

# The Meaning of Dialectic in Plato

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What is the meaning of dialectic in the Platonic dialogues? Plato struggled with this question and his words manifest this struggle, though no definitive answer is ever forthcoming. In this essay, I have a two-fold proposal: first, to present five questions which focus on what I take to be the key factors in Plato's use of dialectic; secondly, to draw out a response to this set of questions from the following works: Theaetetus, Parmenides, Sophist, Statesman and the Seventh Letter. Some of these dialogues do not fully answer each of the questions. In such cases, treatment of the question is concise. Some of the dialogues also intimate an answer which is given more exhaustive consideration in a dialogue which precedes the five mentioned. In this event, I briefly describe the connection between the previous dialogue and the one at hand. The essay concludes with my own reflections on Platonic dialectic. In particular, I take up the issue of whether dialectic is a method of discovery or a method of clarification and attempt to resolve this apparent tension by arguing that pedagogy and scientific inquiry are not dichotomized pursuits for Plato.

## The Questions

1. Each dialogue utilizes or exhibits several different dialectical methods, dialectic itself being the broad notion of a question-answer procedure which, if engaged in by the proper participants, can be used to bring forth for examination the structure of reality. The method was originally devised by Socrates to induce humility and aporia in the interlocutor. This negative dialectic is referred to as the Socratic elenchus. After this preliminary "catharsis," Socrates then used the epagoge, or an inductive method in a loose sense, to consider the similarity between particular propositions and thereby move to a more general or universal proposition which subsumes the individual cases beneath it.

Plato takes the dialectical method over from Socrates and grounds Socrates' search for universals or definitions in a metaphysical scheme--the hierarchy of

forms. Hence, the dialectical movement gains a permanent terminus, a metaphysical underpinning, in the transition to Plato via the Parmenidean influence. Plato does not wholly abandon the features of the Socratic dialectic but incorporates them into his more sophisticated version. Platonic dialectic is primarily the method of collection and division; other subsidiary methods, however, are used to assist the method of analysis and synthesis, namely, the method of analogy and the method of hypothesis. One of the questions I try to answer in this essay is how the dialectical method develops in these middle and later Platonic dialogues. Following this inquiry into the developmental sequence, I describe the salient points of the demonstrations offered by Plato.

2. Philosophic inquiry has a goal or aim for Plato and the dialectical method is preliminary or propaedeutic for this goal. Dialectic is the path the soul must traverse in order to glimpse the true realities and, ultimately, to be brought within the aura of the highest reality, the Good. The eternal eidē themselves, however, can only be apprehended by an immediate intuitive grasp. Dialectic only brings these truths "into view from a distance."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the dialectical process is pulled along or directed by the soul's vague intimation of that which transcends the essences, the Good Itself. The dialogue the Symposium displays this vague intimation as an intellectual longing for the full-faced view of that Beauty from which all particular beautiful things are derived. My second question is: how does each dialogue contribute to an understanding of dialectic as a "turning away" or reversal of one's orientation from the sensible world and a recapturing of our soul's pre-existent direction towards the forms and, more significantly, beyond being?

3. The dialectical path, however, is not to be traveled alone but, at least initially, with a guide or teacher. Dialectic is a conversational mode both for Plato and Socrates, an intellectual activity engaged in by two participants--the teacher poses a question to which the student or interlocutor responds. In the Socratic dialogues, the question-answer form has two specific pedagogical goals. Negatively, it is to strip intellectual conceit from the student by showing him that what he thought was knowledge, is, at best, doxa, that is, opinion or belief, and thereby evoke a state of aporia or puzzlement. This aporia often has a positive repercussion. The student is enlisted in the cooperative search for the truth, or, more precisely, in the use of the question-answer model to discover, by the method of induction, the definitions of his words. This Socratic method of induction or epagogē proceeds by discovering what is common among enumerated instances.

