be abandoned. As I have argued in ch. 10 by combining these apparently contradictory data, it is possible perhaps to define Plato's intention: to preserve the need to posit something like the ideas, while avoiding the kind of unwarranted doctrinal developments which are bound to lead to unsolvable problems.

5. PLATO'S "TWO WORLDS THEORY" AND ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL RESULTS

One objection that is usually raised against the "reductionist" view of the theory of the ideas I have outlined above is that if things were as described, it would be difficult to understand the long string of critiques levelled by Aristotle: for not only do these target a doctrine of the ideas, understood as the actual duplication of substances, but they largely focus on issues that in my view are structurally incapable of being investigated through this theory. As I will try to show in the next chapter, I think that Aristotle's criticism confirms rather than disproves my interpretation. But for a careful analysis of this point I refer the reader to this section of the book. Here I would merely point out that Aristotle's testimony does not allow us to directly ascertain whether the theory of the ideas he attributes to Plato was in his view founded upon intuitive knowledge or on a propositional mode of description. What the philosopher writes in ch. 15 of *Metaph.* z suggests that in his mind the former was probably the case. In this chapter, Aristotle denies that the ideas, as conceived by the Platonists, may be defined; and in support of this view, he observes that no Platonist has ever attempted to provide such a definition (1040b2–3).²¹ But if the intellectual intuition of the ideas cannot be expressed through a definition, that is through an articulate thought and discourse conveying their noetic content, then we have yet to find a valid reason to claim that the Platonic notion of the ideas constitutes a genuine theory. For according to this picture, the intellectual knowledge of the ideas takes the form of a precise, private contact with a transcendent reality, which cannot be further articulated.

The hypothesis that intellectual knowledge possesses an essentially intuitive character according to Plato may be formulated in two different versions: the first may be described as the traditional version, while the latter is more recent and innovative. According to the traditional version, intellectual knowledge is a kind of inner vision which is neither incompatible with dialectics and the rational activity of the *logos*, nor alternative to it. Within this context, the idea (*eidōs*), which is to say the object of vision, ultimately coincides with the *logos* in a way, that is to say with the propositions describing the content of the vision. As a

²¹ Aristotle's claim, which seals his argument that no definition can be given of ideas, is expressed in the form of a rhetorical question: "Why does not one of the exponents of the Ideas produce a definition of them?" In this case, Aristotle cannot mean that Platonists never define what an idea is *in general*, both because definitions of this sort are common in Plato's dialogues and because Aristotle himself had begun his argument by writing: "Nor, indeed can any idea be defined" (1040a8). What Platonists fail to do, in his view, is rather define (i.e. expound in a propositional and predicative form) the noetic content of individual ideas.

side note, I might add that it is in these classic terms that Plato's epistemology is commonly presented not just in most textbooks, but even by those contemporary philosophers who identify Platonism as the dogmatic metaphysics which has influenced the development of Western philosophy for centuries.²²

Yet alongside this form of intuitionism, in more recent times another one has emerged, partly as a reaction to the spread of analytical readings of Plato, especially in the 1950s–1970s. According to this latter perspective, Plato was chiefly interested in searching for definitions²³ (which would essentially limit intellectual knowledge in his view to the correct formulation and arrangement of given propositional statements). According to this new approach – which, with some significant nuances, finds its chief spokesmen in W. Wieland, F. Gonzalez and K. Sayre²⁴ – intellectual knowledge has an intuitive character for Plato in the sense that the knowledge of the ideas cannot be expressed in a propositional form, since language is structurally inadequate for this purpose. Unlike the former, this version of intuitionism does not suggest that *eidos* and *logos* can be identified; rather, it posits a very radical difference between the two. This is the reason why – as may be inferred from the revealing titles of two studies by Gonzalez and Sayre²⁵ – there is no such thing as a “Platonic doctrine of the ideas”. For a “doctrine” implies a propositional medium of expression, and it is precisely against the common treatment Plato's thought in such terms that the new ‘intuitionists’ address their criticism.

What are we to make of the picture that has just been drawn? In my view, as we know, we are certainly to reject the identification of *eidos* with *logos*, since the latter for Plato is a substitute means, incapable of ensuring complete knowledge of the ideas. Having said this, I believe it is also true that the only possible means by which man can know the ideas – however deficient and imperfect this means may be – is the one offered by the *logos*; and that man, therefore, cannot rely on any intuitive form of knowledge higher than the discursive. When examined from different points of view, then, both the “intuitionist” perspective and the “propositionalist” prove partly correct and partly incorrect.

²² One salient example is provided by M. Heidegger. In the course on the *Sophist* he held in 1924–1925 (Heidegger 1992), where he explicitly chose to interpret Plato through the lens of Aristotle (see e.g. p. 11), Heidegger claimed that according to one of its meanings *logos* coincides with *eidos*: “λόγος soviel wie εἶδος” (p. 201). For an orderly reconstruction of the relation between Heidegger and Plato, see Le Moli (2002). On the relationship between *logos* and *eidos*, see also Trabattoni (2004 bis).

²³ Gonzalez (1998), pp. 9–10.

²⁴ Wieland (1982); Gonzalez (1998); Sayre (1995).

²⁵ Sayre (1993); Gonzalez (2003).

It is not difficult to understand how all this may have occurred, if we consider the fact that most critical approaches to Platonic thought today share a largely implicit assumption, namely that Plato's two-world theory and the notion of the actual transcendence of the ideas compared to sensible reality are not to be taken seriously. In other words, scholars believe that the ideas for Plato constitute an object of knowledge that is fully attainable in ordinary life, be it as a vision which translates into a *logos* (or indeed is reduced to it, as its metaphorical symbol), or as a vision which remains inaccessible by the *logos*. We thus get the three above-mentioned pictures of Platonic epistemology:

- 1) an intuition of the ideas that is mirrored by the *logos*;
- 2) knowledge of the ideas based on propositions and definitions alone;
- 3) an intuition of the ideas that cannot be mirrored by the *logos*.

By contrast, if we take Plato's two-world theory seriously, then the scenario becomes far more straightforward. It still holds, as intuitionists would have it, that full and complete knowledge of the ideas is direct and non-discursive in nature; yet this knowledge is only given to the disembodied soul, as taught by the doctrine of recollection; finally, it also remains true, as "propositionalists" would have it, that in his mortal condition man does not possess any means of knowledge higher than the *logos*, through which he seeks to shed light on the traces of the direct vision of the ideas deposited in his soul, by embarking on a constant and never-ending quest. It is clear, therefore, that in relation to Plato's philosophy this hypothesis does not require us to rule out the existence of a separate realm superior to sensible reality (as a frequent objection suggests). Far from denying that the realm of the ideas is separate from the sensible world according to Plato, what I am ruling out here is the possibility for man of having any direct apprehension of the ideas in his ordinary life, precisely in order to safeguard this separation. If anything, the notion of separation is called into question by "ontological" interpretations, according to which the ideas are intelligible substances that are therefore structurally similar to sensible substances, both as objects with given attributes and insofar as they may be known independently and objectively (leading to the so-called "theory of the ideas"). But if this kind of knowledge could really be attained, the separation of the ideas would *ipso facto* be denied. And, as I have already observed (see ch. 3, p. 41), Plato's two worlds would be "reduced" to a single realm: a world containing two kinds of substances, the sensible and the intelligible, which certainly differ in many respects, but are both "substances" that can be known. Such might be the world of Aristotle, perhaps, but not that of Plato.

6. PLATO'S AND ARISTOTLE'S "METAPHYSICS"

These last considerations provide a starting point to further broaden our perspective and clarify some general features pertaining to the kind of tendencies in ancient thought which are usually labelled "metaphysical". The core of Platonic metaphysics, which has its roots in Plato's own writing but was later developed according to several variants in the Academic tradition, in Middle Platonism and finally in Plotinian and post-Plotinian Neoplatonism, is constituted by the combination of an exemplarist metaphysics, according to which the relationship between principles and particulars is one of partial similarity, and a kind of negative theology. According to the latter, full and complete knowledge of principles – which are motionless and immaterial, and hence transcend empirical reality – may only be attained within a higher dimension, which is qualitatively different from mundane reality. Within this framework, the exemplarist assumption can in no way be regarded as contingent, since the need to identify something truly serving as an exemplar is the only factor that effectively compels philosophy to set out after metaphysical principles (i.e. ones not belonging to the material realm). This assumption, moreover, ensures the connection between the sphere of principles and mundane reality without which the metaphysical separation between things and principles would render the latter useless from an explicative and causal perspective. Negative theology, and the weak epistemology connected to it, in turn ensure that the exemplarist assumption will not undermine the actual transcendence of principles, since the partial similarity between a model and its copies does not blot out the qualitative difference between the two: however much we might purify a copy in the attempt to bring it back to its model, from a formal point of view the former will always be inferior to the latter. To use the example of the circle which Plato himself invokes in the *Seventh Letter*, if we progressively increase the number of sides of a regular polygon, this will increasingly come to resemble a circle; yet no matter how many sides we may wish to envisage, a polygon will always remain something qualitatively different from a circle (and then, absolutely speaking, "not a circle"). This qualitative difference may also be described in terms of the gap existing between the finite dimension within which human knowledge is confined and the potential infinity of the quest for knowledge. Just as we will only get an accurate idea of a circle by envisaging a polygon with an infinite number of sides, so we can only attain the complete notion of an idea through the endless process of fine-tuning required to turn the partial similarity between a copy and its model into perfect identity between the two – in other words, by identifying the countless relations linking this particular idea to all others.²⁶ If this kind of negative theology, as I have

²⁶ See the passages quoted in ch. 2, p. 30, n. 34.

rather improperly termed it, really constitutes the cornerstone of “Platonism” in all its various forms, then we can also understand why a streak of scepticism has tinged the Platonic tradition at different moments of its history – ranging from the Socraticism of Plato’s aporetic dialogues and the scepticism common in the third and second-century Academy, down to the theologically oriented forms of scepticism typical of post-Plotinian Neoplatonists (who, starting from Porphyry, also applied negative theology to the ideas).²⁷ This Neoplatonic strand of scepticism is especially evident in the thought of the last scholar of the Academy, Damascius of Damascus, as several studies devoted to him have not failed to note.²⁸

A very different metaphysical approach instead marks Aristotle’s philosophy. Here the field of metaphysics, or rather first philosophy, is divided between the study of suprasensible substance, which has at least certain features in common with Platonist negative theology, and ontology, or the science of being as being. With regard to the former, it is interesting to note that in Aristotle’s case too we find the sort of transcendental dialectics we have seen at work in unwarranted attempts to extend the field of Plato’s metaphysics. Let us think here, for example, of the well known controversy surrounding the nature of divine causality, where it is extremely difficult to determine whether this amounts to efficient causality or final causality.²⁹ While the sequence running from Book 8 of *Physics* to Book Λ of *Metaphysics* would suggest this is an efficient causality, since the existence of an unmoved mover is only posited because the infinite nature of movement requires a cause of this sort, an analysis of the characteristics of the unmoved mover as such suggests that it only moves things as a final cause. In this case too, as we can see, the attempt to lead metaphysics beyond the evidence inferred from sensible reality (where a certain kind of movement reveals the existence of an efficient cause suited to it), or indeed to provide an independent description of the metaphysical object and its causal action, invariably engenders an antinomy difficult to solve.

With regard to the science of being as being, that is to say ontology, no trace instead is to be found in Aristotle of the approaches typical of negative theology. The Aristotelian science of being, understood as both the study of the characteristics of being as such and the study of substance and form as primary aspects of being, represents a no doubt difficult field of knowledge, but one which may realistically be attained, since no original metaphysical difference comes into

²⁷ See Hadot (1974), esp. p. 45; Chiaradonna (2002), p. 267.

²⁸ Linguiti (1990); Rappe (2000); Trabattori (2003 ter).

²⁹ See the many studies which Enrico Berti has devoted to this issue in recent years. Here I will only refer to the latest one, Berti (2014).

play. Aristotelian ontology is rather based on the assumption that thought and language faithfully and unambiguously mirror the reality of things,³⁰ it thus draws upon the reservoir of memory, which is simply conceived as the gathering of experience and does not refer to any structurally separate dimension, in the way Platonic recollection does.³¹ Everything suggests, then, that any imperfection or insufficiency in the results attained is only due to mistakes in the procedure adopted by the knowing subject³² – mistakes which it is therefore always possible to correct.³³

In the light of what has been argued so far, it seems rather strange that a view commonly held by both contemporary philosophers and historians of philosophy should present the Platonic doctrine of the ideas as an ontology analogous to that of Aristotle rather than as a negative theology, which is how it was instead largely understood within the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition. It is certainly true that Aristotle rejects the doctrine of the ideas because, among other things, it fails to constitute an ontology (i.e. the "science sought for" that is discussed in Book A of *Metaphysics*). However, this view in no way proves that Plato aimed to develop "a philosophy of this sort",³⁴ which is to say that science of being which Aristotle investigates in his *Metaphysics*.³⁵ This questionable assumption leads to problems that are truly difficult to solve. Understood as a negative theology, the theory of the ideas suggests that the existence of a range of different entities that are always only partially *x* presupposes the existence of a being that is always absolutely *x* (according to the procedure which Aristotle himself describes through the expression "one over multiplicity").³⁶ The doctrine further defines the function of philosophy as that of moving from what is partially and relatively *x* to what is less partially and less relatively *x* (for example, increasingly elucidating the general nature of justice, courage, goodness, etc. by progressively exploring the network of relations within which these concepts apply). This function is precisely what Plato endeavours to fulfil in much of his writing, often with some considerable "detours",³⁷ yet without ever losing sight of his aim. If, conversely, the doctrine of

³⁰ See *De int.* 16A, *Met.* θ 1051b6–9.

³¹ *Apo* II 19.99b–100^a.

³² *Metaph.* A 993b.

³³ See Trabattoni (2005), pp. 142–149.

³⁴ This expression (τοιαύτης [...] φιλοσοφίας), occurs in a famous passage from *Metaph.* A (983b20–21). As Donini has rightly noted (2003, pp. 46–47), the use of this pronoun shows that Aristotle himself was aware of the fact that the science mentioned in that text constitutes a particular instance of "philosophy".

³⁵ For a more detailed analysis of this point see the following chapter.

³⁶ On this point, see Trabattoni (1994), p. 269, n. 26.

³⁷ Salient examples of these "detours" are to be found in the *Republic* and *Philebus*,

the ideas is mistaken for an ontology, then the ideas become Plato's answer to the question "What is being?", which in turn becomes the crucial philosophical question. In this case, the function of the doctrine will be the "Aristotelian" one of studying the ideas (i.e. being *stricto sensu*), in order to infer the attributes of being as such. Yet in this case Platonic thought would prove an utter failure, since – as revealed precisely by Aristotle's criticism – no "philosophy of this sort" is to be found in Plato. What I mean is that no theory of the ideas is to be found that may be regarded as an imperfect (and hence failed) anticipation of Aristotle's ontology.

What is equally bizarre is that the commonly held view I referred to above does not take account of the fact that the distinction between practical and theoretical sciences, and hence the splitting of the goal of philosophy into the two separate goals of pure contemplation and action, is itself of Aristotelian origin and essentially foreign to Plato.³⁸ Consequently, not only is it difficult to assign to Plato an ontology modelled after that of Aristotle, but it also difficult to associate him with the kind of purely speculative interest which for Aristotle is strictly connected to such ontology. By this, I do not wish to deny that according to Plato philosophers, at least, primarily aspire to knowledge. However, knowledge for Plato is the means by which philosophers – not all men – attain happiness, not the fulfilment of an intellectual capacity for contemplation that is innate to human nature (for the only thing that is innate, according to Plato, is the pursuit of happiness).³⁹

Precisely in order to attain its eudaimonistic goal, Plato's philosophy must address and solve some complex logical and epistemological issues. After all, if no solution to these problems were to be found, this would make Platonic philosophy a kind of refined scepticism, with all the negative implications already emphasised by the ancient traditions that opposed this current (starting from Stoicism). In particular: if nothing can be known about goodness and values for sure, how are we to find the knowledge and guidelines required in order to pursue happiness? This way of framing the problem, however, unjustifiably passes from one extreme to another by assuming that the impossibility of attaining absolute (or absolutely certain) knowledge automatically implies that nothing may be known in general.

where lengthy and elaborate philosophical enquiries serve as a means to further define the meaning of important ethical notions by addressing questions such as "What is justice?" and "What is the good (understood as the good life)?"

³⁸ The fact that it may be appropriate to separate the two functions (i.e. the role of the statesman and that of the philosopher) – as is the case in the *Statesman* – poses no objection to this rule.

³⁹ See Trabattoni (2004), pp. 136–138.

What comes into play here is once again the detrimental mechanism of misleading oppositions which continues to be systematically applied in order to classify Plato's thought according to the simplistic alternative between dogmatism and scepticism, without ever seriously considering the prospect of a "third way".⁴⁰ To argue that the defining features of Platonic metaphysics and epistemology prevent philosophical enquiry from ever really coming to a close, as would occur for instance through a direct apprehension of the ideas, does not at all mean that this enquiry is utterly ineffective or fruitless; rather, it means acknowledging that its outcomes must always be regarded as being at least partly provisional, and that the prospect of further investigation must remain open. The notion that the acquisition of truth can never be regarded as something absolute or definitive does not imply that there is no truth at all; rather, it suggests that truth manifests itself to man – at any rate to the degree that he is confined to the temporal dimension – as the "least refutable"⁴¹ conclusion reached by the enquiry so far, and not as an irrefutable outcome beyond which there is nothing more to seek.

⁴⁰ The idea of a "third way" in the interpretation of Plato (not only between dogmatism and scepticism, but also against any strict dualistic picture of his thought) became a sort of commonplace after the collection of essays edited by F. Gonzalez in 1995. It is still today, I think, the most interesting and rewarding line of interpretation of Plato's thought, as it is the only one capable to face the enormous complexity (and sometimes the ambiguity) of his text. Hence, a simply polemical or ironic attitude toward it (as, for instance, in Fronterotta 2005), not only is out of place, but also offers no fruitful contribution to the debate.

⁴¹ *Phaedo*, 85c9–d1.

CHAPTER 12
IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A “PLATONIC THEORY
OF THE IDEAS” ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE?

The philosophers and theologians
that investigate things that are beyond nature,
or that cannot be seen, say a thousand insanities:
because men are in fact in the dark regarding
such matters, and this questioning serves more
to exercise the intellect than to find truth.

Francesco Guicciardini

1. IS THERE A PLATO’S “THEORY OF IDEAS”?

In the previous chapter I have sought to demonstrate that the first section of the *Parmenides* provides a kind of ‘transcendental dialectic’ in the Kantian sense of the term, which is to say: an attempt to illustrate what unsolvable (as well as philosophically rather uninteresting) difficulties emerge if problems are formulated in the wrong way. From this point of view, I perfectly agree with the conclusions reached by Francisco Gonzalez, who rejects the idea that the object of the criticism offered in the *Parmenides* might be the theory of the ideas found in Plato’s mature dialogues, arguing instead that “the aim of the dialogue is to bring into focus the problems which [...] any attempt to formulate a theory of the ideas is bound to run into”.¹ One of the elements in support of this hypothesis is the fact that Plato’s dialogues not only provide no genuine answer to the many questions raised with regard to the ideas, but do not even betray any inclination on the author’s part to provide such answer.² In point of fact, the only text in which these questions are explicitly formulated is precisely the *Parmenides*, which is to say the one dialogue that purposefully leaves these questions open, as if to show that they cannot be answered. In the light of these facts, it seems as though it is high time for the critical enquiry on these issues to radically change its focus: instead of wasting so much intellectual energy in an attempt to clarify problems which Plato consciously chose not to solve, we should seriously consider the reasons for his choice.³

¹ Gonzalez (2003), p. 59.

² See *ibid.*, p. 35.

³ See *ibid.*, p. 51.

At this point, however, a significant divergence emerges between my own approach and that of Gonzalez. Gonzalez believes that the impossibility of formulating a doctrine of the ideas in the strong sense depends on the fact that according to Plato the ideas are only known in an intuitive and non-propositional way, in a context in which – as Gail Fine also suggests – *one cannot speak of any genuine separation of the ideas from the sensible world*.⁴ By contrast, I believe that this impossibility derives precisely from the fact that a theory of the ideas in the strong sense could only be based on the direct intuition of them, something that is unavailable to man in his mortal state, since *the ideas are actually separate from sensible reality, which they transcend* (and this implies both a realist interpretation of the theory of recollection and an acknowledgement of the fact that only the disembodied soul enjoys direct and full knowledge of the ideas, as evidenced in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*). In the previous chapter – and partly in other works as well – I have sought to demonstrate the above hypothesis through an analysis of Platonic texts, and especially the *Parmenides*, not without considering some evidence from Aristotle. It is on the latter that I here wish to focus, in order to show in greater detail that Aristotle provides ample proof in support of the hypothesis under consideration.

