Dialectic and Dialogue

This is the talk I gave when the City of Stuttgart did me the honor of awarding me the Hegel prize. Since I was the first non-European philosopher to receive this award, I interpreted the occasion as marking another step in the remarkable rapprochement that is now taking place between what for a time seemed two distinct, even hostile, philosophical methods, attitudes and traditions. What we are witnessing is, of course, really no more than the re-engagement of traditions that share a common heritage. But this makes it no less surprising, since as we know it is those who are closest in their presuppositions who are most apt to exaggerate and dwell on their differences. To understand is not to forgive, and to half-understand is all too often to reject.

The assumption that there are two radically different traditions is not restricted to continents or countries; the sense that there is a great philosophical divide is perhaps stronger within my country than it is in Europe. I recently read a history of the development of philosophy from Husserl to the present by a fine scholar who was a classmate of mine at Harvard in the late 30s. As far as one can tell, nothing that happened in England, Australia, or the United States, from Russell and Moore to the present day, contributed anything of serious interest to philosophy. His index mentions exactly one English speaking philosopher, and then only to attack him as a shallow commentator on German and French thinkers. (Of course he also ignores the influence of Frege, the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein, and the Polish logicians.) I am glad to say I do not find this attitude widespread today in Germany. The present volume [Language, Mind and Epistemology, ed. G. Preyer et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994)] is one among a number of evidences of the new openness to the pleasures and advantages of the
free exchange of ideas drawn from philosophical cultures that until recently often seemed so disparate as to preclude productive conversation.

When I chose it, I was unaware that the title I had given this talk was nearly identical with the English title of a book of essays on Plato by another recipient of the Hegel prize, Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer.\(^1\) The coincidence of titles was not completely accidental, however. Some half a century ago, when I was writing my doctoral dissertation on Plato’s *Philebus*, I discovered that by far the most profound commentary on the *Philebus* was Professor Gadamer’s published dissertation.\(^2\) So there is a long history to our shared interest in Plato, the dialectical method, and problems of interpretation. It is natural that Hegel should provide another bridging element.

The *Philebus* was one of Plato’s last dialogues, and in it Socrates makes his last appearance as principle interlocutor. It is remarkable that after the didactic splendors of the middle and other late dialogues, Plato here returns to the elenctic method of his early writings, the inconclusive dialectic of conversational give and take, thesis and rebuttal, that we correctly think of as typical of Socrates. What is so special about this method, and why should anyone believe or expect that it would produce valuable results?

In its simplest form, the elenchus involves just two people, one who asks and one who answers. The questioner has some portentous question: what is courage, what is justice, what is virtue? When an answer has been elicited, the questioner then sets about proving to the answerer that his answer is inconsistent with other things he believes. The answerer now tries to amend or replace the original answer in order to bring his answer into line with his other professed beliefs. This process can continue through a number of steps, but it never arrives at a satisfactory conclusion. Those are the bare bones of the method; as fleshed out in the Socratic dialogues, there are additional features that attract our attention. The answerer is usually someone who claims, or should be in a position to claim, that he knows the answer: he is a wealthy landowner who professes to know what piety is, or a general who.

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should know what courage is. The elenctic treatment discloses his ignorance of what he pretends to know. Given the inconclusive outcome, the method seems designed more to discomfit the victim than to discover the truth.

And how could this procedure discover truth? The original answer proffered by the respondent is shown to be inconsistent with other things he believes, and this is treated as showing that the original answer is false; but logic cannot take us this far. If each proposition in a set of mutually inconsistent propositions is required for inconsistency, then withdrawing any proposition in the set is enough to produce consistency. If consistency is the sole aim, Socrates’ respondents could as well cleave to their original answers by abandoning some subsequent admission. Worse still, there is no reason to suppose any proposition in a consistent set is true. The most that can be said for the elenchus is apparently that by eliminating inconsistencies it removes the logical certainty that at least one of a person’s beliefs is false; relatively small comfort in return for a considerable investment of time and ego.\(^3\)

