THESIS

TRAVELERS IN TRUTH: *ODOS* (ὁδός), *METHODOS* (μέθοδος), AND *EPISTEMĒ* (ἐπιστήμη) IN SOCRATIC DIALECTIC

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2025

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ABSTRACT

TRAVELERS IN TRUTH: *ODOS* (ὁδός), *METHODOS* (μέθοδος), AND *EPISTEMĒ* (ἐπιστήμη) IN SOCRATIC DIALECTIC

My thesis explores the role of dialectic inquiry and the production of belief in three of Plato's dialogues: *Phaedrus, Theaetetus,* and *Gorgias.* I argue that the dialectic method distinguishes philosophy from other *techne* (τέχνη) and highlights the social factors of knowledge production.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……………………………………………………………………………………ii
CHAPTER 1 – OVERVIEW OF THE DIALECTIC METHOD……………………………....1
The Importance of the Socratic Dialectic, 2,300 Years On………………………………4
Aspects of the Platonic Form of Dialectic Philosophy……………………………………5
Dialectic as Distinct from Other *Techne*…………………………………………………..9
My Method of Analyzing the Dialogues in This Article……………………………...12
CHAPTER 2 – DIALECTIC AS ITERATIVE, COMMUNAL INQUIRY IN *PHAEDRUS*…...15
The Failures in Lysis……………………………………………………………………..17
Sophistry and the Search for Consensus at the Cost of Truth……………………………18
Becoming *God-like* via the Art of Dialectic……………………………………………..22
Writing…………………………………………………………………………………...23
Contradictory or Complementary? The Function of Rhetoric, Myth, and Poetry in *Phaedrus*……………………………………………………………………………25
CHAPTER 3 – DIALECTIC, DISPOSITION, AND THE BIRTH OF KNOWLEDGE IN *THEAETETUS*……………………………………………………………………………...29
CHAPTER 4 – DIVERGENT PATHS, DIVERGENT GOODS: DIALECTIC VERSUS SOPHISTRY IN *GORGIAS*……………………………………………………………….…..49
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION……………………………………………………………62

CHAPTER 1 – OVERVIEW OF THE DIALECTIC METHOD

My aim in this thesis is to analyze the key elements, functions, and outcomes of the Socratic dialectic as presented within the Platonic corpus. I argue that in Plato's dialogues there is a consistent emphasis on dialectic as the method of philosophy. Dialectic aims at the truth, through a conversation between interlocutors, who analyze the validity of hypothesis in an attempt to discover if it leads to absurd or contradictory conclusions. Furthermore, the dialectic method is an ongoing process. The ideal interlocutor, following the method, remains open to new opinions in both present and in future discourses. And the method has both personal and public impacts. It is a communal effort; public knowledge transforms private beliefs.

In the following chapters, I will mainly be relying on deep analysis of *Phaedrus, Gorgias,* and *Theaetetus* as evidence for my claims. *Phaedrus* offers a contribution to the Platonic notion of dialectic inquiry, and also includes a discussion of why dialectic is superior to didactic, passive, communication through the written word. Similarly, *Gorgias* highlights the contrast between dialectic and sophistry. This dialogue also explores a key element of the dialectic as an ideal, which may not 'work' for certain personalities whose psyche (Ψυχή) cannot prevail through aporia (ἄπορῐ́ᾱ): inquiry is not a process of implanting knowledge, for no mind is a blank slate. Instead, our intellectual and emotional dispositions "follow us" as we proceed through the method. And some interlocutors, like Callicles, find the route untenable. *Theaetetus* is an ideal third dialogue for my analysis, as it also presents a defense of the dialectic method, and offers a nice mirroring: the dialogue is an example of the dialectic method, in addition to those passages directly addressing the reasons for using it in philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, the discussion of knowledge helps us see how dialectic relates to the Platonic epistemology. All

three of these dialogues are valuable sources of textual evidence to see how Plato conceives of the primacy of the dialectic method as the best way of seeking truth, gaining knowledge, and instilling ethical habits in those who practice it. Dialectic generates public knowledge and cultivates individual virtue.

In my later analysis of these dialogues, I hope to demonstrate how readers can interpret these closing statements as advancing the central thesis of the philosophical dialectic in the overall Platonic corpus: The superiority of the method comes from its ability to develop better theoretical and practical hypotheses (ὑποθέσεις) through consensus. At the same time, the true philosopher never equates any agreed upon hypothesis as "the final word" on any given matter.

Alternative Readings of Plato's Dialectic

In addition to my interpretation of the Platonic works, I also rely in this thesis on commentaries and research from the scholars Julia Annas, Harold Tarrant, and Richard Robinson, and occasional early Platonic commentaries by Albinous, Ideotatus, and others.[1] All of these commentaries share a unitary approach to reading the Platonic corpus. Perhaps the best summation of the unitary position comes from Eudorus of Alexandria, who, writing in the 100s BCE, declared, "Plato is a man of many voices, not of many views."[2] In addition to broader sympathies with such a view, in particular this thesis focuses on taking a unitary view in order to better understand the centrality and purpose of dialectic in Plato's writings. For it allows us to look at the overall form of the dialogues as having meaning in addition to/prior to the variety of occasionally contradictory hypotheses they contain.

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[1] Annas and Tarrant have a similar interest in early commentaries, and I hope to both rely on, and build upon, their summaries and interpretations of these texts.

[2] Tarrant, Harold. *Plato's First Interpreters*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 73.

In contrast, under a developmental reading, many of the inconsistencies in hypotheses or content across dialogues are seen in some sense as a detriment or rationale to conclude that Plato's philosophical system changed significantly over the course of his life, and ought to be seen as a sort of break from the philosophy of the "historical Socrates." Vlastos, one of the foremost scholars on Plato in recent decades, is one of the modern scholars who best articulates the developmental position. His 2007 book, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, appeals to biographical elements in Plato's interactions with various schools of philosophy, his experiences in Sicily, and other historical analysis to conclude that there is a sharp break in the "early" and "late" dialogues. He states that we should not be surprised if such biographical events swept Plato "away from his Socratic moorings and start him on the journey from the 'Socrates' of the Elenctic Dialogues, in whom disciple and teacher had thought as one, to the 'Socrates of the middle period, pursuing un-Socratic projects and anti-Socratic conclusions."[3] In my reading, this is far too strong a claim.[4] Instead of the variety in the dialogues implying a break or inconsistency in Plato's theory, I see the diversity as part of a coherent overall aim of Plato's extant works. Most of the variety, as Tarrant suggests, is due to the genre of dialogue itself. For in Plato's time, the dialogue "genre was itself still in its infancy, and permitted many differences of form, of content, of purpose, and of length."[5] Dialogues that do not offer a single, coherent philosophical doctrine need not necessarily reflect conflicts or competing ideas which Plato himself espoused. Rather, inter and intra-dialogue contradictions may serve a pedagogical role by presenting the reader with a variety of theories for her to consider. Given what we find in the texts themselves, I believe that either interpretation is plausible.

[3] Vlastos, Gregory. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131.
[4] That said, Vlastos offers insightful commentaries on the role of mathematics in Plato's writings which I accept and build upon in this analysis.
[5] Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters,*1.

While I see this work as a continuation, or expansion, of the unitarian work by Annas and others, both unitarian and developmental interpretations also vary in their analysis of the Plato's theory of dialectic. In particular, I do not see Socrates as an ironic or esoteric interlocutor, who says one thing but means another. This sets my interpretation at odds with Vlastos, who claims that Socrates in general is an ironic figure, who is not being earnest in calling himself simply a 'midwife' of ideas. Vlastos, for example, argues that Socrates, at least in the early dialogues, is "complicated, devious, cunning, and not averse to playing pranks on his interlocutors."[6] In Vlastos's reading, we must be ever alert to the irony of Socratic dialectic; it may be the case that posing as a mere midwife is how Socrates 'hides' his true, ironic, tendencies.

On the other end of the interpretative scale, Franscisco Gonzalez sees Socrates as truly earnest, and almost naïve, in calling himself barren of ideas. He thus falls into the "nondoctrinal" movement, "in which the dialogue form is taken seriously and the systemization of Plato's philosophy is rejected."[7] Thus, not only is Socrates barren of ideas, but such a statement to his own humility leads to a questioning of the 'sincerity' on Plato's part of the positive aims in the corpus to develop and defend philosophical theories.

Between these two approaches to the Socratic dialectic, there are other accounts of the Socratic dialectic in the literature such as those found in James Magrini, and others like Gary Scott (*Does Socrates Have a Method*?) or in Leo Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing*." For example, rather than viewing dialectic as a way in which Socrates is a 'teacher' or one who 'leads' his interlocutors to knowledge, James Magrini writes that "Socrates, as Plato depicts him, is not a teacher at all; he is a seeker after moral wisdom who encourages others to engage in the

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[6] Vlastos, Gregory. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 132.
[7] Gonzalez, Francisco J. *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 5.

same search."[8] In this reading, Socrates is indeed a fellow 'searcher' of wisdom, but not to the extent that, as Gonzalez suggests, we must disregard the philosophical theories or propositions written in the corpus, be they by Socrates or one of his interlocutors.

My reading aligns more with the middle path of those like Magrini, who reject the claim that Socrates relies extensively on deception and irony in his dialectic inquiries. Rather, I take him at his word in his profession to be a midwife of ideas, but also sufficiently skilled in the *techne* of dialectic as to help himself, and his interlocutors, develop meaningful philosophical propositions.

In fine, I will approach the dialogues with the view that they show a consistent belief in the dialectic method as 1) the method which sets philosophy apart from, and to some extent above, other *techne* (τέχνη), and 2) a pathway towards attaining better and better hypotheses in which to ground both our epistemic beliefs and our moral actions. And while I will also weave in commentary from Gregory Vlastos, in particular during my analysis of the parts of the dialectic method and the relationship between dialectic and mathematics, I generally rely on the unitary interpretation of the corpus in contrast with Vlastos and the more developmental approach.

The Importance of the Socratic Dialectic, 2,300 Years On

One might ask what relevance there is to understanding, appreciating, or accepting my analysis of the importance of philosophic dialectic in Plato's works. For example, Cartesian approaches to inquiry stress an individual form of inquiry, in which the thinker begins to address a topic by 'forcing' her mind to begin inquiry as a *tabula rasa*. Even if one does not take such a view, it may be admitted that the dialectic method, as an interpersonal and embodied experience

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[8] Magrini, James Michael, "Dialectic and Dialogue in Plato: Refuting the Model of Socrates-as-Teacher in the Pursuit of Authentic Paideia," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 12 (2014): 1321, doi:10.1080/00131857.2013.817942.

is no longer a viable or useful method in our era, with its emphasis on written communication and "disembodied" dialogue. I hope to show, by the end of this piece, that we can and ought to still prioritize dialectic as presented in the Platonic corpus. Or, as Socrates states in *Phaedrus*,

> "The art of dialectic, adopting a soul fit for the purpose of planting and sowing there words with knowledge which will be capable of helping themselves and him who planted them [community pursuit of truth] and…bear a seed from which others grow in other habitats, capable of making it [dialectic] *forever immortal.*"[9]

It is my hope that, in reading this analysis of the form and application of Socratic dialectic, the reader will see that it offers a promising method for how we might re-orient our intellectual inquiry to include a respectful consideration of diverse perspectives, ethical respect for other interlocutors, and openness to new ideas that can help us advance the production and acceptance of knowledge. And the practice of dialectic can alter our perceptions of our own actions and how we can act in accordance with our ethical and empirical beliefs. Socrates makes this clear in saying that, through dialectic, we are "analyzing ourselves."[10]

Aspects of the Platonic Form of Dialectic Philosophy

The idea of dialectic as a method is key to my analysis: *methodos,* in Greek, is based on the root word *odos* (ὁδός), a road or journey. Central to this notion of dialectic as a method, with an overarching structure, and a final goal. As Robinson states, in his comprehensive analysis in *Plato's Earlier Dialectic,* we can use this etymological development to understand that Plato's view of method is that of "a specialization of the notion of going. The method is the description of the temporal actions in their temporal sequence, by which the desired end is brought about."[11] Dialectic is the "path" which guides philosophical inquiry.

[9] *Phaedrus,* 276e6-277a2.
[10] *Theaetetus,* 155a2.
[11] *Theaetetus,* 62-63.

Furthermore, dialectic is a public, rather than a private, means of inquiry. It is a conversational approach to knowledge production. As Robinson writes, in the Platonic sense, "Dialectic was a social activity, or a *koine skepsis*. It could not be furthered by the individual alone."[12] Dialectic requires interlocutors to analyze and 'test' the validity of their private beliefs in a public forum.

The dialectic form starts with the identification of some "primary question" of investigation, or "what is X?" For example, in *Theaetetus* X is knowledge, in *Phaedrus* X is Love; in *Gorgias* X is virtue. The consensus regarding the basic definition of the concept (εἶδος) is essential to creating a structured investigation between interlocutors. It is what sets dialectic apart from sophistry or pure argumentation. In argumentative conversations, each interlocutor often has a different conception of the X in question, and thus they all "carried one way and another, and we dispute both with each other and ourselves."[13] Without a shared starting point, interlocutors risk "speaking past each other" and failing to make progress towards a clearer conception of the X in question.

Once an interlocutor provides Socrates with a possible definition to the above "what is X" question, he proceeds to the next step, which is generally elenctic in form. Through the use of secondary questions, Socrates leads the interlocutor through the propositions entailed by their definition, identifying any absurd or contradictory conclusions which would cast the validity of the answer into question.

However, what makes this system unique is the emphasis on the interlocutor taking an active role in drawing out these conclusions. For example, in *Gorgias* Socrates stresses to

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[12] Robinson, Richard, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic,* 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 77.
[13] *Republic,* 9263a9-11.