I shall begin my enquiry by making what is certainly a rather banal observation, but one which proves important when – as is sometimes the case – it is not taken into account. Aristotle's testimony on Plato may be divided into three different sets of passages, albeit not always fitting precisely:

- 1) passages in which Aristotle explicitly attributes something to Plato and/or the Platonists;
- 2) passages in which a thesis upheld by Plato and/or the Platonists can be inferred from Aristotle himself, who adds to the information he has something he believes to be logically implied by his interlocutors' position (in some cases warning his listener/reader that this is what he is doing);
- 3) passages in which Aristotle only formulates criticisms of theses attributed to Plato and/or the Platonists by adopting the methods listed under 1) and 2).

Now, it is obvious that anyone who wishes to turn to Aristotle's testimony in order to learn what Plato and/or the Platonists may or may not have said or done can legitimately make use – not without much caution – only of type 1) passages. This, then, is the criterion I shall adopt for my enquiry.

⁴ See Fine (2003).

2. IMITATION AND PARTICIPATION

The first passage I shall examine consists in some famous lines from Ch. 6 of *Metaph.* A (987b9–14):

A1

The plurality of things which bear the same name⁵ as the forms exist by participation in them. And participation he took over with a mere change of name. For the Pythagoreans had said that entities existed by imitation of the numbers, whereas Plato said that it was by participation, changing the name. However, as to what this “participation” or “imitation” may be, they left this an open question (*ἀφείσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν*). (own transl.)

Commentators disagree on how to translate the expression *ἀφείσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν* in line b14. The most common reading – accepted by Ross, Tricot and Viano, among others – is that the sentence means “they left before the world of discussion”,⁶ i.e. that the Pythagoreans and Plato left it up to others to investigate the problems they did not personally discuss. The obvious implication of this reading is that both the Pythagoreans and Plato did not undertake any investigation of the relations of participation between the ideas and sensible objects.⁷ In this sense, an even stronger meaning may be assigned to the verb *ἀφείσαν*, as describing not so much the act of ‘leaving the investigation (up to others)’ as that of simply ‘neglecting, avoiding’ it. Indeed, Aristotle frequently⁸ uses the verb *ἀφείναι* in the imperative form (*ἀφείσθω*, or more rarely the plural *ἀφείσθωσαν*) precisely to signal that he will avoid investigating a given problem (because it is not crucial, because it has already been discussed, because there is no need to discuss it at the moment, etc.). A pertinent example may be found again in book A of *Metaphysics* (985b20), where Aristotle writes that with regard to motion Democritus – more or less like all other philosophers – *ῥαθύμως ἀφείσαν* (“has carelessly refrained” – naturally, “from investigating”). It is quite true that when

⁵ I read here, with Schwegler and Bonitz *contra* Ross, *τῶν συνωνύμων* instead of *δμόνυμα*.

⁶ Ross (1924) p. 166.

⁷ Cherniss notes: “The present sentence, as it stands, means that neither Pythagoreans nor Plato gave any explanation of *μίμησις* or *μέθεξις* from which one could determine what the nature of the relationship between ideas and phenomena might be” (Cherniss 1962, p. 180, n. 103). Here we also find a convincing explanation for the reason why extending the genitive *τῶν εἰδῶν* to include the Pythagoreans as well is not a problem.

⁸ See *EE* 1219b31; *EN* 1096a10, 1130b20, 1155b8, 1159b23, 1166a34, 1171a34, 1175a19; *De gen. et corr.* 325B36, 327b31; *De int.* 17A5; *Parv. nat.* 467B18; *Metaph.* 985B20, 990a33, 1027b17, 1028a3, 1034b34, 1046a7; *Phys.* 223B27; *Pol.* 1286a5, 1289b12, 1300b36, 1331b22.

the verb is followed by the infinitive it usually acquires the meaning of “allow” or “let”. One example of this use is in *Metaph.* Λ, 107aa17, where Aristotle writes with reference to the need for the heavenly spheres to amount to a specific number: “we leave to more rigorous thinkers that ourselves the proof of all this (ἀφείσθω τοῖς ισχυροτέροις λέγειν)”. In this passage, however, we find a dative referring to the people to whom the task is left; it is a matter, then, of seeing whether this dative might be replaced by the expression ἐν κοινῷ from 987b14 without affecting the meaning of the verb.

Be that as it may, we are only dealing with nuances here, since in both cases (whether we take ἀφείσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν to mean ‘neglect to investigate’ or ‘leave the investigation up to others’), what the sentence means is that neither the Pythagoreans nor Plato have investigated the issues of imitation and participation. We get a very different picture if we follow the suggestion made by D.J. Allan several years ago, according to which the sentence means that the question “was set aside for joint study”.⁹ In other words, Aristotle

seems to have in mind not a mere abandonment of the question, but some definite action or pronouncement, such as an authoritative publication in which the issue was stated and the discussion declared open.¹⁰

According to Allan, the publication in question would be the *Parmenides*. Aristotle’s account, therefore, would show that Plato conceived the *Parmenides* “as a statement of difficulties concerning the participation of things in the Ideas, which readers of the dialogue were invited to discuss among themselves.”¹¹ These readers, in turn, would be precisely the Pythagoreans and the members of the Academy, whom Plato would have encouraged to conduct shared research. In this respect, Allan endeavours to show that in the case under consideration the term κοινός does not refer to the public at large, as is often the case with Aristotle.¹²

The interpretation I have just outlined, however, strikes me as being rather implausible. Let us leave aside the impression that in this way one is attributing to Plato and Aristotle a work method closely reminiscent of the sort of seminars commonly held in our universities or colleges (whereas we know very little of the kind of work actually conducted within the Academy). What is more problematic is the fact that according to Allan the Pythagoreans that Aristotle would be referring to here would be fellow students and colleagues of Plato and his disciples,

⁹ Allan (1960) p. 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

engaged in common research with them. If the Pythagoreans and Plato are often discussed together (and not only in A), this is because according to Aristotle they state similar things, as may also be inferred from the passage in question: the Pythagoreans (who evidently must have identified principles comparable to the Platonic ones) describe the relation between principle and principled as mimesis, whereas Plato uses the term participation to describe the same thing. There is nothing to suggest that Aristotle here wishes to refer to the Pythagoreans, Plato and the Academics as a genuine community of researchers interested in coming up with solutions to shared problems. Besides, the grouping of different opinions according to their similarities is typical of the whole 'historiographical' excursus of A (we thus read, for instance, that a certain number of pre-Socratic philosophers – who obviously were not working together – had already discovered two of the causes Aristotle identifies in his *Physics*).¹³ Aristotle, in other words, is here providing an abstract evaluation of various views, resorting to all the 'unhistorical' parallels which this operation calls for. Among these we also find an assimilation of the Pythagoreans' theses to those of Plato, which in Aristotle's opinion corresponds to a common failure to adequately address what he regards as the crucial questions implied by these views.

As Allan explains from the very opening of his article, his suggestion is prompted by the wish to solve the difficult problem of why Aristotle never mentions the *Parmenides* when presenting and criticising the doctrine of the ideas. This difficulty would be further aggravated by the very passage we are now examining, if the latter really meant that Plato never investigated the issue of participation: "What about the *Parmenides*?", one might object. But in fact, Aristotle might have reasonably maintained that the *Parmenides* does not constitute a genuine research (ζήτεσις) on the problem of participation, since a ζήτεσις of this sort implies a conscious intention to regard the questions it addresses as being relevant, and hence a commitment to pin down an acceptable answer to them. But as Gonzalez has rightly noted, no traces of this are to be found in the *Parmenides*.¹⁴ Aristotle, therefore, can quite legitimately complain – at least,

¹³ 985a10–14.

¹⁴ A reference to the *Parmenides* is also to be found in Alexander: ταύτην δὲ τὴν μέθεξιν τε καὶ μίμησιν τί ἔστι καὶ πῶς γίνεται, οὔτε τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν τις οὔτε Πλάτων ἀπέδοσαν, ἀλλ' εἶασαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖσθαι πῶς γίνεται καὶ τίνα τρόπον. ἔοικε δὲ τοῦτο καὶ ὑπὸ Πλάτωνος ἐν τῷ Παρμενίδῃ δελοῦσαι (52.3–6). Still, it is not clear how the last sentence is to be understood. Dooley (1979, p. 79) translates "although this point does seem to be clarified by Plato in the *Parmenides*", pointing to *Parm.* 130e ff. as a possible reference. In such a way, Dooley stresses the initial δὲ ('although'), but does not translate the καὶ which follows shortly afterwards. Besides, while it cannot be denied of course that Plato discusses participation in the *Parmenides*, it cannot be argued that he has 'clarified' πῶς γίνεται

according to his own perspective – about a lack of research, even given that Plato wrote the *Parmenides*: for in Aristotle’s eyes this dialogue does not carry enough weight to show that Plato truly addressed the issues of participation and imitation (just as Democritus cannot be said to have truly explored the nature of motion).¹⁵

As we shall now see, the explanation I have suggested finds further confirmation in other passages by Aristotle. However, I should note right from the start that the fact that Aristotle exposes Plato’s silence on certain matters as a failure on his part cannot be taken as counter-evidence. Aristotle has all the right to regard Plato’s choice not to address certain problems as something quite unjustifiable from a philosophical perspective; but, from a historiographical perspective, we cannot simply consider a weakness of Plato’s philosophy anything which Aristotle seems to view as such. If Aristotle informs us, as a matter of fact, that Plato did not investigate participation and imitation, in order to understand Plato’s thought we must search for the reasons *Plato might have had* to behave in such a way, rather than passively accept *those provided by Aristotle*. Not to do so is to go against the methodological suggestions presented at the beginning of this article: it means using Aristotle’s criticism of Plato as a useful source for reconstructing the latter’s thought.

3. POETIC METAPHORS

As it has just been anticipated, the ‘factual’ information which may be gleaned from A1 finds confirmation in other sections of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Let us consider the two following passages, for instance:

καὶ τίνα τρόπον (“how and in what way it happens”). Finally, this claim seems to contrast with the way in which the translator understands the immediately preceding sentence in Alexander’s commentary, namely as expressing Plato’s intention to make the study of this matter a topic of shared research. It therefore seems more reasonable to me to take the verb *δελούσαι* to mean ‘be made known.’ Hence, I would suggest the following translation: “It seems to me that this [i.e. Plato’s choice not to provide any solutions concerning the *πῶς γίνεται καὶ τίνα τρόπον* of participation] is also made known by Plato in the *Parmenides*”. This too would only suggest that according to Alexander Plato refrained from personally discussing certain matters – not, as Allan would have it, that he positively sought to entrust Pythagoreans and Academics with the task of doing so. It is further worth noting that Alexander here clearly distinguishes between Plato and the Pythagoreans, treating them separately.

¹⁵ Allan’s idea, according to which – in the case of the testimony on Democritus – the negative meaning of the verb *ἀφίημι* depends entirely on the adverb *ῥαθύμως* (*op. cit.*, p. 134) is too ambitious: as we have seen above, this verb means “to neglect” in many passages of Aristotle’s work, even when taken alone.

A2

And to say that they [*sc.* the forms] are paradigms and that other things participate in them is to say nothing (*κενολογεῖν*) and to give poetic metaphors. (A, 991a20–22 = M, 1079b24–26) (transl. Lawson-Tancred)

A3

For participation, as we said before, is nothing ... (we are speaking nonsense = *διὰ κενῆς λέγομεν*). (A, 992a28–29) (transl. Lawson-Tancred)

I believe the meaning of the expression *κενολογεῖν* (and of other variants which likewise refer to emptiness, such as *διὰ κενῆς λέγομεν* or even just the adverb *κενώως*) has been convincingly clarified by Mario Vegetti.¹⁶ The meaning of the expression includes two distinct sub-meanings, which correspond to logical-dialectical argumentation on the one hand and to reasoning based on metaphors on the other. Now, since both these methods are less rigorous than the scientific one, according to Aristotle, it is clear that in many cases the philosopher is using the verb *κενολογεῖν* to dismiss arguments that are based on a method of explanation unsuited to the phenomenon to be explained (as is frequently the case with Platonist arguments, in his view). Still, this does not imply that *κενολογεῖν* merely coincides with an incorrect reasoning method that must always be avoided. As again noted by Vegetti, Aristotle himself makes use of this method, when he deems it necessary to adopt more general (and hence broadly acceptable) arguments in order to defend scientific theories apparently marked "by analytical or observational deficiencies"¹⁷ (p. 45). In other words, the truthfulness of a theory here proves to be inversely proportional to its degree of preciseness: the more rigorous a theory, and the more specifically pertinent to the object one wishes to explain, the more likely it is for its truthfulness to be challenged by counterfactual experiences; the more generic a theory, and the more removed from the facts to be explained, the less likely it is for its truthfulness to be challenged. This explains why, in the first instance of the use of *κενολογεῖν* identified by Vegetti, Aristotle provides an apparently perplexing juxtaposition between the two adverbs *λογικῶς* and *κενώως* (*Eth. Eud.* 1217B22–23).¹⁸ Thus when Aris-

¹⁶ Vegetti (1993).

¹⁷ "Da insufficienze analitiche o osservative", p. 45.

¹⁸ As M. Burnyeat has observed with reference to the use of *λογικῶς* in *Metaph.* Z, 1029b13, in such cases the adverb *λογικῶς* must be explained on the basis of the third among the various meanings of the term presented by Simplicius in his commentary on *Physics* (440.19–441.12), namely as describing a method that "proceeds from generalities rather than from principles peculiar and appropriate to the subject" (Burnyeat 2011, pp. 19–20).

total employs the adverb λογικῶς in his polemic against the Platonists, what he is doing is attributing the ineffectiveness (and oddness) of their doctrines to the fact that they are based on an exclusively 'logical-generical' approach to problems.

What has been argued so far enables us to elucidate the real meaning of Aristotle's polemic against Plato and the Platonists in A₂ and A₃. The Platonists' thesis that ideas are the 'causes' of sensible things operates on the level of κενολογεῖν: in itself it might even be true (for it is too general to be refuted), but ultimately it is nothing but empty speech, ineffective from an explanatory point of view. As Aristotle notes in a passage of *De generatione animalium* quoted by Vegetti,¹⁹ in order to be more than just empty speech, arguments must set out from principles that are peculiar and appropriate to the object to be explained. Anyone wishing to elucidate the problem which Socrates tackles in the last section of the *Phaedo*, for instance, namely that of finding the causes of generation and corruption, should – according to Aristotle – consider related phenomena such as the specific privation present in given matter, the individual form it will take, the specific substrate in which the process occurs, the particular efficient cause that triggers the movement, etc. By contrast, an explanation seeking to solve the problem by invoking the forms alone will not be an effective one: for while Aristotle too may agree that the universal notion plays a role in generative processes, identifying causes at this level alone means merely indulging in empty speech, without truly explaining the nature of phenomena.²⁰

Plato and the Platonists are therefore confronted with a stringent dilemma: either they confine themselves to stating that the forms are the causes of things, in which case they remain on the level of empty and vague – albeit probably true – explanations; or they investigate this causal connection and seek to identify an intermediate set of peculiar principles between sensible things and forms, in such a way as to actually elucidate the nature and functioning of the causal connection between the two. But what do Plato and the Platonists add to the simple, empty claim that forms and principles are the causes of things? According to Aristotle, practically nothing at all. For they argue that the causal connection between ideas and sensibles takes the form either of participation or imitation. Yet they do not explain what the two terms concretely mean (cf. A₁). Hence, their addition, which apparently moves beyond κενολογεῖν along the path leading to peculiar principles, actually fails to meet this aim: as Platonists offer no further explanation, their argument always remains on the level of κενολογεῖν. The only

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁰ See *De gen. et corr.* 335b7–24. On the problems in the causes in the *Phaedo* see Trabattoni (2011), *ad loc.* and Trabattoni (2012).

difference is that a transition has been made – to again use Vegetti’s useful classification – from logical-dialectical *κενολογεῖν* to the kind of *κενολογεῖν* that expresses itself through metaphors: in their attempt to add an explanation, Plato and the Platonists find no better solution than to employ poetical metaphors, which according to Aristotle are as generic as the statements of principle they are meant to define.²¹

Once again, my interest lies not in evaluating how pertinent this criticism may be, but in examining Aristotle’s account in search of informations as factual as possible (that is, informations which can reveal what Plato and the Platonists were actually doing). If taken as it stands, Aristotle’s account informs us that in order to clarify the relation between the forms and sensible objects, Plato has spoken of paradigms and participation, but has done so by making only metaphorical use of these terms. Unlike in the case of certain pre-Socratic doctrines – such as those of Empedocles and Anaxagoras – which are criticised in the first two books of *Physics*, Aristotle here does not suggest that he is discussing a well-defined doctrine based of specific principles, albeit a fallacious one. Rather, he suggests that the view held by Plato and the Platonists cannot even be considered an explanatory theory providing specific explanations whose truthfulness is worthy of evaluation, since this view is drastically limited to the logical-dialectical, or at most metaphorical, level of *κενολογεῖν* – as is shown by the fact that the charge of engaging in ‘empty speech’ is chiefly directed precisely against these philosophers. All Aristotle can argue, then, is that they have explained nothing at all.

4. ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE, PLATO HAS NO “THEORY” OF IDEAS

That said, if our intention now is to turn to Aristotle in order to understand what Plato may have done or said, we must put the criticism of the former aside and enquire what interpretation of the ‘Platonic doctrine of the ideas’ may be compatible with the ‘facts’ we come to know through Aristotle’s account. We are thus faced with two opposite hypotheses: 1) the theory of the ideas is inevitably faulty, for it has no means of elucidating the causal relation between forms and sensible objects, even though this clarification is implied as an integral and crucial aspect of the theory; 2) because of the way in which it is formulate, the theory

²¹ See *Top.* 139b34–35: *πάν γὰρ ἀσαφές τὸ κατὰ μεταφορὰν λεγόμενον* (“all we say through metaphors is inaccurate”). Note that terms such as *σαφές*, *σαφώς*, *σαφένεια* represent precisely the explanatory quality which reasoning conducted *λογικῶς κενῶς* lacks. See F. Trabattoni (2003), esp. pp. 279–289.

of forms does not go so far as to provide a detailed explanation of the causal relation between forms and sensible objects; this does not make the doctrine faulty, however, since the clarification of this relation is not an integral and crucial aspect of the theory.

If we adopt Aristotle's perspective, we will be inclined to opt for the first hypothesis. Let us consider, for instance, what the philosopher writes in a passage of Ch. 6 of Book Η of *Metaphysics* (1054a36 ff.). Things of the genus of categories, Aristotle explains, derive their unity from themselves, and not from the fact of falling within the genus of being and the one (which – as is widely known – are not genera at all, in Aristotle's view). Some philosophers (and it is difficult not to think of Plato and the Platonists here) try to solve this difficulty – i.e. that of knowing how categories, or the supreme genera, 'are' in being and the one as within genera – as follows:

A4

And it is because of this problem that some philosophers have espoused participation, though this plunges them into difficulties (*ἀποροῦσιν*) about what the cause of participation is or indeed what participation is anyway. (Η, 1045b7–9) (transl. Lawson-Tancred)

The issue investigated by Aristotle is precisely the causal nature of Plato's forms – what we have been discussing so far. Platonists evidently believe that a thing such as quality (or quantity) is a determined unity on account of the one. They then seek to clarify the nature of this causal relation by invoking the concept of participation. However, they fail to take the next step, which is to explain what ensures the emergence of this relation of participation, and more generally what this relation consists in. Platonists, therefore, according to Aristotle, have a problem (*ἀποροῦσιν*). So are we to conclude that this is a difficulty which *Plato and the Platonists felt they needed to solve*, but failed to solve? Or is it a difficulty that they only ought to have solved *according to Aristotle*?

If we approach the Aristotelian text simply as a piece of historical evidence, the latter prospect seems far more likely. First of all – as previously noted – Aristotle shows that what he is addressing are not false solutions, but rather the lack of any solution; secondly, the very charge of only employing metaphors suggests that the Platonists themselves were aware that it was neither possible nor necessary to say more. Aristotle may not like this – indeed, he certainly does not, since it is precisely for this reason that he regards Plato and the Platonists' stance as destined to failure. But we are here delving into the field of Aristotle's motives and moving away from that of the facts he bears witness to. And the facts – as we shall now see by quoting other passages – all point in the same direction.

Let us carry on our enquiry with a rather interesting passage from *Metaph.* B (997b5–12):

A5

While presenting difficulties of various kinds, the most paradoxical thing of all is the statement that there are certain things besides those in this world, and that these are identical to sensible things except that they are eternal, while the latter are perishable. For they say that there is man himself and the horse itself and health itself, but state no more than this (*ἄλλο δ' οὐδέν*) – much like those who say that there are gods, but in human form. For these posit nothing but eternal men, whereas they posit the ideas as eternal sensibles. (own transl.)

The reference to Plato and Platonists is obvious in the light of the content of the passage, but it is also further confirmed by what Aristotle writes in the immediately preceding lines. Here Aristotle refers to what he has previously argued (probably in Book A, chs. 6 and 9) with regard to the way in which 'we' say that the forms (*τὰ εἶδη*) are causes and substances (*οὐσίαι*). The use of the first person plural, which is also common in A, leaves no doubts with regard to the identity of the philosophers alluded to here.