The two participants are an integral part of the dialectical process, both structurally and dispositionally. With regard to structure, the teacher usually takes the role of questioner, inviting the student to make statements which are then subjected to searching challenges or, at least, requesting the student to affirm or deny certain propositions presented to him. In the earlier Socratic dialogues, the interlocutor was impelled to formulate his beliefs as hypotheses and the teacher, in turn, would draw out the implications of such hypotheses in order to examine their consistency or inconsistency with other beliefs held as true. In the present dialogues, I trace a reduction in the actual contribution made by the interlocutor, though structurally he remains indispensable for affirming or denying the proposition put forth. Thus, I inquire into the change in the formal role of the questions and answers in each dialogue.

This, however, hardly exhausts my concern with the participants. On the contrary, a certain type of person is required for the progress of dialectic. The teacher or guide makes this selection based upon the intellectual and moral potential of the individual. Plato describes these preconditions in a quasi-metaphorical tone: the teacher must discern whether a particular person glimpsed the forms in his pre-natal existence long enough to enable him, through dialectic, to recollect this last vision. By this metaphor, Plato seems to indicate that a degree of native intelligence and an attraction to the virtuous life as exemplified by the teacher, are signs of the student worthy of dialectical training. Thus, the second part of this third inquiry involves how the dialogues clarify the aptitude for engagement in dialectic.

4. The fourth question I present is concerned with the effect dialectic has on the participants. Does it improve their mental acuity or moral temperament and, if so, how does dialectic accomplish this? Plato describes three types of paths that can be taken to come within sight of the eidos: dialectic is the path by knowledge, by rational discourse or a discursive reenactment of the logos. And, as I intend to show in each dialogue, by engaging in this reflective process the participants come to a clearer understanding of the logos itself and its limitations. Hence, another effect to be detected in each dialogue is the logos, the linguistic articulation and clarification of the structure of reality. But dialectic is not the only route to the true reality. There are also the paths by love and by death or purification. Neither of these alternate paths play a dominant role in the dialogues under consideration. Nonetheless, they complement and reinforce the dialectical process.

Eros is the bond that unites the teacher and student in friendship and trust. So, by this union of

kindred spirits, the dialectical process is guarded from any tendency to veer off into eristics or polemics, the spurious forms of dialogical exchange. The eidos is the source of the erotic pull towards the Beautiful. Sensuous beauty on the level of images can be the occasion for the soul's reflection on the form of Beauty so that the soul, in seeking the origin of beautiful things, is drawn to pure form. Furthermore, the path by death or purification is always present--the paradigmatic teacher, Socrates, exemplifying the liberation of the soul from sensible desires and sufferings. A condition for living the life of philosophical inquiry is this death to bodily preoccupations in order to freely engage in dialectic with like companions. Thus, as corollary to my question on the effect of dialectic, is the question of whether these other dimensions of the journey toward the Good by way of mania or liberation from the bodily are present.

5. My fifth and final question regards the role of metaphor and imagery in the dialogues as a counterbalance for dialectic, for the strictly rational quest to understand and formulate the ontological structure. I argue for a dialectical tension within dialectic itself, between dialectic as rational reflection and another mode of understanding, the imaginative intuition. Thus, I cite examples in the dialogues illustrating a metaphorical counterpoise. At the outset, let me offer this hypothesis for the interplay of metaphor and rational discourse: the soul is the metaxy, the mediator between the worlds of the sensible and of the ideal. The soul can move closer to the eidos by participation in dialogos (dialogue), the vocal expression of the true combination of the forms, and thereby come closer to understanding the forms themselves. Logos can never actually reach the eidē, fully and clearly apprehend them, because logos is fastened to the world of becoming, to images. Yes, it moves from those images to a more pristine abstract understanding, but language, like the soul, is a mediator between the worlds of becoming and being. The images and metaphors that Plato elicits are not to be looked upon as impediments to the ascent to the forms. On the contrary, they offer clues to the eidos that often correct faulty or ambiguous words or concepts.

In the spirit of dialectic, then, let me turn to the dialogues and press five questions:

1. How is the method demonstrated?
2. What does the dialogue say about the goal or aim of dialectic?
3. What is the relationship between the questioner and the respondent?
4. Does participation in the conversation have an edifying or enriching effect upon the dialogical partners?

5. When and why does Plato appeal to metaphor to further the conversation's progress?

The format of my answers is to examine what occurs on three different levels in the dialogues and, by doing so, elicit suitable responses. The levels are, first, the actual content of the dialogue; second, what occurs between the two participants; third, the effect that following the dialogue has on the reader.