Callicles that "you'll ruin our previous arguments and will no longer be examining the truth if you speak contrary to what you believe."[14]

Robinson offers a clear analysis of the *elenchus* (ἔλεγχος) *in toto*, writing that

> "The Socratic elenchus is a very personal affair…In the first place, he [the answerer] must believe his own primary statement…In the second place, the answerer must be quite convinced of the logical validity of the argument…Lastly, he must genuinely accept the premises…The art of elenchus is to find premises believed by the answerer and yet entailing the contrary of his thesis."[15]

Without an ethical conviction and emotional interest in the argument, Socratic Elenchus will not lead to any struggle or 'spark' in the interlocutor to truly believe that his initial theory is flawed and thus seek an alternative. Similarly, Vlastos writes, "The method by which Socrates 'examines himself and others,' which I am calling 'the elenchus'…involves the form of argument which Aristotle was to call 'peirastic': a thesis is refuted when, and only when, its negation is derived 'from the answerer's own beliefs."[16] While there is a logical necessity to the elenchus (it must entail a certain contradiction between premises and conclusion) there is also a certain psychological change necessary for the method to effect a change in the interlocutor's system of beliefs.

An example of this method comes through in the long process of inquiry in *Theaetetus,* when the dialogue's namesake offers his first hypothesis: "It seems to me…that knowledge is simply perception."[17] From here, Socrates engages the young man in a lengthy analysis of the nature of perception itself, in order to show the logical inconsistencies of equating this concept to knowledge. While there is much to unpack in that analysis, I here limit my focus to the end result of this long section. Here Theaetetus reaches the conviction Socrates always seeks in subjecting

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[14] *Georgias,* 495a.
[15] Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic,* 15.
[16] Vlastos, Socrates, 111.
[17] *Theaetetus,* 151e2-4.

an interlocutor to elenchus. Theaetetus's initial definition of knowledge as perception leads to a contradiction that he *himself* sees as unacceptable. For as Socrates points out, Theaetetus does "now appear to be seeing what you don't see; and you have actually admitted that seeing is knowing and not to see is not to know. I leave you to draw your conclusion.
Theaetetus: Well, I draw a conclusion that contradicts my original positions."[18]

What is key here is for Theaetetus to accept the contradiction. If Socrates had merely told Theaetetus that his definition was insufficient at the outset, skipping the elenctic altogether, it is arguable that Theaetetus would not accept it. While the end result is the same from an epistemic point of view, the dialectic process makes the interlocutor believe the conclusion Socrates has intended from the beginning. Without the active experience of elenctic and conceptual *aporia,* the epistemic discovery (X is not Y) will not resonate within the interlocutor's soul. This is the transformative element of dialectic.

What does it mean to say that dialectic is truth-seeking rather than truth-attaining? I use the former expression to reflect the continuous, iterative nature of the dialectic method. Thus, any hypothesis accepted or "verified" is only verified for a particular group of people at a particular point in time. At the end of any given conversation, the conclusion reached (if indeed one is reached) remains provisional. For Socrates, the goal of philosophical inquiry was to determine the *best* hypothesis to account for any subject, not an *infallible* one.[19] Further discussions may reveal latent problems with the hypothesis as currently accepted, and this process continues as long as philosophical inquiry continues. For Plato, the goal of philosophical inquiry is to determine the *best* hypothesis to account for any subject, not the *infallible, omnipotent, divine,* one.

[18] *Theaetetus,* 165c8-d1.
[19] *Crito,* 48d.

This comes out most clearly in the use of the term hypothesis throughout the dialogues. Because dialectic starts from a hypothesis, the process is iterative and developmental. Any hypothesis that stands up to inquiry at one time should not be taken as universal or final. As Robinson states, a hypothesis is only "a relatively permanent and solid part of thinking or discourse."[20] No hypothesis, no matter how rigorously defended, is off limits to future critique. *Theaetetus* provide a further example of how the elenchus functions as a process of constantly seeking, rather than attaining, truth *qua* truth. Seeking to distinguish dialectic from other forms of speech, Socrates starts "But…our first aim will be to look at our thoughts themselves in relation to themselves, and see what they are – whether, in our opinion, they agree with one another or are entirely at variance."[21] However, even if they do stand up to such a critique, that does not mean that further analysis is unnecessary or unwarranted. We see this openness to reconsider any particular belief in *Republic* Book X, for example, where Socrates states "Either therefore let us refute these things and show they are not well said, or, *so long as they remain unrefuted* let us never say that."[22] Human knowledge is a type of 'fact-consistent' opinion, but must therefore be seen as provisional and probable. It leads to a larger, though never complete, view of the truth *qua* truth. There is a total and infallible truth exists, even though humans can never grasp it. Instead, as I hope to show, it is the Platonic Forms which offer 'anchors' for human inquiry into the truth, and are both a real and necessary element within dialectic.

Further, while no human can reach a complete and infallible truth, Plato does seem to have a sense that dialectic attains a higher, more developed view of truth than other "knowledge-related" skills or *techne* (τέχνη) such as practical arts or mathematics. Or, as Socrates states in

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[20] Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic,* 95, my emphasis.
[21] *Theaetetus*, 154c-d4.
[22] *Republic,* 610a1-2, my emphases.

the *Republic*, dialectic is "The best and noblest of all possible methods. It is the only art or science that is really awake."[23]

Dialectic as Distinct from Other *Techne*

Rather than appealing only to emotion to convince people of propositions which may or may not have epistemic validity, the dialectic method focuses on first on discovering the (probable/human scale) "truth" of the proposition. And when all interlocutors are following the method, and have the proper disposition, they will accept whatever knowledge propositions stand up to any particular Socratic "probing." However, they also understand that any such proposition is only hypothetical, not infallible or absolute. All hypotheses are open to further inquiry as the dialectic process continues over time, or as new interlocutors take it up for investigation.

Interpersonal dialectic, because it is active and iterative, also allows us to provide a personal touch: while the essential structure of the dialectic method is fixed, each individual requires a slightly different 'combination of elements' in order to truly reach the elenctic conclusion: not only to hear, but *believe* that their initial opinion leads to an untenable contradiction and therefore does not constitute knowledge. We see this in *Phaedrus,* where Socrates emphasizes the importance of dialectic over written texts: "After classifying the kinds of speeches and could and how these are affected, he will go through all the causes, *fitting each to each*, and teaching what kinds they are, and by what kind of speeches and for what reason one soul, being the kind it is, is of necessity persuaded and the other is not."[24]

Dialectic, by "fitting each to each," presents logically consistent propositions in a structured, methodical order to investigate a provisional claim, with attention to the interlocutor's

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[23]*Republic,* 533b-c. See also Robinson, 69.
[24] *Republic,* 272b-b5, my emphases.

temperament. Logical and psychological considerations ensure that the confirmation or denial of the initial premise is truly felt, believed, and held to be valid, by all involved in the conversation.

Socrates also makes clear that this dialectic method, by nature of its psychological element, only works for those with the right psychological 'temperament.' Not only must it be applied to the correct subject matter but only those with a certain ethical commitment to seeking the truth will find it useful. The technique can backfire. Socrates addresses this when he says,

> "People have often before now got into such a state with me as to be literally ready to bite when I take away some nonsense or other from them. They never believe that I am doing this in goodwill…and that I don't do this kind of thing out of malice, but because it is not permitted in me to accept a lie and put away truth."[25]

It is this moral element which distinguishes truth-seeking inquiry from a mere negation or refutation of a hypothesis for its own sake. The reason Socrates wants Theaetetus to agree that his initial definition of knowledge is incorrect is so that he can learn, not simply so that he can be left in this state of *aporia.* There is not this same *oughtness* or moral imperative to learn cobblery, for example. And even when we get to the discussion later of mathematical education versus philosophical education, we will see a lack of an embedded moral dimension in the former.[26]

I wish to conclude with a few initial comments on how Plato seeks to distinguish dialectic from another form of interpersonal discourse: pure sophistic arguments. As we will see in *Gorgias,* the sophistic approach is logically and morally deficient. This idea also appears in *Phaedrus,* where Socrates critiques Lysias because, in his speech,

> "he said the same things two or three times as if he wasn't finding it easy to say many things about the same subject…Indeed he seemed to me to be behaving like some

[25] *Phaedrus,* 151c5-d2
[26] See, for example, Socrates's explanation of the purpose of mathematical education as a means, rather than an end, for the philosopher kings of the *Republic* 121c1-523a).

> swaggering youth, showing off the fact that he can say the same thing in this way and in that, and say it very well in both ways."[27]

This quotation highlights two important differences between the sophist, who practices rhetoric, and the philosopher, who practices dialectic. Sophistry is self-centered, in that the speaker is simply trying to 'thrust' their belief or opinion upon a passive student. There is no back-and-forth discussion, or opportunity to investigate the validity of the sophist's claim. In contrast the philosopher treats any opinion, however passionately held or robustly defended, as provisional. Further, there is no order to rhetoric, and therefore the various arguments confuse the listener. This emphasis on the need for order in dialectic is also present in the sophist versus philosopher discussions in *Gorgias,* lines 503d-504e: No matter the subject of the discussion (love, justice, knowledge), dialectic "skill imposes form on materials."[28]

Alternative Readings of Plato's Dialectic

While I see this work as a continuation, or expansion, of the unitarian work by Annas and others, both unitarian and developmental interpretations also vary in their analysis of the Plato's theory of dialectic. In particular, I do not see Socrates as an ironic or esoteric interlocutor, who says one thing but means another. This sets my interpretation at odds with Vlastos, who claims that Socrates in general is an ironic figure, who is not being earnest in calling himself simply a 'midwife' of ideas. Vlastos, for example, argues that Socrates, at least in the early dialogues, is "complicated, devious, cunning, and not averse to playing pranks on his interlocutors."[29] In Vlastos's reading, we must be ever alert to the irony of Socratic dialectic; it may be the case that posing as a mere midwife is how Socrates 'hides' his true, ironic, tendencies.

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[27] *Republic,* 235a3-a10.

[28] Annas, Julia. *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) 106. See also *Republic* 506-507.

[29] Vlastos, Gregory. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 132.

On the other end of the interpretative scale, Franscisco Gonzalez sees Socrates as truly earnest, and almost naïve, in calling himself barren of ideas. He thus falls into the "nondoctrinal" movement, "in which the dialogue form is taken seriously and the systemization of Plato's philosophy is rejected."[30] Thus, not only is Socrates barren of ideas, but such a statement to his own humility leads to a questioning of the 'sincerity' on Plato's part of the positive aims in the corpus to develop and defend philosophical theories.

Between these two approaches to the Socratic dialectic, there are other accounts of the Socratic dialectic in the literature such as those found in James Magrini, and others like Gary Scott (*Does Socrates Have a Method*?) or in Leo Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing*." For example, rather than viewing dialectic as a way in which Socrates is a 'teacher' or one who 'leads' his interlocutors to knowledge, James Magrini writes that "Socrates, as Plato depicts him, is not a teacher at all; he is a seeker after moral wisdom who encourages others to engage in the same search."[31] In this reading, Socrates is indeed a fellow 'searcher' of wisdom, but not to the extent that, as Gonzalez suggests, we must disregard the philosophical theories or propositions written in the corpus, be they by Socrates or one of his interlocutors.

My reading aligns more with the middle path of those like Magrini, who reject the claim that Socrates relies extensively on deception and irony in his dialectic inquiries. Rather, I take him at his word in his profession to be a midwife of ideas, but also sufficiently skilled in the *techne* of dialectic as to help himself, and his interlocutors, develop meaningful philosophical propositions.

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[30] Gonzalez, Francisco J. *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 5.

[31] Magrini, James Michael, "Dialectic and Dialogue in Plato: Refuting the Model of Socrates-as-Teacher in the Pursuit of Authentic Paideia," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 12 (2014): 1321, doi:10.1080/00131857.2013.817942.

My Method of Analyzing the Dialogues in This Article

While adding my own insights and the insights of others, I wish to let the texts speak for themselves. Thus, I aim to adhere to the recommendations from Richard Robinson's explanation of 'five errors' one may fall prey to when interpreting ancient philosophy.

The first of these errors Robinson calls "*mosaic interpretation.*"[32] Such interpretations are limited to a judicious selection and analysis of phrases to confirm the author's argument. This myopic approach means only quoting, or offering as valid evidence, those elements of the text which support the author's (predetermined) thesis. For example, arguing that Plato took a fully negative view of poetry would be to quote only those instances in which Socrates criticizes the practice, without acknowledging his mentions of its merits.[33] Instead, I will seek to rely on quotations or examples which are consistently expressed across the dialogues, as well as noting issues of contradiction or confusion in my reading.

Robinson next defines "*misinterpretation by abstraction*"[34] or claiming the author "knows" or "presents" a general law when there are only particular examples. For example, if an ancient author mentions that rocks always fall to earth, it would be misinterpretation by abstraction to claim she had developed a theory of gravitation. It is very similar to error three, "*misinterpretation by inference.*"[35]

Error four is "*insinuating the future*," or "reading into your author doctrines that did not become explicit until later." For example, being too anachronistic in terminology. While I hope to demonstrate that Plato had a theory of knowledge as being more of a social, rather than

[32] Annas, *Platonic Ethics,* 1.
[33] For example, his willingness to listen to the poets' defense of their work in *Republic X.*
[34] Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2.
[35] Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2.

individualistic, practice, I would not go so far as to say that his theory is equivalent to the modern theory of "epistemic justice."

The final "error" Robinson cautions against is "*going beyond a thinker's last word*, of ascribing to him not merely all the steps he took in a certain direction but the next step also, which in reality was first made by a subsequent generation."[36] I aim to make clear throughout this thesis the distinction between those ideas contained within the "Socratic dialectic" as it appears in the Platonic corpus, and my own additional ideas of the relationship between ethics and logic in the philosophic discourse.

As Robinson himself admits, it is impossible for the modern scholar, looking back on Plato after over 2,000 years, to fully avoid these types of interpretations. And indeed, 'transgressions' are in some sense necessary if one wishes to proceed beyond a simple summary. But it is worth noting that additional levels of analysis or interpretation must be clearly defined as such, in contrast to what we can reasonably infer from the text itself. Proleptic arguments, from later philosophers, must clearly be attributed to those thinkers not to Plato himself. For example, Plato never explicitly states that his method relies on syllogistic deduction. While we can, in retrospect, see syllogistic inquiry in Plato's dialogues, the concept itself is Aristotelian in origin.

The thesis will proceed along the following path (ὁδός):

Phaedrus expounds the merits of dialectic inquiry through a comparison with writing and rhetorical argument. I start my path here, for it offers me the chance to set up some of the key elements of the dialectic theory I here posit: it is an iterative, communal, and truth-seeking form of inquiry.

