



Part II: **Method**

Graciela E. Marcos de Pinotti

On Plato's Methodological Strategy (*Theaetetus* 151d–186e): From Hypothesis to Self-Refutation

In this paper I attempt to draw attention to certain peculiarities of the methodological strategy adopted in the first part of the *Theaetetus*, within the framework of the discussion of the definition of knowledge as perception. The treatment of the flux doctrine, a radical position which initially seems to support this definition but which eventually deprives it of any sense, plays an important role in the strategy, which, as I shall try to show, bears features which are peculiar to it and which allow us to link it both to the hypothetical procedure used by Plato in previous dialogues and to a special kind of refutational argument used later on in the *Sophist*. This is accounted for by the special place the *Theaetetus* has in the *corpus platonicum*. In its search for a definition, its aporetic character and the absence of any reference to the Forms link it, *prima facie* at least, to the *early* dialogues of Plato, whereas its discussion of knowledge and the physical world and becoming, apart from paving the way for some of the main ontological innovations announced in the *Sophist*, appeals to a refutation strategy which is widely relied upon. The *Theaetetus* being a dialogue capable of forming a bridge between those preceding it and those succeeding it, it should come as no surprise that the examination of certain lines of investigation developed in both the former and the latter succeeds in revealing its argumentative structure.

1

At *Tht.* 151e2–3, in response to Socrates' question concerning the nature of knowledge, Theaetetus defines it as perception (οὐκ ἄλλο τί ἐστὶν ἐπιστήμη ἢ αἴσθησις). Socrates associates this definition with two positions which, while formulated differently, in fact affirm the same thing: one claims that man is the measure of all things, the other states that “nothing ever is, but is always coming to be” (*Tht.* 152e1).¹ This flux doctrine is introduced at *Tht.* 152d2 and discussed at length throughout the first part of the dialogue until its refutation at 181b–183c. Its discussion is part of a broader argument whose structure, as will be seen, is,

¹ All references are to Levett's translation in Burnyeat 1990.

in many aspects, akin to the procedure that starts “from a hypothesis” which is used in the *Meno*.

The problems which in one dialogue and the other lead to resorting to a hypothesis are certainly of a different nature, since it is not the same thing to ask what something is like and to ask what something is, what exhibits its nature. Whereas in the *Meno* the question that triggers the search, and which is examined via a hypothesis, is whether virtue is teachable, in the *Theaetetus* the question concerns the nature of knowledge, and the first answer defines it as perception. However, this does not prevent several points in common arising from both treatments.

(i) In both cases, the stance adopted by Socrates’ interlocutor is indirectly subjected to examination, making its truth-value depend on that of another proposition which, as a hypothesis, provides grounds for it.² The hypothesis expresses a condition which makes that stance plausible, and which, if satisfied, inclines us to give credit to it. Thus, in the *Meno*, in order to determine whether virtue is teachable, the hypothesis that it is knowledge is assumed, whereas in the *Theaetetus*, in order to ascertain whether knowledge is perception, it is proposed that everything is in motion.³ The main indication that this doctrine of total instability is assumed as a hypothesis⁴ is provided by *Tht.* 183a3–4. Once this assumption has been refuted, Socrates, without concealing his disappointment, refers there to efforts ‘to prove that all things are in motion, in order to make that answer [that knowledge is perception] come out correct’.

The affirmation leaves no room for doubt that the theory of universal motion is formulated in support of the definition suggested by Theaetetus, in that it lays down a condition that makes it plausible.

(ii) The next step consists in examining the hypothesis. The peculiarity of this examination is that it first argues in favour of the hypothesis, but then some items that militate against such support are brought to light. Though they do not invite us to reject the argument outright, they at least incline us to restrict its scope. Let us explain this.

In the *Meno* Socrates offers us two arguments of differing signification, one in favour of and the other contrary to the contention that virtue is teachable. The

² See the general characterisation of the hypothetical method offered by R. Robinson 1962, 105–113, particularly the example found at *Meno*, 116–117.

³ On the universal flux as the necessary condition of perception’s infallibility see Crombie 1963, 4 and Sedley 2004, 40.

⁴ Apart from the fact that it is identified as such at *Tht.* 183b4, where Socrates refers to it as a *hypothesis* whose followers do not find adequate language to express it.

first one (*Men.* 87c–89a) supports the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge by the consideration that virtue is useful. The conclusion about its teachability, however, is postponed, since a second argument (*Men.* 89d–96c) leads to a rectification of the answer Meno is expecting. If virtue is teachable, Socrates alleges, another condition needs to be met: the existence of teachers of virtue. Since it seems there are none, it must be concluded, cautiously, that virtue is *not* teachable⁵ and another explanation as regards its usefulness must be sought. The result of the whole discussion depends on both arguments. Virtue, by being useful but not teachable, will not be knowledge but true opinion, a precarious apperception that it is undoubtedly good, but unlike an object of *episteme*, not something teachable.⁶

So the discussion concerning the teachability of virtue in the *Meno* covers two stages, such that the second leads to a nuanced version of the conclusion which follows from the first. In the discussion that takes place in the first part of the *Theaetetus* it is possible, it seems to me, to detect a similar movement. Socrates starts alleging reasons in favour of the hypothesis that everything is in motion, and then brings items to light which deprive the hypothesis of support and invite us to view it less favourably.

At *Th.* 153a–d a true encomium of flux takes place, and in it Socrates puts forward evidence enough (σημεῖα ἰκανά) in its favour. Motion is associated with what passes for being and coming to be, inactivity, with not being and ceasing to be. Motion, he affirms, is beneficial both for body and soul, whereas inactivity has the opposite effect. Later on, to the subtlety present in this thought Socrates opposes the coarseness of those who do not think there is anything other than what they can grasp firmly in their hands, and who do not admit that doings, comings to be, or anything invisible share in being. At this point, the credit which this doctrine deserves demands that some special language be coined, in accordance with the nature which flows from things, some language which does not

5 Cf. *Men.* 90a–96c. For Devereux 1978, 123, this argument can be characterized as *ad hominem* in the sense that it appeals to Meno's limited notion of teaching. It does not prove that virtue is not teachable *simpliciter*, but that it is not taught. According to R. Robinson 1962, 116–117, the end of the hypothetical procedure is probably at *Men.* 89c, 'for after page 89 neither the word 'hypothesis' nor any methodological remark occurs in the dialogue'. Socrates *directly* disproves the proposition that was originally in question (virtue is teachable) and concludes therefrom the falsehood of the hypothesis.