Theaetetus

The Theaetetus is a transitional dialogue insofar as the method demonstrated is the Socratic elenchus, but the total effect of the dialogue is an appeal for an ontological grounding of the knowing process. Theaetetus and Socrates actually discuss the nature of knowledge and, in the course of their conversation, hit upon no satisfactory definition. The structure of their exchange illustrates the Socratic dialectic wherein the interlocutor posits an hypothesis, in this case on the nature of knowledge, and the teacher draws out the consequences of holding this position. This method is used negatively to refute the claim that we derive knowledge from sense perception. Hence, the dialogue in its entirety is an example of the Socratic elenchus. The interlocutor, Theaetetus, proposes four different definitions of knowledge, each of which is challenged by Socrates, shown to involve inconsistencies or untenable conclusions and is set aside in favor of a more sophisticated hypothetical definition which takes into account the limitations of the preceding one. At the end of the conversation, no satisfactory definition has been brought forth, yet a deepened understanding of the subject matter occurs.

The discovery of the indispensability of the forms takes place both on the first and third levels. The discovery is made by examining two other hypotheses in addition to Theaetetus', the Protagorean and Heracleitian, and finding that neither on its own merits provides an adequate definition of knowledge. The Protagorean and Heracleitian positions fail because, like the proposition that knowledge is sense perception, they attempt to ground the dialectical process, that is, the process of coming to know, in the world of becoming, the world of a plurality of individual concrete things. Protagoras' doctrine of man as the measure of all things proves unsatisfactory as a definition of knowledge because he asserts only a subjective criterion of truth and such a view precludes any arbitration between conflicting opinions. The Heracleitian position likewise has a critical weakness: without a stationary object to which concepts and worlds refer, all discourse is rendered impossible. If the totality is in constant flux, nothing can be predicated of

another because nothing has a definite characteristic. Moreover, the Heraclitian theory is itself a performatory contradiction because the very articulation of the theory implies that the words used have meanings and, therefore, refer to something stable. The upshot of the examination of the doctrine of becoming is the recognition, had vaguely by the participants, but more clearly by the reader, that the dialectician is in search of a permanent reality. Socrates' next move is to consider the antithetical position to a world wholly of becoming--the Parmenidean. The implication of demonstrating the untenable conclusion of the Heraclitian position is that its alternative might have something right about it. Socrates, however, does not return to the Parmenidean position.

Let me shift now to the second level of the dialogue to note what has transpired in the structure of the conversation. (My understanding of these features of dialectic will constitute a shift to the third level.) The flaw in the Protagorean doctrine is that without some reference to a norm or standard, differences of opinion cannot be settled. Ironically, the dialectical exchange between Theaetetus and Socrates is an implicit alternative to the Protagorean position. At nearly every step of the conversation, Theaetetus' affirmative response indicates that the dialectician and his apprentice are engaged in coming to an agreement about the meaning of knowledge. The question-answer structure, then, implies that consensus between the participants is a fundamental characteristic of both coming to know something and tacitly understanding the learning process itself. In this dialogue, Plato does not state the basis for this consensus, but the reader anticipates the theory of forms or essences.

Plato indicates another feature of dialectic when he proposes the Parmenidean position but never explicitly mentions it again in the dialogue. Genuine dialectic progresses at a leisurely pace, has a certain free play in its movement which allows it to drop one argument for a more promising one. The noticeable absence of the Parmenidean doctrine sets up a tension for the reader--we know that his position contains a clue to Plato's resolution of the problem of what knowledge is. Plato adopts the notions of permanence and unity from Parmenides' monism and thus we can surmise that thought and its sensuous expression in language somehow unify the plurality in the perceptual field by reference to a permanent standard.