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[36] Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 4.

I next look at *Theaetetus*, and how Socrates demonstrates these elements of dialectic through his critique of Theaetetus's hypothetical definitions of knowledge. Further, I wish in this section to show how the Platonic theory of dialectic as the true art of philosophy relates to his understanding of what kind of knowledge it can generate. For this also gives us a sense of how to best understand his own word, which we then translate into knowledge: *episteme*.

I will end with *Gorgias.* For while it is similar to Phaedrus in critiquing sophistic argumentation. But it also offers an example of another important element of dialectic. In the dialogue, Socrates fails to succeed in holding a true dialectic conversation with any of the three interlocutors. This helps reveal an important feature of dialectic. Insofar as it a communal and participatory method of inquiry, dialectic is only effective when applied to the right type of character. It is not a universally accessible techne: only those with a certain psyche can withstand the rigor of methodical inquiry, and have the strength to fully expose their beliefs to critique and come to believe in any errors they have. Elenctic is a rigorous journey, and, I will argue, one that Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles are unwilling to complete.

The final chapter will situate my argument and reading of Plato within contemporary research in social epistemology related to the situated knower thesis.

CHAPTER 2 – DIALECTIC AS ITERATIVE, COMMUNAL INQUIRY IN *PHAEDRUS*[37]

Having laid out the basic elements that I see in Plato's notion of dialectic as the practice of philosophy, I now wish to transition to my three close reading analyses. I am starting with

[37] Analysis and quotes are based on the translation by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff in Plato., John M. (John Madison) Cooper, and D. S Hutchinson. *Complete Works.* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1997).

Phaedrus because it highlights the key advantages of dialectic as a truth-seeking and knowledge-producing art: it is iterative; follows a clear and consistent method, or journey from one proposition to another; and requires interlocutors to engage actively, both vocally and cognitively. To make these arguments, the dialogue uses a comparative approach: it is through an analysis of the deficiencies of rhetorical, argumentative speech and the written word that allow Socrates to then contrast these lesser arts with the art of dialectic. For in contrast to the former two, dialectic is concerned with truth, requires engagement between interlocutors, and is iterative.

In *Phaedrus*, we also get critiques that speak to the Platonic conception of method (μεθοδος) as a type of journey (οδος). As Socrates notes, in order for Phaedrus and him to get closer to the truth about what, exactly, constitutes love *qua* love, "We have to go the long way around."[38] Dialectic provides the path upon which inquiry proceeds, with the end goal being to arrive at a true belief about the concept under discussion. Socrates notes how, in contrast, when Lysis addresses the topic of love using an argumentative speech, "he seems to fall far short of what we're looking for, since he's trying to swim downstream on his back through his speech, not even from the beginning, but from the end, and begins from what the lover would say to his loved one when he's already left off."[39] The use of terms like "beginning" and "end" here speak to the conception of dialectic as a journey or step-wise process. Socrates also scorns the sophists who "say that you should not make these things so grand, or even go with them back to first principles, taking the long route."[40] Again, there is a sense that a longer route, or a particular path, ought to be followed if one is to properly explore a given topic. Later in the dialogue,

[38] *Phaedrus,* 274a2.
[39] *Phaedrus*, 264a3-7.
[40] *Phaedrus,* 272d2-e1.

Socrates describes dialecticians as those who are "in conversation, steadfastly navigating"[41] their discussion towards its goal. This "end" may be either elenctic and aporetic, where one rejects a previous belief but fails to find a more truth-seeking alternative; or elenctic and progressive, where one rejects a previous belief but reorients along a truth-seeking path.

Plato's *Phaedrus* also speaks to the ethical implications of developing one's ability to engage in dialectic. For example, Socrates argues that dialectic inquiry into the nature of love serves to make it "so that his lover here may no longer waver from one side to the other, as he does now, but may make a life simply in accordance with Eros aided by philosophical discussion."[42] In a sense, ethics and ontology are two sides of the philosophic coin: in thinking objectively about love, one can analyze his own actions, and their underlying beliefs, in an objective manner. The philosophical inquirer, Socrates argues, is "better in his natural aptitude…and furthermore blended with a nobler character."[43] Again, the rational approach helps channel the emotional elements of the philosopher's soul. Other commentaries note the relationship between reason and morality in Plato's dialogues. Annas, for example, sees a similar theme within Plato's ethical theory, noting that Platonic dialectic is a practice of "assimilating our thoughts to a form utterly different from the form they have when we are engaged in mundane ordinary thinking."[44] Thinking about the objective qualities of love allow us, as individual subjects, to love others through actions consistent with these beliefs about what love is *qua* love.

Susan Bickford, in her commentary on *Phaedrus,* notes that "the drama of the dialogue suggests the need to…investigate the relation between two questions at the heart of moral

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[41] *Phaedrus,* 259b.
[42] *Phaedrus,* 257b3-6.
[43] *Phaedrus,* 279a3-6.
[44] Annas, Julia. *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 57.

thinking: not only 'is it true?' but also 'does it truly move me?''"[45] In the dialogue's comparison of the *techne* of rhetoric to the *techne* of dialectic, Socrates discusses how each art sets the path of the soul. And as we see in *Phaedrus,* ultimately it is only the art or *techne* (τέχνη) of dialectic that can ultimately set us on a journey towards both truth-seeking and self-motivating beliefs.

The Failures in Lysis

Lysis's speech[46] is notable for what it lacks in contrast with philosophic dialectic. It does not follow the method of dialectic, where one first posits a definition of a concept and then tests it against alternatives. This includes the typical "opening" of dialectic, or the "what is X" question. Socrates emphasizes the importance of this first step, telling Phaedrus that

> "If you wish to reach a good decision on any topic…You must know what the decision is about, or else you are bound to miss your target altogether. Ordinary people cannot see that they do not know the true nature of a particular subject, so they proceed as if they did; and because they do not work out an agreement at the start of the inquiry, they wind up…in conflict with themselves and with each other…[W]e should agree on defining what love is."[47]

The method of dialectic starts with a hypothetical, or posited, definition of the X in question. And by beginning in this way, as Socrates later states, "whether its definition was or was not correct, at least it allowed the speech to proceed clearly and consistently with itself."[48] Thus, even if a particular, posited definition proves false, it offers an anchor. Or rather, the definition of the idea is like the compass heading: it is what the path of the speech is consistently seeking and referring back to as it moves forward.

[45] Bickford, Susan. "Logos, Inspiration, and Self-Motion in Plato's Phaedrus." *Plato : The Internet Journal of the International Plato Society* 25 (2024): 10. doi:10.14195/2183-4105_25_1.
[46] *Phaedrus,* 231a1-233c9.
[47] *Phaedrus,* 237b8-d1. we also see this argument in *Cratylus,* wherein, "The name is an instrument for teaching the thing, and stresses the role of the dialectician in the correct use of names."[47]
[48] *Phaedrus,* 265d8-d10.

Socrates's own speech comes closer to a philosophical inquiry rather than a work of prose or a work of persuasion, for it begins with posting a definition for love before proceeding to address the issue of how to treat a lover. As Socrates asks, "Must there not be knowledge of the truth in the mind of the speaker about whatever he proposes to speak about?"[49] Or in other words, unless Lysis can articulate and defend a definition for love itself, he cannot be expected to offer knowledge about whether it is better to love or to be loved. Thus, Socrates still employs the persuasive genre, but in a way that at least conforms to certain elements of the dialectic *methodos* (μέθοδος).

Furthermore, Socrates critiques the inherently argumentative form of Lysis's composition. Rather than trying to advance or refine the listener's understanding of love and lovers, Lysis, as Socrates argues, "seemed to me to be showing off, trying to demonstrate that he could say the same thing in two different ways, and say it just as well both times."[50] Thus it is not truth seeking like philosophy and therefore its arguments about love are not informative, or examples of knowledge of love.

Sophistry and the Search for Consensus at the Cost of Truth

These specific criticisms of Lysis's speech leads Socrates to make more general arguments against argumentative rhetoric *qua* rhetoric. One of the central arguments against sophistry presented in *Phaedrus* dialogue is that, because sophistry seeks only to persuade, rather than inform, listeners, it cannot be a *truth-seeking* endeavor. Socrates states:

> "the man who is going to be a competent orator has no need to have anything at all to do with the truth…or even with such people who are of this type by nature or nurture [no like with like]…no one in the law courts has the slightest interest whatever in the truth of these things, but in what is persuasive."[51]

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[49] *Phaedrus,* 259e5-6.
[50] *Phaedrus,* 235a6-8.
[51] *Phaedrus,* 272d2-e7.

Dialectic is inherently truth-seeking; rhetorical argumentation is thus its antithesis. Again, the dialogue defines sophistry mainly through exposing its deficiencies as compared with dialectic. "His whole effort is aimed toward that, for it's there that he's attempting to produce conviction."[52] Again, there is not a concern for truth, but rather for consensus. Rather than dialectic, which seeks to teach, rhetoric only seeks to persuade.

Sophists employ an argumentative style in their speeches. Rather than helping their listeners gain knowledge from the arguments they make, the sophist instead aims to convince the masses to accept or act in accordance with his views, whether or not those people understand or agree with what he says. This argumentative approach can thus lead the sophist into making contradictory claims. In his critique of Thrasymachus, for example, Socrates argues that in argumentation, "he who does this using his [Thrasymachus's] art makes the same thing seem just to the same people at one moment, and when he wishes unjust?"[53] Because sophists are not pursuing truth, they can expound contradictory theories on the same subject. A sophist violates the law of noncontradiction, and therefore cannot be sharing knowledge with their listeners.

Phaedrus later reveals to Socrates his belief that "it is not necessary for the intending orator to learn what is really just, but only what will seem just to the crowd…Nor again what is really good or noble, but only what will seem so. For that is what persuasion proceeds from, not truth."[54] Here we get an explicit declaration of the irrelevance of truth for the rhetorician, in stark contrast to the philosopher. If the philosopher as one who is truly moved by true beliefs, those persuaded through rhetorical speeches are only able to truly believe what is said, without it necessarily being a truth-seeking line of argument. Bickford's commentary notes a similar

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[52] *Phaedrus,* 271a1-3.
[53] *Phaedrus*, 261d1-3.
[54] *Phaedrus,* 260a1-a4.

contrast between persuasion through rhetoric versus dialectic. Either one can be truly moving, but "the 'feeling of knowing is not an *epistemic* condition; we may or may not actually have knowledge that stands up to further investigation."[55] And only dialectic can provide such this further investigation, wherein one puts forth beliefs for the analysis of the community of inquirers, fellow philosophic travelers along the 'truth-seeking' path.

Further arguments for the superiority of the philosopher over the sophist come through in Socrates's description of the mythical "plain of truth."[56] In this mythical interlude, Socrates describes the soul "that follows a god most closely, making itself most like that god…this should does have a view of Reality, just barely."[57] What's notable here is that the soul only glimpses at, or sees a partial view, of this divine field. It is not possible for a human soul to see all of Reality, or to come away with an infallible and complete view of Reality or omnipotent truth. Rather, as Socrates recites, "only a philosopher's mind is perfect *as perfect can be*."[58] While we, as humans, cannot truly dwell in the divine field of truth, those who navigate the philosopher's path, through the *methodos* of dialectic, get as close as humanly possible to this divine realm, catching 'glimpses' of the infallible truths with rest within it.

This reading of the myth as an argument for epistemic limits of the human mind reflects ancient Greek commentators who argued that the ideal or perfect human strives to be as *God-like* as possible, though seeking truth. Annas captures this view well: as she puts it, for the ancient commentators, one who seeks the truth emulates "the ideal or perfect human [who] strives to be *like* God."[59] At the same time, the qualification here that a philosopher is as perfect as perfect can

[55] Bickford, "Logos," 10.
[56] *Phaedrus,* 248b6.
[57] *Phaedrus*, 248a2-5.
[58] *Phaedrus,* 249c5-c9.
[59] Annas, *Platonic Ethics,* 20.

be, I believe, serves to reiterate that dialectic and philosophy are truth-seeking, rather than truth-attaining. The human mind cannot actually obtain divine, infallible truth. While philosophy is superior to sophistry, it is nonetheless a form of continual and *iterative* knowledge production.

Bickford's modern commentary of *Phaedrus* reaches a similar conclusion to those of the ancient interpreters. She sees philosophic dialectic as a practice that must be "ongoing because human knowledge is incomplete and reason has its limits."[60] No hypothesis, however well it performs under dialectic scrutiny, should be accepted as infallible. Or put another way, if truth is *being,* knowledge is *becoming.* Knowledge grows as the mind 'glimpses at' more pieces of truth. But since it never can see the whole field of truth at one time, the human soul has knowledge, which, over time, leads the philosopher to gather a web of beliefs that are *becoming* more and more like a comprehensive truth.

Socrates takes up this hypothesis and seeks, as he puts it, to "convince Phaedrus…that unless he pursues philosophy properly, he will never be able to make a proper speech on any subject either. And let Phaedrus be the one to answer."[61] Here we see one of the key elements of the dialectic method reiterated: the interlocutor must come to believe in the validity of the new hypothesis. Again, dialectic leads the soul to truth through an active process. And indeed, at the end of this part of the conversation, Socrates states "the art of a speaker who doesn't know the truth and chases opinions instead is likely to be a ridiculous thing – not an art at all!" and Phaedrus, as "the one to answer" seems now to believe this when he replies "so it seems."[62] In this case, the elenctic seems to be successful.

Becoming *God-like* via the Art of Dialectic

[60] Bickford, "Logos," 19.
[61] *Phaedrus,* 261a3-a6.
[62] *Phaedrus*, 262c1-c4.

Socrates now explicitly addresses the merits of dialectic as the true art of philosophy, stating that "I am myself a lover of these divisions and collections, so that I may be able to think and to speak; and if I believe that someone else is capable of discerning a single thing…I have always called them 'dialecticians (διαλεκτικός).'"[63] This dialectician is one who seeks truth, and can convey such knowledge of the truth, through a consistent method. By contrast, all forms of rhetorical argumentation, Phaedrus admits, "certainly lack the knowledge you're talking about."[64] Again, we see the emphasis on how sophistry cannot be a truth-seeking endeavor, while dialectic does constitute such an endeavor.