6 For Gonzalez 1998, 179–180, at the end of the *Meno* we have two contradictory conclusions drawn from two different arguments, and the key to the 'antinomy' is the ambiguity of the word 'teachable'. The method of hypothesis does not inquire into the meaning of the terms used, and it presents us 'only two ambiguous half-truths: virtue is teachable and virtue is not teachable'.

include the verb *to be*, and which is limited to verbs capable of expressing the processes to which everything is subject.⁷ Without it, Socrates reflects, ‘if you speak in such a way as to make things stand still, you will easily be refuted’ (*Tht.* 157b7–8).

The consideration here is that saying is doing something, and that we should adapt language to what flows incessantly. Otherwise, by portraying what is in permanent flux as stable one will be refuted. At this stage of the discussion, I would like to insist, Socrates and Theaetetus are placing great emphasis on those aspects of the flux doctrine which invite adherence, and are allowing it be considered an acceptable explanation of what is real. Socrates appears to subscribe himself to what these ‘wise men’ are saying, to the extent that Theaetetus does not succeed in discovering whether the things Socrates is saying are what he himself thinks, or whether he is just testing him.⁸

Instead of concluding, in the *Meno*, that virtue is knowledge and is, as such, teachable, a second line of reasoning leads to a lessening of the connection initially suggested between virtue and knowledge. At *Tht.* 181b8–183c3, similarly, a new argument is developed which, even if it does not shatter what was said in support of the view that everything is in motion, reveals that this doctrine, by virtue of its radicality, is untenable. At *Tht.* 179e1–2 Socrates proposes ‘to examine it by going back to its first principle, which is the way they [the fluxers] present it themselves’. This announcement gives way to the second stage, which extends to 183c3, in which the doctrine will be refuted. The starting point of the new argument is the distinction between two kinds of change, spatial movement and change of quality, to which all things are subjected should it be the case that everything is in constant motion.⁹ The problem is that such a stance, it now becomes

7 Cf. *Tht.* 157a7–b9, on the analysis of the flux theory first attributed to Protagoras (152c, 155d) and then to the entire range of philosophers, with the exception of Parmenides. In this context Socrates expands on an elaborate theory of perception which, according to Cornford 1935, 49, has its origin in Plato himself. What is new in this passage, McDowell observes 1973, 141, n. *ad loc.* 157a7–b8, “is the exclusion of ‘something’, ‘someone’s’, ‘my’, ‘this’ and ‘that’... as a denial that things persist through time”. What is significant, to my mind, is that Socrates introduces it as a plausible explanation, and he formulates his conclusion using the first person plural.

8 Cf. *Tht.* 157c4–6. Socrates, invoking his ignorance and his maieutic art, answers that only about the latter is at issue: he is practicing midwifery on Theaetetus.

9 Cf. *Tht.* 181c3–d7. Otherwise, Socrates argues, ‘things are both moving and standing still, and it will be no more correct to say that all things are in motion than to say that all things stand still’. McDowell 1973, 179, n. *ad loc.* 179d1–180d7, distinguishes ‘the doctrine of total instability introduced in the present passage from a less radical doctrine which turns out to be that involved in the theory of perception’. The flux doctrine, as I interpret it, is presented, from the beginning, as a radical doctrine according to which *nothing* is but *everything* is subject to becoming. What is

evident, far from supporting the definition of knowledge as perception, leads rather to the fact that no affirmation has a precise meaning or has more value than any other: 'if all things are in motion, every answer, on whatever subject, is equally correct' (*Tht.* 183a5–6).

Theaetetus' answer to the Socratic question about the nature of knowledge therefore becomes irrelevant. The flux doctrine finally deprives the definition of knowledge of the support which it was called on to sustain.¹⁰ As for the special language that had demanded to be coined if the radical flux theory is true, it is now observed that, if it is indefinite enough, as the theory demands, it will prevent its followers from putting it into words. This theory cannot be communicated through any language akin to the flowing nature to which everything would be subject, because such language would communicate nothing. Thus 'the exponents of this theory need to establish some other language; as it is, they have no words that are consistent with their hypothesis' (*Tht.* 183b2–4).

While at *Tht.* 157b1–9 Socrates seemed to include himself among those who considered it viable to reform our language in order to avoid that the fact of flux refuted what is said, it is now the theory of radical flux that turns out to be refuted by the *factum* of language. His followers are reduced to silence, caught in their own hypothesis.

According to R. Robinson, Plato professes to show that the fluxers are wrong because from their doctrine there follow consequences which are obviously false; therefore, the doctrine which entails them must be false too.¹¹ For Kahn (2007, 45) the conclusion of the argument is rather that there can be no description of a world without stability: a coherent statement of the thesis of total flux is not possible. Both readings are probably partly true. Plato believes that the use of language requires a certain fixity in the object, enough stability so that what is said conveys a precise meaning. This is something which the fluxers silently accept

modified is the perspective concerning it. First its positive aspects are exposed and then its weaknesses are brought to light.

10 For Sedley 2006, 96, the definition of knowledge as perception can survive only if perception is radically unstable, but this concession renders the definition unstable, no more true than false. And "this is a collapse, not of language, but of *dialectic*" (98). Socrates' objection is 'that it postulates a world in which there can be no dialectic, and no definitions (...). Theaetetus' definition undermines itself: it is a definition that presupposes a world in which there can be no definitions' (99).

11 Cf. Robinson 1950, 9: their view "entails that nothing can have any description applied to it (*Tht.* 182d4), or all answers are equally right (*Tht.* 183a5), or all existing language is useless except perhaps the phrase 'not so' (*Tht.* 183b4). We are tacitly given to understand that these consequences are obviously false and therefore the view which entails them must be false too".

when they use language to express their doctrine, but which they deny when claiming that everything is subjected to constant movement and change. From Plato's standpoint, they are confronted with the dilemma of remaining silent, refusing to communicate the doctrine they embrace, or claiming that everything changes and moves, at the price of being caught out in an irreparable state of falsity, since the statement of this thesis presupposes a certain stability. I shall return to this point later on, to show the connection between the present argument and a refutation strategy profusely used in the *Sophist* against the kind of opponent who contradicts himself when he tries to articulate his thesis. First I would like to address another aspect which, to my mind, corroborates its similarity to the methodology used in the *Meno*.

(iii) In the arguments offered in both dialogues, as I have been saying, there arise elements which deprive the hypothesis of support and invite us to rein it in. Socrates' argumentation erodes our trust in the view that virtue is knowledge, or that everything is in motion, just as certain facts seem to refute it too, such as, in the *Meno*, the non-existence of teachers of virtue, and, in the *Theaetetus*, the very act of asserting that everything is in motion. However, the items initially alleged in favour of the hypothesis are not totally discarded. In the *Meno* the initial identification of virtue and knowledge is rejected, while it is not denied that virtue, as true opinion, is based on a certain knowledge. Similarly, in the *Theaetetus* the reduction of everything to movement is called into question while still acknowledging the latter as possessing a privileged role in what is real. In fact, in the *Sophist*, which Kahn (2007, 53) considers a sequel to the *Theaetetus*, Being includes both the unchanging and what changes. The encomium that the theory of flux initially deserved is not shattered, and its positive features are not ignored, but its scope is restricted so as to include a certain stability, which is necessary for the theory to be presented as a plausible picture of what is real. Its own discussion and subsequent refutation entail the tacit affirmation of a certain fixity, which is a condition for the theory to be able to be put into words and be an object of examination.