In the passage just quoted, Aristotle is clearly indicating what he regards – at least, as far as may be inferred here – as the most serious difficulty faced by the Platonic doctrine of forms. This difficulty springs directly from the procedure which leads Plato and the Platonists to posit the existence of the forms, and from the way in which they consequently describe them. The philosophers in question, Aristotle argues, simply posit the ideas by taking sensible things as their starting point and adding the attribute of eternity as the only feature distinguishing the former from the latter. For these philosophers claim that there exists a man *himself*, a horse *itself* and health *itself*, simply by applying an *αὐτό* to the sensible objects, *without adding anything else* (*ἄλλο δ' οὐδέν*). This attribute of eternity which Plato and the Platonists add to sensible things in order to produce the ideas is given by the very *αὐτό* ("itself") they juxtapose to the terms describing the things in question. The fact that this is indeed what Aristotle believes may be inferred from two other passages from texts in which he criticises Platonic-Academic stances:

A6

There is, they say, something which is good 'itself'. He thus adds 'itself' to the universal [i.e. common] expression. But what could this be, if not eternal and separate? (*Eth. Eud.* 1218A10–12) (own transl.)

The second passage comes from Ch. 16 of *Metaphysics* Book Z (1040b 30ff.). Aristotle here reproaches Plato and the Platonists for their failure to identify

the exact nature of the imperishable (ἀφθαρτοι) substances which exist beyond individual and sensible things (παρὰ τὰς καθ' ἕκαστα καὶ αἰσθητάς) The context is thus identical to that of A5. Aristotle does not deny the fact that there exist eternal substances, distinct from sensible ones, but rejects the idea that they may coincide with those identified by Plato and the Platonists. Why? The answer is one we have already heard:

A7

They thus posit them [*sc.* the ideas] as identical to sensible things in terms of species (for these we know) – man himself and the horse itself – by adding the expression ‘itself’ to the sensible things. (1040b32–34) (own transl.)

According to Aristotle, therefore, Plato and the Platonists believe that they can define the nature of eternal and imperishable things, and the difference between these and sensible things, simply by adding the word αὐτό to the sensible things. Most importantly, as may be inferred from A5, Aristotle claims that *this is all they do*. What this means is that in Aristotle’s view Plato’s theory of forms amounts to nothing more than an affirmation of the existence of things formally analogous to sensible things, and having the fact of being in themselves (and hence eternal) as their only additional attribute. Therefore, if we stick to Aristotle’s account, we are forced to admit that the theory of forms he attributes to the Platonists is exceedingly poor:

- 1) with regard to the nature of the ideas, all we can say is that the latter are analogous to sensible things, only with the added attributes of ‘inseity’ and eternity;
- 2) with regard to the relation between the ideas and sensible things, all we know is that the forms are the cause of things, based on a relation of imitation and participation. In other words, we have nothing more precise than a *generic* affirmation of the causality of the forms and the *poetic-metaphorical expressions* which describe this causality in terms of imitation and participation.

We may conclude this analysis, then, by stating that the thesis initially proposed, following Gonzalez’s investigations – and according to which no genuine Platonic theory of the ideas exists – finds ample support in the picture of this ‘doctrine’ as it emerges in Aristotle’s writing.

5. WHY ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A PLATONIC THEORY OF THE IDEAS

I now wish to extend my enquiry a little further, since Aristotle's testimony also provides valuable evidence concerning the reason why no genuine theory of the ideas is to be found in Plato's writing.

As previously noted, Aristotle accuses Plato and the Platonists of adopting a fallacious procedure for identifying eternal and imperishable substances. This procedure takes sensible reality as its starting point, marks out general characters within it, and then turns these into individual substances separate from sensible things. In Aristotle's view, this leads to a monstrous and contradictory outcome: for the imperishable substances admitted by Platonists, namely the ideas, are simultaneously endowed with the incompatible characters of universality and individuality/separability.²² Now, according to Aristotle it is possible to define, and hence scientifically know, only universal characters, but these are not separate substances.²³ Hence, we are faced with the two following alternatives: 1) if definition and knowledge are possible, this means that their object is a universal notion; 2) if, on the contrary, the object has an individual character, knowledge must be acquired in a different way. In the case of compounds of matter and form, knowledge will be acquired through sense-perception (*aisthesis*) if the matter is sensible, and through intuition (*noesis*) if the matter is intelligible (paradigmatic examples of these two cases are the circle of bronze and the mathematical circle). If a compound is neither perceivable by sense-perception nor by intuition, there is no way of knowing whether it exists or not, even though it is possible to know it to some extent by means of the corresponding universal notion (for instance, if I cannot currently perceive a bronze circle, I cannot know whether it exists; yet what I do know is that, if it exists, its shape corresponds to the universal notion of circle).²⁴

This distinction partly also applies to imperishable substances, insofar as some of them are compounds. For there are some imperishable substances, such as the stars, that are comprised of matter and form, and which may be grasped by means of sense-perception. Through sense-perception we can get to know some of their distinguishing features (the fact that they only change in terms of location, move according to a uniform circular motion, etc.). Yet these substances would be what they are – which is to say eternal and imperishable substances endowed

²² *Metaph.* M, 1086a32–34.

²³ Cf. *An. po.* 87b38–39; *De an.* 417b22–23; *Eth. Eud.* 1248a10; *Eth. Nic.* 1140b31; *Metaph.* B, 999a28; Γ, 1003a14–15; Z, 1039a14–21; M., 1086b5–6, 33; 1087a11.

²⁴ *Metaph.* Z 10, 1036a2–8. Cf. Frede-Patzig (1988), pp. 194–195.

with the aforementioned features – even if they were not perceived,²⁵ since their features are necessarily inherent to their nature and may be inferred through reasoning. This is an important point, since it enables Aristotle to argue that it is possible to know imperishable substances which are not compounds of matter and form, and which therefore escape both sense-perception and intuition: as it is necessary to posit the existence of these substances in order to explain sensible reality, it is possible to get to know them by tracing the reasoning that illustrates this necessity (as Aristotle does in *Phys.* 8 and *Metaph.* Δ).²⁶

In the light of this doctrine of Aristotle, it is possible to clearly identify both the shortcomings which he detects in the rival Platonic doctrine and – on the basis of these shortcomings – the features he attributes to it. If the Platonic ideas were universals, it ought to be possible to provide a definition of them. Yet this is not the case. In Ch. 15 of *Metaph.* ζ, Aristotle writes: “Nor, then, is it possible to define any form. For the idea, as they say is counted among individual things, and is separable” (1040a8–9, (own transl.). This is confirmed by what Plato and the Platonists do: for none of them ever attempts to define any idea; and if they did, Aristotle’s objections would strike them as being clearly valid.²⁷ Aristotle thus maintains that the Platonic ideas cannot be known by means of definition, both as a matter of fact (based on what the Platonists do) and as a matter of principle (for defining the ideas would in any case be impossible). The reason for this is that the Platonists describe the ideas as individual and separate things.

If the forms are such, one might be inclined to believe that they may be known through intuition (*noesis*). Aristotle’s account, however, clearly indicates that the Platonists do not even reach this conclusion. For Plato and the Platonists do not ultimately affirm the existence of the ideas as separate and individual objects by means of intellection – so that the existence of the object is proven by the fact that (and as long as) the ideas are perceived in such a way. On the contrary, Plato and the Platonists posit the existence of the ideas not by perceiving them (either through their senses or the intellect), but simply by combining the characters of sensible reality with the attributes of ‘inseity’ and eternity. The nature of this procedure may successfully be elucidated precisely by considering Aristotle’s account. Plato and the Platonists take sensible reality as their starting point and mark out its universal characters. But since these universal characters are raised to the status of individual and separate substances, the logical invariance typical of universals – for the definition of ‘man’ will not change, for instance,

²⁵ *Metaph.* ζ 16, 1040b34–a1.

²⁶ See Frede-Patzig (1988), p. 455.

²⁷ *Metaph.* ζ 15, 1040b2–4.

as the time, place and subjects it is applied to change – becomes an ontological feature of the ideas (which thus are made into imperishable and eternal things).

The procedure just illustrated accounts for most of the oddities Aristotle detects in the Platonic doctrine of forms. If the ideas are neither known by means of definition nor grasped through intuition, there would still be the third way of knowing individual substances granted by Aristotle himself, the one pertaining to imperishable things which are not compounds of form and matter (namely the method which infers the existence of given objects and some of their features from something else). Indeed, a degree of similarity is to be found between the two ways of reasoning. Just as Aristotle establishes the existence of the unmoved mover(s), and defines its/their features, through an inferential procedure which sets out from the need to explain some aspects of sensible reality (the eternity of motion and time), in the same way Plato infers the existence of the ideas, and the features they must have, by speculating on some empirical data, which could not be explained without invoking causes of that sort.²⁸ In both cases, moreover, the features of the object inferred that may actually be known are strictly dependent upon the features of the facts on which the inference is based: for if I infer the need for x on the basis of the need to find a sufficient cause to explain y, I will be able to say about x anything which is necessary in order for x to be the sufficient cause of y – and nothing more than that.

It is easy to see, however, that this method (which we may describe as "metaphysical inference") leads Aristotle and Plato to attain two very different results. While the unmoved mover, just like the forms, is not directly intuited, but is rather inferred through reasoning which sets out from the sensible, according to Aristotle the phenomenon to be explained can qualify the unmoved mover by assigning it a number of features: for it must be a mover, it must be unmoved (in order to account for eternal motion), it must be an act, and it must consist in thought (since thought is the only activity accomplished without matter). On the contrary, since Plato's ideas are only inferred from the fact that not all reality can be partial and transitory, they only differ from sensible things insofar as they possess the predicates of 'inseity' and eternity (whereas beautiful things are always only temporarily and partially beautiful, the idea of beauty must always be beautiful and cannot be anything other than beautiful). Hence, the only way to set down a theory of forms connected to a specific field of enquiry is to draw something specific and positive from the above predicates.

²⁸ See ch. 11. It is interesting to note that in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*, Proclus explicitly draws this analogy, which he resorts to in order to accuse Aristotle himself of duplicating the reality he wishes to explain (*In Parm.* 929.18–28).

But as Aristotle scathingly remarks further on in A6, “something which is white for many days is in no respects whiter than a thing which is only white for a day (1218a12–13).” Hence, a person studying the idea of whiteness (= eternal whiteness) is studying exactly the same object as the person who is studying the perceptible colour white (= transitory whiteness). The fact that the ideas are in themselves and eternal, then, does not open up any specifically metaphysical field of investigation as an alternative to research focusing on the physical world: in Aristotelian terms, the metaphysical entities which Plato speaks of do are not enough to identify a ‘first philosophy’ different from and superior to ‘second philosophy’.

It is precisely for the above reasons that, according to Aristotle himself, the Platonic ‘doctrine’ of the ideas is exceedingly poor. For what field of enquiry is open to the particular kind of knowledge which has the forms as its object? Nothing may be achieved through definition, since the ideas are individual and separate, nor through intuition, since the ideas are not intuited, but rather inferred. As for inference, its outcome is limited to the mere affirmation of the existence of entities which serve as a perfect and eternal embodiment of the very same characters that are to be found in an imperfect and intermittent form within sensible reality. Not without reason, then, Aristotle can argue that the procedure adopted by the Platonists resembles that of people who affirm the existence of the gods but believe they have human forms (see A 5). Clearly, these people have no real knowledge of what the gods are, but merely infer their nature by changing the quantity of the human characteristics known to them (as suggested by the expression for “these we know” in A 7). Likewise, Plato and the Platonists infer the nature of the ideas by changing the quantity of sensible determinations. So just as the former individuals, for instance, set out from the fact that men are wise in order to then claim that the gods are omniscient, the latter set out from the fact that in the sensible world there are temporarily beautiful things in order to then claim that the idea of beauty is eternal and imperishable beauty. And just as anthropomorphism cannot provide adequate ground for the acquisition of theological knowledge, likewise the Platonic notion of the ideas fails to establish itself as a genuine doctrine.

6. FROM PLATO’S POINT OF VIEW: PLATO’S CRITICISM OF ARISTOTLE

Switching now from Aristotle’s side to that of Plato, we may note that the Aristotelian representation of the ‘facts’ pertaining to the Platonic ‘doctrine’ of the ideas is essentially faithful and correct. First of all, the use of the pronoun *αὐτό* and of related expressions as a way of qualifying the ideas is well attested in Plato’s writing. Even the connection which Aristotle draws between

this pronoun and the attributes of imperishability and eternity (which in A 6 is explicitly presented as Aristotle's own inference) fully corresponds to the usual way in which Plato speaks of the ideas. According to Plato, the ideas are indeed things which "are ever the same and in the same state" (ὡσαύτως αἰεὶ ἔχει κατὰ ταυτά).²⁹

Moreover, it is also true that Plato *adds nothing more* to this, and in particular that he does not attempt to clearly elucidate the nature of the causal relation between the ideas and things. Finally, Aristotle also correctly identifies the reason why Plato cannot add anything more to the few things he states with regard to the forms and the way they operate, namely: the fact that according to Plato the ideas can be known neither by means of definition nor by means of intuition,³⁰ but only by means of an inference which is too simple and generic to open up any proper field of enquiry.

If this is the case, Platonists will thus be forced to claim λογικῶς καὶ κενῶς that in order to explain sensible reality it is necessary to posit the existence of causes such as the ideas (i.e. things that are absolutely x, y, z, etc.), since a more detailed description of this causal relation would require *direct* and *independent* knowledge both of the effect (which we have: cf. again "for these we know" in A7) and of the cause (which instead is not available). With regard to the poetic metaphors as participation and imitation, here too it is easy to understand not only why Plato believes it is necessary to resort to concepts of this sort, but also why he believes that any further specification is impossible. The claim that things participate in the ideas is a metaphor for the fact that the causal relation between the ideas and things is of a genuinely ontological nature;³¹ and the claim that they are imitations of the ideas is a poetic image expressing the fact that this causal connection depends on the analogy of attribution which exists between cause

²⁹ *Phaed.* 78d2–3. Similar expressions frequently occur in *Phaed.* 78c–80b. Phrases of this kind, however, are often used – positively to describe intelligible reality and negatively to describe sensible reality – in other dialogues as well. See *Crat.* 439e, *Soph.* 248a, 252a, *Polit.* 269d, *Phil.* 59c, *Resp.* 479a, 484b, *Tim.* 29a.

³⁰ Actually, this might be the only essential element of Plato's perspective which Aristotle overlooks. For Plato's dialogues might be taken to suggest that according to the philosopher genuine knowledge of the forms takes precisely the form of intellectual intuition, although Plato usually confines the intuitive vision of the ideas to the place beyond heaven and the time in which the soul is disembodied (*Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*), or envisages this vision as the high point in a process of initiation from which Socrates himself is significantly excluded (*Symp.* 210a). Clearly, Aristotle believed that this metaphysical realism was not to be taken seriously, or at any rate that it was marred by the substantial unreliability of mythical-metaphorical procedures.

³¹ The hypothesis according to which the ideas only exist in thought is explicitly ruled out by Parmenides in the dialogue named after him (132b–133a).

and caused: if it is necessary to argue that sensible beauty is caused by something else, then the latter must possess the attribute of which it is the cause to a perfect degree (self-predication).

According to both Aristotle and Plato, then, the ‘doctrine’ of the ideas ultimately boils down to a few generic claims, which are only corrected by obscure poetic metaphors. Still, this should not be taken to suggest that Plato’s philosophical project is a failure (or that Aristotle’s criticism of Plato is to be regarded as pertinent *from Plato’s own point of view*). Nor should we believe, by contrast, that Plato’s philosophy may only be defended by proving that Aristotle’s criticism is unjustified, and by showing in what way – and in what texts – Plato addresses problems that according to Aristotle he has left unsolved. For to do so means defending Plato’s position by setting it squarely within the framework of Aristotle’s philosophical paradigm, of the specific questions he raised, and of the kind of solutions he deemed satisfactory. According to Bonitz, for instance, Aristotle’s observation in *Metaph.* 987b14 that Plato never elucidated the link of participation is unfair, as Plato discusses participation in the *Parmenides* and causality in the *Timaeus*. Bonitz then concludes that Aristotle has all the right to regard Plato’s treatment of these issues as unadequate, but cannot claim that Plato simply neglected them.³² Similar remarks are formulated by Giovanni Reale, who indeed entitles the paragraph with his commentary on 987b9–14 “An unwarranted stance of Aristotle’s vis-à-vis Plato”: Reale notes that Plato discusses not just participation, but also presence and commonality (in the *Phaedo*), and that he adopts the notion of idea as a paradigm possessing an ontological normativeness which escapes Aristotle. Finally, like Bonitz, Reale points out that Aristotle completely overlooks the “mediating function of the demiurge”.³³

Actually, the reference to the *Parmenides* does not seem a pertinent one, since while it is clear that in this dialogue problems connected to participation and the relation between sensibles and ideas are addressed, it is just as clear that these problems are not solved. As already stated, I agree with Gonzalez that this is an intentional omission; but even if it were not, Aristotle would *de facto* be right in arguing that the discussion provided in the *Parmenides* does not elucidate any of the difficulties raised by him. As concerns the notions of presence and commonality, moreover, and even more so the paradigmatic function of the forms, the points made by Reale merely confirm Aristotle’s argument: from Aristotle’s perspective, what we have here are only empty (and/or metaphorical) words, at least if they are not accompanied by *σάφειστεραι* explanations, which

³² Bonitz (1848), p. 91.

³³ Reale (1993), pp. 58–59.

is to say explanations directly pertaining to the phenomena to be explained and capable of elucidating the concrete functioning of the causal connection investigated.

All this clearly presupposes a purely Aristotelian notion of philosophy, envisaged primarily as the science of causality, as well as an equally Aristotelian representation of causes and causal explanations. In the light of these, it is not enough to state that the forms are present in things, for instance: for one must also explain just in what way they can be present in them. It is not enough to argue that the forms are paradigms: one must also clarify what the model-copy relation between ideal reality and sensible reality consists in exactly. In other words, Aristotle is quite right to argue that the notions Plato resorts to are confined to a general and metaphorical level, and not further explicated in a way more closely pertaining to phenomena – and hence *σαφέστερον* – which he deemed essential in order to develop a genuine theory of causes. Much the same can be said about the demiurge. I believe that Cherniss offers a correct reading when he suggests that Aristotle did not regard this notion as a serious one from a philosophical perspective (as is shown by the fact that even in *Λ*, which contains references to the *Timaeus*, Aristotle regards as still open the question of what the cause of participation may be):³⁴ not without good reason, Aristotle must have thought that the action of the demiurge represents an explanation as unscientific and unphilosophical, as the one offered by individuals who believe that the first pages of *Genesis* provide a proper scientific or philosophical explanation for the constitution of the universe.

I wish to stress once more that these observations should not be seen as detrimental to Plato's philosophy, since there is no reason to believe that Plato harboured a conception of philosophy identical to that of Aristotle. On the contrary, it would be far more correct to maintain that Plato made a conscious choice to embrace metaphysics not as a rigorous science of causes or a broad explanation of their functioning, but rather as a discipline consisting in the formulation of general, metaphorical (or even mythical) statements (see for instance, on support of this hypothesis, *Phaedo* 100d5–8, where Socrates clearly shows no interest for a detailed explanations of the relationship between ideas and sensible things³⁵). This choice on Plato's part would certainly agree with his idea of the nature and purpose of philosophy: for if the aim of philosophy

³⁴ Cherniss (1962), p. 378, n. 294.

³⁵ "Nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of (*κοινωνία*), or the sharing in (*παρουσία*), or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful".

is chiefly the Socratic one of increasingly elucidating what goodness, justice and beauty in general consist in, then it is essential to argue that in principle (and hence generally) the absolute and general characters of goodness, justice and beauty truly exist and determine the nature of reality (in a way that is best described through metaphorical expressions). For if these characters did not exist, the minimum prerequisites for investigation would be lacking (and thus we would have to adhere to Protagorean relativism).

Once it has been established that the forms exist, Platonic philosophy – just as Aristotle argues – will no longer have as its object things marked by determinations that differ from those of sensible things; rather, it will investigate justice, beauty and goodness as we experience them. The ‘theory’ of the ideas, however, has the decisive effect of making the philosophical investigation of experience completely different from the investigation undertaken by people who merely seek to identify the different, partial and transient aspects of empirical reality.³⁶ For Plato’s investigation has the aim of attaining an increasing degree of generality, based on confidence of the fact that this endeavour is possible precisely because metaphysical inference ensures that absolute determinations (the forms) truly exist and are the causes of relative determinations.

Were we to accept this ‘Platonic’ conception of philosophy, we might even argue that in an ideal eternal present the two philosophers switch roles. Platonic thought may be seen as *ante-litteram* criticism of the Aristotelian project – which can hardly be regarded as having been accomplished, either by Aristotle or by later philosophers – of shifting metaphysics from the field of generic statements, metaphorical explanations and plausible myths to that of genuine science (to the point of turning this project into the chief aim of philosophy). What proves most revealing here is the history of ancient Platonism from Antiochus to Plotinus and the late Neoplatonists, who often pursued the aim of developing a non-metaphorical Platonic metaphysics, either by attempting to elucidate the relation of participation between the ideas and things or by providing a realist interpretation of the myth of the *Timaeus*. Plato, of course, did not regard the *Timaeus* as a myth in the disparaging sense of the term: a metaphorical interpretation of the narrative of the *Timaeus* does not imply (for instance) that the demiurge does not exist; rather, it implies that this figure serves as a metaphorical and generic representation of the divine and providential rule which ensures the order of the cosmos. By contrast, it would be utterly un-Platonic to claim that this principle functions as a cause which meets Aristotle’s ‘scientific’ requirements. With only a few exceptions (e.g. Atticus), the Platonist tradition has largely pursued the above

³⁶ Such are the ‘philodoxes’ whom Socrates talks about in the final section of Book 5 of the *Republic*. See Ch. 8.

task, which may be interesting perhaps from a general theoretical perspective, but is ineffective and useless from the point of view of Platonic exegesis (which is ultimately what the Platonists were concerned with).