Yet the dialogue does condemn rhetoric outright. At times, Socrates seems to concede that rhetoric can be a type of *techne*, to wit a means of conveying knowledge to others. For he says that both are acts of speech, and "the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul."[65] Yet not all speech acts are equally truth-seeking or truth-motivating. The passive acceptance of a truthful statement, without any further epistemic effort, does not mean one will be inclined to set out along a truth-seeking life. Only when one truly believes in the value of dialectic and the pursuit of truth will one be able to pursue the life of a philosopher. Speeches may contain knowledge of such things, but they cannot create knowledge-seeking motivations in the soul who hears them. It is not sufficient to merely hear such things in a speech: one must also have such propositions 'written in her soul' through dialectic practice.

It is also unclear if one who does not practice dialectic in addition to rhetoric can even produce a knowledgeable speech. As Socrates points out, "the reason they [teachers of rhetoric] cannot define rhetoric is that they are ignorant of dialectic. It is their ignorance that makes them

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[63] *Phaedrus,* 266b3-c1.
[64] *Phaedrus,* 266 c8-c9.
[65] *Phaedrus,* 272d1.

think they have discovered what rhetoric is when they have mastered only what it is necessary to learn as preliminaries."[66] Again, we see the repeated argument in the dialogue that speeches, writings, and other genres are only useful as propaedeutic tools. Over time, the soul masters these lesser *techne* in order to sufficiently 'construct' a *psyche* or mind ready to practice the *techne* of a philosopher: the most noble *techne* of dialectic.

It is this prior grounding in dialectic that distinguishes the speech made by Socrates, a philosopher, with that of Lysis, the sophist. For the sophists "say that there is no need to be so solemn…one who intends to be an able rhetorician has no need to know the truth about things…They only care about what is convincing…Whatever you say, you should pursue what is likely and leave the truth aside."[67] Only a philosopher who has mastered dialectic can use speeches, because she will be equipped with knowledge that directs the soul towards truth.

Writing

We now come to the final section of the dialogue, in which Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the benefits and limitations of writing.[68] Again, Socrates sees writing as inferior to dialectic, since "it is external and depends on signs that belong to others…you [the writer] have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality."[69] Reading a text does not, and cannot, replicate the active process of learning, but is instead a way of reminding someone of what they already know. Dialectic is instead "a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener…it is much nobler to be serious about these matters, and use the art of dialectic. The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it *discourse accompanied by*

[66] *Phaedrus*, 269b6-b9.
[67] *Phaedrus,* 272 d1-273a1.
[68] *Phaedrus*, 274 b6-b7.
[69] *Phaedrus*, 275a6-a9.

knowledge."[70] By contrast, speeches and writings "at their very best can only serve as reminders to those who already know…only what is written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention."[71] And still, the philosopher is only as "perfect as perfect can be." Or, as Socrates states, "To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover – a philosopher- or something similar would fit him better."[72] Again, we see the notion of human life as a continuous quest for wisdom. Just as knowledge, as it grows, is *becoming* truth, the philosopher who has a passion for such knowledge is *becoming* wise.

In his reading of early commentaries on Plato, the Ancient Greek scholar Tarrant seems these ancients also interpreting Plato in this way. Early commentaries argue that Plato's works see dialectic philosophy as "a moral science that is integrated and internally consistent, with the less fundamental explained in terms of the more fundamental and *vice-versa*."[73] This also helps us understand how the wisdom-loving philosopher can still be a source of knowledge. Even though she is not wise, she follows a path where, in her love of wisdom, she becomes *wiser* over time. And such a lover of wisdom also leads the most noble, most morally virtuous life. This person, as one who understands the nature of writing, speechmaking, and dialectic, along with the latter's superiority, is a philosopher.

In this section, Socrates reaches the 'end point' of the dialogue, and has guided Phaedrus towards and understanding and acceptance of his theories of dialectic, rhetorical argument, writing, knowledge, and how they can be brought to bear upon the central question into the nature of love *qua* love.

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[70] *Phaedrus,* 277b1-b5.
[71] *Phaedrus,* 278a2-a6.
[72] *Phaedrus*, 278d4-6.
[73] Tarrant, Harold. *Plato's First Interpreters,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 145.

Contradictory or Complementary? The Function of Rhetoric, Myth, and Poetry in *Phaedrus*

But there is a puzzling irony in *Phaedrus*. The dialogue also rejects ability of writing to lead to philosophical growth, despite the fact that this very proposition is in a written work. In his lamentation of the Egyptians who first invented writing, Socrates notes that through their reliance on writing "they are reminded of things as a result of alien impressions which are from outside, and not from within."[74] The problem with writing versus discursive inquiry is the inability or difficulty of the former to lead to epistemic growth in the reader. In contrast, dialectic belief "is written with knowledge in the soul of the learner [not alien like writing] capable of defending itself, but knowing how to speak and how to keep silent before those it should."[75] For a belief to truly adhere in one's soul, she must accept it, not simply hear it. This type of active agreement can only come through conversational methods. And more precisely, true beliefs can only come from dialectic conversation.

In using this myth, Socrates hopes to lead Phaedrus to agree that truth is the ultimate good in his recitation of Stesichorus's speech. The speech argues that "the plain where truth stands…has the grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul."[76] Myth cannot replace philosophic dialectic in actually attaining truth, but, in fitting "like to like," it is a proposition which prepares the soul for the ardor of philosophic rigor. Bickford has a similar position towards the role of the mythical stories and rhetorical speeches in *Phaedrus*. She argues that "reason can't justify itself unless one is already persuaded of the value of reason…If I don't already think that by reason and argumentation, I can achieve some good, then what argument

[74] *Phaedrus*, 275a5-7.
[75] *Phaedrus,* 276a-607a1.
[76]*Phaedrus,* 248b6-c1.

can persuade me?”[77] This is the apparent self-defeating element of dialectic: not all souls will truly believe in the value of reason simply through an argument which only employs reason. Thus, as Bickford also notes, Plato’s “understanding of the limits of reason shows why Socrates’[sic] practice of dialogic reasoning is necessarily intertwined with exhortations, provocations, and reproaches.” [78] The use of speeches and myths are not meant to be substitutions or equals of dialectic inquiry when it comes to forming beliefs. Rather, they are propaedeutic means of re-orienting a lost soul, and giving them the self-motivation, to chart a new, truth-seeking way of life.

Annas offers a similar interpretation of the role of the myths and speeches in both *Phaedrus* and other such Platonic works as the Republic. In her view, as in mine, these non-dialectic elements are not at odds with Socrates in his fully dialectic role. For they too are coherent with “a single position” and re simply “different treatments which can be thought of as different ways of voicing it.”[79] While they do not take the long path of dialectic, speeches and myths produced by one who has that dialectic techne can serves as ‘shortcuts’ which get at the truth in a roundabout way. And for those who are not ready for the arduous path of dialectic, a moving myth or speech can be a first step, instilling the initial and self-motivating belief in the value of knowledge, an ongoing inner-drive to sustain her in the lifelong journey towards truth.

Cooper argues for a similar reading in order to rethink the “paradox” of Plato’s decision to use writing in order to make philosophical arguments and ‘model’ dialectic speech. Cooper’s argument, one that I agree with, is that Plato’s writings do not show us a contradiction with what Plato writes in *Phaedrus*, nor a reason to reject Plato’s work as merely ironic prose. For Socrates

[77] Bickford, “Logos,” 8.
[78] Bickford, “Logos,” 9.
[79] Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 17.

in *Phaedrus* does argue that writing is worthless or incompatible with philosophy. Rather the dialogue seems more interested in highlighting the superiority of dialectic inquiry when it comes to actually acquiring knowledge. The act of writing, or reading, must not be confused with the higher art of dialectic, or the act of 'writing knowledge' into the soul. Or as Cooper writes, "Knowledge is only in souls, but, despite *Phaedrus'* own critique of writing, reading such a dialogue may be a good way of working to attain it."[80] In these works then, we see that the Platonic corpus, and *Phaedrus* in particular, is more concerned with making clear what the written word can and cannot do when it comes to impacting the beliefs of the reader. Plato, I would argue, did not mean for his works to be a sufficient means of developing the philosophical techne, but that does not mean they are irrelevant in helping one develop such a craft.

Furthermore, when Socrates states that a true philosopher will not put his theories into writing, this seems to further the contradiction or absurdity of the dialogue; how could we call this philosophical writing if, by its very nature, philosophy cannot be captured in writing. For only looking at one, isolated presentation of beliefs (whether or not they are knowledgeable or not) is not sufficient for being a philosopher. Here again I see Bickford as in agreement with my interpretation. She notes that the conversational and intercommunal aspects of dialectic are key advantages over reading a written text. She argues that *Phaedrus*

> "shows the need to 'examine and evaluate not only external discourse but also the voices within,' for it is through this process that we reject some alien discourses and transform others into authentic ones, ones that are 'our own.' Not only are some *logoi* better than others, then, but also a better soul-condition means being in a specific kind of relation to the *logoi* that move us."[81]

It is this 'better soul-condition' that only the wisdom-loving acquire through the practice of dialectic.

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[80] Plato., John M Cooper, and D. S Hutchinson, *Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.) 1997, 400.
[81] Bickford, "Logos," 11.

Thus, in this dialogue we do not get an overarching, fully rational and logical account of love. Rather, here we see how Plato employs myth, speeches, and logical arguments together, reaching out to all potential readers with words that will be 'like to like' with their particular souls. And yet, the final aim is the same for them all: to truly believe, in their soul, in the moral and epistemic primacy of dialectic.

Such a successful matching of dialectic to a well-prepared soul occurs in Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus.* I will argue in the next chapter that in Theaetetus, Socrates finds a common-traveler who is truly self-motivated to pursue truth. And in the subsequent chapter, I will argue that in the *Gorgias* we see that Plato was well aware of the limits of dialectic. For not all interlocutors are willing to be Socrates's fellow travelers along the 'wisdom-loving' path.

CHAPTER 3 – DIALECTIC, DISPOSITION, AND THE BIRTH OF KNOWLEDGE IN *THEAETETUS*[82]

As in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates argues that knowledge is "written in the soul," *Theaetetus* emphasizes the deeply personal nature of dialectic conversation. I here argue that, whereas the *Phaedrus* defines Plato's notion of dialectic, which leads away from error and towards truth, *Theaetetus* allows the reader to "see" dialectic in practice. And like Phaedrus in

[82] Analysis and citations are from a translation by M.J Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat, as printed in Cooper.

his namesake dialogue, Theaetetus proves able to meet the challenge of undergoing Socrates's rigorous dialectic training, demonstrating the necessary character of a truth-seeking individual.

Theaetetus offers us an exemplary form of Socratic dialectic: the communal and amicable search for a plausible definition of knowledge or what Plato calls *episteme* (ἐπιστήμη).[83] And while the dialogue ends in *aporíā* (ἀπορία) , without finding a definition that Theaetetus or Socrates judge viable, the method does offer a positive development in the search for a better definition in the future. Thus, in a dialogue about what exactly knowledge is, we can see how dialectic methods are best equipped for such an inquiry.

Polansky, approaching Plato's writings from a unitary perspective, sees a similar purpose for the dialogue, writing that "the exploration of all the candidates for knowledge belongs to philosophy…it is especially crucial in the course of their [Socrates and Theaetetus's] seeking knowledge of knowledge that they reflect upon their very own mode of inquiry."[84] We see how Plato conceives of dialectic as the search for knowledge, a search which can also help us better understand the object it seeks, truth. Plansky also notes that

> "Theaetetus and Socrates engage in self-reflection and of a sort that raises examination of the various candidates for human knowing to truly philosophical or dialectical inquiry…they attack the obscurity in principles that other disciplines overlook. The luminous reconsideration of all that has preceded [in their conversation] marks the crucial difference between self-reflective dialectical investigation and the rest of the sciences."[85]

Theaetetus helps us understand why dialectic, as a truth-seeking journey (ὁδός), is the best way of producing any one species of knowledge. Or to put it another way, dialectic is the *techne* by which humans can attain the highest level of knowledge about any and all other *techne*

[83] This might lead one to ask if I am using the correct term, knowledge, to describe the product of philosophical dialectic. I wish, therefore, to clarify that here I am using knowledge as a translation of the Greek word *episteme* which has been translated as both knowledge and understanding in various translations and contexts. My final chapter will discuss the implications of this choice of translation for contemporary epistemology.
[84] Polansky, Ronald M. *Philosophy and Knowledge : A Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 14.
[85] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 20.

(τέχνη). Again, quoting Polansky, "*Theaetetus* acts out a conception of knowledge."[86] The dialogue provides an example of the dialectic *techne* in action, and the type of *episteme* it can produce.

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates uses the analogy of a 'midwife' to argue that the dialectic method is a form of both delivering the interlocutor's beliefs and inquiring into whether they constitute viable, truth-seeking hypotheses or fatal falsehoods. As Socrates states, "the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is an error" which would occur through an elenctic inquiry, "or a fertile truth."[87] For those who interact with Socrates, "as time goes on and our association continues, all whom God permits are seen to make progress — a progress which is amazing both to other people and to themselves."[88] But just as in the *Phaedrus,* where Socrates emphasizes that a human can only aim to be 'wisdom-loving' rather than wise, philosophic dialectic constitutes a *motion towards* ultimate and infallible truth. While the dialogue ends in *aporia,* it still makes progress on the journey, or *odos,* towards a 'truer' definition at a future time.

Once the dialogue establishes the *mise en scene, S*ocrates asks two questions of Theaetetus: "Now isn't it true that to learn is to become wiser about the thing one is learning?" and also that "Knowledge and wisdom will be the same thing?"[89] In both cases, Theaetetus answers in the affirmative. But as Socrates then admits, he "can't get a proper grasp of what on earth knowledge really is. Could we manage to put it into words?" Thus, they agree that learning,

[86] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 24.
[87] *Theaetetus,* 150 c1-3.
[88] *Theaetetus,* 150d4-6.
[89] *Theaetetus,* 145d6-7; 145e5.

knowledge, and wisdom are all intimately connected; but the relationships between them are still uncertain.