From the refutation of radical flux the inference is drawn that *not everything* is subject to change in all its aspects, even though the content of this negation remains ambiguous, and in the rest of the dialogue — let us remember that in the *Theaetetus* Plato omits all reference to the forms, and constructs a Socrates who is ignorant of his metaphysics — it is not clarified.¹² Hence the need to prove that

¹² Is Plato trying to show that there is *something* which keeps itself from change in all its aspects, a stable world of intelligible Forms (Cornford, Cherniss)? Or does he mean that *nothing* changes in the radical sense that the fluxers proclaim, not even the physical world subject to

perception does not constitute knowledge by means of an argument such as the one offered at *Tht.* 184b–186c. Such a refutation deprives the definition of knowledge as sensation of support, and in that sense weakens it, but it does not refute it. Although the definition is no longer plausible in view of the flux doctrine, it could be presented as sound on a different basis. Socrates suggests this when he affirms that they will no longer accept that knowledge is perception, ‘not at any rate on the line of argument which supposes that all things are in motion’ (*Tht.* 183c1–2: ἐπιστήμην τε αἴσθησιν οὐ συγχωρησόμεθα κατὰ γε τὴν τοῦ πάντα κινεῖσθαι μέθοδον).¹³

This means that, following another line of reasoning, Theaetetus could uphold that knowledge is perception. Refuting this formula too, then, is a future project, and that is exactly the aim of *Tht.* 184b–186c, the formulation of a proof that perception is not knowledge, the details of which I shall not dig into in this paper. Let it suffice to say that perception is belittled there on grounds of its being incapable of grasping *ousia*, a definite character belonging to everything which it is possible to talk or think about.¹⁴ The refutation of the radical flux doctrine by demonstrating the impossibility that Being, Motion and Rest exclude each other, prepares the ground for some of the main ontological innovations of the *Sophist*.¹⁵

2

The refutation of universal flux, apart from being part of an argumentational procedure which contains traces of the hypothetical method used in previous dialogues, appeals to a refutation strategy profusely used in the *Sophist*. In this dialogue Plato resorts to the *factum* of language to show the weakness of certain positions which cannot square with with the fact of being stated. In every case, the opponent finds himself in difficulty trying to articulate his position, since the

becoming (Robinson, Owen, Crombie)? The question has been discussed since Aristotle's day, and it continues to divide scholars.

13 For Castagnoli 2010, 214, n. 35, Socrates envisages the possibility that Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as *aisthesis* ‘finds support in some different ontology’.

14 Cf. Modrak 1981, 50. For Kahn 1981, 120, the *ousia* required for knowledge and truth is ‘the propositional structure of thought, provided by or modelled on language, and entailing reference, predication, and assertion. It is this structure that is required for thought to be true or false’.

15 According to Kahn 2007, the most important change is the explicit enlargement of the notion of Being to include the nature of things that change. Cf. *Sph.* 247d8–e4, 248e7–249a3 and specially 249d3–4, where Plato insists that Being must include both the unchanging and what changes (249d3). As this author emphasizes, the inclusion of change is new (48).

very act of asserting it entails the commitment to something which is in conflict with the content of what his position is meant to express.¹⁶ For Plato the use of language requires, among other things, enough stability for what is being said carry a definite sense. This is something the fluxers tacitly accept when trying to articulate their position in *logos*, but which they deny when claiming that everything is in incessant motion.

At least two examples in the *Sophist* point in this direction. One is that of the Monist, who denies multiplicity when stating that only the one is. The assertion of this thesis demands, however, the use of names, something which a Monist, for whom there exists only one thing, cannot admit.¹⁷ The way in which the Monist presents his theory, Castagnoli (2010, 220) explains, is incompatible with the content of what the theory is meant to express. Although he phrases his thesis in words, he implicitly contradicts it.

Another example is that of those who claim that things are unblended and incapable of having a share of each other. Nevertheless, they cannot avoid combining terms in their speech. Strictly speaking, there is no need for others to refute them, since they have their enemy inside themselves, like Eurycles the ventriloquist (*Sph.* 252c5–9). The image leaves no room for doubt that the conflict comes to light as soon as the opponent asserts his thesis and by virtue of his *own* admissions, which are refuted the moment he tries to articulate his position; once again there arises a conflict between the way in which his thesis is asserted and its content.

These arguments proceed, without exception, from what is said by the opponent. We should not forget that they are positions whose articulation in language is a key instance in which it is made clear that they are incompatible not only with ordinary opinion — they are literally paradoxical — but also with the conditions of their own statement. The method, as it is described at *Sph.* 243d, thus consists

16 In the *Sophist*, as Wilmet 1990, 97 says, Plato on at least four occasions (238a–239a, 243d–244a, 244b–d, 251e–252c) takes on opponents by taking advantage of inconsistencies between what they say and the particular way in which it is put forward. These arguments show that their claims ‘are *intrinsically* incoherent: what is proposed and how it is proposed are inconsistent and incompatible’. See Castagnoli’s (2010, 205–247) examination of ‘operational self-refutation’ in Plato.

17 Cf. *Sph.* 244b6–d13. Perhaps the Monist would not mind admitting that only the one is and that the rest is a mere name, in the spirit of Parmenides B8, 38. However, as Crombie 1963, 393 explains, “‘that there exist two names’ must mean something like ‘that there exist *grounds* necessitating the use of two non-synonymous words’, or ‘that the one substance contains two aspects’”. Plato infers that the Monist cannot even admit there is *a single* name, because this implies affirming the existence of more than one thing, and thus falling back into multiplicity.

in imagining that the followers of these doctrines are present. This explains the profuse use of verbs of *saying* throughout the discussions with such opponents.¹⁸ The dialogue with the defenders of universal flux poses a special difficulty, since it is not easy to obtain an explanation from people who are as unstable as the philosophy they defend. Socrates and Theodorus thus decide to take charge of the issue themselves and investigate this theory as a problem (*Tht.* 180c5–6).