The greatest efforts in this direction were made by Plotinus, who adopted a whole array of different strategies in the attempt to solve the metaphysical problems which Plato had left ἐν κοινῷ ζήτησιν – such as the issue of participation and the presence of the ideas within sensible reality (e.g. VI, 4–5) – with the aim of making up for the omissions we find in the *Parmenides* and countering Aristotelian objections. Thus in the attempt to defend Plato against Aristotle's attacks, many ancient Platonists ultimately provided a picture of Plato's philosophy which is utterly twisted by Aristotle's theoretical and methodological assumptions and the kind of questions he regarded as crucial.³⁷

The above endeavour led both Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists to develop philosophies that are essentially different from that of Plato. But, of course, the issue of the faithfulness of these philosophers to their master proves largely irrelevant to an evaluation of their doctrines. By contrast, faithfulness to Plato ought to be seen as an essential prerequisite for contemporary historians, whose only aim is to understand Plato's philosophy. Consequently, historians ought to do away with the kind of Aristotelian assumptions that are so often systematically adopted, and stop regarding the questions which Aristotle considered crucial as being self-evidently relevant according to a Platonic perspective as well.

³⁷ I have briefly outlined the "Aristotelian" drift of Plotinus' "Platonic" metaphysics in Trabattoni (2013 bis).

CHAPTER 13
THE UNITY OF VIRTUE, SELF-PREDICATION
AND THE “THIRD MAN” IN *PROTAGORAS* 329E–332A

This section of the *Protagoras* has generally been studied from two different points of view. Those chiefly investigating the problem of the unity of virtue will connect it to the remaining section of the *Protagoras* and to the topics of Socratic-Platonic ethics common to the dialogues from the first period. Those focusing on the fact that we find here some rather exemplary instances of so-called self-predication will instead approach these passages in order to examine the epistemological problems related to the theory of ideas (in particular the *vexata quaestio* of the “third man”). Without wishing to downplay the significance of these enquiries, which are especially useful for the in-depth analysis of certain general problems in Plato’s philosophy, I believe that in order to meet the more limited goal of grasping what Plato wished to claim when writing these pages, the two issues cannot be separated. The sections of the *Protagoras* in which Socrates makes self-predicative statements, in particular, can only fully be understood if these are not read in the light of contemporary logic, but rather as premises that Socrates believes are useful to dispel Protagoras’ disagreement concerning the unity of virtue.

1. THE UNITY OF VIRTUE

As soon as Protagoras has ended his lengthy speech – both mythical and dialectic – in favour of the teachability of virtue, Socrates changes the subject in an apparently abrupt manner by asking the sophist whether the various virtues should be envisaged as different parts of a single whole, or as names all referring to the same thing (329c–d). This change may be explained in various ways.¹ It is essential, however, not to feed the problem by invoking abstract criteria for literary-thematic unity. Indeed, it is easy to note that an invitation for Socrates to pose the above question had come from Protagoras himself, when he had claimed that virtue exists as a single element (324d–325a). In his answer, Socrates

¹ See e.g. Hemmenway (1996). In his presentation of the myth, Protagoras had shown himself to believe – albeit implicitly – in the existence of two kinds of virtue: a “demotic” virtue, typical of democracy and consisting in obeying the laws; and an “elitist” virtue, analogous to Callicles’ and consisting in the ability to hold sway over the crowd – a virtue ultimately coinciding with the “wares” Protagoras would sell his clients. This is why Socrates wishes to point out that virtue is a single whole.

states that he only wishes to clarify a small doubt (329b6), one related precisely to the fact that Protagoras himself in his speech had talked of the various virtues as if they were a single thing. It is necessary to conclude, therefore, that the new investigation Socrates embarks upon entirely follows from what came before, and that Socrates' behaviour seems completely plausible and natural. Rather, the question is to establish what, from the author's perspective, the theoretical link may be between the teachability of virtue and its unity. This link does not appear to be at all difficult to pin down; in a way, it represents one of the recurring motifs in the exegetical tradition surrounding the *Protagoras*: virtue must be teachable if it is the science of good and evil, and a science of this sort cannot but be a single whole.

Protagoras sticks to the first horn of the dilemma: there is only one virtue, but comprised of many parts. Socrates then asks him – to put it in Aristotle's terms – whether the various virtues are homoeomerous (like gold fragments) or non-homoeomerous (like the various parts of a face) with respect to the single general virtue. Protagoras replies that they seem to him to be non-homoeomerous; he then immediately explains that he does not believe it is necessary for someone who possesses at least one virtue to possess all of them. In fact, he adds, there are some people who are brave but unjust, and others who are just but not wise (329e).

This first exchange is crucial in order to understand the kind of operation Plato is carrying out in this section of the dialogue, as well as his doctrine of virtue more generally. In the sections in which Socrates questions Protagoras by comparing different kinds of virtue, such as bravery, holiness, justice, knowledge and wisdom, his explicit intention is to show the inconsistency of the distinctions drawn by the sophist. This would show that Plato accepts the Socratic doctrine of the unity of virtue. Such conclusion, however, jars with the *Republic*, which seems to suggest that at least four virtues exist according to Plato: knowledge, bravery, temperance and justice.²

Now, what proves crucial in order to settle the issue is precisely the difference between homoeomerous and non-homoeomerous parts proposed in *Prot.* 329d–e. For if the various virtues are homoeomerous parts of the same general virtue, this means that they are pieces of the same thing: in this case, while distinct virtues still exist, it is nonetheless necessary to conclude that virtue as such is a single whole, since these difference do not affect its essence. Let us suppose, for example, that virtue may be defined as “the knowledge of good and evil”:

² See too Vlastos (1972): in the light of what may be drawn from “definitional” dialogues such as the *Euthyphro*, Vlastos finds it very surprising that Socrates might accept the reduction of all virtues to a single one.

bravery will be a homoeomerous "piece" of this substance and will differentiate itself from the other virtues through some non-essential characteristics. Bravery will thus mean *the knowledge of good and evil* in relation to what ought to be feared and what not, just as temperance will mean *the knowledge of good and evil* in relation to what desires ought to be satisfied. Consequently, while the various virtues are all different, a single and identical essence of virtue must exist in all of them (differences are to be found between separate gold fragments, yet none of these is essential, since the fragments all share an identical substance).³ This is not the case with non-homoeomerous parts, which are similar to the various parts of a face, where each part has its own function (330a4: *δύναμιν ἰδίαν*), irreducible to that of others. Socrates here mentions the eye and the ear, and it is no coincidence perhaps that this is the same metaphor Gorgias uses to illustrate the unavoidable qualitative difference between words and things.⁴

Protagoras, then, is not reluctant to acknowledge the unity of virtue, but assigns this unity a weak meaning, which is emphasised by the very fact that he regards the various virtues as non-homoeomerous parts of the whole. For Plato, however, this weak way of understanding the one-many relation creates insurmountable problems on both the ethical level and the logical one (after all, the two levels are closely connected).

In order to deny that the various virtues might be homoeomerous parts of a whole, Protagoras shifts the debate onto a level Socrates had not yet touched upon. He supposes that it is possible to verify the alleged homoeomery of virtues on the basis of the behaviour of the people possessing them. Particularly significant is one of the two examples he provides in 329e5–6: that it possible to be brave without being just. Bravery is not just a randomly chosen example, as is shown by the final section of the dialogue, in which Protagoras sets up his ultimate line of defence around bravery. Naturally, it must be supposed here that what lies behind the exchange between Socrates and Protagoras is the sophisticated plan of the author, who structures the dialogue in such a way as to bring up the points he wishes to draw his reader's attention to. The point stressed in this case is the common opinion – as widespread at the time as it is now – that it is possible to be brave without being wise, just, honest, and so on. Indeed, negative moral judgements about bloody crimes often come with an acknowledgement of the

³ I believe the example of gold is less problematic than Vlastos would have it (see e.g. 1972, pp. 439–440). If for instance we take two gold objects of different shapes, the criterion for differentiation is good enough to draw an analogy between these different gold objects and the different virtues, since in both cases we find a common substance.

⁴ Cf. Sext. Emp., *adv. math.* 7.83–87 (= 82 B3 D.-K.); Ps. Artist., *de Mel., Xen. et Gorg.* 980a–b (= 82 B3^a D.-K.).

bravery of the people who committed them. Plato's aim is to show that a view of this sort, which is clearly shared by Protagoras himself, betrays a fundamental ignorance regarding the nature of virtue. Anyone who believes that an unjust man can also be brave (i.e. can possess the virtue of bravery) clearly has no correct notion of either bravery or virtue (for he calls bravery something which has nothing to do with this virtue).

In practice, this error is brought to light by evaluating judgements that are concretely formulated with regard to men and their actions. On the theoretical level, the error stems from a fallacious application of the one-many relation to the case of virtue. Plato's aim – here as elsewhere – is to redefine common ethical concepts from within by emphasising those dialectical contradictions that are not perceived when these concepts are used in a careless or superficial manner, but which in fact do not withstand scrutiny. If a person believes that it is possible to be unjust but brave, he or she has not inferred the correct consequences from the fact that virtue – as Protagoras himself had claimed in his speech (324d–325a) – is a unity. The unity of non-homoeomerous parts which Protagoras is now speaking of is only nominal, since it does not reveal any one feature shared by the various parts. If, turning to Aristotelian biology, we argue for instance that the heart and lungs are non-homoeomerous parts of the human body, what this means is that the unity of the body only has a connective function, without there being any relation of similarity, any common predicate, between these organs in themselves, or between these organs and the body. The only common predicate, in this case, will be the fact that both organs are “parts of the body”, but clearly this is not enough in itself to make the one-many relation here a relation of participation. Virtue consists in the unity of its parts, such as bravery and justice, because these parts *are* virtues, whereas the human body does not consist in the unity of its organs in the same sense (for the lungs and heart are *not* human bodies).

2. THE UNITY OF MEANING AS A MATTER OF EXPERIENCE

The stance Protagoras takes in 329e thus represents a form of nominalism. Plato's operation consists in showing that this nominalism is untenable because it conflicts with other practical and theoretical requirements acknowledged by Protagoras himself. Nominalism stems from a practical observation, namely the range of previously posited assumptions according to which it is possible to be unjust and brave at the same time. Indeed, it is precisely in order to preserve and justify this verdict that Protagoras affirms the non-homoeomerous unity of virtue. According to Plato, however, this reasoning must be reversed. The opinion according to which it is possible to be both unjust and brave is a starting point that was assumed without any justification and which stems from a kind

of pre-categorical intuition of what it means to be brave. As the *Laches* explains in detail (192b–193c), bravery would appear to be a rather separate matter, since it seems to be the least intellectual of all virtues: indeed, it seems to stand in jarring contrast to knowledge (as illustrated by the case of the technicians, who will appear the less brave the more their actions are made safe by their expertise). This impression is reversed by Socrates in the final section of the *Protagoras*. What it is important to note here is the fact that the flaw is a structural one. If Protagoras acknowledges that virtue is a single element, and that bravery and justice are virtues, this means he acknowledges that the latter are to be understood as homoeomerous parts of virtue in general. The conclusion this leads to is that it is not possible to be both brave and unjust; hence Protagoras' implicit starting point turns into a point of arrival, but obviously with the reverse implication: rather than arguing that the various virtues are non-homoeomerous parts of virtue in general since it is possible to be brave without being just, one must argue that it is impossible to be both brave and just since bravery and justice are homoeomerous parts of virtue in general (thus on the basis of this outcome it will be necessary to redefine the *real* nature of bravery and justice).

It might seem that the difference between Protagoras' reasoning and Plato's consists in the fact that the former is based on experience, whereas the latter is deductive. Actually, this is not so at all. Plato's reasoning is also based on experience, only in the form of linguistic-conceptual evidence. Since men, including Protagoras, believe that there is such a thing as virtue in general, they are also forced to admit that one cannot be unjust and brave at the same time. The difference, therefore, lies in the fact that Protagoras' position, which here stands for common opinion, trusts experience even in its contradictory aspects and does not worry about bringing contrasting pieces of evidence into order by distinguishing between judgments that stem from actual facts and judgments that derive from apparent, misleading or ill-founded facts. Protagoras, then, plays the classic role reserved to Socrates' interlocutors, who believe that they know what they in fact do not. Socrates' position, on the contrary, is immune from this shortcoming. The philosopher does not take his lead from any predetermined and ill-founded conception of virtue – from any implicit assumption or explicitly stated definition. Socrates rather sets out from the minimum evidence, according to which justice and bravery are virtues.

As always, the mechanism here through which Plato's philosophy operates is not the intuitive or propositional knowledge of ideas, but the unity and identity of the universal, which sets the stage for enquiry and leads to a progressive increase in knowledge. This is the reason why Plato's dialogues so often engage in an attempt to identify the universal as a unitary entity, while hardly seeking to provide a more detailed picture of it through a definition. Let us take, for

instance, the opening pages of the *Meno*, which discuss precisely virtue.⁵ The Gorgian description of virtue provided by Meno is not directed towards any unitary perspective, but gives rise to a *σμένοος ἀρετῶν* (72a7). Still, this plurality cannot be claimed to be original. This cannot be claimed not because through some sort of meta-empirical procedure a kind of knowledge of the idea of virtue is attainable capable of refuting Gorgias' conformist empiricism (according to which no synthesis can be made of all the various virtues – those of women, men, children, slaves, free men, etc.). Rather, this is not possible because a synthesis already takes place on the empirical level the moment all bees, say, and all virtues are referred to, by using the same term, as “bees” and “virtues”.⁶ An original unity must therefore exist that brings together what all bees and all virtues have in common, and in relation to which all bees and all virtues can only be homoeomerous parts. This does not mean that all bees and all virtues are the same, but that there must be at least one aspect (the fact of being a bee or a virtue) with respect to which they are the same. Indeed, anyone who answers the question “what is virtue?”, whatever his answer may be, is bound to refer to this unity of meaning (or *eidōs*: 72c7) that is already implicit in the fact that the question makes sense. The defeat of nominalism, in other words, already takes place on the level of experience, since a person who sets off from nominalist assumptions cannot avoid describing experience in a self-contradictory way. No matter how concrete and rich in content his knowledge of reality may appear (let us think of the Gorgian description of the various virtues again), this richness will turn out to be only apparent, since it can put up no resistance against *elenchos*, which is always capable of reducing it to nothing by exposing its intrinsic contradictions (as in the case of Socratic maieutics). By contrast, however poor the knowledge may be of someone who is only sure about the unity of the universal, this knowledge will not only resist any attempt to refute it, but will also serve as a first step along the path leading to the (re)establishment of knowledge.

⁵ See Brancacci (2002).

⁶ By this I do not mean to say that according to Plato the presence of a common name is enough to prove the existence of a corresponding idea. Even without invoking Aristotle's testimony, the possibility of an endless proliferation of ideas is denied by Plato himself in a famous passage of the *Statesman* (262a–264b). The same passage suggests that an idea must be posited each time a name positively stands for a truly common quality (i.e. an *eidōs* and not simply a “part” of a greater whole), as is indeed the case in the examples of the bee and of virtue.

3. THE QUESTIONS OF EXISTENCE AND THE "REFUTATION" OF PROTAGORAS

Protagoras' claims regarding the weakness of the relation between general virtue and particular virtues enable Socrates to conclude that in his interlocutor's opinion science, justice, bravery, temperance and holiness are essentially different things (330b3–6). Socrates then moves on to examine these virtues one by one, starting from justice. First of all, he asks (330c1):

ἢ δικαιοσύνη πράγμα τί ἐστὶν ἢ οὐδέν πρᾶγμα;
Is justice a thing or not a thing?

He then imagines someone jointly questioning him and Protagoras as follows (330c3–5):

Ὡ Πρωταγόρα τε καὶ Σώκратης, εἶπετον δὴ μοι, τοῦτο τὸ πρᾶγμα ὃ ὠνομάσατε ἄρτι, ἢ δικαιοσύνη, αὐτὸ τοῦτο δίκαιον ἔστι ἢ ἄδικον;
Protagoras and Socrates, tell me about this thing you just named, justice. Is it itself just or not just?

Protagoras answers affirmatively, so that Socrates can continue with another question (330c7–8):

Ἔστιν ἄρα τοιοῦτον ἢ δικαιοσύνη οἷον δίκαιον εἶναι ...
Justice is the sort of thing that is just.

Immediately afterwards, the same set of questions is applied to holiness (330d1–e2). It consists of two crucial points:

- 1) a question along the lines of "does something such as x exist or not?"
- 2) a question that leads to self-predication, along the lines of "does x have the character of x-ness or not?"

Let us start by examining question 1). It belongs to a specific kind of Socratic question, which we shall call the "question of existence".⁷ Socrates is generally said to begin his enquiries, at least conceptually, with a question introduced by the classic proposition *τί ἐστὶ* ("what is": e.g. *Eutyp'h.* 11b4–5: *ἀλλ' εἰπέ ... τί*

⁷ See chapter 4, p. 53 and ch. 11, pp. 201–204.

ἔστιν τὸ τε ὅσιον καὶ τὸ ἀνόσιον; “tell me what the pious and the impious are”).⁸ The passages just quoted show, however, that Socrates often begins his enquiry with an even more radical question, asking not “what is x?” but “does x exist?” or “does something along the lines of x exist?”⁹ According to the two-fold division of Socratic questions proposed by G. Santas,¹⁰ what distinguishes these two questions is the fact that whereas the former is a “which question”, the latter is a “whether question”, i.e. a question which the interlocutor must answer with either a yes or no. Still, it is a rather unique kind of whether question: for in this case it is not a matter of assigning a subject a given predicate or not, but of establishing whether the thing discussed exists.

The importance of questions of this kind, which in my view have not been given enough relevance by scholars,¹¹ becomes evident in the light of what has been argued above. But it becomes even clearer if we examine Socrates’ argument as a whole.

Once it has been established that justice is just and holiness is holy, on the basis of the irreducible differences between virtues acknowledged by Protagoras, justice will not be such as to be a holy thing (and hence will be impious) and holiness will not be such as to be a just thing (and hence will be unjust). But whereas this conclusion strikes Socrates as absurd, Protagoras observes that it is not: for while it is true that certain similarities exist between holiness and justice, Socrates is wrong to believe that even a small resemblance is enough to establish the identity of two different things. Shortly afterwards, the discussion is cut off abruptly, as Socrates notes that his interlocutor is ill-disposed towards the subject (330e–332a).

When examining Socrates’ argument, critics have often stressed the logical error it entails, for it assumes that something non-just or non-holy must *ipso facto* be un-just or im-pious (whereas it may well be neither just nor unjust, neither pious nor impious).¹² Actually, this aspect of the matter is neither interesting

⁸ See for instance Giannantoni (1995), esp. p. 4.

⁹ As I have already argued elsewhere (Trabattoni 1996), I do not believe that those cases in which the question of existence is introduced by expressions such as λέγεις or καλεῖς reflect the way in which the question was formulated by the historical Socrates (who would be raising questions in order to learn about his interlocutor’s opinions) and that they stand in contrast to the use of Socratic questioning made by Plato (who would be raising questions in order to launch an enquiry about the essence of something). Rather, I believe that Plato’s investigation also proceeds through the testing and comparing of opinions. See too Trabattoni (1998), pp. 119–138.

¹⁰ Santas (1979).

¹¹ The most recent up-to-date publication on the matter I know is Longo (2000).

¹² See e.g. Vlastos (1972), pp. 441–442; Capra (2001), p. 181.

nor useful in order to understand the passage in question. Socrates' argument also works if we ignore the transition from non-just to unjust, from non-holy to impious. Plato, who as always is more concerned here with the rhetorical effects achieved than the overall logical correctness, only adds this passage in order to make his words more persuasive. But in order to reveal how absurd Protagoras' view is, all he needs to do is show that according to the latter's own claims (330e–331a) it cannot be argued that a just action is also holy, or that a holy action is also just. This in itself is shocking to common sense and thus raises some difficulties for Protagoras.

Naturally, common sense is not enough for Plato. According to common sense, for instance, it is possible to be brave without being either wise or just, and this is not an acceptable view at all.¹³ Indeed, if common sense were all there is, Protagoras' shrewd defence might work. Protagoras answers by saying that different things, including those that appear to be the opposite of one another, such as white and black, can in some ways be alike, proving similar to quantitatively variable degrees. In such a way, a multitude of similarities and differences emerge that may be evaluated only on an individual basis and on an empirical level, something which ensures a large variety of relations. We might argue, for instance, that holiness resembles justice, but not in such a way that there is no difference between the two; and that bravery resembles justice even less, thus making it possible to be both brave and unjust.