Theaetetus first offers the definition that "the way it appears at present, at any rate, is that knowledge is simply perception."[90] By adding the caveat, at present, shows that Theaetetus is willing to posit a belief, or a *hypothesis*, and submit it to inquiry. In other words, he is suited to the iterative and ongoing act of dialectic inquiry. While he defines knowledge as perception initially, he still seems open to rejecting this definition should it fail to be truthful, or at least truth-consistent. There is also a nice literary element here, in the use of knowledge as perception and that of it 'appearing' so. Socrates then connects this with Protagoras's hypothesis that "man is the measure of all things…[and] that as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you."[91] Socrates then states a conclusion of Theaetetus's definition of knowledge, to wit that, if knowledge is perception, then it "is always of what is, and unerring – as befits knowledge."[92] However, as Socrates notes, one thing, such as the temperature, may be perceived as warm to one person, and cold to another. Yet if perception is knowledge, this leads to contradiction: knowledge will be unerring, and therefore two contradictory, subjective perceptions are both unerring.

But it is unclear how this particular conclusion can support any viable definition of knowledge. For example, Socrates uses visual perception, stating that "color is…private to the individual percipients," then asking Theaetetus, "would you be prepared to insist that every color appears to a dog, or to any other animal, the same as it appears to you?"[93] Theaetetus responds in the negative, and must also must affirm Socrates's next question: "do you even feel sure that

[90] *Theaetetus*, 151e2-3.
[91] *Theaetetus,* 152a2-a9.
[92] *Theaetetus,* 152c3-5.
[93] *Theaetetus,* 154a1-a5.

anything appears to another human being like it appears to you? Wouldn't you be much more disposed to hold that it doesn't…?"[94]

Thus, we arrive at a fatal flaw with the first definition: if knowledge is perception, then every subjective perception is an infallible truth. However, since individual perceptions vary, we have to conclude that knowledge allows for contradictory statements, both of which are true. One person can perceive it is warm, while another that it is cold, and both must, on this account, have knowledge of the temperature. When Socrates 'tests' Theaetetus's hypothesis that knowledge is perception, it means he is "forced into saying the most astonishing and ridiculous things."[95] For example, Theaetetus must agree that "if I answer what seems to be true in relation to the present question, I shall say 'No, it is not possible'; but if I consider it in relation to the question that went before, then in order to avoid contradicting myself, I say 'Yes, it is.'"[96] Here we see the typical example of a dialectical elenctic: Theaetetus's presupposition that knowledge is perception leads him to make contradictory statements, and he therefore ceases to believe it. Socrates then states that this is the goal of dialectic, for it is a way "To look at our thoughts themselves *in relation* to themselves, and see what they are – whether, in our opinion, they agree with one another or are entirely at variance."[97] It is only through dialectic, when the individual makes her private beliefs public, that she is able to 'see' whether or not they are consistent with one another. We see here another key element in the role of dialectic as a way of truth-seeking through an 'alignment' of beliefs: We accept our beliefs when they are consistent with one another, and reject them when they lead us into absurd or contradictory conclusions. This process constitutes knowledge creation. Yet this creative action also requires destruction, when it serves

[94] *Theaetetus,* 154a8-11.
[95] *Theaetetus,* 154b9-11.
[96] *Theaetetus,* 154d3-6.
[97] *Theaetetus,* 155a2-3

to 'cleanse' the soul of a falsehood, rather than confirm its validity. Socrates determines that defining knowledge as perception is a "phantom."

In this analysis of the view that knowledge is perception, Socrates also highlights the difference between dialectic and rhetoric. For he admits that sophists often do find ways to ensure that "the tongue will be safe from refutation but the mind will not."[98] This serves to contrast sophistry with dialectic: in the latter, one is striving to ensure that her statements cohere with her beliefs. And as such, the statements must complement rather than contradict one another. Accordingly, we can deduce here an important aspect of the theory of knowledge in Plato's corpus: knowledge seeks truth by ensuring that one's whole 'system of beliefs' presents a coherent and consistent picture of reality.

While the next section of the dialogue focuses on two interesting theories of sight and motion, what I wish to focus on are how certain elements of these speeches connect to the larger theory of dialectic and its importance for knowledge: "Since that which acts on me is for *me*, and not for anyone else…Then my perception is true for me…How then, if I am thus unerring and never stumble in my thought about what is – or what is coming to be – how can I fail to be a knower of the things of which I am a perceiver?"[99] This line of reasoning must be accepted by Theaetetus if he wishes to cling to his initial hypothesis that knowledge is nothing more than what a private subject perceives. So here the dialogue not only exposes the perennial problem of how perception is related to knowledge: the elenctic method thus shows why equating the two leads to consequences that are inconsistent with Theaetetus's other beliefs.

One of the consequences, as Socrates points out, is:

> "If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him; if no man can assess another's experience better than he…how could it ever be, my friend, that

[98] *Theaetetus,* 154d9.
[99] *Theaetetus*, 160c3-d3.

> Protagoras was a wise man, so wise as to think himself fit to be a teacher of…we who are ourselves each the measure of his own wisdom?"[100]

If we allow that our own subjective perceptions are infallible, this leads to contradictions. Thus, dialectic can produce knowledge because it is not simply a subjective perceptive experience. Rather, philosophic dialectic takes our private beliefs and perceptions, subjects them to a public test, and determines whether or not they are consistent with other beliefs or consequences of the particular belief in question. Only through this active, interpersonal, process can the individual and the community determine whether a particular belief or hypothesis is valid and therefore truth-seeking, and an appropriate one for the lover of wisdom to uphold.

Annas offers a similar interpretation of the critique of knowledge as individual, perceptive, and subjective in *Theaetetus*. In rejecting the hypothesis that knowledge is perception, Socrates and Theaetetus ultimately reject the idea that an individual subject, in isolation, cannot be the final source or judge of knowledge. Rather, the individual must 'bring forth' beliefs formed by perception and subject them to communal investigation and reflection. Annas's commentary highlights the ethical implications of this association between knowledge and interpersonal collaboration. Rather than believing in one's own epistemic superiority, dialectic inquiry is epistemically superior because it requires "reasoning which takes people beyond their own particular and personal viewpoints and gets them to think from the point of view of the universe." [101] This is a refutation of the view that "Man is the measure of all things."

Polansky, too, sees an ethical connection here, noting that "when we are forced to notice that things show themselves in such different ways, we tend to lose our easy confidence that we know how things really are."[102] By rejecting the view that knowledge is perception, we see

[100] *Theaetetus*, 161d2-e3.
[101] Annas, *Platonic Ethics,* 108.
[102] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 70.

Socrates showing us the limits of our own personal, subjective experience as a means of forming our beliefs about the world.

Having thus exposed a problem in the view that knowledge is perception, Socrates now takes the opportunity to again, like in the *Phaedrus,* excoriate those who attempt to defend this view through sophistic argumentation. He wonders if such arguments are a means of "just playing to the crowd?[103] Again, the emphasis in sophistry is to defend what is likely, or popular, rather than what is truth-seeking. The value of dialectic is not simply that, like sophistry, it is interpersonal. Just because one brings forth his perception and finds them accepted by the public, this type of public validation does not indicate that a certain belief is knowledgeable. This is because the sophist shares her beliefs with the aim of convincing others; she is already convinced that they are the 'correct' beliefs. By contrast, the philosopher shares her beliefs in order to test them. Thus, dialectic is discourse aimed as scrutinizing, rather than persuading. Dialectic seeks to teach, rather than persuade. Sophistry is a knack based on power and persuasion. Dialectic is a *techne* requiring cooperation and logic.

The dialogue thus far leads Theaetetus to clarify that perhaps knowledge is not perception in toto, but, "just that in them which we see and hear. We both see and know the shape and color of the letters; and with the spoken words we both hear and know the rise and fall of the voice. But what schoolmasters and interpreters tell us about them, we don't perceive…and we don't know either."[104]

This leads Socrates to ask Theaetetus if he also believes in the entailed statement, to wit: "Can a man who has learned something not know it when he is remembering it?" To which

[103] *Theaetetus*, 162d1-d3.
[104] *Theaetetus*, 163b9-c3.

Theaetetus replies, “How could that happen…That would be a most extraordinary thing.”[105] Thus, by asking clarifying questions, Socrates draws out a contradiction within Theaetetus’s web of beliefs: He admits that one can remember what one knows through perception, even when there is no perception present. Thus, knowledge is not the same as any form of perception.

However, before letting this hypothesis rest, Socrates attempts to play devil’s advocate. He notes that, “if the father of the other tale were alive…He would find plenty of means of defending it.”[106] Here we see another example of the limitation of investigating a belief *without* the presence of the person who holds that belief. Or in other words, in the ideal version, Socrates and Theaetetus would be in active discourse with Protagoras. Instead, they are only able to investigate the belief which, like a written text, and unlike a fellow person, cannot defend itself. The philosopher, *qua* human subject, can both present and defend her hypothesis in a dialectic conversation: but the proposition, *qua* proposition, is inert.

Yet in this case, only the proposition is available. Therefore, Socrates admits that, in this less-than-ideal situation, “We [Socrates and Theaetetus] have got to take ourselves as we are, I suppose, and go on saying the things which seem to us to be.”[107] In this dialogue, perhaps, if Protagoras were present, the conversation would have charted a different path and led to a different outcome. There is a sense here that inquiry and beliefs, even if accepted in one instance, must not be taken as the ‘final word on the matter.’

After this last, failed, defense of the Protagorean hypothesis of knowledge as perception, Socrates and Theaetetus take a brief interlude to contrast the methods of the sophist and legal rhetorician versus the philosopher. Or as Socrates says, he will now inquire into “the man who

[105] *Theaetetus*, 163d1-d7.
[106] *Theaetetus,* 164a1.
[107] *Theaetetus*, 171d5-6.

has been knocking about in law courts and such places ever since he was a boy; and compare him with the man brought up in philosophy."[108] For the philosopher, "it does not matter to such men whether they talk for a day or a year, if only they may hit upon that which is."[109] The philosopher engages in conversation in order to seek out the truth. By contrast, "the man of the law courts…[is] skilled in flattering…and so resorts to lies…and in the end grows up to manhood with a mind that has no health in it, having now become – in his own eyes – a man of ability and wisdom."[110] The sophist is in the absurd position of telling lies and appealing to emotion and argumentative skills in order to get others to accept their proposition. And to the extent that they succeed, they then make the error of claiming to be wise, when in fact they have 'no health' in their soul.

We also see an emphasis in *Theaetetus* on intellectual humility and constant willingness to inquire into new ideas or beliefs that the philosopher has, and which the sophist lacks. Or as Socrates says in the *Phaedrus,* a philosopher knows he cannot be wise, but only wisdom-loving. Similarly, dialectic is truth-seeking, but never truly 'settled.' The consensus reached at the end of dialectic inquiry is still only a posited statement, never a final, absolute truth.[111]

The elenctic cleansing of dialectic is described later, when Socrates notes that when a sophist "is willing to stand his ground like a man for long enough, instead of running away like a coward…an odd thing happens. In the end the things he says do not satisfy even himself."[112] This quote encapsulates the function of elenctic. It is only through personal, cognitive reflection

[108] *Theaetetus*, 172c8-d1.
[109] *Theaetetus*, 172e1.
[110] *Theaetetus*, 172e1-b3.
[111] The reference to a rigid conviction of the sophist that he is wise also, I will argue, is the 'character' of sophist whom we meet in the *Gorgias*.
[112] *Theaetetus,* 177b3-7.

that the method can 'draw' out inconsistent beliefs within the interlocutor's mind, forcing her to confront the absurdity and reject false beliefs.

I see Socrates's mythological example in Stephanus lines 172c through 177c as a case of a new 'voice' expressing the same 'views' that are present throughout the dialogue in terms of the aims of philosophy and dialectic. Polansky, in a similar analysis, concludes that "The digression provides, in somewhat figurative form, the answer to the question of the whole dialogue through its account of the natures of man and god."[113] Furthermore,

> "Allusions to poetry or other philosophers may clarify the point in question, increase its importance, or tell subtly against the apparent, meaning. Images or examples introduced in the dialogues help interlocutors understand the approach to be taken in answering a question often also suggest what the answer should be."[114]

But again, in all cases, these attempts to help the interlocutor better understand also serve the end of preparing them for the rigor of dialectic; they are waystations along the route in developing one's philosophical *techne,* or dialectic. Poetry, images, and myths cannot be seen as substitutes for dialectic and its unique ability to keep us on a path of forming beliefs that seek-truth. The mythical elements are not meant to confuse, contradict, or replace the dialectic inquiry which constitutes the bulk of the dialogue. Rather, we see in *Theaetetus* a clear demonstration of what Socrates calls the highest *techne* of a philosopher. By understanding the nature of many things, she can match 'like with like' and connect with her interlocutor in a form he can understand. Theaetetus, as one still 'in training' as a philosopher, needs to hear Socrates's message as a myth as a sort of propaedeutic means of helping him learn the *techne* of philosophical, abstract, reasoning. As I argued in the *Phaedrus,* I interpret the myths in *Theaetetus* as ways of teaching or leading Socrates's interlocutor along the path of philosophy.

[113] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 148.
[114] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 21.

Another issue in reading the text is the somewhat apparent irony of Socrates claiming to be 'empty' of ideas. For as he states in this section dialogue,

> "Theodorus…it is too good of you to think that I am a sort of bag of arguments, and can easily pick one out which will show you that this theory is wrong. But…the arguments never come from me; they always come from the person I am talking to. All that I know, such as it is, is how to take and argument from someone else- someone who is wise – and give it a fair reception."[115]

Yet it is difficult to accept this account given how competent Socrates is in following the dialectic method and structuring his questions in ways that seem 'predetermined' to draw out falsehoods. This idea of a predetermined 'path' for the conversation implies that Socrates already has knowledge of whether a certain belief that Theaetetus has reflects *episteme* or ignorance. Here I take a middle view. For while it seems that Plato employs a clever bit of irony here, it offers the reader further clarification of what the *techne* of dialectic really is: it is more of a method of inquiry into hypothesis, rather than a method of generating the hypothesis. This is similar to Tarrant who writes, paraphrasing Plutarch, that "Plato can offer us *his* epistemological ideas via the interlocutor, without Socrates deviating from his strict role as midwife."[116] Dialectic draws out ideas, and it is the ability to 'draw out' certain ideas that could contradict one another which Socrates, as a practitioner of the dialectic *techne,* is able to do. He is not so much coming up with views as he is 'guiding' the conversation towards them.