In addition, theirs are radical positions, which involve absolute denial. The denial can be explicit, as in the case of the rejection of all manner of blend or combination, or just implicit, as in the case of Monism, which implies the denial of multiplicity, or of universal flux, according to which no stability is possible. The negative nature of these theories imposes restrictions on the use of language. However, instead of attaining a language which is capable of satisfying the requirements of the theory which is embraced, Plato shows that the nature of things ends up revealing to the language. This theory, because of its radical negativity, is refuted. The attempt to subordinate language to ontology fails.¹⁹

So does Plato really prove that such theories are false, or does he at the most place his followers in a vulnerable situation? The question is not easy to answer. Even if it is not expressly said that this is about false theories, it is shown that there is no coherent statement of such theories, and, if they were true, they could not even be expressed or, more strictly, nothing could be said at all; in a word, there would be no language.²⁰ Since this is obviously false, we are entitled to suppose that the theory leading to it — a theory which is incompatible with the ordinary practice of language — is also false. In this sense, the radical opponent with whom Plato is in confrontation, whatever the figure he incarnates — the Monist,

18 Cf. *Tht.* 181a6, 8, b2, c4, c6, d8, *Sph.* 244b6, 9, c12, 251e8. As Wilmet 1990, 97–99, points out: “such a method is already implicit in the early, ‘definition’ dialogues, where Socrates forces someone to say what he thinks, i.e. forces him to *speak*, and tries to derive from that sole speech either inconsistencies or conclusions that the speaker is *not* ready to endorse”.

19 The first stage of the discussion of the theory of radical flux is at *Tht.* 157b, where the attempt to adapt language to what flows incessantly takes place in order to avoid being refuted. However, at *Tht.* 181b–183c (second stage), by proving that total instability would make the language practice impossible, the theory of radical flux is refuted by the *factum* of language. As I explain in Marcos de Pinotti 2017, 141–145, some kind of permanency is the *sine qua non* of the meaningfulness of language, so that if the assertion ‘nothing is, everything is changing’ makes sense, it is false, because some sort of stability is possible.

20 Baltzly 1996, 153: ‘Plato is interested in philosophical views which are such that if the conditions which would make them true obtained, those same conditions would make it the case that neither they, nor anything else, could *ever* be expressed in any way... Someone who, like Plato, is convinced that philosophical conversation is an important path way to truth will of course be very mindful of the pre-suppositions of the possibilities of thought and discourse’.

the follower of flux or any other — is reduced to silence, or, if ready to articulate his position, to an irremediable state of falsity.²¹ The key to the Platonic refutation strategy, understood as such, is none other than the *factum* of language. The moral of these arguments is that the philosopher, rather than reforming language according to his theory concerning the way things are, uses dialogue to make language reveal the true nature of the things that are. This is how a theory is subjected to testing. And if its content is such that, were it true, it could not be expressed, it will be a theory not deserving to be embraced by the philosopher.²²

It is worth highlighting that Plato, as Socrates' true heir, instead of precipitately rejecting theories which could be considered obviously false or deprived of sense, subjects them to thorough scrutiny and seeks to show their inconsistencies. He considers that his paradoxical nature does not relieve him as a philosopher, but rather makes him turn them into a subject of inquiry. These theories appear as possible explanations which deserve credit until their internal contradictions come to light. In this instance they are refuted, and the purpose of the refutation is not the opponent's defeat but the success of the investigation.

I find that in the case of the theory of universal flux, the criticism of the *Theaetetus* is constructive inasmuch as it introduces restrictions which permit the value that Plato acknowledges in the theory from the beginning to remain unscathed. In fact, this criticism paves the way for a conception of Being which is generous enough to include changing as well as unchanging entities, which is the key to the ontology of the *Sophist*, in which motion is one of the genres of Being. In this sense, as Kahn says (2007, 53), Plato's attitude towards the fluxers shifts from negative criticism to re-appropriation.

This criticism, according to the interpretation offered here, is inserted into an investigation procedure which draws inspiration from previous dialogues and anticipates the refutation strategy used later in the *Sophist*. This confirms the special place of the *Theaetetus* in the progress of the dialogues, and suggests a continuity as regards the method which Plato considered characteristic of philosophy. In it, hypothesis plays an important role. A hypothesis is a proposition the philosopher knows he does not know, a supposition temporarily assumed, whose

²¹ See Robinson 1950, 9, cf. *supra* n. 11), and Baltzly 1996, 153. *Contra* cf. Castagnoli 2010, 218: the self-refutation argument in *Tht.* 181–183 'has not proved that extreme flux must be false'; the Monist "had been reduced to stupid silence or meaningless babbling ('the one is one of one'), but had not been explicitly rejected as false" (224).

²² On the possibility of subsisting as true without the possibility to articulate in language cf. Wilmet 1990, 100: 'a philosophical thesis that cannot be said is not a philosophical thesis (and Plato in various places repeats that the worst would be to be deprived of the means — language — to philosophize)'.

truth value he is ready to explore and establish, though not without first going through the difficulties and facing possible objections. In this sense, the use that Plato makes of hypotheses evokes his teacher's practice, determined to scrutinise opinions and to fight the presupposition about knowing what is not known. Also, the refutation strategy used against an opponent that, when trying to articulate his thesis, contradicts himself, is a reminder of Socrates' own strategy and his interest in making his interlocutor speak. Hypothesis and self-refutation, key ingredients in the philosopher's investigation procedure, show Plato's fidelity to the Socratic legacy.

Álvaro Vallejo Campos
Dialectic in the *Theaetetus*

1 Introduction: Dialectic and *Elenchus* in the *Theaetetus*

In this paper I would like to examine the role and character of dialectic in the *Theaetetus*. In the middle of his analysis of Protagoras's man-the-measure doctrine, Socrates declares that if whatever anyone judges is true for that person, then not only Socrates himself, but also his art of midwifery (τῆς ἐμῆς τέχνης τῆς μαιευτικῆς) and the whole business of dialectic (σύμπασα ἢ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι πραγματεία) would incur absolute ridicule.¹ This sentence unites the fate of the Socratic technical method of examination with the entire *pragmateia* of this art of dialogue that Plato called 'dialectic'. We should also observe that Aristotle, in the very first words of the *Topics*, presents his major work on dialectic as a *pragmateia*, the same as Xenocrates.² In the ensuing lines of the aforementioned passage, Socrates clarifies the nature of both activities, that is, his own method and the practice of dialectic, which coincide in the task to 'examine and try to refute each other's appearances and judgments' (ἐπισκοπεῖν καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖν ἐλέγχειν τὰς ἀλλήλων φαντασίας τε καὶ δόξας, 161e, Levett trans.). Therefore, another version of the Socratic *elenchus* seems to be at the core of the Platonic concept of dialectic in the *Theaetetus*, forming an essential part of it.