The reason why Protagoras' defence does not work is, indeed, a theoretical one. One cannot envisage the universe of similarities and dissimilarities as a differentiated and chaotic multiplicity, because an underlying order exists that makes it possible for there to be similarities and dissimilarities in the first place. Again, Protagoras illustrates the uncritical acceptance of any experience, the inability to comprehend that the analysis of experience is in itself capable of establishing fixed points of reference and of distinguishing opinions that can be accepted from others that must be rejected. If *a* resembles *b* to the degree that it is possible to say that predicate *x* is applicable to both, this means that the similarity/dissimilarity relation between *a* and *b* cannot be reduced to an empirical comparison between two individual entities, and that it may only be understood from the point of view of the universal. In particular, one must argue that there exists a universal predicate *x* which is applicable to both *a* and *b*, and

¹³ The hypothesis that Protagoras is acting as a spokesman for common sense in the dialogue is further supported by the fact that in the final section he insists on rejecting the principle of the unity of virtue in the case of bravery, which is to say the very virtue that according to the common way of thinking would appear to be the least related to all others.

identical to both. Consequently, claiming that *a* and *b* are similar and dissimilar to a quantitatively variable degree will be neither enough nor accurate; rather, one must argue that they are qualitatively (and hence totally) dissimilar with regard to predicates *y, z ... n*, but qualitatively (and hence totally) similar with regard to predicate *x*. As may be read in a passage from the *Phaedo* (93a14–b2), each soul is a soul in the same way as all other souls (which nonetheless differ in other respects). The same also applies to virtues, which may differ in various respects, but must be absolutely identical insofar as they are all virtues (Cf. *Meno*, 72c–d).

This leads us back to the conflict between “universalism” and nominalism: either virtue is nothing but a word, in which case the various virtues are utterly different objects that are brought together only on the basis of linguistic conventions (in Aristotelian terms, bravery and justice are virtues only homonymously); or virtue as such exists, in which case there must be something universal and identical whereby the same concept may be applied to things differing in many respects (in Aristotelian terms, bravery and justice are virtues synonymously). It is once again worth noting that this conclusion is reached without having yet posed the question “what is virtue?” (or indeed having come up with an answer to it), but only by speculating on the one-many relation, based on the shared understanding that there *exists such a thing as virtue* – an assumption Socrates’ interlocutors never seriously question.

This leads us to the question of existence and the reason why it is so important. When in the passage quoted above (330b6–c2) Socrates asks Protagoras whether justice is something or nothing, what he is really asking is whether or not Protagoras believes in the existence of universals. The sophist’s affirmative answer, therefore, is in itself incompatible with his nominalism and relativism. In particular, it should prevent Protagoras from approaching the issue of similarities in the empirical, quantitative and individualistic manner in which he addresses it in 331d1–e4. As shown by the fact that he again resorts to the example of the face, Protagoras is incapable or unwilling to distinguish between the unity of homoeomerous parts and the unity of non-homoeomerous parts. A face does not exist as a *single* object in the same way as something such as justice (or virtue) exists as a *single* object: for whereas a face exists as a *single* thing despite being particular, justice can only exist as a *single* thing if it is something universal; indeed, affirming that justice is a *πρᾶγμα τί* is tantamount to affirming the existence of justice as a universal. In other words, in order to defend himself adequately, Protagoras should argue that unitary things such as justice, holiness and virtue itself do not exist, since unity only comes from their name.¹⁴

¹⁴ On the reasons why Protagoras does not go so far as to uphold a radical stance such

These observations enable us to broach the issue of self-predication, which is brought up by question 2), and to start noting some of the factors that can stand in the way of its correct interpretation. One of these factors is the hypothesis that Plato treats the universal as a kind of individual substance. Justice, for instance, would be a certain thing, and this is what Plato would be arguing when he writes that it is *πρᾶγμα τί* ("a certain thing"). Once we have established that the universal is an individual substance, it becomes possible, and indeed necessary, to assign it some predicates. But given that even when raised to the status of an individual substance the universal continues to be simply the same universal predicate it was originally, the only predicate it may be assigned is the one internal to it. The conclusion, then, must be as follows: Plato conceives justice as a thing (i.e. a substance) that is just.

This, however, is not at all the case. Claiming that the universal exists as a given thing is only an opening move that enables Plato to defeat nominalism. The philosopher does not wish to argue that there is such a thing as justice which is typologically similar, say, to the pencil-case before me. What he is arguing is that whenever it is thought, uttered or understood, the word justice always refers to the same meaning; hence, there really is such a thing as justice.

Besides, the question of existence is far from irrelevant in relation to the universal, and this for a number of reasons. The nominalist cannot give assent. Rather, he ought to claim that justice in general does not exist since (for example) men give the name 'justice' to things that are always variable, such as the advantage of the person who happens to be in power (it remains to be ascertained whether the nominalist with this might not have already granted too much to avoid refutation, but we are not concerned with such problem for the time being). It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, for Socrates to raise the question of existence; indeed, it is necessary. The question of existence would instead be utterly meaningless if Plato believed the object it refers to to be an individual substance. Who would ever dream of asking a question such as "Is your sister Catherine something or nothing?" It is difficult to imagine that Socrates is seeking to demonstrate the existence of specific individual entities through questions of this sort. The question makes any sense only if the object is a universal, since only in this case may someone doubt its existence and thus only in this case does it make sense to subject the question of existence to the variable of agreement (as opposed to briefly solving it by turning to consider the evidence).

as this one see Hemmenway (1996), p. 16: "His [i.e. Protagoras'] concern for his public reputation does not allow him to question claims such as 'justice is something' ..."

Further proof of what has just been argued may be found in a passage of the *Philebus* (15a–b) in which Socrates draws a distinction between the unity which is assigned to things that are born and die and the unity which is assigned to things that do not undergo this process. For whereas in the former case no problems emerge and there appear to be no reasons to raise any objections (συγκεχώρηται τὸ μὴ δεῖν ἐλέγχειν), in the latter case – when positing that man is one, the ox is one, the beautiful is one, the good is one, and so on – many disagreements emerge. Consequently, the primary task of philosophical enquiry will be to establish whether these unities really exist:

Πρῶτον μὲν εἰ τινὰς δεῖ τοιαύτας εἶναι μονάδας ὑπολαμβάνειν ἀληθῶς οὐσας.

Firstly, whether one ought to suppose that there are any such unities truly in existence.

As the examples provided also suggest, the difference between corruptible and incorruptible unities clearly corresponds to that between the unity of particular entities (e.g. this man, that ox) and the unity of universal entities (e.g. man, the ox). The importance and primacy (πρῶτον) of the question of existence, which make it a preliminary stage for any rational-philosophical enquiry, thus stem from the fact that in this case, unlike in the case of sensible things, the question is far from obvious: it is far from obvious that there exists a unitary meaning for good and beautiful, or indeed for man and ox, i.e. that there exists a specific thing (for this is what the predicate of unity implies) such as being an ox or being a man.¹⁵

4. SELF-PREDICATION: A CRITIQUE OF VLASTOS

The question of existence, therefore, is not intended to turn universal terms into substrates (thus making them capable, as subjects, of receiving an inner predicate), but rather to set the enquiry on the level of the universal. In asking Protagoras whether he believes justice to be something or nothing, Socrates is seeking to learn from him whether he accepts the existence of universals, and hence whether he is willing to conduct the research on that level.

We shall consider the importance of this concession later. Let us now turn to the issue of self-predication. Are justice and holiness – Socrates rhetorically asks – not respectively “just” and “holy”? Indeed, if holiness itself (αὐτὴ ἡ ὁσιότης)

¹⁵ I have provided a slightly broader treatment of this perspective in Trabattoni (2001).

were not holy, it would be difficult to claim that anything else is (330d8–9). On this basis, Socrates submits the following objection to Protagoras: can we really claim that justice (being just) is not also something holy? And that holiness (being holy) is not something just?

Self-predication is one of the problems which interpreters have most freely engaged with (especially over the past fifty years). The outcome of this research is a vast range of studies that are difficult to master not only on account of their sheer number, but because of the often rather marked use they make of logical technicalities of the sort scholars of ancient philosophy are not always familiar with.¹⁶ Since I am among those scholars who have read many of these works – and not without difficulty – I wish to raise two general critical points. If we base our analysis of self-predication on the assumption that Plato's universals (or ideas) are sets or classes in Frege's or Russell's sense, or on the assumption that universals are objects in the same way as sensible things (and hence that they may be subjected to analogous forms of predication), then it is truly impossible to come up with any explanation.

As our starting point, let us take the aforementioned article by G. Vlastos, which has marked an important watershed in the whole approach to the issue, while also representing a decisive moment in the history of the interpretation of this passage from the *Protagoras*.¹⁷ If self-predication meant attributing an inner predicate to a universal subject, Vlastos argues, this would lead to some absurd consequences. Justice and holiness represent the classes or sets of just and holy actions; but precisely for this reason only the actions themselves, not

¹⁶ Particularly helpful in this respect is the warning issued by Seeck (1997) not to interpret Plato's writing according to the criteria of formal logic. Seeck most reasonably suggests that we should instead interpret Plato in the light of natural language, whose structural "vagueness" and "ambiguities" do not prevent us from grasping what Plato means (see esp. pp. 13–35). Regrettably, warnings of this kind have almost invariably come from "continental" interpreters and thus have hardly been heeded by those scholars who are used to reading only works written in English. The consequence of all this, in my view, is that at least some critics in the analytical tradition are carrying on an internal debate that is almost self-referential and usually not very fruitful from an exegetical standpoint (a brief overview of the main critical stances may be found in Manuwald, 1999, pp. 251–252). By contrast, what I find less interesting in Seeck's work is his attempt to interpret the *Protagoras* without making any reference to philosophical ideas and issues of a more general kind.

¹⁷ I cannot take into consideration here the whole debate that has emerged on the matter, where the main issue at stake is the extent to which Socrates' argument may be regarded as correct or incorrect. Prior to Vlastos' article, important contributions were provided by Gallop (1961), and Savan (1964). See too Penner (1983), Wakefield (1987), Taylor (1991).

the characters, can be described as just and holy. Vlastos therefore suggests that when Socrates states that justice is just this is no ordinary predication, but an instance of Pauline predication. The reference here is to Ch. 13 of Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in which a sentence such as "charity is benevolent" does not mean that charity itself is benevolent, but that charitable men are.¹⁸ Besides, we need not look so far, since the very passage from the *Protagoras* under consideration features similar examples of Pauline predication, such as "justice is holy", which do not pose any serious interpretative problems. The mistake many scholars have made consists in overestimating the exceptional character of the self-predicational assertions, without realising that they are in fact Pauline predications not unlike many others.

In such a way, the problem of self-predication seems to disappear. What further complicates the matter, however, is the fact that according to Vlastos in Plato's writings we find instances of self-predication which actually constitute ordinary forms of predication (as in the case of beauty in the *Symposium*, which in Vlastos' view Plato actually regards as being beautiful). This ambiguity, moreover, would be due to the fact that Plato was not clearly aware yet of the distinction between these two forms of predication: in particular, he used Pauline predication without noticing its defining features.

The supposed presence of exceptions of this kind is enough in itself to weaken Vlastos' interpretation. But since I am not interested in examining the issue from a general perspective here, I shall simply endeavour to show that the reference to Pauline predication provides no satisfactory explanation for Socrates' argument in *Protagoras* 329b–332a. Let us sum up the line of reasoning. Socrates asks Protagoras whether, in his view, the various virtues may be traced back to a single one. Protagoras denies this, stating that there are brave but unjust men, and men who are just but not wise. Socrates' answer, when framed in Vlastos' terms, would run as follows:

- 1) justice is just, which is to say – translated into ordinary predication – that just men are just;
- 2) justice is holy, which is to say – translated into ordinary predication – that just men are holy.

¹⁸ Vlastos later clarified (Vlastos 1974) that Pauline predication does not reduce the meaning of a sentence to concrete objects, but along with these also concerns the abstract terms themselves. However, this is irrelevant from our perspective, since in both cases self-predication ("justice is just", "just things are just") is reduced to a tautology, which is precisely what seems unacceptable to me.

Socrates, in other words, would simply be denying what has just been argued by Protagoras: the sophist claims that someone who possesses virtue *x* may not possess virtue *y*; through Pauline predication, Socrates replies that someone who possesses virtue *x* must also possess virtue *y*. So where is the argument? What we are left with is the “logical error” that is implicitly hinted at in 331a9–b1, where Socrates suggests that if his opinion is rejected, then justice is turned into something impious (meaning that just men may be impious). We have already seen, however, that this “error” is irrelevant: anyone who accepts the unity of virtue will probably find the prospect that a just man, albeit not impious, may be “non-holy” equally disturbing;¹⁹ and anyone who does not accept this idea will probably have no trouble acknowledging that a just man may also be impious.

Vlastos’ solution, therefore, does not work. Certainly, when Socrates states that justice is just he must also be saying something about the universal he is speaking of – something that makes sense in the context of his argument. The universal, then, cannot simply be the class bringing together a certain group of entities: for in this case self-predication must necessarily be of the Pauline sort and we find a premise being drawn within the argument that is neither useful nor meaningful – namely, that just men are just.

Vlastos’ study is nonetheless helpful from at least one point of view. He is right in emphasising the fact that the aim of Socrates’ argument has to do with the actions of just and holy men, not the relations between concepts; and that the study of the relations between concepts must be used to draw conclusions on the empirical level (for instance: that one cannot be both brave and unjust). If Socrates has Protagoras admit that justice is just and holiness is holy, this must be because he finds this concession useful to show that unjust men cannot be brave and that just men cannot be impious.²⁰

Protagoras actually clearly realises what Socrates is trying to do and denies the interlocutor his assent (331c). Protagoras, in other words, neither picks up Socrates’ “error” nor points out that speaking of a just justice makes little sense or has little to do with the problem under consideration (since what is being discussed is men). Protagoras instead shows that in his view, if it were true that justice is necessarily holy, he could not claim that there are men who are unjust but holy.

Since we, modern commentators, really have no reason to interpret Socrates’ words any differently from how Protagoras interprets them in the dialogue, we should try to understand why Socrates, in wishing to show that the brave person

¹⁹ As Seeck notes, from the point of view of natural language “non-just” is simply a stronger or more direct term for “unjust” (Seeck 1997, p. 36).

²⁰ Seeck (1997), p. 39, 80–81.

is necessarily also holy, deems it necessary to have Protagoras concede first of all that justice and holiness exist and then that they are respectively just and holy.

5. SELF-PREDICATION: SOME OTHER INTERPRETATIONS AND A HYPOTHESIS OF SOLUTION

In order to grasp the structure of this reasoning, we shall now turn to a suggestion formulated by A. Nehamas a few years after Vlastos, and which in my view is among the most interesting ones to have been made regarding the issue of self-predication.²¹ According to Nehamas, the self-predicative assertion *F-ness is F* means that “the *F* itself, whatever it turns out to be, is what it is to be *F*.”²² Self-predication, in other words, describes the real and complete nature of an idea. So when Socrates states that justice is just, what he means is that only the idea of justice (justice itself) possesses that characteristic in its pure form.²³ Indeed, as is suggested by *Hyppias Minor* 289c, a beautiful girl cannot be beauty itself because she will be beautiful in some respects but ugly in other respects. Again according to Nehamas, only the definition of *F* has the prerequisites for actually being purely *F*. As an example of the kind of substitution that can be operated in the sentence “justice is just”, the scholar repeatedly mentions the definition of justice that many believe may be drawn from the *Republic* (“doing one’s own business”). The self-predication “justice is just”, in other words, would mean in this case that only “doing one’s own business is what must be understood as justice”. The corollary of this thesis is the idea that according to Plato only the ideal character *F*, not any empirical thing, may correctly be described as *F*²⁴ (the Parmenidean background which Nehamas assigns to this hypothesis need not concern us for the time being).

Nehamas believes himself to have explained self-predication in this way, distinguishing it from both ordinary predication (“justice is a just thing”) and sheer tautology.²⁵ In Vlastos’ opinion, however, Nehamas has failed to reach his goal: for his suggestion ultimately falls within the second alternative, since it turns self-predication into a “self identity disguised by periphrastic grammar.”²⁶ An answer to Vlastos later came from A. Silverman, who sought to defend Nehamas’

²¹ Nehamas (1979).

²² *Ibidem*, p. 95.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

²⁶ Vlastos (1981), p. 76.

position.²⁷ I do not wish to go into detail here. Rather, it is important to make one observation concerning Vlastos' stance. The scholar believes that his hypothesis of interpreting self-predication as Pauline predication represents a third way between ordinary predication and tautological assertions. In fact, as we have seen above (cf. n. 16), Pauline predication may also be reduced to a form of tautology, one extended to individual objects.

Self-predication is instead understood as ordinary predication by R. Heinaman in an article seeking to disprove all alternative interpretations.²⁸ What I am interested in here in particular is the two objections Heinaman has raised against Nehamas' thesis.²⁹ First of all, this thesis disrupts the analogy between sentences such as "justice is just" and "justice is holy" (an analogy that is instead preserved by Vlastos' Pauline predication). For while the former sentence means that only justice is really just, the latter cannot mean that only justice is really holy. Secondly, if it were indeed true that only beauty is beautiful, then the analogical gradation that Plato assigns to the relation between the idea of the equal and empirical forms of equality in *Phaedo* 74–75 would no longer hold.

In order to counter these objections, I believe it is necessary to modify Nehamas' suggestion considerably as well. The claim "justice is just" does not imply, as Nehamas would have it, that only justice can be described as just; rather, it means that "being just" is the essence of justice. This, however, does not prevent us from similarly claiming that "justice is holy", in the sense that "being holy" is an essential characteristic of justice, albeit to a different degree of intensity than "being just". Besides, it seems to me that this is precisely what Socrates wishes to prove to Protagoras in the passage under consideration.

Still, the claim "justice is just" cannot *only* mean that being just is the essence of justice. For in this case, self-predication would indeed resemble a tautology, which is what Vlastos notes in his critique of Nehamas: a useless tautology in general and one that is utterly incapable of constituting – as is the case in the *Protagoras* passage we are discussing – the premise of an argument.³⁰

²⁷ Silverman (1990).

²⁸ Heinaman (1989).

²⁹ Heinaman (1989), pp. 70–73.

³⁰ The fact that so-called self-predication cannot be regarded as a tautology (and indeed that the very concept of self-predication is a misleading one, since it places the whole discussion on a logical level which encourages this reading) has also been stressed by Seeck (1997) pp. 73–89. Even the recent suggestion made by C. Meinwald (1991 and 1992) that we should understand self-predication as a specific form of "tree predication" (whereby the sentence "the just is virtuous" would not mean that justice possesses the quality of

We will be drawing closer to the correct solution if we realise that when Socrates states that “justice is just”, he is not attributing any predicate – no matter how essential – to a subject, but rather isolating a universal entity that exists, in its essence, absoluteness and perfection, apart from all particular things. The frame of reference is clearly the Platonic notion of ideas. A common shortcoming of many contemporary interpretations, in my view, is precisely that they confine the discussion to the logical-semantic sphere, while completely overlooking its ontological-metaphysical aspect.³¹ According to Plato, claiming that justice itself is just to an eminent degree means claiming that there exists a universal justice which possesses in an exemplary way a characteristic that particular things possess only in a partial manner (the equal itself is more equal than empirical forms of equality, since it is perfectly equal). What this means is that justice itself cannot be regarded, as Nehamas would have it, simply as the definition of justice. In order fully to account for Plato’s cases of self-predication, as well as all his other claims concerning the ideas, there must be some plausible sense in which justice itself is actually something (*πρᾶγμα τι*) just to an exemplary degree. At the same time, this requirement ought not to lead us back to a literal interpretation of self-predication, according to which justice is simply a just thing (as such, it would have to be numbered, for example, among those entities that are expected to pay back their debts).

The above goal can only be reached, in my view, by stressing the metaphysical aspects connected to the issue of self-predication. And in order to do so, it is crucial to examine by what route Plato came to believe that it was necessary to posit “self-predicative” entities.

exercising virtue, but that justice is an integral part of virtue) does not really move beyond tautology: for claiming that “justice is just” in this case simply means affirming the identity of justice with itself.

³¹ Within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the roots of this attitude stretch far back in time (let us think of Russell, who as a mathematician was a Platonist, and yet believed it is necessary to strip Plato’s universal of all metaphysical implications). Generally speaking, one might say that the studies on Plato influenced by this current of thought tend to follow two contrasting and mutually exclusive tendencies: some interpreters, who offer a metaphysical reading of Plato, believe “that on the whole there is not much to learn from Plato except what mistakes one should try to avoid” (Penner 1987, p. 56). Other interpreters instead seek to defend Plato from the charge of having made these mistakes by underemphasising or even denying the metaphysical import of his philosophy. While providing divergent interpretations, both groups therefore take as their starting point the idea that metaphysics is a source of serious philosophical mistakes. The above-mentioned book by Penner is a revealing, and intelligent, example of this tendency. It goes without saying, though, that by following an approach of this sort it is very difficult indeed to provide a historically accurate interpretation of Plato’s thought.