Another critical feature of dialectic displayed on all three levels of the dialogue is the reflective turn away from sense perceptions to the mind itself in order to locate the objects of knowledge. In the struggle to work out a better definition, Theaetetus and Socrates probe cognitive activity itself for an explanation of how knowledge takes place. Plato has recourse to

metaphor at this point in the dialectic as a tool to lift the explanation of what knowing is from the level of the concrete to the abstract. This move brings to mind the explanation of the ascent to knowledge in terms of the Divided Line. In the Republic, Plato described the movement away from the world of becoming to that of being as a four-fold step starting with reflections of sensible objects, then ascending to these objects of perceptions, or what Plato refers to as images, to mathematical entities and finally to the eide or essential realities themselves. Each level corresponds with a degree of knowledge attained:

answering to these four sections, assume these four affections occurring in the soul--intellection or reason for the highest, understanding for the second, belief for the third, and for the last, picture thinking or conjecture--and arrange them in a proportion, considering that they participate in clearness and precision in the same degree as their objects partake of truth and reality.<sup>2</sup>

In the Theaetetus, Plato uses the metaphor of an aviary stocked with birds to account for the knower looking inward for the objects to which his thoughts and words refer. Though the aviary image has shortcomings because it cannot account for the possibility of false judgments, nonetheless, it is a sensuous analogue for the dialectician's search for essences, for the permanent abstract realities upon which to affix the meaning of words. This image enables Theaetetus to ascend from the level of true opinion to that of understanding. Therefore, at this new level, knowledge means giving a rational account of a true opinion. By giving a rational account, Socrates means that Theaetetus should be able to justify his belief in logos--rational discourse. Thus, in the concluding section of the dialogue, Theaetetus and Socrates attempt a primitive analysis of the structure of language in order to ascertain the conditions for knowing something. Propositions are a complex network of words which can be reduced to their components. But words, as names, refer to primary elements for which no account can be given. Dialectic, on the first level, then, is roughly formulated as the interaction between simple essences which are intuitively known and a combination of these elements which are known by rational reflection.

The goal of dialectic is stated on the level of the conversation by Socrates: "That is why we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other, and that means becoming like the divine so far as we can, and that again is to become righteous with the help of wisdom."<sup>3</sup> On the second level, the level of

the demonstration of dialectic in the dialogue, "becoming like the divine" is exemplified in the relationship between Socrates and Theaetetus. Theaetetus entrusts himself to his teacher by his honest responses. Theaetetus takes the risk of having his ideas examined and refuted by his teacher. Why is Theaetetus willing to take this risk?

Here I shift to the third level of dialectic, my own understanding of the dialogue. Theaetetus intuits the Good in Socrates, the intellectual midwife who has no dogmatic positions to force upon his students, but instead encourages them to give birth to their own opinions, to put them to the dialectical test for their rational content. Yes, it is true that Socrates refutes all of Theaetetus' hypotheses on the nature of knowledge. However, Theaetetus has come much closer to the Truth by entering into dialogue with Socrates. Perhaps there is no form called "knowledge." Rather, we come to an understanding of knowledge by both participating in and reflecting on the dialectical process.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates invites Theaetetus to join him in dialogue so that Theaetetus may display his reputed qualities of virtue and intelligence. At the end, Theaetetus has a better understanding of the meaning of these qualities because Socrates has brought them to fuller fruition. Socrates expresses the effect of the dialectical process on Theaetetus: "Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh, Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today's scrutiny, and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know."<sup>4</sup> But has Theaetetus really been left without any positive understanding? Are these the words of the ironic man who has given Theaetetus something far richer than a pat definition of knowledge? Socrates has devoted time and attention, the gifts of friendship, to Theaetetus in whom Socrates also intuits the Good. Theaetetus, in turn, is bound to Socrates out of love and respect because Socrates has taken him along the path toward the Good by knowledge and love.

### Parmenides

In the Parmenides, the hypothesis dropped in the Theaetetus is repositied in order to subject it to a dialectical examination. Thus, the explicit theme of the dialogue is the doctrine of Being, the view that all of reality is a permanent unity. Socrates and Zeno initiate the dialectical exchange by inquiry into the problem of how the forms combine between themselves. They mention the participation of individual things in the



forms but quickly pass over this relation because contrary forms can be predicated of the same individual. Predication of many forms to one individual does not present problems for the dialectical mode of thought and language. However, the participation of a unitary form in another does entail difficulty. Hence, the genuine problem for Plato in the dialogue is the nature of the participation among the forms themselves. The Parmenidean doctrine is a clue to why dialectic has trouble reckoning with the relation between the forms. The puzzle is how the One, a unity, can be predicated of Many, a plurality. The problem is set up in the second half of the dialogue with Parmenides' defense of his own position by attempting to predicate existence and non-existence of the One.