This also highlights a clear break between Plato's view of knowledge production through dialectic versus foundationalist views of knowledge production. For Plato, knowledge does not require a struct internalist approach: an 'empty' mind that, in isolation, builds knowledge by building up from foundational beliefs. Rather, dialectic is personal, active, and does not require starting at some 'foundational' truth. Instead, dialectic works with our minds *in media res,* not

[115] *Theaetetus*, 161a8-b5.
[116] Tarrant, Harold. *Plato's First Interpreters,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, 173.

tabula rasa. It can do this because the method focuses on a particular belief, or one's answer to the "What is X" question, and then determines whether any beliefs the hypothesis entails expose a contradiction with other beliefs she holds. Socrates argues that sophistry lacks this central element when he states that those who claim that all is becoming cannot engage in dialectic because

> "If you ask any one of them a question, he will pull out some little enigmatic phrase from his quiver…and if you try to make him give an account of what he has said, you will only get hit by another…you will never reach any conclusion with any of them, ever; indeed they never reach any conclusion with each other, they are so very careful not to allow anything to be stable…in an argument."[117]

Without anchoring themselves to a particular concept, or an X, they cannot make progress. This idea of never reaching a conclusion also reinforces the idea that dialectic conversation follows an *odos*, or a path from one thing to another. The Heraclitean philosophers Socrates here chides are like those who merely wander this way and that, never making any forward progress towards knowledge, or truth-seeking consensus. Again, dialectic does not aim at a singular, final solution, so much as a gradual refinement of one's overall web of beliefs by cleaning one's soul of contradiction.

Having finally rejected his hypothesis that knowledge is perception, Theaetetus offers a new definition. As Socrates restates it later, he wonders if "knowledge is not to be found in experiences but in the process of reasoning about them; it is here, seemingly…that it is possible to grasp being and truth."[118] It is this process of judging, which Socrates calls the "activity of the soul when it is busy *by itself"*[119] which Theaetetus now offers as a definition of knowledge

[117] *Theaetetus*, 180a3-8.
[118] *Theaetetus*, 186d2-4.
[119] *Theaetetus*, 187a3-4, my emphases.

worthy of exploration. Socrates also takes this moment to praise Theaetetus for being willing to engage in dialectic and truly allow himself to reject his earlier belief, saying,

> "Theaetetus, you have answered me in the way one ought – with a good will…If we continue like this…either we shall find what we are going out after; or we shall be less inclined to think we know things which we don't know at all – and even this would be a reward we could not be fairly dissatisfied with."[120]

This highlights the fact that the dialectic method requires a certain type of personal commitment to seeking truth, a commitment which not all minds necessarily have. Only those with the right training and disposition to truth are suitable practitioners.

This notion is reiterated here in the comparison Socrates makes between the soul and a ball of wax, which varies between people, such that it can be "in some men rather hard, in others rather soft."[121] This speaks to the idea of our soul, or mind, as a medley of various beliefs, some of which are knowledge, some of which are not. The idea that some balls of wax are harder than others relate to the importance of character in determining the outcome of a dialectic argument: in particular, those with a 'harder' ball of wax will be more resistant to the elenctic step in the dialectic method.

This then leads to a distinction between false and true judgements as a matter of connecting these impressions properly, or as Socrates says "judgment is erratic…When it brings together the proper stamps and records correctly in straight lines, it is true; when it does so obliquely and crosswise, it is false."[122] Thus, we get a sense of knowledge as not just about isolated judgments, some that are true and some that are false, so much as an issue of how the mind can relate, or 'align' these impressions properly in making a new judgment or forming a new belief.

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[120] *Theaetetus*, 187b8-c5.
[121] *Theaetetus*, 191d1-d3.
[122] *Theaetetus,* 194b3-7.

This idea of knowledge, as related to connections between beliefs, reappears when Socrates explores the notion of what it might mean to possess knowledge. He makes an analogy between the soul and an aviary, where the birds are pieces of knowledge. But it can occur, under this analogy, that while one "is hunting for one piece of knowledge, it may happen…that he makes a mistake and gets hold of one instead of another."[123] Again, it is not just having pieces of knowledge, but employing or referring to them correctly, that is epistemically important. Socrates again refers to the limitations of forming truth-seeking beliefs internally, as opposed to through interpersonal dialectic, when he says in passing that "we could never be in error so long as we remained within our thoughts themselves."[124] We do not consciously make judgments and believe that they are false. Thus, in the isolation of our own private discourse, we will be following a method, or *odos*, which leads us astray.

Once this path is exhausted, we get to an inquiry into the final option presented, namely that "true judgement with an account is knowledge."[125] The exploration of knowledge as true opinion with an account affords Socrates another opportunity to contrast dialectic with other *techne*, such as the arts and sciences. And again, we see that dialectic not only surpasses the 'knack' for sophistry but also these fellow *techne*. Here the main issue begins with the hypotheses or axioms employed in other sciences, such as mathematics. For Theaetetus, as a mathematician, takes his starting axioms as given, and unexplained. Or as Polansky notes, "A mathematician goes back only to starting points that are themselves left unexplained."[126] By contrast, Socrates, in pressing deeper, rejects this notion of 'accepting' even the posited axioms. In dialectic, all propositions, however 'foundational,' must be investigated. Thus, as Polansky

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[123] *Theaetetus*, 199b3-4.
[124] *Theaetetus*, 196c5-6.
[125] *Theaetetus,* 201d1-d2.
[126] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 213.

says. “dialogue is thus an inescapable element of the Platonic conception of philosophizing.”[127] While mathematics clearly serves a propaedeutic role in priming one for dialectic, it cannot produce the same depth or level of understanding as that obtainable through philosophic, interpersonal, conversational inquiry.

This section of the dialogue also reiterates the conversational aspect of philosophy. In his analyses, Polansky argues that “thought, as Socrates defines it in 189-190a, is of the sort that tries to determine what things are, because it is asking itself questions and trying to answer them…When speech vocalizes such thought, it makes evident externally what has gone on internally.”[128] Whether we are in dialogue with others or merely talking to ourselves, what emerges from this description is the notion of conversation as an integral part of how we think, judge, and therefore form our beliefs. But whether or not these turn out to be truth-seeking/knowledgeable beliefs cannot be determined internally, for we are not always attuned to the various subconscious errors in our reasoning. Unlike the path charted by dialectic, it cannot be consistently a ‘truth-seeking’ route. At the same time, merely stating a belief or proposition is not sufficient.

At the same time, dialectic does seem to lack the epistemic qualities inherent in thought. Indeed, Socrates seems to suggest that positing a belief as anything other than propositional is merely a likeness of what one thinks. As Polansky notes, speech “discloses the person’s opinion, the conclusion of thought, rather than the process of internal discourse that leads to the opinion…it reduces thought from an internal *conversation* to a public *statement*.”[129] In contrast, dialectic seeks to better represent the internal process, thereby vocalizing how we think, not just

[127] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 214.
[128] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 223.
[129] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 224.

what we believe. And it can also be superior to the internal conversation: by adding more voices, the interlocutors can correct and point out errors in reasoning or fallacious assumptions that the speaker believes to be correct. And according to Socratic theory, humans only form beliefs they believe are true, we are generally interested in acquiring truth, not in being deceived. Similarly, Polansky notes, "the true Socratic view is that sheer obliviousness is impossible. Once humans learn to speak, they have thoughts and possibly opinions about everything that is. Some of these opinions will misrepresent things and be false. But even persons with false opinions generally suppose they are true."[130] It is this tendency to find our own opinions probably that makes elenctic such a central element in the dialectic method: the philosopher must always be critical of any opinion she has going into a discussion or investigation, and fully willing to cast it out if it proves untenable and leads one away from truth.

However, even this third definition of knowledge as correct judgment with an account cannot withstand the rigors of dialectic. For Socrates notes that for any proposition, "it is impossible that any of the primaries should be expressed in an account…But with the things composed of these, it is another matter. Here, just in the same way that the elements themselves are woven together, so their names may be woven together and become an account."[131] Thus we have the concept that beliefs, as indivisible propositions, cannot be knowledge because they cannot be accounted for. It is worth noting that this idea of knowledge differs from the modern idea of knowledge as something that requires justification. An account need not be a justification, but rather a narrative of how various beliefs fit together in order to create knowledge. Further, the importance of dialectic in creating knowledge is reinforced through the notion of an account, or a public explanation, of how one's avowed belief is woven into a coherent instance of

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[130] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 273.
[131] *Theaetetus,* 202b1-b5.

knowledge. In the dialectic method, it is the elenctic process which can reveal such coherent beliefs.

This idea of knowledge as being the possession of a coherent system of beliefs further helps to reveal the notion that knowledge is not just a true belief, in isolation, for it would suggest that "elements are unknowable and complexes knowable."[132] If they were both knowledge, it would lead to a contradiction. This issue leads Socrates to put forth the notion of three different types of 'account:' "making one's thought apparent vocally"[133] "by reference to its elements"[134] and "by being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things."[135] That none of these propositions, taken in isolation, can be enough to successfully define knowledge may be a case of epistemically beneficial *aporia* in a larger sense: for not only does the dialogue argue against three 'false' beliefs about knowledge, it leaves the reader wondering if the entire argument was doomed. For if knowledge is about relationships, then it is a truth-seeking, active, never-ending phenomena: knowledge grows, but never stops growing, the more we engage in dialectic debate and subject a private belief to an interpersonal exposition. Dialectic is a public method, yet it inherently aims to put private beliefs into a 'truth-seeking,' direction. Our minds will always wander forward, and always form beliefs, but a philosopher will subject them to dialectic to make sure that the process proceeds upon a truth-seeking bearing.

At the end of this *aporetic* dialogue, Socrates remains committed to continuing his dialectic inquiry and wishes Theaetetus to join him. To help the latter avoid feeling discouraged

[132] *Theaetetus*, 202e1.
[133] *Theaetetus*, 206d1
[134] *Theaetetus,* 207a2.
[135] *Theaetetus*, 208c9-11.

about the lack of a definitive answer, Socrates notes that even the aporia is epistemically useful, telling him that from now on,

> "if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as a result of this inquiry…and if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don't know."

Dialectic improves both his logos and his *ethos*. In thinking philosophically, one acts morally. As Polansky notes, the dialogue makes us see "the connection between science and practice, that is, between knowledge and virtue."[136] It is by seeking knowledge that we recognize our own limits, and are willing to engage in communal inquiry that seeks truth, rather than merely a defense of our current beliefs.

Aporia is in my reading an appropriate ending for this dialogue. Rather than showing some lacking or failure of Platonic theory, the discussion's inconclusive ending seems fully consistent with Platonic philosophy *in toto.* For we must remember that for Plato, human knowledge is distinct from divine knowledge. All opinions, as creations of human minds, are tentative and truth-seeking, rather than infallible or divine. Thus, I agree with Polansky that "*Theaetetus* offers nearly as complete an account of [false opinion and knowledge] as is *humanly* possible."[137] Perhaps, then, for Plato, the knowledge produced through dialectic inquiry is justifi*able* if not justified true belief.

This idea of dialectic as a lifelong journey is akin Socrates's description in the *Phaedrus* of a philosopher as wisdom-loving rather than wise. The aporetic ending highlights this 'ongoing' nature of the philosophic techne. Omnipotent and infallible knowledge is above the human mind; only the divine is the truly wise. Or, as Annas says, the philosopher's dialectic is a

[136] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 30.
[137] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 177.

truth-seeking and iterative *techne* that mirrors a "rational structure on a cosmic scale which our own reason is to be moved to *emulate*."[138] Polansky notes a similar type of epistemic humility in Plato's philosophy, writing that "humans have to struggle along the course laid out by Plato, for their comprehension of the elements seems always to lack finality in spite of the completeness and success apparently present in the dialogue."[139] Because dialectic is an iterative and continuous process, it is the path one travels throughout the entirety of her life. This is what I believe Plato is demonstrating as the dialogue comes to a close. For as Socrates implores of Theaetetus: "Let us meet here again in the morning."[140] The philosopher never stops plodding along the path towards truth. Knowledge is always on the path towards becoming like truth, rather than being truth itself.

To review thus far: *Phaedrus* expounds the merits of dialectic inquiry through a comparison with writing and rhetorical argument. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates demonstrates these elements of dialectic through his critique of Theaetetus's hypothetical definitions of knowledge. Further, the dialogue presents us with the Platonic theory of dialectic as the true art of philosophy relates to his understanding of what kind of knowledge it can generate. For this also gives us a sense of how to best understand his own word, which we then translate into knowledge: *episteme*.

My final close reading addresses *Gorgias.* As I hope to show, while it is similar to *Phaedrus* in critiquing sophistic argumentation. But it also offers an example of another important element of dialectic: it is only effective when Socrates's interlocutors have an antecedent commitment to truth and objective inquiry. But this is a rigorous journey, and, I will argue, one that Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles are unwilling to complete.

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[138] Annas, *Platonic* Ethics, 108.
[139] Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge,* 239.
[140] *Theaetetus,* 210c-d4.

CHAPTER 4 – DIVERGENT PATHS, DIVERGENT GOODS: DIALECTIC VERSUS SOPHISTRY IN *GORGIAS*[141]

I argued *Phaedrus* offers us a measured account of rhetoric. There, Socrates admits that, while rhetoric can 'accidentally' contain truthful beliefs, it is still not a means of teaching or

[141] Analysis and citations are based on the text as translated by Donald J. Zeyl, based on Greek text from E.R. Dodds, in Cooper.

creating true knowledge: only dialectic, as a true *techne,* can achieve that 'highest' claim. In *Gorgias*, we are offered a much harsher treatment of those who employ the 'knack' for rhetorical argument. Here, Socrates not only strives to expose the failures of rhetoric, but also of sophists, or those who seek to convince others to hold certain beliefs through rhetorical speech. Not only is rhetoric a mere knack[142] rather than an skill*,* it damages the souls of the sophist and her audience. rather than presenting a problematic contradiction or divergent view of rhetoric *qua* rhetoric, we see that much of the tension and combativeness absent from *Phaedrus* arises not so much from the subject of discussion, but rather the 'malformed' souls of Socrates's interlocutors: Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. For as I noted in my argument about *Phaedrus,* only a soul that believes in the value of truth can be a true lover of wisdom (philosopher) and both believe in the value of, and possess the training to withstand, the test of dialectic inquiry.