Let us consider, for example, the passage from the *Republic* in which Plato criticises the stance of him “who does not think there is a beautiful in itself or any idea of beauty in itself always remaining the same and unchanged”. Such person, Socrates observes, should be asked the following questions “My good fellow, is there any one of these many beautiful things that will not also appear ugly and base? And of the just things, that will not seem unjust? And of the pious things, that will not seem impious?” (478e7–479a8; note that here too we find piety, or holiness, and justice, as in the *Protagoras*).³²

As we can see, in this passage Socrates does not blame non-philosophers for failing to see those particular objects known as ideas or for ignoring their definition. Instead, he criticises these people because the imperfection and relativity of sensible things, which they are all too familiar with, does not lead them to posit the existence of perfect and ever self-identical things. Consequently, the distinction between “just justice” and “just things” is not drawn on the basis of any objective knowledge of two different kinds of reality. The starting point in Plato’s reasoning is simply provided by particular things and their imperfection. Precisely – and only – because these things possess specific attributes in a partial and imperfect way does Plato deem it necessary to suppose that these attributes must have a perfect and absolute existence separate from that of individual entities. Plato, in other words, does not speak of “just justice” because he has independently apprehended any object of this kind, but simply because it becomes necessary for such an object to exist based on an analysis of our experience (in which there are no things that are just in absolute terms). This deduction, according to Plato, is justified by the *synagogé* procedure, whereby the *many relatively* beautiful things are seen logically to imply the existence of *a single absolute* beauty. Naturally, it is possible to question the soundness of this procedure. One cannot argue, however, that Plato reaches the concept of ideas by any other route (as is showed by the aforementioned passage from the *Republic* and other similar ones).

Justice therefore (the idea of justice or justice itself) is neither a definition encompassing all just things, nor a just thing, as individual men or actions can be. It represents the pure transposition of something relative in absolute terms. If justice itself could be reduced to some kind of class, set or definition, then it would not represent justice in the full and perfect sense, because the class of just things, or the definition of justice, cannot be called “just” in itself. Nor would there be perfect justice if justice were a thing, since no just *thing* is perfectly just. Justice, then, really is a perfectly just thing, but this perfection it possesses

³² I have already quoted and commented this passage in ch. 8, p. 155 and ch. 11, p. 204.

projects it onto a metaphysical plane that makes it impossible to speak about it in the same terms as one might speak about just things in the sensible world (for ideal justice is not a just thing in the same sense). In other words, we should not forget that Plato's ideas are transcendent and separate entities. And it is only natural that when discussing self-predication (as well as many other Platonic issues), people who overlook this aspect will get caught up in insoluble problems, which from a historiographical perspective are largely irrelevant.

6. AN INTERPRETATION OF *PROTAGORAS'* PASSAGE

Once we have grasped the meaning of self-predication, we are in the best position to understand what Plato is seeking to argue in the passage of the dialogue we are concerned with.³³ Protagoras has observed that there are men who are brave but unjust, and men who are just but not wise. By analogy, he therefore believes that there can be men who are just but impious, and vice versa. This opinion too could find some solid foundations in tradition and in the common way of thinking. Take the conflict in the *Antigone* between the heroine and Creon, for instance, where in order to do something holy (bury her brother) the former character behaves unjustly (transgressing the law), whereas the latter character does the exact opposite. Or take the case of Euthyphro, who in order to purify himself from *phonos* (thus committing a holy act), commits *adikia* towards his father.

Now, it is possible for conflicts of this sort to arise especially because the cases of holiness and justice mentioned are rather remote from full and perfect holiness and justice (to the point, perhaps, that they only seem to be holy and just in an apparent way). Certainly, Euthyphro's "holy" action proves unjust because it is not an exemplary case of holiness, but an instance of holiness that is only such from a certain point of view, whereas from other points of view it is not – just as individual entities are beautiful in some respects but ugly in others (based on what we read in the *Republic*). By shifting the focus of the argument from just, brave, holy and wise men to the qualities they embody, Plato wishes precisely to rule out situations of this kind, in which given qualities are only approximately

³³ As should be evident, I believe we are bound to admit that in these passages from the *Protagoras* Plato is referring to universals, which is to say those things that in other dialogues he calls ideas (or *eide*). In my view, this may also be easily inferred from an expression such as *αὐτὴ ἡ δσιότης* (330d8–e1). This is the chief reason why I feel I cannot accept the interesting exegetical suggestion made by Seeck (1997), who – as we have seen – strips these passages of all metaphysical meaning, arguing that the claim "justice is just" denotes justice as "eine aktive Instanz in den Köpfen der Menschen" (p. 84).

represented. With the question of existence and the device of self-predication, Socrates shifts the argument onto the level of the universal, i.e. to that unitary meaning of justice that universally applies in all cases, and as such represents true and perfect justice – what is truly and fully just. This move, after all, would seem like a most appropriate one for the exchange that is taking place between Socrates and Protagoras: for in order to reject the idea of the unity of virtue put forth by Socrates, Protagoras had turned to consider individual cases. And let us not forget that Protagoras is speaking before an audience here, where each person present (just like each reader) is probably thinking of a few examples drawn from his own personal experience.³⁴ Socrates therefore invites Protagoras, and all other possible interlocutors, to reflect not on cases of justice and holiness as these are commonly defined, but on the very concepts of holiness and justice, which is to say on what they believe to be just and holy in the full, true and absolute sense; and then on this basis to verify whether it may be granted that a *really* just man might not be holy.

Again, Protagoras perfectly understands what he is being asked by Socrates. He does not get back to the examples, but places himself on the same level as Socrates' question, essentially confirming the latter's view. Socrates' absurd hypothesis that justice might be impious and holiness unjust is not addressed, suggesting that Protagoras agrees with Socrates on this point. Still, he insists on arguing that holiness and justice can hardly be the same thing, or in any case seems to believe that Socrates has not proven that they are. For Protagoras, in other words, the essence of being just is different from the essence of being holy, and this is precisely the reason why men may possess a specific virtue without thereby possessing all virtues.

³⁴ Hemmenway (1996) has insightfully noted that both the possibility of being brave but unjust and that of being just but not wise allude to the distinction between demotic virtue (where being just chiefly means respecting the law) and agonistic-elitist virtue, of the sort extolled by Callicles (pp. 14–15). This is a perfectly plausible reading. Besides, I believe that Plato regarded Callicles' morals not as a sophisticated hypothesis put forth by daring intellectual minorities, but as the morals actually embraced by most people, regardless of what they may outwardly claim. This is one of the reasons why I cannot accept one of the key points in Seeck's interpretation (*op. cit. passim*). For the scholar believes that Socrates is seeking to make Protagoras comply with the common way of thinking, for which the just cannot possibly be impious, and vice versa. Actually, what matters here is not so much the common way of thinking (according to which, while it is impossible to be both holy and unjust, it is still possible to be brave but not wise, for example); rather, what matters is what must apply in general. The common way of thinking may agree with Plato that the just is always also holy, yet it may base this identity on a particular and petty notion of holiness and justice (let us think, for instance, of the narrow idea of both these concepts that old Cephalus has in Book One of the *Republic*).

The fact that Protagoras insists on this point is not surprising. As we have seen in the previous pages, in this section of the dialogue he acts as a champion of the particular and of difference. Conversely, it is easy to understand why, faced with this final act of resistance on Protagoras' part, after a few words Socrates gives up and tries to reach his goal through a different path. Protagoras "sees" the unity of justice but does not "see" the unity of virtue, and Socrates is helpless in the face of this incapacity or rejection. For all Socrates has done is formulate a kind of rhetorical question, asking Protagoras whether it might not be the case that someone who is *truly* just must, purely for this reason, also be holy – and vice versa (i.e. whether holiness may be unjust, and vice versa). Yet Protagoras, possibly in bad faith, does not answer as one would expect. Plato hints at Protagoras' bad faith when he states that he feels irritation at granting Socrates anything (331c), and when he describes the latter's ironic amazement before Protagoras' insistence that the just and the holy barely resemble one another (332a).³⁵ This suspected bad faith, however, does not constitute a refutation, nor is what Socrates presents a genuine argument. Hence, Socrates is forced to change his strategy.

The correct method of making any progress is in fact dialectics, which is to say the study of the relations of inclusion, exclusion and participation between ideas (or concepts). Yet, this does not mean that dialectics work on the basis of a specific knowledge of *perfect* justice, holiness, bravery or virtue (nor that Socrates is here asking Protagoras to formulate judgments on this basis). Indeed, the universal acts as an "operational" criterion for our judgments, not as an immediate object of knowledge (for it is possible to tell whether two things are equal or not, but not to see or define the equal itself). Socrates' exhortation, then, simply means that the goal of one's enquiry must always be what is most general, and hence perfect, in relation to what is partial, transient and individual. The dialectician, for instance, while not evaluating Euthyphro's alleged holiness on the basis of any knowledge of absolute holiness, knows that absolute holiness lies beyond all possible approximation, and will thus move beyond the holiness of Euthyphro, Antigone or anyone else, indefinitely extending his investigation

³⁵ A different interpretation is provided by McKirahan (1985). McKirahan believes that Protagoras is reacting in an intellectually honest way (p. 350), and that he does not pick up Socrates' mistake (the shift from contrary to contradictory) because his interlocutor's arguments have nonetheless persuaded him to change his initial view, according to which the various virtues are completely independent from one another. On the contrary, it seems to me that Protagoras' view, at least in this section, is always the same, namely: that while there is a certain similarity between the various virtues, this is not enough for us to argue that they constitute a single virtue or to rule out that men may possess only certain virtues but not others.

in order increasingly to approach his unattainable model. Likewise, Protagoras cannot expect to make any progress on the road leading to a clarification of the relations between the various virtues by merely examining particular examples of "just", "holy" or "wise" men.

CHAPTER 14
PLATO: PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND KNOWLEDGE
An Overview

1. PHILOSOPHY AND (OR VS.) POLITICS

The image of the philosopher in Plato's works oscillates between two opposite extremes and two different levels. The first level concerns the relationship between philosophy and politics. On the one hand, there is the portrayal of the philosopher as sketched out in the *Phaedo*: Socrates is forced – as actually happened – to leave the city, but he does not particularly regret it, for this is the only way he can fulfil his lifelong aim. According to him, all those who apply themselves to philosophizing correctly (ὅσοι τυγχάνουσιν ὀρθῶς ἀπτόμενοι φιλοσοφίας) do not really concern themselves with anything but dying and death (64d). The opening section of the dialogue explains his attitude: as the philosopher's main desire consists of knowing purely intelligible objects – which can never be completely known as long as the soul is still with the body – the philosopher can attain his goal only after death. In the meantime he will behave as if the soul had already departed from the body: he will concentrate on himself, and keep sheltered from practical and material duties (65e–66a, 67c–d, 82d–83c, etc.).

This description of the philosopher and his inclinations does not imply that philosophy has nothing to do with politics. In a crucial passage of the dialogue Socrates makes clear, in fact, that the philosopher's tendency towards death does not exclude his being the only real owner of such "social" virtues as temperance and courage (68c–70e).¹ Actually, the oscillation which is being dealt with here never leads to the deletion of either extreme, but possibly to its relative belittlement. No doubt it is in the *Phaedo* that we are presented with the philosopher's utmost estrangement from politics. The way of the philosopher and that of the city separate radically and finally, ratifying the split between, on the one hand, a social and civil life which, in spite of Socrates' warnings, cannot be philosophical, and, on the other, a philosophy that cannot be politics. Socrates' sentence points to the fact that the philosopher's educational task has failed (as well as Themistocles', Miltiades', Cimon's or Pericles', who could neither prevent the fellow-citizens they "educated" from bringing action against them or even ostracizing them, nor teach virtue to their sons²). Such a portrayal is indeed similar to the one we find in the *Theaetetus*: the philosopher does not know any

¹ See Trabattoni (2011), pp. xxvii–xxx.

² See *Gorg.* 502e–503d; 514c–516e, *Meno*, 93b–c, *Prot.* 319e–320b.

public or “political” place in the city, for only his body dwells in it, not his soul; moreover, he is so detached from any social interaction that he does not even know whether his neighbour is a man or some other sort of animal (173d–174b).

The opposite extreme is the philosopher/king portrayed in the *Republic*. In the transition from book I to book II of this dialogue it is possible to observe the movement from which the oscillation arises. Book I introduces the Socratic philosopher, who is only interested in ethical investigations on the one hand, and who, on the other, thinks that he can do no more than remove defective opinions (357a1: Ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα εἰπὼν ὄμειν λόγου ἀπηλλάχθαι). But because of the vigorous assaults by Glaucon and Adeimantus, Socrates is after all persuaded to “make a defence, and not abandon the argument” (368c, transl. T. Griffith), that is to lead a positive inquiry into the nature of justice, injustice and their respective degrees of usefulness. Book I therefore recalls the Socrates of the *Apology* and *Phaedo* who, though clearly a better and wiser man than his fellow citizens, nevertheless leaves them without succeeding in fully defining a new theoretical basis on which a political life can be reconstructed. This Socrates, thus, is the philosopher who managed to save himself and his own morality, but not the city.

That private salvation does not suffice to define the object of philosophy is clearly shown by the remaining nine books of the *Republic*. But there is also a passage where this point is explicitly settled. In the last part of book V, Socrates deals with the so-called “third wave”, that is the hypothesis stating that there will be no end to suffering for either the state or the human race unless kings and rulers begin to philosophize properly and correctly (φιλοσοφήσουσι γνησίως τε καὶ ἰκανῶς) and unless politics and philosophy are vested in the same person (473d). In order to prove this, Socrates first states that the philosopher loves learning in its completeness and in all the forms in which it appears. This feature is the reason why, as Socrates states at the beginning of the following book, the philosopher has the right to rule. But now Socrates must come to terms with the objection made by Adeimantus, who replies that the philosopher usually appears to be too eccentric to be of any use in political life. This appearance, Socrates explains, depends on the fact that the philosopher spends his life in corrupt states, ruled by demagogues, where people inclined to philosophy can barely keep their good disposition. As a consequence, in such states very few people can practise philosophy decorously (496a–b).

In such a condition, the philosopher is “like a man falling into a den of wild animals, refusing to join in their vicious activities, but too weak to resist their ferocity single-handed”, running the risk of

Be[ing] killed before he could be any use either to himself or to anyone else. Taking all this into his calculations, he will keep quiet, and mind his own

business, like someone taking shelter behind a wall when he is caught by a storm of driving dust and rain. He sees everyone else brimful of lawlessness, and counts himself lucky if he himself can somehow live his life here pure, free from injustice and unholy actions, and depart with high hopes, in a spirit of kindness and goodwill, on his release from it (496d–e, transl. T. Griffith).

A reference to both Plato's and Socrates' lives can be identified in this passage. For the former the obvious connection is with the sections of the *Seventh Letter*³ in which Plato explains that the iniquity of the times, well testified to by Socrates' death sentence, forced him

to say (λέγειν, i.e. to confine himself to making use of λόγος), in praise of true philosophy (τὴν ὀρθὴν φιλοσοφίαν), that from her height alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual (326a5–7; transl. G.R. Morrow).

It is no coincidence, either, that immediately afterwards Plato restates the wish repeatedly expressed in the *Republic*: evil will not desert humanity, unless those practising philosophy in a correct and true way (τὸ τῶν φιλοσοφούντων ὀρθῶς γε καὶ ἀληθῶς γένος) become the rulers, or alternatively are placed by divine will (ἐκ τινος μοίρας θείας, 326b3) at the head of the city.

Still more evident is the allusion to Socrates' biography. Not only is there a hint at the death threat that those who try to oppose injustice by themselves have to face, but also at the philosopher's beautiful hope (καλὴ ἐλπίς, which echoes εὐέλπις in *Phaedo* 63c5 and 64a1) of departing serenely and peacefully from earthly existence. The "normal" reading of these passages interprets them as a posthumous justification of Socrates who, during his own lifetime, avoided as much as possible any political commitment: given the conditions in which he lived, he could not help holding himself aloof, or he would surely die, thereby becoming useless to both himself and others. His trial, sentence and death cruelly prove this analysis to be true. In the light of the *Seventh Letter*, all of this also applies to Plato's behaviour: he thus justifies his not embarking on political life and in spite of his inclinations, given the troubled political times spanning from the Four Hundreds' rule (411 BC) to Socrates' death.

It is worth asking, now, what the difference is between the Socrates of the *Apology* – possibly far closer to the historical Socrates – and Plato, author of the dialogues, who in the *Gorgias* has Socrates define himself as the only real politician of his times, and who furthermore in the *Republic* tries to prove philosophy's

³ As we know (see ch. 1, n. 8), I hold the *Seventh Letter* as Platonic.

full “politicity”, and the philosopher’s right to rule. What element in Platonic thought could possibly reconcile politics and philosophy, so clearly dissociated in the “philosopher” Socrates as depicted in the *Phaedo*?

Let us begin with a preliminary observation. Glaucon replies to the words in the above mentioned passage of the *Republic* (in which Socrates seems to justify the renouncing attitude of a philosopher compelled to live in wicked times) as follows: “if he [*sc.* the philosopher] could have accomplished that before his departure, it would be no small achievement” (transl. Griffith). However this is not enough for Socrates (497a3–5):

And yet not the greatest achievement (τὸ μέγιστον) either – since he did not happen (μὴ τυγχῶν) to be in a political system worthy for him. In one which is worthy for him his own growth will be greater, and he will be the salvation of his country as well as of himself (μετὰ τῶν ἰδίων τὰ κοινὰ σώσει).

So, the positive result obtained by Socrates in the *Phaedo* becomes secondary, as the philosopher can here salvage only his own, and not common good. It is perhaps no coincidence that at the beginning of the *Phaedo* the narrator of the dialogue tells Echecrates the story of Theseus’ sacred ship in these words (58a10–b1):

Is it the ship in which, the Athenians say, Theseus once sailed to Crete, taking with him the two lots of seven victims. He saved them and was himself saved (καὶ ἔσωσε [*sc.* the victims] τε καὶ αὐτὸς ἐσώθη) (transl. G.M.A. Grube).

Theseus, who traditionally played a founding role in the establishment of Athens as a real and proper political body,⁴ becomes the symbol of the philosopher’s task, that is to save not only himself, but also the city; not only his own good, but also the common good; not only his soul, but also the political community in which he dwells. In other words, the wise man wishing to achieve the highest aim (τὸ μέγιστον) must become a politician as well, which is precisely what Socrates could not accomplish.

2. FROM LOGOS TO ERGON: IS IT ONLY A MATTER OF CHANCE?

In the above mentioned passage from the *Republic* (497a3–5), misfortune (δυστυχία) is again blamed as the cause of this partial failure: if the philosopher

⁴ Cf. Musti (1992), pp. 149–150.

happens (τυχών) to live under a corrupt regime he can do nothing but wait for better times, carefully holding himself aloof. But is this what Plato really wants to suggest? What other alternatives might there be? How is it possible to break down the vicious cycle between philosophy and politics, between the need for the philosophers to rule the city and the evidence that only an already philosophically educated city might welcome such a regime? According to Mario Vegetti, the only possible solution consists of positing “the seizure of power by a small group of “spontaneously” formed philosophers.”⁵ But such a hypothesis, involving a sort of *ante-litteram* Leninism, is not to be clearly found in the *Republic*.⁶

Going back to the rough parallel between Socrates’ and Plato’s lives, focus might be placed on what Plato actually did in order to correct, according to the τὸ μέγιστον model, the dissociation in his teacher’s λόγος and ἔργον, and to reconcile politics and philosophy (*i.e.* the good of the community and that of the individual). The section of the *Seventh Letter* in which Plato recounts how he was forced, after Socrates’ death, to devote himself to an exclusively theoretical activity (326a5: λέγειν ... ἠναγκάσθη) has already been mentioned. But the story does not end here. Further on in the *Letter*, when stating why he finally accepted Dionysus’ invitation to the court of Syracuse, Plato writes (328c3–7):

This ... was the “bold” purpose I had in setting forth from home, and not what some persons ascribed to me. Above all I was ashamed lest I appear to myself as a pure theorist (μὴ δόξαιμι ποτε ἑμαυτῷ παντάπασι λόγος μόνον ἀτεχνῶς εἶναι τις), unwilling to touch any practical task (transl. Morrow).

This would lead us to expect a resolution on Plato’s part, following his two trips to Sicily to the court of young Dionysus, to pass from *legein* and *logos* to *ergon*. But, surprisingly enough, from the whole of the *Letter* it emerges that what Plato displayed was nothing but *logos* itself: in Syracuse Plato only provided Dionysus with advice and suggestions, and even this with a degree of caution. He did the same with Dion on several occasions, and with Dion’s friends as well, to whom

⁵ Vegetti (2003), p. 111. Vegetti refers to *Resp.* 520b. The quotation of this passage could however create some misunderstandings, firstly because the spontaneity alluded to does not concern the philosophers’ education as much as their birth, and secondly because no reference is made to a possible revolutionary action on their part.

⁶ The operative proposal put forward by Socrates at the end of book VII, according to which firstly all citizens older than ten should be sent to the country (541a), can hardly be taken as a realistic project; it would rather seem to tend to underline the fundamental importance of education.

he addresses the *Letter* after Dion's death: always and only suggestions. It is true that the *logoi* delivered by Plato in the political circumstances hinted at here have spread beyond their theoretical and scientific school context, and have been addressed to men of action, people able and willing to influence the state of things. Nevertheless, as far as Plato is concerned, it is always a matter of *logos*.