In the context of the dialogue, the first level, Parmenides offers a rule for the dialectical exercise: the skilled dialectician must draw out the consequences of both affirming and denying a proposition. The second half of the dialogue is a frustrated attempt to employ this rule on the doctrine of Being. The predication of existence and non-existence to six elementary notions--unity, plurality, rest, motion, similarity and difference--engenders a host of inconsistencies on the first and second levels of the dialectic. The reader, however, must take this negative conclusion to a higher level and ask what this outcome reveals about dialectic. Has Parmenides given us an example of mere sophistry or has Plato taught us something about the reaches of dialectic?

I argue for the latter of these possibilities. Early on in the dialogue, Parmenides describes dialectic as a "preliminary training" for knowledge of the forms themselves.<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that in the Republic, Plato specifies types of training which facilitate the mind's turn away from sensible reality toward the eternal truths. Geometry, astronomy, rhetoric and music have only instrumental value; they are propaedeutic for engagement in dialectic because they train the soul to orient its view to the eidōs.<sup>6</sup> Now Parmenides' confusion indicates that dialectic itself is preliminary because the most abstract terms seem to lie outside its reaches. There are two explanations of why these terms cannot be rationally apprehended in themselves: these forms may be so abstract that they lie beyond logos or they may be so general that they pervade all forms and things. The terms unity, plurality, rest, motion, similarity and difference are perhaps, then, the ubiquitous conditions for knowing. On the other hand, being and non-being seem to be boundary terms which situate logos--the articulation of the structure of reality--in the intermediary region of becoming. Another limitation of Plato's formulation of dialectic is also revealed in the unsuccessful attempt to predicate existence and non-existence. Plato tries

to reduce the relation of identity (and non-identity) to one of predication.

The second half of the Parmenides thus unveils those elementary universals which constitute the upper limit of the hierarchical order of eide. Dialectic moves upward towards these richest and fullest realities but they cannot be combined and, consequently, cannot be rationally apprehended. On the other hand, a downward movement from the rightly intuited genus toward the indivisible species was intimated in the Theaetetus by Socrates' discussion of definition as knowledge of the individuating characteristic.<sup>7</sup> In the Parmenides, Zeno describes a key feature of the Platonic dialectic; the first step in this method is looking over many particulars in order to discover what is common to all. The search for the right genus is one of the tasks of the skilled dialectician "because most people are unaware that you cannot hit upon truth and gain understanding without ranging in this way over the whole field."<sup>8</sup> Finally, on the first level of the dialogue, Parmenides maintains that the eidos can only be "seen" or intuitively apprehended by those who have souls akin to the divine: "Only a man of exceptional gifts will be able to see that a form, or essence just by itself, does exist in each case, and it will require someone still more remarkable to discover it and to instruct another who has thoroughly examined all these difficulties."<sup>9</sup> Hence, the effect of dialectical training is to prepare for this intuitive grasp of the form in itself.

### Sophist

The Sophist most clearly illustrates the Platonic, as opposed to the Socratic, dialectic--the method of collection and division. The ostensible theme of the dialogue is the search for the correct definition of the sophist. However, on the second level, the actual development of dialectic, Plato shows that the method of synthesis and analysis uncovers the true combination of the forms. In the context of the dialogue, the Athenian Stranger sets forth the task for dialectic:

now that we have agreed that the kinds stand toward one another in the same way as regards blending, is not some science needed as a guide on the voyage of discourse, if one is to succeed in pointing out which kinds are consonant, and which are incompatible with one another--also--whether there are certain kinds that pervade them all and connect them so that they can blend, and again, where there are divisions, whether there are certain others that traverse wholes and are responsible for the division?<sup>10</sup>

The relationship of language to the order of the forms is also explicitly stated in the dialogue. The Stranger uses the metaphor of weaving to explain the relation of the forms to each other. The aptness of the metaphor is best viewed in the structure of language. Here, two different forms of speech, nouns and verbs, analogous to the warp and the woof of the woven fabric, interweave to form statements.<sup>11</sup> A true statement, then, is one which correctly maps the genuine "interweave" of the forms. The reader, however, reflecting upon the text, can come to understand the Platonic ontology as a vast network of interconnected essences. Rational discourse is the articulation of this complexity.