The metaphysical restraint in the *Theaetetus* is obvious, because there is no explicit, unmistakable reference to the forms of the previous dialogues. This has been a common topic of all commentaries on the dialogue and one of the main philosophical questions under interpretation. Nevertheless, as we shall see, this Platonic attitude is notoriously limited through indirect references to the forms and to other aspects of the philosophy that we already know from other works. It is also a fact that, as many scholars have indicated, in the *Theaetetus* Plato seems to go back to the 'semi-historical Socrates' of the early aporetic dialogues, in the sense stipulated by Sedley,³ and presents him in a manner that would be incomprehensible if the dramatic setting of this work had been occupied by that other

1 τὸ δὲ δὴ ἐμόν τε καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς τέχνης τῆς μαιευτικῆς σιγῶ ὅσον γέλωτα ὀφλισκάνομεν, οἶμαι δὲ καὶ σύμπασα ἢ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι πραγματεία (*Tht.* 161e4–6). I very much appreciate the comments of E. Berti and M. Narcy, who read a previous version of this paper.

2 The title of one of his works is *peri to dialegesthai pragmateia* (D. L. IV 13).

3 Sedley 2009, 3 and *passim*.

incarnation of Socrates who expounds the metaphysics of the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. My explanation of this circumstance is that Plato is trying to depict the practice of a dialectical conversation, the task of which consists in arguing from a philosophical point of view that runs contrary to the doctrines dogmatically expounded in previous dialogues. If the most accepted chronological order of the dialogues is true and we take into account the mutual internal references, we also have to notice that the *Theaetetus* is placed in a series of dialogues beginning with the *Parmenides* and continuing with the *Sophist* and the *Politicus*. I will therefore reflect on the lines of continuity running through these two groups of dialogues, namely, between the preceding dogmatic texts, such as the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, and the ensuing works of the later period that seem to start with the *Theaetetus* or make reference to this dialogue. In my view, the Platonic concept of dialectic and the use of the *elenchus*, which is so prominent in this work, can be interpreted not as a rupture with the preceding dialogues but as an external support to basic elements of their metaphysics that emerge from the refutation of those theses that are opposed to it, as well as anticipating the new elements that would be expounded in the dialogues that followed.

2 Dialectic in the *Theaetetus* and Aristotle

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato lays stress on Socrates' ignorance and on the elenctic character of his maieutic *technē*, which apparently are two sides of the same coin. Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is not wholly absent from the non-aporetic dialogues, but no one would deny that in the *Theaetetus*, compared with other dialogues of the same chronological group, this is a very distinctive feature that determines its philosophical methodology. Many scholars trying to interpret the dialogue have asked 'why does Plato make such a point of (Socrates) being philosophically barren (150c–d)?'⁴ My answer to this question is that the *Theaetetus* is a dialogue that has a predominant concern with methodology and that Socrates embodies the *elenchus* as an essential trait of Plato's concept of dialectic in order to exhibit its refutative dimension. Aristotle occasionally distinguishes between dialectic and *peirastic*, but sometimes also acknowledges 'the art of examining' or *peirastike* as a 'branch of dialectic' (trans. W.A. Pickard) or, more literally, as a certain kind of dialectic (*dialektike tis*, *Sophistical Refutations: S.E.* 171b4–5). He

⁴ See Sayre 1992, 228.

even says that ‘the essential task of the art of dialectic and of examination’ is the same and consists of ‘discovering some faculty of reasoning about any theme put before us from the most reputable premises’ (183a37–b1). The Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is the perfect character for representing the technical method of refuting that constitutes, in Aristotle’s opinion, this essential part of dialectic. Aristotle gives us an outline of this dialectical expertise, describing certain characteristics that can all be applied to the Socrates of the *Theaetetus*. First of all, in this dialogue, Socrates, does, indeed, speak in many passages of his art of midwifery as a *technē* (cfr. *Th.* 149a4, a7, 150b6, 161e5, 184b1, 210b8, c4) and Aristotle in *The Sophistical Refutations* confirms the technical mode of this way of examining, because although ‘everybody is engaged in refuting (ἐλέγχουσιν)’, as he says, and they ‘take a hand as amateurs in this task’, only ‘dialectic (ἡ διαλεκτική) is concerned professionally (ἐντέχνως)’ with this practice, for ‘he is a dialectician who examines by the help of a theory of deduction’ (ὁ τέχνη συλλογιστικῆ πειραστικὸς διαλεκτικός, *S.E.* 172a34–36).⁵

Second, for Aristotle, ‘dialectic proceeds by questioning’ (172a18) and, as we know, Socrates affirms that he limits himself ‘to questioning others’ and that he never ‘makes any pronouncements about anything himself’ (*Th.* 150c5–6). Socrates says in the *Theaetetus* that ‘none of the arguments ever comes from me, but from the person who is having the discussion with me’ (Mcdowell trans. 161b2–3) and Aristotle seems to corroborate this statement when he warns us that, in the event that the answerer did not concede us any thesis, we ‘would then no longer have had any grounds from which to argue any longer against the objection’ (172a20–21). A refutation, says Aristotle (*Analytica Priora* 66b11–12), is a deduction ‘which establishes the contradictory. But if nothing is conceded, a refutation is impossible’.

Third, however, the interrogative character of Socrates’ dialectic is intimately linked to his disavowal of knowledge. Aristotle seems to be describing the procedure of Socrates’ midwifery, for he says that the interrogative nature of this form of examining an interlocutor’s views is a technique that ‘a man may possess, even though he has not knowledge’ (172a22–23). So the return to the Socrates of the early dialogues, barren as he apparently is of any substantive philosophical knowledge, and his image as a man who practices the art of midwifery, used for the first time in the *Theaetetus*, fits the character of this dialogue very well and seems so different from the Socrates of the middle dialogues. Aristotle also makes

5 This quotation leaves no doubt about the intrinsic relation between the *elenchus* and dialectic, although it is also possible to use it in a non-dialectical domain. On the possible differences between Plato and Aristotle in the use of the *elenchus*, see Dorion 2012, 257, 259.

reference to geometry, which is represented in our dialogue through characters such as Theodorus and Theaetetus, just to say that dialectic, unlike geometry, ‘does not consist in knowledge of any definite subject’ (172a28). In a direct reference to Socrates (S.E. 183b7–8), he states that this was the reason ‘why Socrates used to ask questions and not to answer them, for he used to confess that he did not know’.