Annas seems to be getting at a similar point when she notes that in Plato's philosophy "knowledge-giving explanations are thus grounded in the store of [a soul's] recollectable concepts."[143] That none of Socrates's three interlocutors can agree with him — and indeed all seem to talk past him — stems from a lack of a shared 'store' of beliefs: to wit, mastery of the *techne* of dialectic and an ethical commitment that truth, rather than power, is what makes someone truly just. The interlocutors must believe in both the method and the concept, or at least be willing to reconsider such beliefs as mere hypotheses, in order to engage in a dialectic inquiry on the subject.

The dialogue presents us with another issue: How can we account for Socrates's rather 'combative' attitude in the piece? It seems to be a sort of snide, ironic discourse inconsistent with

[142] *Gorgias,* 465a2-3.
[143] Annas, 153.

the ideal of dialectic as an interpersonal and cooperative exercise. As Tarrant, for example, notes in his analysis of *Gorgias*, “no dialogue is more permeated with the vocabulary and theory of exposing and refuting (*elenchein* and *exelenchein*).”[144] The dialogue struggles to make positive progress, but instead stagnates into a back and forth ‘attack’ between Callicles and Socrates’s views of the good life, the nature of justice, and what is best for the soul.

One way of interpreting the nature of the combative attitude in the work comes from Terence H. Irwin. In his view of *Gorgias,* Socrates is not being ironic or naïve in calling Callicles an ideal interlocutor. As Irwin notes, Callicles’ “views about philosophy, ethics, and politics seem to be designed in order to give us a vivid picture of everything that Socrates rejects.”[145] Thus, Irwin’s argument highlights ways in which Callicles fulfills the aims of Socratic discussion. As support, Irwin cites Socrates’s claim at line 486e that Callicles is an ideal interlocutor.[146] This may seem difficult to square with the distinctly non-cooperative temperament of Callicles. But Irwin does convincingly argue that Callicles is an ideal example of an interlocutor for whom it is meaningful and epistemically fruitful to be caught in a contradiction of views. As Irwin puts it, Callicles “ holds views that all seem plausible and are not easily abandoned, and…that the contradiction remains even when the suspicion of muddle, or carelessness, or confusion by eristic tricks, is removed.”[147] Callicles is an ideal interlocutor because he is honest. Or, as Irwin says, if he “is ashamed of something, it will be because he believes it deserves shame, and hence his shame will be a reliable guide of what he takes to be better or worse.”[148] This means that his speech is not deceptive in the same way as that of Polus. Furthermore, Irwin rightly concludes

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[144] Tarrant, Harold. *Plato's First Interpreters,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, 129.
[145] Irwin, Terence H, and J. Clerk Shaw. “Cooperation and the Search for Truth: Socrates and Callicles,” in *Plato's Gorgias*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024),146.
[146] Irwin, “Cooperation,” 147.
[147] Irwin, “Cooperation,” 149.
[148] Irwin, “Cooperation,” 162.

that Callicles "is willing to participate seriously for long enough to reveal his different convictions, explore their implications…and to recognize the conflict between them."[149] Thus, the nature of the combat is not so much a failure of dialectic, or an example of a 'purely ironic' Socrates. Rather, the overwhelmingly *elenctic* form stems from dissonance between Socrates's and Callicles's background beliefs. In being willing to speak honestly, Callicles truly is an ideal interlocutor. Thus, Socrates is not being ironic in his praise of Callicles as an ideal interlocutor, unlike Polus and others who may back down and refrain from speaking what she *truly* believes for fear of censure.

The first section of the dialogue centers on Socrates's and Gorgias's inquiry into the art of oratory. Polus seems unable to converse in any other way, for as Socrates laments, he "has devoted himself more to what is called oratory than to discussion…because when Chaerephon asks you [Polus] what craft Gorgias is knowledgeable in, you sing its praises…But you haven't answered what it is."[150] Already, we see that the character of a rhetorician is able to easily grasp or employ the art of the philosopher: dialectic, communal, inquiry. At this point Gorgias replaces Polus as Socrates's main interlocutor, and he offers a definition of rhetoric as "the ability to persuade by speeches."[151] Again, as we saw in the *Phaedrus*, rhetoric aims at persuasion irrespective of truth. For as Socrates notes, it is a type of flattery which "takes notice…I won't say by *knowing,* but only by *guessing.*"[152] The sophist, as a flatterer, does not speak from knowledge, and therefore is not interested in truth or imparting knowledge to her listeners. Flattery simply aims at what is convincing in any given situation. If the truth is not convincing, therefore, it may not be in the interests of a flattering sophist to argue for it.

[149] Irwin, "Cooperation," 170.
[150] *Gorgias*, 448d9-e4.
[151] *Gorgias*, 452e1.
[152] *Gorgias,* 464c5-6.

This is a view of sophistry as a form of speaking without knowledge is supported by Allison Murphy. She argues that one who employs rhetorical argumentation "is only well-grounded if they possess the intelligence required to identify their true good."[153] For Socrates, only one with the proper training in dialectic, one who has a *techne* rather than a knack, has the intelligence to discern what is truly good. As she notes, "From Socrates'[sic] point of view, rhetoric (at least as championed by Polus and Callicles) lacks the appropriate intelligence, by itself producing what is only apparently good."[154]

Here Socrates also makes an aside highlighting the notion of dialectic as conversation which follows a consistent method, explaining to Gorgias that "It's not you I'm after, it's our discussion, to have it proceed in such a way as to make the things we're talking about most clear to us."[155] As the reader proceeds through the rest of the dialogue, I believe he should take this first appeal of Socrates seriously, and *refer back* to it when reading later parts of the dialogue, when Socrates's combative tone might *seem* at odds with this claim.

This initial appeal for a good-faith discussion of the issues, rather than *ad hominem* animosity, aside, Socrates elicits the first belief under examination, to wit that "Oratory is concerned with matters that are just and unjust."[156] I will note here a certain amount of irony to having the "what is X" question center on the theme of 'justice' since sophistry, as Socrates states, is a type of speaking unjustly.[157]

Upon Gorgias's consent to this hypothetical definition of oratory as the form of speech concerned with justice, Socrates divides oratory further, positing that there are "two types of

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[153] Murphy, Allison. "Revealing Commitments," In *Plato's Gorgias*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024) 197.
[154] Murphy, "Revealing Commitments," 194.
[155] *Gorgias*, 453c3-5.
[156] *Gorgias*, 454b5.
[157] *Gorgias,* 460d2.

persuasion, one providing conviction without knowledge, the other providing knowledge." Gorgias agrees that these are two modes of persuasion, and also agrees with Socrates that oratory "results in being convinced without knowing…And so an orator is not a teacher…about things that are just and unjust, but merely a persuader."[158] Oratory may talk about justice, it cannot teach others, or offer knowledge, about it. Furthermore, Socrates points out the irony here, that "a non-knower will be more persuasive than a knower among non-knowers."[159] Thus, oratory seems to work better when it is not truth seeking, or an expression of any knowledge held by the speaker. Rather, oratory works better when the speaker is not concerned with truth, and may even wish to conceal it. For as Socrates notes, in an attempt to persuade, the orator becomes "eager to win instead of investigating the subject under discussion."[160]An audience is easily convinced when an orator is only looking to *win* rather than *learn.*

Here we have the potential for an elenctic moment, a chance for Gorgias to truly refute or cleanse his mind of his past false belief about oratory. Socrates points out the incompatibility of two statements Gorgias made, alerting him that "You were saying that the orator could also use oratory unjustly…But now, as we subsequently examine the question, you see for yourself too that it's agreed that, quite the contrary, the orator is incapable of using oratory unjustly."[161] Instead, Gorgias proves unable to go through with the elenctic here, and Polus now replaces him as Socrates's interlocutor.

However, as with Gorgias, the following exchange ends in a perfect opportunity for an elenctic cleansing of Polus's soul:

[158] *Gorgias*, 454e3-11.
[159] *Gorgias*, 803b6-7.
[160] *Gorgias*, 4574-5.
[161] *Gorgias*, 461a1-b1.

> "Socrates: Since we're in agreement…if a person who's a tyrant…puts somebody to death…because he supposes that doing so is better for himself when it's actually worse, this person, I take it, is doing what he sees fit, isn't he?
> Polus: Yes.
> Socrates: And is he also doing what he wants, if these are actually bad? Why don't *you* answer?
> Polus: All right, I don't think he's doing what he wants…
> Socrates: So, what I was saying is true, when I said that it is possible for a man who does in his city what he sees fit not to have great power. Nor to be doing what he wants.
> Polus: Really, Socrates! As if *you* wouldn't welcome being in a position to do what you see fit in the city, rather than not!"[162]

In his final reply, Polus shows his unwillingness to believe in, or commit to, the dialectic method. For while he *states* that Socrates is right in his particular example of the tyrant, he is unwilling to cleanse his soul of its current opinion or *doxa* (δοξα) that the tyrant is doing what he wants, even if what he wants is what is good but is doing something bad. When he is forced to admit that he holds two contradictory beliefs, he could cleanse himself of one or the other to maintain a coherent belief system. Instead, he steers the conversation towards a different topic via an *ad hominem* critique of Socrates.

Soon afterword we find another exchange highlighting the difference between the soul of the philosopher Socrates versus the sophist, Polus. In their analysis of Archelaus, Polus believes that the example vindicates his position, but as Socrates sees things differently, stating that "Is *this* all there is to the argument by which even a child could refute me, and do you suppose…I now stand refuted by *this* argument?...My dear man, you're trying to refute me in *oratorical* style."[163] Here Polus is using an oratorical method, which further emphasizes the difference between dialectic and the type of conversation this dialogue has become. Rather than seeing a successful instance of dialectic inquiry, similar to what we see in *Theaetetus, Gorgias* shows Socrates thwarted at every turn, unable to steer the conversation towards truth-seeking discourse.

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[162] *Gorgias,* 468d1-e8, my emphasis.
[163] *Gorgias,* 471d4-e4, my emphasis.

As the conversation with Polus grinds to a halt, Callicles, another sophist in the conversation, interjects with his ‘inquiry’ against Socrates. In an ironic twist, Callicles states “Socrates, I think you’re grandstanding in these speeches, acting like a true crowd pleaser.”[164] This statement does offer us an ironic moment. For while Callicles accuses Socrates of relying in lengthy speeches to make his argument, it is Callicles who now goes on to make such a speech.[165] In my view, the accusation Callicles makes against Socrates is one which Socrates is more justified in making at Callicles.

However, other commentaries interpret this ‘ironic accusation’ differently. Murphy, for example, has a more charitable reading of Callicles. She sees a larger symmetry between Callicles and Socrates, which each side accusing the other of falling into the same errors. Murphy comments, “According to Socrates, rhetoric *pretends to be what it is not*, namely philosophy, with the power to achieve the human good. The rhetoricians advance the mirror charge: *philosophy pretends not to be what it is.*”[166] Murphy even goes to far as to argue that Socrates’s success in revealing the limits of the interlocutors souls is “achieved through means that very much resemble the rhetors’ own practice, so much so that the rhetors can claim, not without reason, that Socrates is just like them.”[167] However, I would add that it is not hypocrisy, once we realize the ultimate aim of a philosopher, which is to seek truth. There is still a subtle difference here, and one that highlights the distinction between dialectic and rhetoric. While Socrates accuses rhetoric of pretending to be philosophy, the rhetoricians claim that philosophy (irrespective of what it actually is, or what method it employs) does not advance truth. And since the rhetoricians does not see truth as anything good *per* se, they deny that philosophy can lead to

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[164] *Gorgias*, 482c3-4.
[165] Running from lines 482c3-486d1, or about 3 pages of uninterrupted oratory in Cooper.
[166] Murphy, “Revealing Commitments,” 198.
[167] Murphy, “Revealing Commitments,” 203.

a good life. As Murphy notes, "Philosophy claims to proceed with an eye on the true good, while rhetoric ultimately has no other justification apart from its actual ability to dominate."[168] Truth for Callicles, Gorgias, and Polus is not the good or the aim of human life. Thus, there is an ethical antecedent commitment required for one to follow philosophy, and this is a result of one's own psyche: one must, through some other training, come to hold a love of wisdom.

One of the first signals that Callicles is not committed to the dialectic method comes when Socrates asks Callicles to aver that pleasure and the good are the same thing. Callicles replies that, "to keep my argument from being inconsistent….I say they're the same."[169] However, in appealing only to the argument rather than his own beliefs, Callicles is not following the proper method. As Socrates notes, "Callicles…you'd no longer be adequately inquiring into the truth of the matter with me if you *speak* contrary to what you *think*."[170] We see here a case of Socrates noting that one can very well say what one does not truly believe, but that to do so is not constitutive of dialectic. He notes another case of such 'deceit' a few sentences later, addressing Callicles thus: "You do know. You're just pretending you don't."[171] So while it does seem that Callicles has a proper psyche, insofar as he is interested in self-reflection and truly understanding and articulating his beliefs openly and clearly, he lacks a key commitment : a desire to seek truth *at the cost* of his own beliefs. However honestly and willingly Callicles will work with Socrates to articulate his beliefs and understand them, he never seems to suggest that his views may prove to be false.

Again, we see how Plato's notion of the distinction between speech and thought captures a key difference between the sophist and the philosopher: in argumentative discourse, a sophist is

[168] Murphy, "Revealing Commitments," 199.
[169] *Gorgias,* 495a4-5.
[170] *Gorgias,* 495a6-8, my emphases.
[171] *Gorgias,* 497a10-11.

only concerned with presenting a convincing argument, even if that means deceiving her listeners and speaking contrary to what she believes. By contrast, the philosopher is concerned with understanding her own beliefs, rather than trying to persuade others to adopt them. The sophist takes the wrong path, starting at the end, with a conclusion, and then constructing an argument to compel her listeners to accept it. The philosopher charts the truth-seeking path, expressing her beliefs but not considering them the final matter. In a sense, the philosopher is interested in having to defend her beliefs in the interest of 'cleansing her soul' of falsehood. The sophist achieves consensus through persuasion; the philosopher achieves consensus through communal agreement.