Now let us return to the second level, the dialogical structure, to highlight Theaetetus' and the Stranger's exhibition of dialectic. The Stranger anticipates the difficulty of tracing the definition of the sophist. Before embarking on this forbidding journey, the guide suggests that Theaetetus and he examine a corollary dialectical move--the method of analogy. The dialectician selects a genus which he anticipates will be similar in structure to the word 'sophist' but less complicated. So, they make a trial run on the definition of the angler. Upon arrival at a satisfactory division of the genus down to the indivisible species, in this case the definition of an angler, the dialectician and his apprentice reflect back on the process in order to extrapolate the type of questions asked that brought about a successful division. Next, they apply this set of questions to 'sophist'. As the dialogue progresses, six different divisions are made and each terminates in one of the many guises of the sophist. However, none of these divisions is looked upon as a failure because the six divisions as a group are, in effect, a collection. The divisions illustrate the dialectician's struggle to intuitively apprehend the right genus. The correct selection culminates, if the proper divisions are made, in the true definition of 'sophist'. The Stranger offers a description of the method of division: "Holding fast to the characters of which the Sophist partakes until we have stripped off all that he has in common with others and left only the nature that is peculiar to him."<sup>12</sup> The apparent goal of the dialogue, the definition of 'sophist', is set in contrast to what occurs, the dialectician's demonstration of his art.

The participants in this dialogue deserve mention because they indicate a structural development in the dialectical process. Plato reduces the role of the interlocutor to that of merely affirming or denying propositions. This reduction indicates a structural transition from dialectic as an actual conversation between two people to dialectic as the thought process itself. "[T]hinking and discourse are the same thing,

except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind itself, without spoken sound."<sup>13</sup> Taking this comment to the third level of the dialogue, I interpret the significance of this shift as the intended effect of training in dialectic. The question-answer structure should eventually be internalized by the student and thereby result in the student's own ability to think correctly. It is fitting that Plato early in the dialogue suggests that dialectic is the purifying of the mind from ignorance.<sup>14</sup> The movement to purify the mind of its ignorance is analogous to the method of division in dialectic wherein the genus is submitted to "purification" by division in order to arrive at the indivisible species. Thus, in this dialogue a coalescence of the paths by moral purification and by knowledge occurs.

Finally, I would gravely neglect the Sophist without a consideration of the subject matter of the dialogue, the tethering down to the true definition of the sophist. In the process of demonstrating the dialectical method, a picture of the sophist emerges as a foil to the genuine lover of wisdom. The dialogists gradually establish a dichotomy between the sophist and the philosopher which can be capsulized in the following three contrasts. First, as propaedeutic for the dialectical practice, the philosopher cleanses himself of all presuppositions by a confession of ignorance unlike the sophist who, ironically, is furthest from the truth when he arrogantly claims to possess it. "When a person supposes that he knows, and does not know; this appears to be the great source of all the errors of the intellect."<sup>15</sup> Secondly, as we see this point unfold before us, the philosopher pursues true definitions, whereas the sophist avoids them and, instead, revels in linguistic imbroglios. We hear the Stranger express this in an interrogative: "When we say that he deceives with that semblance we spoke of and that his art is a practice of deception, shall we be saying that, as the effect of his art, our minds think what is false, or what shall we mean?"<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, the genuine dialectician lures his student to abstract heights by the art of persuasion while the sophist uses coercive means such as subtle psychological manipulation in order to trip his victims up in contradictions and, thereby, "win" his point. Moreover, the dramatic tension in this dialogue reaches a denouement with the third contrast. The conversation comes to rest on the definition of the sophist as one who feigns dialectic through the specious art of contradiction. Nevertheless, the dialecticians achieve a theoretical triumph over this conniver by faithfully continuing the dialectical division until the method settles on the individuating difference--the sophist as mimic of the very art used to capture his correct definition.