Fourth, the aim of the art of examining is, naturally, to refute the opinions upheld by the respondent (cf. S.E. 172a34–5) and, as we have already seen, this is the fundamental task of Socrates’ art as practised in the dialogue with Theaetetus (161e7). The imaginary appearance of Protagoras takes place in a dialectical scene where the aim, as he says, is to dispute (ἀμφοισβητεῖν, 167d5) his doctrine, for, as Aristotle reminds us in the *Topics*, a thesis, such as the opinion put forth by Protagoras, constitutes a dialectical problem about which ‘either the mass of men disagree (ἀμφοισβητεῖ) with the wise about the thesis, or that the one or the other class disagree among themselves’ (*Top.* 104b32–34). In the *Theaetetus*, contrary to the first attitude that he manifests in the *Protagoras* (cf. 334c–335a), he agrees to proceed ‘by asking questions’ (δι’ ἐρωτήσεων, 167d6) and declares that it is the best procedure for a man with any intelligence. Thus, disagreement, discussion through a discourse based on questions and answers and, finally, refutation of the respondent are intimately related in the dialectical setting as presented in the *Theaetetus* and in the handbook of dialectic written by Aristotle. *Elenchus* is, of course, a central topic of the dialogue: Protagoras has to protest because he declares that he will be refuted (ἐλέγχομαι, 166b1) by Socrates’ questions only if the respondent is giving the answer that he would have given. The Socratic *elenchus* is a well-known characteristic of the early dialogues, but we will have to see if we can distinguish a new spirit in its use, as I believe there is, which the *Theaetetus* is designed to display as a central trait of Socrates’ midwifery.

Fifth, we could add, in my opinion, another additional similarity between Aristotle’s concept of dialectic and the Socratic art of midwifery presented in this dialogue: both Aristotle and Plato try to show the differences between dialectic, on the one hand, and the eristic or antilogical practices, on the other, which have a merely agonistic character. In the passage just quoted, where Protagoras tries to defend his thesis from the Socratic *peirastic*, he asks him not ‘to be unjust in his questioning’ (167e1), because it would be a great inconsistency that someone who professes to be concerned about virtue could ‘behave unjustly in arguments’ (ἀδικοῦντα ἐν λόγοις, 167e2–3). Once more, even the vocabulary used by Aristotle is very similar in expressing the same claim: the eristic or antilogic concept of dialogue must be distinguished from dialectic because ‘the art of contentious reasoning (*eristike*) is foul fighting (*adikomachia*) in disputation (*antilogia*, S. E. 171b23)’.

Plato, as he does in many other passages of his works, presents his concept of dialectic establishing a contrast between a merely agonistic controversy (ἀγωνιζόμενος, 167e4) and the kind of dialogue (διαλεγόμενος, 167e5) that should be used in the practice of serious philosophy.⁶

Aristotle explains this injustice, committed with arguments by eristic and sophistic practitioners, due to their common aim, which is ‘to win at all costs’ (*S. E.* 171b24) without obeying the rules of fair discussion. Plato and Aristotle realized that, from an external and superficial point of view, dialectic was confused with the kind of dialogue that could be found in the sophistry and eristic.⁷ As Nehamas, for example, has shown, terms, like philosophy, dialectic, eristic or sophistry, ‘do not seem to have had a widely agreed-upon application’ during the fourth century.⁸ Nevertheless, Nehamas maintains that the difference between the Socratic practice of the *elenchus* and his sophistic opponents ‘is a difference more in purpose than in method’⁹ and that the difference between Plato’s dialectic and the sophistic method only becomes clear when he introduces the theory of forms in the middle dialogues and connects his concept of dialectic to this doctrine with the result of ‘underwriting the nature and practice of dialectic’.¹⁰ It is true that both Plato and Aristotle establish a very important difference between dialectic and the antilogical (*Tht.* 164c7, 197a1) or eristic practices (*S.E.* 171b32), which depend on the agonistic motivation of the latter. The contrast on this basis between controversialists (ἀγωνισταί) and philosophers (φιλόσοφοι, 164c9–d1) is clear in the *Theaetetus*. The ‘spirit of ill will or contentiousness’ (δυσμενῶς οὐδὲ μαχητικῶς, 168b3) that characterizes their practices should not taint the philosophical nature of the dialectic employed by Socrates. In fact, Aristotle, in a well-known text, where he tries to establish a line of demarcation between sophistic, dialectic and philosophy, declares that the difference depends on the ‘purpose of life’ (*Metaph.* IV 2, 1004b24–5). The mood of this contrast is similar in the *Theaetetus*, wherein the difference depends on the educational motive of dialectic and philosophy, trying to help the interlocutor and show him his mistakes

⁶ As we know, in the *Meno* Socrates distinguishes between a questioner who belongs to the group of *eristikón te kai agonistikón* and one who proceeds ‘milder and in a more dialectical manner’ (*dialektikóteron*, 75c9–d4).

⁷ See Nehamas 1990, 3–16. In the *Philebus* (16c–17a), the difference between a dialectical and an eristic discussion is clearly established in terms of method, in this case directly related to the number of intermediates between the one and the multiplicity comprised in every form that the dialectician is able to discern.

⁸ Nehamas 1990, 5.

⁹ Nehamas 1990, 11.

¹⁰ Nehamas 1990, 12.

(168a1), while in the agonistic controversies the aim is just ‘to make jokes and trip people up as much as one can’ (167e5–6). Nevertheless, in my opinion, there is not only a difference in aim or purpose, as Nehamas upholds, but also in method, for those who proceed in an antilogical way only found their agreements on a mere verbal basis (πρὸς τὰς τῶν ὀνομάτων ὁμολογίας, 164c7–8). On the contrary, the dialectical discussion, as Protagoras’s claim in the dialogue manifests, cannot proceed ‘chasing after words’ (166c1).

The results of the antilogical and dialectical practices can be the same, for both have as their aim the contradiction of the respondent, but for Aristotle the sophistic and eristic practitioners proceed on an unfair basis and present as deductions what are not, and this is why he proposes to call them not merely deductions but contentious deductions ‘since it appears to deduce, but does not really do so’ (*Top.* 101a3–4). The case of refutation, analysed specifically by Aristotle, also admits, naturally, a false illusion sometimes dependent on language, as Plato states in the *Theaetetus*. Aristotle gives us plenty of information about the ‘the arguments used in competitions and contests’ to achieve refutation, which rely on a specific method, such as exploiting the homonymy or ambiguity of words, of which we could also give plenty of references in Socrates’ dialogue with Theaetetus or Protagoras. This contrast between a legitimate use of dialectical reasoning and other unfair practices does not seem to depend only on a different purpose, but also on a distinct method that constitutes dialectic as a rational conception of discourse not based merely on tricks and ambiguities.

I come now to a sixth analogy between Socrates methods as shown in the *Theaetetus* and dialectic as conceived by Aristotle. When the *peirastic* examination of Theaetetus and Protagoras proceeds, we realize what the true object of dialectic is that the Socratic analysis is bringing forth. These things are all those ‘which are common to everything’ (185c5; *ta koina*, 185e1) and, as once was observed by G. Ryle,¹¹ Plato and Aristotle agree almost completely that they represent the dialectician’s concern. We can leave aside for the moment the probable allusion to Platonic forms and confirm that even if Theaetetus and the Socrates of this dialogue are not experts in the depths of metaphysics, they are no less concerned with these predicates with which, as Sedley puts it, ‘Socratic dialectic was already starting to be exercised in the early dialogues’.¹² The most interesting point is that these common predicates can be used without metaphysical commitment since, as C. Kahn says,¹³ ‘the *Theaetetus* says nothing whatsoever about

¹¹ Ryle 1967, 59.