The next section of their conversation makes this contrast between the philosopher and the sophist more explicit. It also addresses the key ethical superiority of dialectic conversation versus oratory, speechmaking, or argumentative conversation. Socrates implores Callicles to engage earnestly, noting that "our discussion's…about the way we're supposed to live."[172] The philosopher forms beliefs based on "what's best for the soul" while the masses who attend speeches seem more concerned with "the soul's way of getting its pleasure."[173] As Socrates states, "Do you think that orators always speak with regard to what's best?...Or are they, too, bent upon the gratification of the citizens…?"[174] Socrates notes how oratory must be methodical if it has any hope of being concerned with what is good for the souls of those who listen to it. He asks Callicles to affirm that "the good man, the man who speaks with regard to what's best, say whatever he says not randomly but with a view to something, just like the other craftsmen…Do we agree that this is so or not?"[175] This relates to the argument for dialectic as a type of method

[172] *Gorgias,* 500cc1-4.
[173] *Gorgias*, 501b5-c1.
[174] *Gorgias*, 502e1-5.
[175] *Gorgias*, 503e1-504a5.

(μεθοδος) or journey (οδος) with a clear end in mind. It is a motion towards something. And for this particular *techne* it is a motion that compels the soul to become wiser.

Yet here again, Callicles refuses to yield to the conclusions brought forth in dialectic. For Socrates notes that, given his past statements and consent, he is forced to conclude that it is "indeed better for the soul to be disciplined than to lack discipline, which is what you yourself were thinking just now."[176] However, while Callicles should affirm this, we see either that he was deceptive and did not actually state his beliefs in the previous discussion, or else that he simply cannot will himself to 'cleanse his mind' of contradiction. In either case, he seems to have a soul that is not suited to dialectic, for it is unable to be honest in what it says, nor consistent in what it believes. Thus, rather than accepting this opportunity for an 'elenctic' moment, Callicles shrugs away from Socrates, adamant that "I don't know what in the world you mean Socrates. Ask somebody else."[177] At this point, Callicles seems to admit that he is not committed to the dialectic method: even if he has been saying what he believes, rather than, as he later admits, "I gave you these answers just for Gorgias' sake."[178] he fails to consider that such beliefs may be, as Socrates describes them in the *Theaetetus,* mere wind-eggs. This is not in keeping with the method of dialectic, in which one posits what one believes but is willing to reject it if it fails under scrutiny.

At this point, Callicles refuses to go further with Socrates, yet implores him to finish by himself, speaking for both himself and his interlocutor. However, Socrates still emphasizes that this must be a communal endeavor, stating that "I'll go through the discussion, then…and if any of you thinks that what I agree to myself isn't so, you must object and refute me…I'm searching

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[176] *Gorgias*, 505b10-11.
[177] *Gorgias*, 505c1-2.
[178] *Gorgias,* 505c5-6.

together with you so that if my opponent clearly has a point, I'll be the first to concede it."[179] This quote seems to emphasize two critical elements of the dialectic method that Callicles, with a soul 'molded' by the 'knack' of sophistry, cannot follow. First, the inquiry Socrates practices is "a communal endeavor" or one of cooperative learning, rather than competitive persuasion. Secondly, Socrates notes that he is willing to concede to others when they expose falsity in his beliefs.

In the following section, Socrates tries to continue the conversation alone, embarking on a soliloquy that runs, largely uninterrupted, for 122 Stephanus lines. Even when forced to continue on alone, after Callicles refuses to press forward, Socrates emphasizes that he "does not have knowledge and is searching in common"[180] with his three interlocutors. Again, Socrates emphasizes how dialectic inquiry ought to be cooperative and communal, not combative. Socrates continues, saying that "if this [the possession of justice and self-control makes people happy] is true, we must consider what the *consequences* are."[181] Here, we see a description and enactment of the dialectic method: An interlocutor posits a belief, and then he and his fellow interlocutors subject it to scrutiny, attempting to 'unearth' any additional beliefs it entails that he either did not, or can no longer, *also* accept.

Rather than seeing this full method play out, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all bow out of conversation. They are unable to reach a consensus with Socrates, and are also unwilling to engage in an elenctic 'cleansing' of the contradictory and untenable *antecedent* beliefs they brought to the discussion. They have neither the epistemic interest in seeking truth, nor the ethical commitment to engage in a communal process of inquiry. They are not interested in

[179] *Gorgias*, 505ee-506a5.
[180] *Gorgias,* 506e3-4.
[181] *Gorgias,* 508b2-b4.

pursuing truth, and thus do not have the same soul as a 'lover of wisdom' (φιλόσοφος). Or as Murphy writes, "Socrates has vanquished the rhetors, but based on their own understanding of what occurred, the rhetors have no reason to be convinced."[182] Thus, Socrates tries to match 'like with like' in taking a more combative tone, the attempt fails because they do not have souls interested in seeking truth.

So now it is left for Socrates to close the dialogue alone, by attempting to defend his view of the complementary nature of justice and self-control with a myth or account. As with other appeals to mythology, this seemingly tangential and 'unphilosophical' section of the dialogue presents a difficulty for my view of the emphasis or centrality of dialectic in Platonic philosophy. However, I again believe that the answer can be found by appealing to my earlier discussion of *Phaedrus*, where Socrates describes the true philosopher as one who knows both the nature of souls and the nature of all forms of argumentation and investigation, who is thus able to match 'like with like.' It seems that this final appeal, or attempt to 'push' Callicles in a truth-seeking direction, demonstrates such ability. Socrates, as a philosopher, sees that Callicles does not have the proper type of soul to handle dialectic inquiry, but perhaps may be more apt to respond to a speech appealing to Homeric myth. Thus, even if the account is not ideal, it is still truth-seeking, insofar as it may make Callicles believe in the value of philosophy and dialectic. Thus, while the myth does not override or meet the same standards or ideals of dialectic, it may perhaps still be a propaedeutic. Had it succeeded, it may have been an opening for Callicles to reconsider his own views on justice as what is 'good' versus merely pleasant.

The ultimate, aporetic ending in *Gorgias* stems from the inherent limits of the souls of the interlocutors. This makes it a different type of aporia from that in the *Theaetetus,* which stems

[182] Murphy, "Revealing Commitments," 205.

more from the difficulty of the subject matter (knowledge). Instead, the inconclusive ending in *Gorgias* stems from the souls of the particular interlocutors. Thus, the failure is not inherent to the topic or the dialectic process. In *Gorgias*, I think it is worth contemplating how the dialogue could chart a far different course if we replace Socrates's sophistic interlocutors with the mathematical student, Theaetetus.

The ability for the latter to commit to the dialectic method offers more evidence for the view that Plato sees math as propaedeutic for philosophy. Yet as to whether Socrates, and the appeals of philosophy, ultimately succeed against those of the rhetorician, the issue remains in aporetic limbo. Or as Murphy argues, "The dialogue will not definitively determine which perspective is accurate, leaving the reader to make the final discernment."[183] Here, we encounter a dialogue mirroring what Socrates argues in *Phaedrus*: there are limits to the amount that a written work can offer us.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

The concept of the Socratic Method retains a central place in how Western scholars introduce students to philosophical inquiry. In this project, I have attempted to add my voice to that tradition of philosophical inquiry.

My methodological approach has been to explicate both the form and the function of dialectic inquiry in Plato's writings. Through a close reading of *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus,* and

[183] Murphy, "Revealing Commitments," 198.

Gorgias, I offer a definition of dialectic as a truth-seeking means of reaching agreement. It is also the *techne* distinctive of philosophical inquiry. It diverges from sophistry, which aims at what is most persuasive, irrespective of truth. The superiority of the dialectic *techne* (τέχνη) is in its ability to develop better theoretical and practical hypotheses (ὕποθέσεις) through consensus. And unlike mathematics, which also aims at truth, dialectic reaches a higher level of knowledge by refusing to regard starting hypotheses as certain. The mathematician works off a given set of axioms which remain 'closed' to inquiry. In contrast, the true philosopher never equates any agreed-upon hypothesis as "the final word" on any given matter.

I take as my starting point the analyses and arguments on dialectic put forth by other Plato scholars including Julie Annas, Harold Tarrant, Richard Robinson, Allison Murphy, and Terrence Irwin, in addition to Tarrant's and Annas's analysis of ancient commentaries by Albinus and Eudorus of Alexandria. All of these scholars have been useful for my interpretation of the dialogues, because they read Plato deeply and comprehensively in an attempt to understand the dialogue's philosophical significance as a *unified* corpus. And while these commentators offer different views, they are all united, as am I, in reading the Platonic corpus as a philosophically consistent whole.

This interpretive approach sets my work squarely within the unitarian tradition, as opposed to the developmentalist tradition. While both the developmentalist and the unitarian analyses of Plato's dialogues highlight the role of dialectic in his philosophy, they appeal to it in order to make two different arguments for how to read Plato's corpus. Vlastos, for example, offers a concise overview of the developmental thesis, which explains the diversity and divergence of views between dialogues by looking to how *historical* events sweep Plato "away from his Socratic moorings and start him on the journey from the 'Socrates' of the Elenctic

Dialogues, in whom disciple and teacher had thought as one, to the 'Socrates of the middle period, pursuing un-Socratic projects and anti-Socratic conclusions."[184] The developmentalist view explains the diversity of opinions and genres in the corpus in a chronological and biographical way: contradictions reflect contradictions between a "historical Socrates" and a later Socrates who articulates Plato's own views once he, *qua* individual philosopher, breaks free from his Socratic influences.

In contrast, I appeal to a unitary method of interpreting the diversity of opinions across the corpus. While the unitarian school includes a diversity of arguments, scholars in this interpretive tradition generally agree with the ancient commentator Eudorus of Alexandria, who, writing in the 100s BCE, declared, "Plato is a man of many voices, not of many views."[185] Instead of the variety in the dialogues implying a radical break or inconsistency in Plato's thought, I see the variety as part of a coherent overall aim of Plato's extant works. Contradictions may serve a pedagogical role by presenting the reader with a variety of theories for her to consider.

My interpretation of dialectic, as a philosophical notion, is unique insofar as it draws support from the dramatic nature of the dialogues themselves. Thus, I ascribe the conflicting arguments in Plato's dialogues, both inter-and intra-dialogue, to the intellectual diversity of the interlocutors and the diversity of ideological commitments and antecedent beliefs which they bring to the topic under discussion with Socrates. My argument offers a deeper exploration of how, in *Phaedrus, Theaetetus,* and *Gorgias,* the personalities and antecedent beliefs of particular interlocutors influence both the direction and the conclusions of dialectic inquiry. My project

[184] Vlastos, Gregory. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 131.
[185] Tarrant, Harold. *Plato's First Interpreters,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, 73.

looks at the dialectic method and in particular how it highlights the social factors of belief formation. Dialectic inquiry in Plato's dialogues follows a prescribed method, yet the exact path charted and the final outcome of any *particular* dialectic conversation depend in part upon the prior commitments and beliefs of the interlocutors. And because of this connection between the *knowers* and the epistemic outcomes of dialectic inquiry, the search for truthful beliefs and the formation of knowledge is an iterative and ongoing process: new conversations with different interlocutors will chart different paths, which may or may not get closer to the truth.

As these three dialogues unfold, the reader encounters a diversity of knowers: the mathematician Theaetetus, who earnestly searches for knowledge with Socrates and who, while ultimately remaining in *aporia* (ἀπορία), advances far further down the path of truth-seeking and knowledge production. I also see Socrates *attempt* to engage with Gorgias, the powerful and combative sophist, who refuses to proceed once he is forced to say what he truly believes, but which he fears will bring him condemnation.

In both cases, the interlocutor's background experiences are clearly relevant to the epistemological outcomes of the dialogues. In *Theaetetus,* the *aporetic* ending is the result of the object of inquiry: a satisfactory definition of knowledge, as a concept, remains elusive *despite* Theaetetus's commitment to truth and willingness to cleanse himself of false beliefs about knowledge. In contrast, *Gorgias* ends in frustration due to Socrates's inability to 'connect' with his interlocutors. For as Murphy explains, "Antecedent commitments reveal more fully not merely the beliefs one holds, but who one is."[186] Because Socrates's antecedent commitments contrast to sharply with those of Callicles, the *aporia* or doubt that the reader confronts at the end

[186] Murphy, Allison. "Revealing Commitments." In *Plato's Gorgias*, 146–71. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 197.

of the dialogue is not so much doubt about what justice is, but rather which character – that of the philosopher Socrates or the Sophist Callicles – is in the best position to uncover it.

As I take the last few steps of my *odos* (οδός)*,* I offer a potential new line of research based on my arguments highlighting the relevance of the diversity of interlocutors to the diversity of epistemic outcomes in each of these three dialogues. While we do not get explicit treatment of these themes in Plato, I argue that the dramatic elements of the corpus offer implicit examples in defense of modern work in social epistemology and the "situated knowers" thesis. [187] Kristin Inteman offers the following definition of this theses: to wit, that "Social location systemically influences our experiences, shaping and limiting what we know."[188] Rather than treating inquirers as generic epistemic agents, the situated knower thesis argues that each human epistemic agent is distinct, and that such personal idiosyncrasies impact what he or she believes. This notion of differentiated knowers may find support in Plato's dialogues, insofar as they leverage the particular characters interacting with Socrates in order to advance certain philosophical notions.

Or, to put it another way, I here posit that Plato's philosophy, insofar as it leverages a dialectic and dramatic form, offers a demonstration of social epistemology in action. Of course, further inquiry is required to determine if this hypothesis is probable, or a mere wind-egg.

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[187] For a general overview of this theory, see Toole, Briana. "Standpoint Epistemology and Epistemic Peerhood: A Defense of Epistemic Privilege." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 10, no. 3 (2024).
[188] Intemann, Kristen. "25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where Are We Now?" *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010), 783.

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