It seems therefore that Plato never took into consideration the Leninist hypothesis of a *coup d'État* by the philosophers: either in his youth, when he preferred to refrain from political activity, or at the court of Dionysus I and II, where he confined himself to giving suggestions. Moreover, this position is also openly theorized in an important section of the *Seventh Letter* (331b4–d5):

But a men who does not consult me at all, or makes clear that he will not follow advice that is given him – to such a man I do not take it upon myself to offer counsel: nor would I use constraint upon him, not even if he were my own son. Upon a slave I might force my advice, compelling him to follow it against his will; but to use compulsion upon a father or mother is to me an impious act, unless their judgement has been impaired by disease ... This is the principle which a wise man must follow in his relations towards his own city. Let him warn her, if he thinks her constitution is corrupt and there is a prospect that his words will be listened to and not put him in danger of his life; but let him not use violence upon his fatherland to bring about a change of constitution. If what he thinks is best can only be accomplished by the exile and slaughter of men, let him keep his peace and pray for the welfare of himself and his city (transl. Morrow).

The philosopher, thus, will not use violence in any event, not even when his aim is the building of the *ἀρίστη πολιτεία* (such as the one theorized in the *Republic*): he will speak, according to what can be read in *Resp.* 496d–e and according to what Plato himself did with Dionysus II, and only insofar as he does not risk death, for this would make him useless to others as well as to himself.

Must it thus be concluded that Plato always confined himself to *logos*, being content with waiting for a fate propitious enough for the transition to *ergon*? An apt example of such lucky circumstances would be, in particular, the taking of power in Syracuse by a tyrant who – as Dion assured him – seemed to be positively oriented towards a philosophical life (*VII Ep.*, 327c.-e). “What better opportunity (*καιρός*) can we expect”, he said, “than the situation which Providence (*θεία τιμή*) has presented us with?”⁷ The reference to divine fate also

⁷ 327e3–5.

occurs elsewhere in the *Letter*. A first interesting example (the other will be dealt with later on) can be found in 326b3, where Plato states that the chance that philosophers might become rulers or vice versa depends ἐκ τινος μοίρας (“divine favor”). Here there emerges a full parallel with one of the two passages of the *Republic* in which the same idea is expounded (499b–c): the possibility that the philosophers become rulers could be fulfilled ἐκ τύχης (“by chance”, b5), while love for true philosophy may develop in the heirs of present kings or rulers ἐκ τινος θείας ἐπιπνοίας (“from a divine inspiration”, c1).

The outlined scenario seems to show, without significant differences between the mature Plato of the *Republic* and the elderly one of the *Seventh Letter*, that the philosopher/politician never goes beyond the limits of *logos*, while the crucial transition from *logos* to *ergon* requires an essential (though imponderable) contribution of such things as καιρός (“opportunity”), τύχη (“chance” possibly θεία, “divine”), θεία μοῖρα (“divine favour”) or θεία ἐπίπνοια (“divine inspiration”). But can this result be considered conclusive? Actually it cannot.

3. POLITICS AS A *TECHNE* GROUNDED ON THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE GOOD

It is worth considering, first, that in Plato’s opinion the relationship between *logos* and *ergon* is quite close. According to the “*techne* analogy”, which pervades most Platonic works, the ability to give an account (*logos*) is effective on both the theoretical and the practical levels. In the *Gorgias*, for example (449c–450c), Socrates shows that the subject of all arts (and not just rhetoric) consists in *logoi*, and in the *Ion* the expert of each art has the authority to judge the correctness of discourses pertaining to his field of competence (531d–532b). It follows that those possessing a *logos* can generate the corresponding *ergon* at once, without the intervention of any external and independent factor, such as καιρός and θεία μοῖρα.

A careful reading of the first “protrectic discourse” that Socrates directs to young Cleinias in the *Euthydemus* (278e and f.) leads to the same conclusion. Socrates draws up a list of goods which includes “wisdom” (σοφία, 279c1–2), and Cleinias agrees that such things are really good. But soon afterwards he notices that the utmost good of all (279c6: τὸ μέγιστον τῶν ἀγαθῶν), that is “good chance” (εὐτυχία), appears to have been omitted (279b7). However, changing his mind again, Socrates concludes that this is not the case: Cleinias and he appear ridiculous for they did not realize that εὐτυχία, from a substantial point of view, had already been mentioned. Indeed – he goes on to explain – σοφία is εὐτυχία (279d6). As the expression εὐτυχία has an overt connection to τύχη (“chance”), it is quite clear what Socrates means here: the good success of and in things (definition deduced from the term εὐτυχία) owes nothing to fate (whether

divine or not), but depends entirely on wisdom.⁸ For instance, one can write correctly not because of good fortune, but because of one's own competence as a grammarian (279e2–3).⁹

This Platonic point of view has often been criticized as false, or at least not very realistic, often by contrasting it with the Aristotelian position:¹⁰ in order to achieve happiness (εὐδαιμονία or εὖ πράττειν), external goods exposed to the changes of fortune are also needed. But such criticism is typically founded on a misleading account of Plato's thesis, an account which does not take into consideration his belief in an after-life, so largely present in Plato's work – from the *Apology* to the *Phaedo*, to *Gorgias*, up to the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. The Socrates of the *Phaedo* can hold that external goods are unimportant in order to achieve happiness, precisely because he believes that such an end can only be reached after death. Such a position may surely be scorned as naïve and not validly grounded; it is nevertheless not possible to ascribe to it the same limits as those characterizing Stoic ethics (as though Socratic-Platonic ethics were a sort of immature Stoicism¹¹).

Therefore, once τύχη – whether θεία or not – has been put aside, σοφία can produce a good life by itself, in both the private and the public context. But what is it that founds the automatism of the transition from a theoretical to a practical moment (the corresponding ἔργα)? The same principle which is at the basis of the Socratic ethics' paradoxes: it is possible to maintain that nobody deliberately accomplishes evil if and only if 1) happiness and good are the same thing; 2) it is possible to identify the good that corresponds to happiness; 3) nobody makes him/herself intentionally unhappy. On the basis of these three assumptions,

⁸ An essential work for a better understanding of this passage of the *Euthydemus* is Reshotko (2001).

⁹ Clearly, this does not rule out the fact that in order to lead people to act in a certain way a more or less extended period of training is required. However, the purpose of such training is to foster the development of knowledge, not to bridge the gap between knowledge and action (for according Plato there is no such gap).

¹⁰ A paradigmatic case is offered by the well-known book by Martha Nussbaum (1986). Her analysis, however, is based on two mistaken principles: 1) she does not consider the fact – which will be dealt with later on in the essay – that Plato can affirm the “non-fragility” of the good only on the basis of eschatological premises; 2) she confuses the fact (absolutely plausible) that men can legitimately consider fragile things as goods with the hypothesis (absolutely unlikely) that they desire these things *exactly because they are fragile, transitory, mortal* (see Trabattoni 2008 bis). It seems, in fact, that the most suitable description of human desire from a general point of view is proposed by Plato: those who love love good and beautiful things, and would like to own them forever – that is that they would like them to last eternally (see *Symp.* 206a).

¹¹ Thus Annas (1999). *Contra*, v. Trabattoni (2000 ter) and (2004 ter).

once somebody has singled out the aim he or she wants to pursue (*a*) and the means through which it can be accomplished (*b*), s/he will infallibly resort to them, whatever they require, independently of any other consideration.

Taking examples from Plato himself (the *Lysis*), it is possible to verify what has been said so far with a sort of *in vitro* experiment.¹² Let us suppose that a person's only objective consists of multiplying wealth (*a*), that his neighbour owns the infallible means to accomplish this (*b*), and that he is willing to help (*c*); as a result, such a person will infallibly and automatically entrust the management of his patrimony to that neighbour. Only the intervention of aims differing from the one listed in *a* (for example the pleasure of dealing personally with one's own business) can bring about an exception to this behaviour.

This is the very line of reasoning Plato applies to the political level, in the *Republic* in particular. Whoever knows with certainty his/her good (*i.e.* their happiness) and the proper means to achieve it will infallibly act accordingly. But, as in the above mentioned example from the *Lysis*, one may also happen to know with that same degree of infallibility that one's happiness can be fulfilled by relying on the competence of others, *i.e.* by depending on someone who knows the good/happiness for themselves and for others. Therefore, supposing that in a city there really is a class of wise men knowing how to achieve happiness both for themselves and their fellow citizens, then the government of that city is necessarily due to them. These are, of course, the philosopher-kings of the *Republic*, who are indeed defined as those who know (later on it will be explained to what extent) the true reality of things and of good in particular. Moreover, such good has a universal feature, and a distributive value: it is the good of the state, of each and every one of its social classes, and of every individual citizen.

Instead of pointing out the possible negative effects caused by this universalization of good, which are summarized by Aristotle when arguing that Platonic good would be totally abstract and "not feasible" (*οὐ πρακτόν*),¹³ it is important to notice that such a process is necessary in order to refute the Trasimachean point of view (which, in its turn, is an implicit consequence of Protagoras' relativism), according to which the usefulness/good of single entities or groups cannot be preserved without conflicting with the usefulness/good of others. Besides, Plato indicates rather clearly what he means by "universal good". In a crucial passage of the *Symposium*, Diotima first identifies the usefulness of *eros* in the possession of good, and then the usefulness of such possession in the fact that it provides happiness (205a1–3):

¹² See *Lys.* 209c–d.

¹³ See *Eud. Eth.* 1, 1218a38.

That's what makes happy people happy, isn't it – possessing good things. There's no need to ask further, "What's the point of wanting happiness?" The answer you gave seems to be final (transl. A. Nehamas – P. Woodruff).

Anything can be desired in order to obtain something else, but the only thing which is desired for itself (and therefore puts an end to the recurring question "for what purpose?") is happiness. Happiness is thus the supreme good, or rather the only thing which is *really* good.¹⁴

The same framework can be drawn from the *Republic*. Soon after the form of Good has been introduced in book VI (505b), Socrates outlines a sort of treatment *de summo bono* anticipating the far more structured examination found in the *Philebus*: is good "pleasure" (ἡδονή) or "wisdom" (φρόνησις)? All those who state that good coincides with φρόνησις have to add that it is a matter of knowledge of good. They nevertheless say nothing about the good, and behave as if we and they already knew it. Actually this is not the case. But when such a paramount issue for human life is at stake we cannot be content with deceitful knowledge. In fact, no-one would settle for apparent good in the place of real good. Now, what is this *real* good that no-one would trade with appearance? It is clearly a matter of happiness, because while it is possible to desire, for the sake of convenience, to appear noble, rich or virtuous although it is not true (see the daring suggestion addressed by Machiavelli to his prince¹⁵), no one would desire to be only apparently happy, nor choose apparent over real happiness.

One need not go too far to understand, thus, what Plato means in the *Republic* by "knowledge of the good", and the reason why this knowledge founds the union between philosophy and politics. Good is not a metaphysical abstract object having no influence on the real life of people and communities. Rather it is an object which must be known for very practical purposes, as this is the only way to make our lives happy. For this same reason, this good must be highly universal, which in turn is precisely the reason why it is so difficult to know.¹⁶ So, as all

¹⁴ See *Lys.* 218c–220b.

¹⁵ *De principatibus*, xviii.

¹⁶ The main difficulty met by critics in defining the Platonic idea of good consists in the apparent incompatibility between the metaphysical interpretation (good is a sort of ideal object absolutely transcendent) and the ethical one (good is the object of desire, the attainment of which produces the good life, or εὐδαιμονία). Christopher Rowe, for example, refuses to identify good in the *Lysis* (πρῶτον φίλον) with good in the *Republic*, and is inclined to keep the two dialogues formally separate (Rowe 2002, pp. 256–257). In fact a solution to this problem can be provided on the basis of the close relationship between theory and practice which pervades all of Plato's works. The object of desire is happiness. Since happiness can be achieved only by knowing that universal good which

men necessarily desire to achieve their own happiness,¹⁷ to Plato the political problem boils down to this: to convince non-philosophers that philosophers really do possess the only form of knowledge that can produce the *work* (*ergon*) of their happiness and, consequently, to entrust into their hands the rule of the state.

Τύχη (“chance”) plays a completely marginal role within this process. The chance that people inclined to philosophy will actually be born is guaranteed, in Plato’s opinion, by the naturalistic background at the basis of Hesiod’s Myth of the Races; it is, moreover, corroborated in the already mentioned passage in which Socrates speaks about the philosophers that spontaneously appear in misruled cities. That these natures can maintain themselves untouched by the bad habits of existing societies is also explicitly acknowledged when Socrates speaks about those few people, endowed with good natural gifts, who are able to remain faithful to philosophy in spite of the difficult conditions of life (496b–c); further proof is given in the lives of Socrates and Plato himself. Furthermore, one cannot rule out the possibility that citizens can be persuaded to accept the philosophers’ rule willingly, convinced by their valid reasons. Θεία τύχη (“divine chance”) could have a part in triggering the eventuality that a person inclined to philosophy becomes a tyrant. But the advantageous aspect consists only in the fact that, in this case, it would be enough to persuade one person only, who, holding power, could put into practice the educational procedures able to persuade all the others too. This precisely coincides with what Plato writes in the *Seventh Letter* (328c2–3): “it was only necessary to win over a single man and I should have accomplished all the food I dreamed for” (transl. Morrow). Here there emerges, favoured on the practical level by the intervention of τύχη, though unaltered in his theoretical structure, the above exemplified pattern of the relationship between philosophy and politics (that is between *logos* and *ergon*):

- (1) The philosopher knows *universal* good;
- (2) Universal good corresponds to knowledge of the means that make people and communities happy;
- (3) The ἔργον (“work”) derived from this knowledge (ἐξείργαζεσθαι πάντα ἀγαθά) is produced when power is entrusted to the philosophers;

makes all other things good (human life firstly), the desire for happiness (ethical good) immediately generates the desire to know good (metaphysical good): this is not because happiness coincides with knowing (otherwise prominence of political interest in Plato could not be explained), but because it is necessary to know certain objects in order to fulfil a good life.

¹⁷ *Euthyd.* 278e3; *Symp.* 205a5–9.

- (4) This is the case when all the non-philosophers convince themselves of the truth of (1) and (2);
- (5) *A good means by which practice can be shortened is provided by the lucky circumstance in which a tyrant accepts and puts the philosopher's suggestions into practice.*

4. SCEPTICISM VS. DOGMATISM

Therefore, if the picture sketched above is correct, there are not two different and separate tasks, the first of which consists in realizing philosophy as knowledge, and the second one in turning this knowledge into practice (on into *ἔργα*, e.g. a *coup d'État*). *Erga* come into being (or not) depending on the strength (or weakness) of the philosopher's knowledge of good and his ability to obtain acknowledgement of this. Turning again to the *in vitro* example, the man who desires to enrich himself will *no doubt* commit his patrimony to that neighbour of his who is an expert in economy, if he is really convinced of his knowledge; there is no need for his neighbour to do anything but to show the possession of such knowledge. If, alternatively, that man is not sufficiently persuaded of his friend's economic skills, he will not commit his patrimony in any case: there is nothing "practical" that the neighbour can do to change his mind apart, of course, from the theoretical "action" to strengthen his own knowledge and persuasive skills.

Of course, the would-be expert in economy might also decide to resort to violence, perhaps even with the "well-meaning" attitude of those who do so for the "good" of others. This would not be useful at all though. Plato is in fact persistently consistent, from the *Republic* to the *Laws* (and indeed, before that, the *Crito*), in stating, without the least hint at moralism, the *practical ineffectiveness* of violence and the *political necessity* of persuasion. Take, for example, the famous apologue of Giges' ring. If good behaviour were attained only through the coercive power of law, without inner persuasion, society could preserve its good habits only if those who manage the application of the law had an infallible punitive power; but this is clearly unfeasible (even without appealing to the purely theoretical possibility of Giges' ring): Plato, in fact, does agree with Antiphon in thinking that any time an agent could move and act unnoticed, nature would necessarily prevail. A similar consideration is made – and further elaborated¹⁸ – by the Athenian in the *Laws*, above all in the sections where Plato shows that preambles, the aim of

¹⁸ See for instance *Leg.* III 690c2–3, where the Athenian asserts that the authority of law is valid for those who deliberately accept it, and that it is not violent by nature.

which is in fact persuasion, are the best parts of laws. In Plato there is no violence but that of education; but his aim is once more directed to the production – through persuasion – of spontaneous rather than forced behaviour.¹⁹

Thus, only the knowledge of the philosopher and his persuasive capacity should be taken into consideration. Here the second level of the oscillation concerning the philosopher's nature comes to the fore: according to Plato, is the philosopher's knowledge (relatively) strong or (relatively) weak? Is Plato's philosophy aporetic or conclusive, dogmatic or sceptic? The solution provided for these questions is fundamental in order to evaluate the solidity of the connection between philosophy and politics. More to the point: if Plato's epistemology is interpreted in a more or less sceptical or weak way, the entire Platonic theoretical apparatus risks toppling under its practical claims, thereby becoming inconsistent with its ethical-political vocation.

From the time of Plato's early followers and up to the present day, a fierce battle has been fought between dichotomic interpretations, between a (relatively) dogmatic Plato and a (relatively) sceptical one. Only a few hints at the trends of contemporary debate can be considered here, thus necessarily simplifying things. The image of Plato's philosophy resulting from the main continental tradition is rather conclusive and presents it as involving a sort of intellectual insight into the principles of reality. The analytical scholarship reaches almost the same conclusion: it considers as prevalent in Plato's philosophical works the activity of finding such definitions as can answer Socrates' questions. As for the "new hermeneutic paradigm" put forward by the Tübingen-Milan school, the option in favour of conclusivity does not need to be proved. The existentialist Plato – against whom Tübingen scholars reacted in the Fifties – was the exact opposite: it was a Plato asking questions without being interested in the answers. In the last thirty years, the relative openness of Platonic thought has been proposed in various ways by several interpretative traditions. We may mention, if only in passing, the followers of the methodological indications of Leo Strauss; or the great number of scholars agreeing with the *dialogical approach*: a criticism of the so-called theory of the spokesman that leads, in its more extreme versions, to question the very fact the Plato wrote with the aim of disclosing his personal opinions.

These problems have already been largely examined in the previous chapters. I will now briefly discuss them once more for the sole purpose of elucidating the relationship between theoretical reflection and political thought in Plato. In the first place, it is to be observed that a sceptical interpretation of Plato's thought is, strictly speaking, hardly admissible. If one of the primary purposes of

¹⁹ See Trabattoni (2001 bis).

Plato's philosophy (if not the main one, as I, among many others,²⁰ am inclined to believe) consists in ruling ethical and political life in the light of the knowledge of good, this aim is hardly compatible with scepticism. The far more extreme hypothesis of an agnostic Plato, hiding behind the dialogical form as he has nothing to say in the first person, cannot be defended either. The choice of the dramatic explanatory form does not mean that the author does not want to make his voice heard too: that voice speaks to the reader not directly, but through the dramatic construction.²¹ And it seems that the Platonic text is full of clues supporting this assumption.

"Conclusivists" do not have it easy either. As far the "definitionists" are concerned, the object of their interest is completely missing in the dialogues. As Paul Shorey already observed more than a century ago, Plato never tries to define the noetic content of a form.²² Even in the only dialogue in which Socrates seems to succeed in his search for the definition of an ideal object (justice in the *Republic*), this is explicitly declared to be provisional (504a–c). As for "intuitionists", we shall not go into the question whether they are right or not (I have answered it in the negative elsewhere²³). Here it will only be remarked that an intuitionist gnoseology is hardly consistent with the combination of knowledge, persuasion and politics we have spoken about. If the *ergon* of politics, which is the fulfilment of philosophy, can be put into practice only thanks to the public acknowledgement of the philosopher's wisdom, a possible claim to a personal and private intuition of good is ineffective, since it would amount only to a sort of self-certification devoid of any evidence.²⁴ Those eager to promote the strength of an intuition are in fact compelled to motivate it persuasively, so that intuition withdraws to the realm of things whose existence or non-existence is totally indifferent.

5. HOW WISE IS THE PHILOSOPHER?

Thus if neither definition nor mental grasp of ideas is actually available to men, how could the philosopher show his mastery of useful and trustworthy knowledge? Can Platonic dialogues actually display a clear-cut difference

²⁰ A quite recent example is Allen (2013).

²¹ For a more detailed account of this principle see Trabattoni (2004), pp. 47–70.

²² Shorey (1903), p. 28.

²³ See ch. 8.

²⁴ "If what we privately possess is not already linguistic, how can we talk about it?" (Rosen 1983, p. 88).

between opinion and science, between apparent knowledge and real knowledge, between a conclusive and an aporetic way of arguing, between philosophy and sophistics (or rhetoric)? Plato's writings do not appear to provide a univocal answer. It is not just that we find in Plato's work a large group of aporetic writings (including dialectical dialogues as *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*). On a more general level, there is very often a clear disparity between the epistemic strength of the general statements and the relative weakness of the results actually achieved.²⁵

An obvious case is offered by the *Meno*. Although this dialogue has an aporetic outcome, at a certain point Socrates differentiates quite firmly between "right opinion" (ὀρθὴ δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) (98b). But even in formally conclusive dialogues such a difference is not as effective as one would expect. At the beginning of book VI of the *Republic*, for example, Socrates defines philosophers as "those who are capable of grasping (δυνάμενοι ἐφάπτεσθαι) what is always the same and unchanging" (484b4–5, transl. Griffith). As the dialogue unfolds, however, it becomes clear that even the "philosopher" Socrates can only give his opinion²⁶ about the highest and worthiest object of knowledge (506d–e, 517b, 533a).