¹² Sedley 2009, 107.

¹³ Kahn 2007, 47

the ontological status of the *koina*'. Although the list given of these common attributes is extensionally equivalent, as he sustains, to a list of forms (Being, Different, Same, Similar, Dissimilar, One, Admirable, Shameful, Good, Bad, etc.), the truth is that many of these could be 'the kinds that function in dialectical argument in *Parmenides* and *Sophist*'.¹⁴

As we have seen before, for Aristotle dialectic 'does not consist in knowledge of any definite subject' and 'for this reason, too, it deals with everything' and 'even amateurs make use in a way of dialectic and the practice of examining'. 'What serves them here is these *koina* or general principles' that are used in dialectical discussions and which everybody knows as well as the scientist (cf. *S.E.* 172a27–33). In a sentence that can be interpreted as a definition, Aristotle asserts that the dialectician is 'a man who regards the common principles (*ta koina*) with their application to the particular matter in hand' (*S.E.* 171b6–7). This is why the practice of dialectic is not incompatible with Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and this, as expressed by E. Berti,¹⁵ can be understood. Aristotle considered Socrates a dialectician in the most genuine sense of the word. Thus, the dialectical activity displayed in the *Theaetetus* satisfies the fundamental conditions specified by Aristotle for a discussion to be considered truly dialectical. With regard to these *koina*, the dialecticians 'try to inquire', says Aristotle (*Met.* 995b23–24), 'doing their investigation from the *endoxa* only'. The specific difference of the dialectical deduction is, indeed, that 'it reasons from *endoxa* or reputable opinions' (*Top.* 100a30), which he defines as premises 'which are accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise –i.e. by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and reputable of them' (100b21–b23). It is true that in the *Theaetetus* the difference with other dialogues seems to depend on the notorious authority of the philosophers or sophists who have upheld their opinions subject to dialectical scrutiny.¹⁶ In this case, it is not only important to analyse Theaetetus' views, as

¹⁴ Kahn 2007, 47; see Vallejo 1988, 154.

¹⁵ Berti 2004, 203.

¹⁶ See Vlastos 1991, 266. Unlike what happens with the practice of *elenchus* in the Socratic dialogues, as Vlastos observes, the thesis that is put into Theaetetus' mouth is 'compound with a strange metaphysical doctrine' that 'by no stretch of the imagination could have been fished out of Theaetetus' own belief system'. Nevertheless, Vlastos defended a very sharp distinction between the 'peirastic' *elenchus* of the Socratic dialogues and Aristotle's concept of dialectic reminding us of his distinction between *dialektikoi* and *peirastikoi logoi* (*S.E.* 165b38; see Vlastos 1999, 49, n. 39). Although in this paper we are not dealing with the version of the *elenchus* in the Socratic dialogues, we can also say that in other texts this contrast is not so sharply established and Aristotle speaks of *peirastike* as a part or a characteristic of dialectic (*S.E.* 171b4, b9, 172a21, 172a31, etc.). See Berti 2004, 203.

in most of the early Socratic dialogues, but also, and especially, the opinions of very well-known philosophers such as Protagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles or ‘the best poets in each genre, Epicharmus in comedy and Homer in tragedy’ (152e3–5). Socrates presents the doctrine implied by Theaetetus definition as ‘an agreement’ of many ‘wise men, apart from Parmenides’ in a manner that fits perfectly with the definition of what Aristotle calls a dialectical ‘thesis’, ‘a paradoxical belief of some eminent philosopher’ (104b19–20) and, in fact, he quotes as such ‘the view of Heraclitus that all things are in motion’ (104b21–22). Nevertheless, the dialectical character of the discussion of this thesis in the *Theaetetus* is still possible given Socrates’ avowal of ignorance for it can proceed from *endoxa* or by considering those common questions that are within the reach not only of the wise and the expert but also of amateurs who ‘make use of dialectic and the practice of examining’ (S.E. 172 a 30–31).

3 *Elenchus* as an Essential Part of Dialectic

The *Theaetetus*, if we believe in the most credited results of the stylometric methods, is placed between two groups of dialogues: on one hand, it is very close from a stylistic point of view to the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*; on the other hand, it is inserted into the sequence of *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Politicus*, as the mutual internal references of these dialogues show. So my purpose in the rest of this contribution is to analyse briefly, first, the presence of the elenctic dialectic displayed in the *Theaetetus* in these two different groups of dialogues between which it seems to be inserted, and second, the possible differences between this dialectical practice and the Socratic *elenchus* of the early dialogues. Naturally, we should not completely neglect the philosophical contents of our dialogue, if our aim is to understand the relation of this apparently aporetic dialogue with Plato’s work.

Starting from this last question, we should remember what I take as the two main epistemological and ontological theses of the *Republic*. The demarcation of the true philosopher is established under the epistemological antithesis of two different *dynameis* that correspond to *episteme* and *doxa* or, in other words, to reason and sense perception. From an ontological point of view, this difference depends on the existence of another antithesis formulated in terms of *ousia* and *genesis*. These two central philosophical theses, which are not explicitly present in the *Theaetetus*, are, nevertheless, confronted in this dialogue with their contradictories in a way that seems to follow the dialectical method recommended not only by the *Republic* but also by the *Parmenides*. Socrates’ difficulties in this dialogue are due to the fact that, in accordance with Parmenides, he has tried to

define (ὀρίζεσθαι, 135c8) the forms before going through the preliminary stage of ‘training’ (πρὶν γυμνασθῆναι) and the evolved character that we find in the *Theaetetus* recognizes his ‘terrible passion’ for these exercises (οὕτω τις ἔρωσ δεινὸς ἐνδέδυκε τῆς περὶ ταῦτα γυμνασίας, 169c1). This training with the *logoi* is exemplified in the *Parmenides* by the case of Zeno, who in the *Sophist* (frag.1 Ross), the lost dialogue written by Aristotle, was presented as the discoverer of dialectic. The advice that Parmenides gives to a young and inexperienced Socrates is that he ‘must not merely make the supposition that such and such a thing is and then consider the consequences (συμβαίνοντα ἐκ τῆς ὑποθέσεως, 135e9–136a1); he must also take the supposition that that same thing is not’. If we, as readers of the *Republic* and the *Parmenides*, come from these dialogues to the *Theaetetus*, we realize that ‘the entire dialogue’, as C. Kahn says,¹⁷ can be interpreted ‘as a dialectical enterprise’.