## Statesman

The explicit theme of the Statesman is, again, the search for an exact definition. However, the underlying theme, the second level of the dialogue, is the search for a formula which orders the division of the genus. The dialectician, the Athenian Stranger, expresses the real goal of the dialogue within the text:

[W]e must train ourselves to give and to understand a rational account of every existent thing. For the existents which have no visible embodiment, the existents which are of highest value and chief importance, are demonstrable only by reason and are not to be apprehended by any other means. All our present discussions have the aim of training us to apprehend this highest class of existents.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, shifting to the third level of the dialogue, I contend that Plato seeks a formula for the cleavage of the genus in order to insure the most nearly perfect matching of the structure of classification with the hierarchical arrangement of the *eidē*.

Let us proceed to the second level of the dialogue and follow the Stranger's struggle to tease out the exact formula for classification. His first rendering is a rule of thumb which prescribes a subdivision that roughly splits the class down the middle. The Stranger, on the first level of the dialogue, demonstrates this subdivision as the student and he progress toward the definition of 'Statesman'. He corrects the Younger Socrates' impulse to immediately apportion off a species from a genus rather than follow a symmetrical pattern downward to the correct classification. The Stranger also indicates that dialectic gains its objectivity precisely because it follows the real order of forms. The dialectician reveals this characteristic by his repeated admonitions against the Younger Socrates who allows his subjective biases to influence his choice of division. For instance, the student suggests that the species "man" be apportioned off the class "animal." However, the teacher insists that the youth separated "man" off too soon in the general division. The teacher illustrates this mistake by proposing another animal capable of rational thought, the crane, who would also tend to separate off the species of which he is a member too early. Here Plato presses the point that dialectic itself is not the source of its own ordering. Instead, it is a tool whereby those of a philosophical disposition can articulate the structure of the real. Or, the point put more succinctly, the Platonic ontology has primacy while thought and lan-

guage are the human attempts to approach the divine by understanding and expressing its structure.

The Stranger discovers the formula for the right division further along in the dialogue in the notion of the art of measurement. This notion is subdivided into things measured relative to each other and things measured according to their relation of resemblance to a fixed norm. The due measure is the standard which makes art and an objective judgment of excess and defect possible. On the first level of the dialogue, the Stranger asserts that dialectic itself is based on a norm "due measure": "[W]hen one day we come to give a full exposition of true accuracy in dialectic method, we shall find the need of this postulate concerning due measure . . . ." <sup>18</sup> Dialectic resembles the due measure when the philosopher can correctly analyze a class of things into the complete myriad of indivisible species and, also, correctly synthesize many different things under their genus. <sup>19</sup>

In the context of the dialogue, a corollary to analysis and synthesis emerges. The Stranger explains the method of example:

It operates, does it not, when a factor identical with a factor in a less-known object is rightly believed to exist in some other better-known object in quite another sphere of life? This common factor in each object, when it has been made the basis of a parallel examination of them both, makes it possible for us to achieve a single true judgment about each of them as forming one of a pair. <sup>20</sup>

On the second level of the dialogue, the Stranger and the Younger Socrates illustrate the method of example. They want to know whether the notion of the "tendance" of the human community is the proper genus for the definition of the Statesman. They are unclear about the meaning of 'tendance' but think that it vaguely resembles the notion of weaving. Thus, they apply the method of analysis to 'weaving' in order to clarify the meaning of 'tendance'. They feel confident that they have found the right genus because both the art of weaving and the art of tending mankind operate on the principle of due measure. The genuine Statesman weaves his citizenry together into a harmonious whole by finding the proper hierarchy of their skills and professions and the proper balance of their temperaments. But the method of example can also be taken to the third level of the dialogue. The dialectician also follows the due measure of division in order to find true definitions.

## Seventh Letter

The final work I probe for answers concerning the development of the Platonic dialectic is the Seventh Letter. A pronounced structural change occurs: the question-answer format conducted by two participants, the teacher and student, is abandoned, at least ostensibly. However, I argue that Plato reveals the intention of dialectical training in this dialogue. Dialectic as rational discourse is eventually internalized and becomes the form of rational thought. On the second level of the dialogue, Plato demonstrates this internalization. This is the dialectician par excellence carrying on an inner dialogue with himself.