It has been suggested that Socrates was convinced that every man is in possession of certain basic truths, so that wisdom can be achieved by weeding out the beliefs that are inconsistent with the basic truths.\(^4\) Whether or not Socrates believed or assumed this I do not know, but I think something like this is a sound idea. There are very good reasons to suppose that it is not possible that most, or even many, of our simplest, and in this sense most basic, beliefs are false; we cannot be wrong in thinking there is a world outside our minds, a world that contains other people, plants and animals, pastures and mountains, buildings and stars. To argue for this view is a large task that I cannot undertake now;\(^5\) and it would be to no avail, for though the assumption of a general endowment of truths may improve the odds that the elenchus will clear out the deadwood of error and leave the trees of truth standing, this cannot explain Socrates’ faith in his method. The


reason is that it cannot explain why the elenchus is the sole, or even an efficient, route to the truth.

If Socrates knew the way to the truth, why didn’t he follow it on his own and announce the result to those who would listen? Instead, he insisted that he did not know the truth. Many scholars have taken this disclaimer as Socratic irony, a form of open pretense. But I think we must take him at his word, for he also stoutly maintains, with no touch of irony that one can detect, that he himself expects to profit from the elenctic exchange, even though the elenchus seems to do no more than reveal the ignorance of his respondents. Socrates says,

It is not from any sureness in myself that I cause others to doubt; it is from being more in doubt than anyone else that I cause doubt in others. So now, for my part, I have no idea what virtue is, while you, though perhaps you may have known before you came in touch with me, are now as good as ignorant of it also. But none the less I am willing to join you in examining it and inquiring into its nature. (Meno 80C–D)

Finally, we should bear in mind the famous passage in the Phaedrus where Socrates explains why a living discussion is altogether superior to a written record of that discussion. Written words, he says, seem alive, but when you question them they always give the same answer. A word, once written, is tossed about by those who understand it and by those with no interest.

So there are two vital aspects of the Socratic dialectic which transcend the mere attempt to convict a pretender to knowledge of inconsistency. One is that both participants can hope to profit; the other is that unlike a written treatise, it represents a process which engenders change. If it attains its purpose, an elenctic discussion is an event in which the meanings of words, the concepts entertained by the speakers, evolve and are clarified. In this respect it is a model of every successful attempt at communication.

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6 Here are two more examples: When Protagoras asks whether he should answer for himself or as “the multitude” would, Socrates replies “It makes no difference to me, provided you do the answering. For what I chiefly examine is the proposition. But the consequence may be that I the questioner and you the answerer will also be examined” (Protagoras 333B–C). Meno is pleased by the style of Socrates’ answers, and Socrates replies “Well then, I will spare no endeavor, both for your sake and for my own [my italics], to continue in that style” (Meno 77A).

7 Phaedrus 275E.
There can be a great difference between a dispute involving people who understand each other well, and an exchange in which achieving mutual understanding is a large part of the problem. But there is an even greater chasm between an exchange viewed as a situation in which the participants have clear concepts whether or not they use the same words to express those concepts, and an exchange seen as a process in which the concepts themselves come into focus. A written discussion veils this distinction almost completely. Writing reduces the number of active interpreters to one, the reader, thus eliminating the interaction of minds in which words can be bent to new uses and ideas progressively shaped. Writing may portray, but cannot constitute, the intersubjective exchanges in which meanings are created and firmed. Socrates was right: reading is not enough. If we want to approach the harder wisdom we must talk, and, of course, listen.

I have just alluded to the passage in which Plato explains the superiority of the spoken word over the written. We should interpret this passage in the light of another passage in which Socrates persuades his respondent, Euthyphro, that he cannot mean what he has said about the nature of piety. Euthyphro complains that Socrates makes his words move about; they won’t stay put. Socrates agrees that he does this, though not intentionally; just as Daedalus made his statues move, Socrates makes the words of others move, though he would rather that they stood still. This is just the sort of movement that is at its best in an oral exchange. As they try to understand each other, people in open discussion use the same words, but whether they mean the same things by those words, or mean anything clear at all, only the process of question and answer can reveal.