²⁵ See ch. 5, p. 86.

²⁶ See Trabattoni (1994), pp. 140–148. The reiterated hints made by Socrates of his "opinion", which the metaphysical books of the *Republic* extensively contain, suggested to Rafael Ferber the idea that Plato did not achieve a firm and definitive knowledge of the highest principles, so that the so-called "oral doctrines" should also be more properly redenominated "oral opinions" (*ungeschriebene Meinungen*); they were not written down because of their debatable and temporary character (Ferber 1989², 1991). More in general, Ferber supported the idea that Plato believed in the structural fallibility of all knowledge tools – *logos* and *noesis* included. He was – predictably – opposed by the Tübingen school, and especially by Szlezák and Krämer. The issue is treated in Ferber (2003), pp. 145–149 and n. 55. Here Ferber rapidly hints at the objections made by the Tübinger scholars, and replies in the light of the principle (which I share) according to which "the mediation of knowledge about ideas, as it is structured in the Platonic dialogues, cannot be completely freed from δόξα" (p. 146). Nor can further considerations by Szlezák (2002) add any new interesting insight into the topic. The fact of minimizing the belittling tone used by Socrates when giving his opinion by ascribing it to "Attic urbanity" or "irony" (p. 59) is yet another revival of an old and ineffective *passepourtout*, while the assertive and imperious tone adopted by Socrates in presenting his opinion to his interlocutors (pp. 59–60) is not revealing at all. The hypothesis according to which Socrates' opinion corresponds to the truth is actually, as Szlezák says, "eine reale Möglichkeit" (p. 59). But in order to verify this possibility in a definite way, so that a point could be achieved beyond which "man nichts mehr suchen wird" (*ibid.*), it would be necessary to observe the correspondence between opinion and reality from a superior point of view, which man is not allowed to do, as any man – the philosopher included – can formulate sentences only by moving within his opinions.

Should it be concluded, therefore, that Plato admits the existence of yet another figure of the philosopher, holder of higher and more conclusive knowledge than that shown by Socrates in the *Republic*?²⁷

Many other examples could easily be added. In the *Parmenides*, the main character of the dialogues on the one hand casts a long and seemingly destructive series of doubts on the theory of forms, while, on the other, he maintains that it is nevertheless necessary to pose the existence of ideas (135b–c). The dialogue does not provide a clear-cut solution to the dilemma. In the *Sophist*, the positive outcome of the dialogue fails to dissipate the threatening shadow cast on the reliability of philosophy in the first part, where one of the definitions of the sophist was actually a fitting description of precisely the confuting method used by the “philosopher” Socrates (226b–231b); and in this dialogue *this particular problem* remains unresolved.²⁸ Finally, I ought to mention what is arguably the most significant Platonic text in this respect, namely Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* (for a more detailed discussion I will refer to the previous sections of this book).²⁹ On the one hand, the passage in question suggests that the philosopher occupies the intermediate position of ὁρθῆ δόξα, whereas σοφία is the exclusive prerequisite of the gods. On the other hand, it is here that we find the most comprehensive description Plato ever offered of the path leading the philosopher to the contemplation of forms (209e–212a). Nevertheless, just at the beginning of this root of knowledge there appears again, as in the *Republic* and in the *Cratylus*,³⁰ the suspicion that Socrates’ “philosophy” is not enough to bring him to the end of this “initiatory” journey (209e5–210a2). So once again we are faced with the same question: could there ever be a third figure of philosopher, wiser than Socrates and capable of turning philosophy into ultimate knowledge?³¹ Or would it not perhaps be more productive to think that, according to Plato, the

²⁷ As we saw in ch. 7, a similar case can be found in the *Cratylus* (439b4–8).

²⁸ Moreover, those who maintain that the *Sophist* exemplifies a reliable “Platonic” method for defining the forms (be it dialectical or dihypothetical) must first of all suppose that there is a form of “sophistry” corresponding to the sophist, and secondly explain why the dialectical method only seems to work with human types such as the sophist and the politician (as rightly pointed out by Rosen 1983, pp. 47–48).

²⁹ See esp. ch. 5.

³⁰ See ch. 7.

³¹ Cf. Scott – Welton (2000), p. 150: “According to Diotima, something analogous to Socrates’ ignorance is characteristic, not of Socrates alone and specifically, but of the philosopher *as such*.” One could think, truly, that in such instances Plato is thinking of an oral doctrine superior to the written one, as the exponents of the so-called Tübingen-Milano school believe. As I have raised my objections to this position elsewhere, nothing further will be added here.

mixture of ignorance and knowledge can bear different levels of prevalence of the one on the other, and can never be definitively and conclusively unravelled?

6. WHAT DOES THE PREFIX *PHILO-* IN THE WORD *PHILO-SOPHOS* MEAN?

By focusing the inquiry on the meaning that Plato ascribed to the word “philosophy”, we have reached the core of this inquiry, and it becomes possible to suggest a solution. First of all, what does the word philosophy mean to Plato, and who is the philosopher? In book v of the *Republic* (475e), answering a specific question by Glaucon (Who are the philosophers in your opinion?), Socrates defines them as “those who love contemplating truth” (ἀληθείας [...]φιλοθεάμονες). In both remarks we find the prefix *philo-*. But what is the exact meaning of it? In the *Lysis* the attempt to define *philia* (“friendship”) as attraction between mutually similar things (214a) fails once it is verified that *philia* never turns to objectives that the desiring subject already owns. This argument entails the idea that *philia* is a sort of dynamic tension towards something that the subject desires to own, and therefore lacks. And it is precisely according to this principle that Diotima, in the *Symposium*, can affirm that *eros*, being a philosopher, is neither wise nor ignorant (203e5): he in fact desires (*philei*) knowledge, but he can desire it precisely because he does not have it. Those who, as the gods, are in the *stable* situation of owning knowledge are untouched by the dynamic nature of *philia*. And indeed (204a1–2) no gods philosophize, nor desire to become wise.

It is usually observed that the emphasis on the defective aspect of compounds prefixed by *philo-* has nothing to do with their common meaning in Greek and in English: the Greek language has a very large number of nouns and adjectives which are compounded with such a prefix, though they do not necessarily indicate any such deficiency.³² For instance, if someone is said to be “bibliophile”, that is a lover of books, this does not mean that, *precisely because of this*, he is devoid of them. It seems therefore that nouns compounded with the prefix *philo-* simply aim at denominating love for a certain activity and those who devote themselves to this.

The meaning of the Greek term *philia*, however, is strictly linked to the term “desire”, and undoubtedly desire entails a deficiency. An obvious example is pro-

³² Cfr Dixsaut (1985) in part. pp. 45–49. The classical article by W. Burkert (1960) about the origin of the concept of “philosophy” still represents a point of reference. A collection of the main ancient documents regarding this issue can be found in Dixsaut (1985), pp. 365–369.

vided by erotic *philia*, where it is clear that those who love are always in tension, unsatisfied and troubled, as long as they cannot reach the object of their desire. On further consideration, though, reference to an unfulfilled tension is implicit in any form of *philia*. One may even say that such a tension is a stable feature of man's condition, for humanity naturally desires to own good forever, while on the other hand it cannot achieve this end because of the temporality and limitation of human existence. Of course this applies, first and foremost, to *sophia*, which is the highest object of desire according to Plato: as far as *philia* is concerned, human beings can never definitively escape from an intermediate condition, a condition that partakes of both "poverty" and "richness."

This, in fact, is the case of the philosopher in the *Symposium*. He is not totally devoid of knowledge, as is evident from his intermediate collocation between ignorance and wisdom. But since such knowledge could never equal the perfect knowledge of the gods, it must be stated, rigorously speaking, that he *is not wise*. However, the philosopher *also is wise*, as long as he – unlike the ignorant – owns a certain form of knowledge, despite its defects and approximations. Philosophy, which is the highest level of knowledge that human beings can attain in mortal life, is at the same time and in two different ways knowledge (*epistêmê*) and non-knowledge. The history of human knowledge therefore corresponds to the history of *philo-sophia*, while *sophia* arises only when such a history has come to its end.

7. WHY THE PHILOSOPHER, WHILE NOT A *SOPHOS*, STILL MAKES THE BEST POLITICIAN

The application of the above framework to the *Republic* seems at first sight more difficult. In this dialogue, in fact, the figure of the philosopher is both portrayed as an ideal exemplar of man able to achieve perfect knowledge (that in such a case would be *sophos* rather than *philo-sophos*, god rather than man), and regarded in a realistic way as someone who is only comparatively wiser than others. In the definition reported above, though, exactly such a realistic figure of the philosopher is portrayed. It cannot be inferred from it that he presently and durably *owns* the truth he is looking for, *i.e.* a quantity of *sophia* enough to remove definitively his desire for it (*philo-sophia*). In fact Socrates does not state that the philosopher is one who *contemplates* truth, but rather one who *loves* contemplating it. And the prefix *philo-* cannot but have the usual weakening meaning.

The course of book v confirms this hypothesis. If the philosopher treated here were the wise man, Plato would contrast him with a portrayal of an ignorant man, whereas in fact he contrasts him, coining a neologism, with the *philodox*. Why is

this? Evidently because, rigorously speaking, the philosopher is a “non-wise man” just as all others are. The difference between philosophers and non-philosophers must therefore reside elsewhere. It consists in the fact that philosophers *believe in the existence* of immobile realities (476c–d) and turn their interest to them, while other men, even those who are interested in learning (the *philodoxes*), *do not believe in the existence* of such objects (476c, 478e–479a), and thus turn their attention to tangible and transitory things.³³

Both the sceptical and the “conclusivist” interpretations of Platonic philosophy must thus be rejected. Since the philosopher always has an approximate quantity of knowledge, and is therefore not allowed to state that knowledge is impossible, a sceptical reading is misleading. But the same assumption (the philosopher owns *a certain quantity of knowledge*) leads to refutation of the opposite position too. In Plato’s opinion, philosophers are those who in the first place are persuaded of the existence of immobile realities, and in the second place tend to a progressively deeper knowledge of them. They are not those who own real and durable knowledge. “Conclusivists”, both “intuitionists” and the “definitionists” (who admit, as the word itself reveals, a sort of de-finitive knowledge of such realities), do away with the prefix *philo-*: in other words, they think that men can achieve, at least in certain circumstances and as far as some specific objects are concerned, as much knowledge as the gods (*sophia*). Such a hypothesis, though, does not seem to correspond to the Platonic notion of philosopher and philosophy.³⁴

Let us apply these conclusions to the political theory. Philosophers, in order to persuade their fellow citizens to entrust them with ruling the state, must in the first place persuade them of the actual existence of immobile realities, and that the knowledge of them is the only proper guide that can help to solve ethical-political problems. I think Plato tried to achieve such a result thanks to the positive use of Socratic dialectic, which is largely documented in the aporetic

³³ Cf. ch. 8, pp. 161–162.

³⁴ It is not to be thought that Plato understands the gap between philosophy and *sophia* in the sense that while *sophos* owns a *full and complete knowledge of all* truths, the *philo-sophos* owns only a certain number of these truths (although increasable). Plato, in other words, is committed to what Brice Wachterhauser has defined as “a ‘strong’ model of finitude as opposed to a more conventional, “weak” notion of our finitude as knowers” (Wachterhauser 1999, p. 107). Its main reason, however, is quite different from that found in Gadamer’s “Platonism”, since it depends not so much (and not only) on the historical condition of human beings, as it does on Plato’s strong metaphysical claims. Plato places ideas (the source of any truth) in a realm that is beyond the reach of human beings. Being mortal, man can only glimpse them by way of reminiscence. As far as the concept of “finitude” in Plato’s thought is concerned see Hyland (1995).

dialogues. The failure of the definitions suggested by Socrates' interlocutors to solve important ethical issues, together with the failure of these dialogues in general, must lead hearers/readers to acknowledge the necessity that the universals actually exist, although it seems very difficult (or rather impossible) to give a definitive account of them. That said, philosophers must in the second place persuade common citizens that it is philosophers who have the right to inquire into those realities. Here the topic is briefly dealt with by giving a single example, and although it should be treated more thoroughly, the essence of the question is this: philosophers must show their fellow citizens that, if there is a unique good common to all people and community, there is far more hope of knowing some aspects of it by means of the dialectics practised in the Academy, no matter how sophisticated it may appear, than – for instance – by means of the smooth humanistic education of Isocrates.

This process of persuasion is obviously plagued with difficulties, so it should come as no surprise to find that it failed. The range of such difficulties is as wide as the gap dividing the *philo-sophos* from *sophos*. If the philosopher and wise men were one and the same, there would be no difficulty at all, and the *ergon* of politics would come as the immediate and necessary consequence of the acknowledged wisdom of the philosophers. The expert in economy of the *Lysis* (going back to our example) is the picture of the infallible wise man who is acknowledged as such. It is obviously a hypothetical case, not to be found in reality. The core of Plato's political proposal, which is thoroughly consistent and structured in all his works – from the *Republic*, to the *Statesman* up to the *Laws* – consists in showing that what is infallibly true in the ideal paradigm must be true in a proportionally reduced way in the real world. If the expert in economy in the *Lysis* is acknowledged as a very competent, but not infallible man, his neighbours will not automatically entrust him with the management of their patrimony; they will rather ponder the idea and not all will resolve to go through with it. Plato means that it is nevertheless better to rely on an expert, although as a *philo-sophos* “not *sophos*” he is not protected from the possibility of error, rather than entrust a non-competent with the decision (even though this were the directly involved subject). The passengers of a ship in a storm or the sick, for example, surely do not believe that the steersman and the doctor can boast an infallible knowledge, that will always help them to solve all their troubles. However, they obey the experts' prescriptions, rather than follow their own whims, as they are aware that the experts know better.³⁵ This is also true of politics; although there are no acknowledged *sophoi*, who could

³⁵ See. *Theaet.* 170a–b.

infallibly lead the state towards good and happiness, it is nonetheless better to entrust the philosophers with the state than the *philodoxes* – not to speak of the ignorant men – because the philosophers are closer to knowledge than all the others.

This is why a relatively weak interpretation of the Platonic epistemology does not lead to any abrogation of the principle according to which politics is first and foremost a theoretical matter; and why the problem of conciliating Plato's supposed political maximalism with a weak theoretical support, that would possibly make the "practical" help of violence unavoidable, actually does not exist. The quantity of political progress the philosopher can promote exactly matches the quantity of truth he can own and show his fellow citizens. This is why, in the *Republic* and all subsequent dialogues, Plato endeavours in various ways to strengthen the philosopher and philosophy's theoretical claims. Firstly, he shows that in spite of possible difficulties as far as particular learning is concerned, a theoretical survey cannot do without the philosophical assumption that the universal and the one are foundative in relation to the particular and the multiple (*Parmenides*, *Philebus*); then he strongly defends the real efficacy of philosophical dialectics, both against those who thought it was useless from an ethical-political point of view (*Philebus*), and against any possible contaminations with rhetoric (*Phaedrus*) or sophistic (*Sophist*). Lastly – though the three actions are in fact simultaneous – he shows that the object of philosophy is the good in human beings (*Philebus*) and in the cosmos (*Timaeus*).

8. THE MODEL AND ITS APPROXIMATIONS: THE COHERENCE OF PLATO'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

On these grounds, the naturally political vocation of philosophy (which reaches its *climax* in the *Statesman*, in the *Laws* and in the *Seventh Letter*) is once again confirmed. Since we must admit that there neither *sophia* nor *sophos* exists on earth, we are faced with a twofold difficulty. On the one hand, the *philo-sophos* risks not being able to display enough knowledge to be accepted as a ruler. Far worse, however, is the risk that would-be philosophers become tyrants on the false pretension of being *sophoi*, and therefore having the right to rule the city by means of violence. The fact that Plato considered this eventuality worse than the first becomes apparent in the classification of constitutions set forth in the *Statesman*. In this dialogue democracy is said to cause little good and little evil and, because of this, to be not only far better than tyranny, but also than other imperfect forms of lawless constitution (303b). According to Plato, the law is precisely the corrective device in order to avoid this danger. If the ruler of a state is *sophos* (like the gods, or like the perfectly wise men of the ideal state to whom the

Republic refers), the positive law³⁶ becomes unnecessary. The perfect knowledge their souls are endowed with would infallibly lead them to the right decision, with no need to write anything down. The *philo-sophos*, as only relatively good and wise, is of course subject to error. It is therefore necessary to write laws down; and it is also essential, as Plato indefatigably repeats in the *Seventh Letter*, that even those who rule submit to them.³⁷ According to Plato, no matter how competent Dion and his fiends and the academics among them were as *philosophoi*, no matter how capable those to whom he addressed his *Letter* were, none of them could qualify as *sophos* – not even he himself.

In the light of all this, in the passage of the *Seventh Letter* in which he particularly focuses on the suggestions to give to Dion's friends, it becomes clear why Plato expresses the hope that such suggestions are carried out by "one to whom the gods have given a modicum of right opinion" (336e2–3: πάντα τινα ἄνδρα, ᾧ καὶ βραχὺ δόξης ὀρθῆς μετέδωκεν θεία τις τύχη, transl. Morrow).

It could be (wrongly) assumed that the elderly Plato, made cynical and disillusioned by Syracusan events, is settling for a smaller objective: from the rule of wise men practising a pure exercise of dialectics founded on science and with no need for written laws, to the rule of common men, to whom a god donated a gleam of right opinion, and who have to write laws down to commit themselves to them. Actually Platonic thought has not changed in the least. Even in the *Republic*, birth and conservation of philosophical natures depends on τύχη. The *Republic*, moreover, does not aim to show which is the only state worth realizing, but to outline an ideal model from which the principle that must be respected in contingency and historic reality can be drawn: the *wisest* man must rule in any case.³⁸

³⁶ In the *Republic* the noun *nomos* recurs often. However, as Margherita Isnardi Parente noticed, Plato "does not intend this term in the common legal-political sense here" (Isnardi Parente 1996, p. 27).

³⁷ The transition from the ideal condition of rule by infallible wise men to the real one, where all submit to the authority of laws, represents the political aspect of that general way of carrying out the metaphor called "second sailing" (δευτερος πλοῦς) by Plato in three different passages of his work: in the *Statesman* (300c), where the topic just hinted at is discussed; in the *Phaedo* (99d–100a), where it represents the second-best way, provided by *logoi*, to which human knowledge must conform, as it cannot know ideas directly (in the same way by which senses learn their objects); in the *Philebus*, where it represents the move from knowledge of the good which cannot be full and complete to the more reasonable recovery of a way leading to it. For a careful historical-philological survey on the real meaning of the metaphor cf. Martinelli Tempesta, (2003). On its political use see Ausland (2002).

³⁸ See ch. 8, pp. 160–161.

On the other hand ὀρθὴ δόξα (“right opinion”) is such an ambiguous notion in Platonic thought that schematic or scholastic interpretations are unavoidably misleading. If “right opinion” identifies, as in some passages of the *Meno*, a completely irrational possession of correct notions arbitrarily donated by the gods, it has of course not much to do with philosophy.³⁹ Moreover, there is no doubt that Platonic epistemology is basically marked by a clear-cut difference between *doxa* (= opinion, and then fallible knowledge) and *epistēmē* (infallible knowledge). However, as infallible knowledge is precluded to man in his mortal status, the difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher occurs within *doxa* and its different levels of truth. The philosopher does not content himself with having “right opinions”, but tries to understand in general *why* these are true (or “rights”). His distinctive skill consists in the repeated action of λόγον δοῦναι (“to give an account”), by means of which he moves towards science, showing knowledge that is incomparably superior to that of non-philosophers, the *philodoxes*, and of those displaying a “right opinion” intended only as irrational capacity to guess. Such a knowledge could be named *epistēmē* in the strict sense (i.e., “science”), if compared to ignorance or the non-philosophers’ irrational “right opinion”; but this does not mean that the issue of “right opinion” (ὀρθὴ δόξα) has really been set aside. The knowledge of the philosopher is a kind of ὀρθὴ δόξα only as far as it is not identical to σοφία, and cannot “give an account” (λόγον δοῦναι) only as far as *absolute, apodictic and definite* accounts (*logoi*) are concerned. In fact, it deals actually with nothing but *logoi*.

The knowledge of the philosopher, no matter how high or low his level of approximation to truth, is therefore always a “right opinion plus an account” (ὀρθὴ δόξα μετὰ λόγου). This is exactly the third definition of knowledge put forward by Theaetetus in the dialogue bearing his name. The reason why it is nevertheless rejected, as I attempted to show in the previous chapters, is that the philosopher’s knowledge is not infallible like the *epistēmē* sought by the *Theaetetus*, nor is this science to be found into the human world. Only the gods are infallible. And consequently even the best possible constitution will still be nothing more than a rough imitation of its ideal paradigm.

³⁹ This condition is indeed attributed to non-philosophical figures as politician or poets, Cf. Trabattoni (1985–1986).

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