On the first level of the dialogue, Plato formulates the dialectical process as a five-fold scheme of name; description; image; knowledge or understanding of the object; and the true reality. While this scheme is not a definition of dialectic, it is the dialectician's attempt to give a rational account or explanation of knowledge by listing its components and describing their interaction. The order of the scheme itself marks the ascent to full knowledge, the experience of the eidē themselves, through logos. First, words are questioned in order to better understand their meanings or definitions. Second, the description itself is worked out by turning to definitions. Third, there is the examination of concrete instances, whether in the form of objects or representations of object. Fourth, one turns to the mind's own activity, the source of understanding and true opinion where the mind directs its inner vision to the essences, the true realities. Rational thought is an ongoing interplay between the first four components. However, logos is not capable of bridging the gap between the conception and the true reality. Plato describes the leap from rational apprehension to an immediate intuitive apprehension.

Hardly after practicing detailed comparisons of names and definitions and visual and other sense perceptions, after scrutinizing them in benevolent disputation by the use of question and answer without jealousy, at last in a flash understanding of each blazes up, and the mind, as it exerts all its powers to the limit of human capacity, is flooded with light.<sup>21</sup>

The metaphor of light is the expression which most closely resembles an intuitive grasp. Logos itself is inadequate because it is discursive, bound to the realm of becoming, to the sensuous. It must by its very nature remain fluid, alive, inadequate, but still indispensable.

Plato emphasizes the nature of logos by contrasting it with its derivative image, written prose. He warns

his readers against encasing the living reality of logos in a static mode of expression. The written word separates the thinking process from its articulation. Consequently, prose must always be interpreted and is, therefore, vulnerable to misinterpretation. This misinterpretation is possible because the written word cannot correct the reader who posits a faulty hypothesis on the meaning of the text. The written word is the thought process rigidified, the effete imitation of the true reality of the questions and answers. The primary reason, then, for avoiding prose is that it thwarts the spirit of inquiry. Plato's paramount concern is the continuation of the philosophical conversation, not what any single philosopher might contribute as an answer. Finally, the aspiring philosopher cannot learn dialectic from the written word because dialectic can only be transmitted from teacher to student through mutual participation in the process.

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it into words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.<sup>22</sup>

This quotation from the Seventh Letter provides a springboard for my concluding appraisal of the meaning of Platonic dialectic. These concluding comments are from the stance of the third level, the reader's participation and consequent reflection on the dialogues. What does Plato really accomplish by means of his dialogues? He provides dialectical instruction for the reader both by the subject matter discussed in the dialogues, the first level, and the structure of the interchange between the dialogical partners, the second level. I, the reader, bring the dialectical training to the third level when I reflect on the first and second levels and come to a clear understanding of dialectic. By taking me through his dialogues, Plato, in effect, teaches me how to think more clearly and correctly, or, what is the same, to think rationally. Is dialectic a method of discovery or one of clarification? Both, though the two modes are not an identity. In my attempt to clarify my understanding of the essential character of reality, I also discover what the structure of that reality is. Dialectic is the critical link between thought and reality.

By raising my understanding to the level of language, rational discourse, I also find or come to know the abstract structure of reality, the eidos. My entering into rational thought and discourse is not an



event but a process which draws me closer to the real. Dialectic, therefore, is the tool by which I maintain my intellectual openness, my wonder about life. It is the path that allows me to put a question to Being and await a response.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Paul Friedlander, Plato--An Introduction (Princeton, Bollinger Series LIX, 1973), p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Plato, The Collected Dialogues of Plato, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 747, 513e.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 881, 176b.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 919, 210c.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 930, 135d.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 753-763, 521e-531d.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 918, 209d.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 931, 136d.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 929, 135b.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 998, 153c.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 1009, 262d.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 1012, 264e.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 1011, 263e.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 911, 229a.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 972, 229c.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 984, 240d.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 1053, 285e.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 1052, 284d.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 1052, 285b.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 1044, 278c.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 1591, 344b.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 1589, 341d.

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