It is easy to confuse what goes on in a live conversation with what we find in a written dialogue. If we read that someone, under questioning, says “Justice is doing good to one’s friends and evil to one’s enemies”, and subsequently is honestly persuaded that it is not just to do evil to anyone, using the same word, “justice”, we are almost certain to conclude that the speaker has radically changed his mind. The original statement and the later admission, we say to ourselves, contradict each other. And so they do if the word “justice” means the same thing in both occurrences. We are

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8 Euthyphro 11B–E.
almost certain to take fixity of meaning for granted because as passive readers we attach the same meaning to the word each time we read it—or at least we assume the word has the same meaning from start to finish, for otherwise what are the discussants discussing? Yet in truth it often happens that what is being discussed is exactly the issue.

We have a strong tendency to believe that thoughts almost always have a definite content. Like Euthyphro we may have trouble finding the right words; a clever questioner like Socrates may be able to trip us up; we may fall into confusion on occasion. But for the most part, we think we know what we think and mean. Language is just the sometimes awkward tool we use to express our thoughts. I suggest that this picture, which seems so natural, misrepresents the actual situation; until we abandon the assumption that our important ideas are clear, we will not appreciate the power and purpose of the elenctic method. Let me give an admittedly contentious example. Many people are convinced that if they are sometimes free to act as they please, then their actions cannot be caused, or, if caused, then caused by a will that is not itself caused. Such a person may also believe he is in fact sometimes free to act as he pleases, and yet that determinism is true. This looks like outright inconsistency, and it may be. But more likely it is a matter of confused or unclear concepts: both the idea of a free action and the idea of determinism are difficult concepts, for most of us they are concepts clouded with confusion. A discussion cannot be expected to solve the "problem of free will" if the concepts used to state "the problem" are murky, for no clear problem will have been formulated. What a discussion can do, with luck, is dispel some of the fog; it can at least reveal that our aporia is due to the fact, not that we are grappling with a deep metaphysical puzzle, but that we need better or different concepts.

It may seem that all that is needed to improve matters is to insist that the key terms be defined at the start. This strategy supposes, however, that we already have at hand a supply of clear concepts, and words to express them. But if the word on which we are trying to bestow a clear meaning is not yet clear, it is unlikely that we will have an appropriate reservoir of precise words and concepts available to employ in the definition. There is also the question, given that the word we wish to define stands for no clear
idea, how we will recognize that a definition is correct. There is another, even more basic difficulty with the definitional strategy: there may not be a satisfactory definition. The Socratic dialogues typically have the form of a search for a definition; what is it, Socrates will ask, that all cases of virtue, or beauty, have in common, and the proposed answers have the form of definitions. Why is the search always a failure? The reason, I think, is simple. We have no interest in a definition that does not employ concepts or words that are simpler and more basic than the definiendum. But the words and ideas we seek to define in philosophy, words like “justice”, “beauty”, “truth”, “virtue”, “knowledge”, are as basic as you can get. Unless you are going to go in circles, everything can’t be defined. These words and the work they do, confused and murky as they may be, are part of the foundations of our thinking. It is a mistake to try to dig deeper. Definition is not the way to make the foundations firm.

It often happens that we use words we do not fully understand, but this is possible only if there is something there to be understood. I may use the word “quark”, for example. I have a vague idea what it means, and I know where to go to find out more. (To find out much more I would have to learn a lot of physics and mathematics that I don’t now begin to command: a full understanding of the word “quark” would require knowing how it features in certain theories.) In such a case there is more to know about the word because there are others who use it for communication and calculations in ways I cannot; there is something for me to learn. The advances we can hope for in philosophical dialogue are not like this; as Socrates insists, he cannot teach people what virtue or justice are, for he does not know himself. I take this to mean, not that there is a clear concept available, but that the elenchus may, if properly conducted, help the participants create a clearer idea.

Discussion that revolves around the word “freedom”, to choose another example, may bog down because there may be an unnoticed ambiguity in the way the word is being used. Heeding the existence of ambiguity and resolving it is an obviously useful exercise. It is frequently necessary if a conversation is to make progress. But again, important as disambiguation is to clarity and understanding, it requires that there already be available the two or more concepts into which the various meanings of the
ambiguous word are resolved. This process therefore cannot be
the same process in which a new concept is forged, perhaps by
giving an old word a clearer or a more productive role.

Definition and disambiguation are powerful tools in the service
of better thinking and improved communication. It is a mistake,
though, to suppose we understand what a perfect language would
be like. It is possible to imagine, or even invent, languages with a
simpler and less misleading grammar than English or French or
Croatian, a language in which the logical relations among sen-
tences are easy to discern, and the rules of deductive reasoning
made perspicuous. We might even learn to speak such a language,
as our computers in a sense already do. But there would remain
the task of assigning meanings to the elements, the basic vo-
cabulary of nouns and verbs and the rest, and this we could do
only by using our familiar resources.

We are apt to think of a natural language as a definite mono-
lithic structure. As each of us learns his or her first language, it
seems like a given, something each person absorbs as best he or
she can, something which, if completely mastered, would insure
flawless mutual understanding. It is hard to shake this conception
of language, but of course it must be wrong. Languages were not
bestowed on mankind; until people talked there were no
languages. The ultimate goal in speaking cannot be to get the
language right, but to be understood, for there is no point
to language beyond successful communication. Speakers create
the language; meaning is what we can abstract from accomplished
verbal exchanges. It follows that a language cannot have a life of
its own, a life apart from its users.

I see the Socratic elenchus as a crucible in which some of our
most important words, and the concepts they express, are tested,
melted down, reshaped, and given a new edge. It is a microcosm of
the ongoing process of language formation itself, though a
sophisticated and self-conscious microcosm which takes advan-
tage of rich and complex linguistic and cultural institutions already
in existence. To illustrate the point, let me compare a feature of
elementary language learning with the cooperative reworking of
verbal usage that occurs in dialectical exchange.

In learning a first language, many words must be learned by
ostension, which involves pointing or otherwise indicating
objects, surfaces, or events to which the word applies: we all first
learned how to use words like “green”, “horse”, “hammer” and “rain” in this way. Of course some of these words might be learned instead by looking in a dictionary; but only if other words had first been learned by ostension. Ostension has an obvious limitation: in our whole lives we can be exposed to no more than some finite number of examples. There is always the chance that when a new case arises the learner will deviate from the norm. As the new word is gradually surrounded by a growing ocean of other words, some of them closely connected to the new, the chances of deviation shrink, but never vanish. At some point, the difference between learning a new word and sharpening the use of a familiar word in the process of discussion disappears. After all, even in the learning situation the deviant learner deviates not from some abstract rule or norm but from what the teacher, and perhaps the rest of the community, agree on. The ordinary learner is simply someone who, perhaps wisely, has been persuaded for the moment to suit his practice to that of one or more others. A stubbornly deviant learner, on the other hand, may have an insight into a deep similarity of cases that others have missed, and she may carry the community with her. This is exactly what Socrates does, or attempts to do, when he tries to persuade his companions to stop using the word “just” to apply to acts in which someone returns harm for harm, and to apply it instead to acts that return benefit for harm.

Our words are at their best when applied to familiar examples. They become increasingly vague or undefined as we approach the borderlines or the unusual. When does green become blue? Is disagreement here disagreement over the word, or the color? It hardly matters, for the outcome is the same: what we come to agree on shapes our language and our thinking, and it shapes how we come to view the world. Color words are a trivial example. When the words concern our fundamental values and beliefs, words like “knowledge” and “virtue”, “honesty” and “person”, the changes effected in our language by searching, sympathetic discussion can make a profound difference to how we live together. As Gregory Vlastos splendidly says, someone who, like Socrates, practices the dialectic method accepts “the burden of freedom which is inherent in all significant communication”.

9 Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher, p. 44.