We cannot help but recall what Aristotle says in the *Metaphysics* about the possibility of ‘demonstrating negatively’ (Ross trans., ἀποδείξει ἐλεγκτικῶς, 1006a11–12) or, more literally, of ‘demonstrating by refutation’.¹⁸ Yet even in the *Republic*, a text which is, in my opinion, very relevant for understanding the task of dialectic, Plato declares that the dialectician is the man who is ‘able to give an account of the essence of each thing’ (τὸν λόγον ἐκάστου λαμβάνοντα τῆς οὐσίας, 534b4). So the distinctive characteristic of dialectic in the *Republic* is not only the rational justification of hypotheses, but also to give an account of the essence of each thing, which is nothing more than being able to define it. Moreover, in the ensuing lines of this text we learn, in relation to the Idea of the Good, that in this case, ‘likewise (ὡσαύτως, 534b8), as in the others, we have to define (διορίσασθαι) and distinguish with our discourse’ the object of the definition and, as if ‘we were in battle’, we have to find our way ‘through all attempts to refute our theory’ (διὰ πάντων ἐλέγχων διεξιῶν, 534c1). This text seems to confirm that the justifi-

¹⁷ Kahn 2013, 52. Nevertheless, for Kahn the *Theaetetus* ‘does not imply support for the specific ontology of the *Phaedo* or *Republic*’ and this is why the positive sequel will be assigned ‘not to Socrates, Plato’s spokesman for the classical theory, but to a sympathetic visitor from Elea’ (*ibid.*, 51).

¹⁸ It falls outside the scope of this paper to tackle the question of the oxymoron character that has been attributed to this expression in Aristotle’s thought (see Brunschwig 2000, 125–6; Narcy 1989, 97), for we are just looking at the *Theaetetus* from the perspective of his concept of dialectic. I just want to highlight the positive implications of the *elenchus* in order to establish philosophical theses. The paradox of an apparent oxymoron in the case of Aristotle derives, says Narcy (1989, 98), from his own terminology, while for Plato ‘refutation is the same thing as demonstration’.

cation of hypotheses and the dialectical task of giving definitions of every concept cannot be conceived in the *Republic* as two different functions. To give a definition in the sense specified (of giving ‘a *logos* of the essence’) implies for Socrates in this work that the dialectician is able to ‘render an account to himself and others’ (534b4–5), but this last function is precisely what he finds missing in the work of mathematicians, because they leave their hypotheses unaccounted and do not ‘render any further account of them to themselves or others’ (Shorey trans., 510c6–7). What I want to emphasize is that these two related functions of dialectic are directly linked to the necessity for the dialectician to defend his point of view through all kinds of refutation.

In the *Theaetetus*, the fundamental theses of the *Republic* from an ontological and epistemological perspective are examined following the recommendations of Parmenides to Socrates. In fact, the contradictory position, asserted by Theaetetus in his first definition of knowledge as perception, has to be tested to see ‘whether its consequences are mutually consistent or not’, if we want to express it in the *Phaedo*’s words (εἴ σοι ἀλλήλοις συμφωνεῖ ἢ διαφωνεῖ, 101d5). Protagoras, with his well-known statement of ‘Man, the measure of all things’, and Heraclitus, with the doctrine of the universal flux, give to Theaetetus’ definition of knowledge as sense perception the necessary philosophical dimension to represent the contradictory thesis of all that was sustained from this point of view in the *Republic*. Aristotle would establish that in virtue of the law of excluded middle, of two contradictory sentences one is true and the other false.¹⁹ The dialectical development of Theaetetus’ definition seems to deliver contradictory statements to the theses upheld in the *Republic*, thus philosophically reinforcing them by refuting the possibility of the doctrine that is equivalent to their negation.

We all agree that the *Theaetetus* has the external form of an aporetic dialogue, but, as Sedley has indicated, we can distinguish between its internal and its external midwifery, for whereas the first fails, the second, ‘practised on us the readers may yet succeed’.²⁰ The definition of knowledge as sense perception, when dialectically developed, is examined against those who ‘don’t think that there is anything other than what they can grasp firmly in their hands’, for ‘they don’t admit doings, comings into being or anything invisible (τὸ ἀόρατον), as sharing in being’ (ὡς ἐν οὐσίας μέρει, 155e6). So the refutation of the definition of knowledge is examined and its falsity is *elenctically* demonstrated when considered in conjunction with that ontological ‘hypothesis’ (183b3), as it is called in the dialogue. We are inevitably reminded of the case, mentioned by Aristotle in

¹⁹ Cfr. Berti 2004, 366.

²⁰ Cfr. Sedley 2009, 11.

the *Metaphysics*, of those who deny the principle of non-contradiction. One of the fundamental concerns of Socrates in his examination of the definition of knowledge is the consequences of this hypothesis for the problem of *ousía*. Based on the thesis that everything is in motion, it leads to the conclusion that reality is necessarily (ἡ ἀνάγκη, 160b6) of a merely relational character (*pròs ti*, 160b9) and that ‘by nature’ nothing ‘has a being of its own’ (ὡς οὐκ ἔστι φύσει αὐτῶν οὐδὲν οὐσίαν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον, 172b4–5). This ontological thesis, examined together with the definition of knowledge as sense-perception, is based on a concept of ‘moving reality’ (φερομένη οὐσία, 177c7, 179d3) that represents the contradictory view of the *ousía* which is defined in the *Republic* by opposition to *genesis*. The dialectical analysis of that ontological position leads to a contradiction, for ‘if all things do change’, it could be established ‘both that things are so and that they’re not so’ (183a6). As Aristotle will show in his *elenctic* demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction, those who deny the validity of this principle ‘do away with substance (*ousía*) and essence’ (*Met.* 1007a21). Both texts highlight that the referential function of language proves to be impossible because, as Socrates shows, ‘every answer’ (183a5) is equally correct and those who state this theory ‘must establish some other language’ (183b2).²¹ The *reductio* of this ontological position is so powerful in Socrates’ eyes that the definition of knowledge as sense-perception cannot be accepted ‘at any rate not according to the line of argument that all things change’ (κατὰ γε τὴν τοῦ πάντα κινεῖσθαι μέθοδον, 183c2–3). The reader can apply the logic of contradictories and safely conclude that, if it is not true that all things change, something must be at rest and unaffected by the universal flux of Heraclitean theory. This seems a positive conclusion valid not only retrospectively but also for the ontological position that Plato has to adopt, whatever changes may be introduced in the ensuing dialogues.

Nevertheless, the dialogue proceeds and continues examining the specifically epistemological aspect of the definition of knowledge as sense-perception. The *elenctic* character of the dialogue with *Theaetetus* explains the point of de-

²¹ See Burnyeat 1990, 45. As Burnyeat puts it, ‘language is emptied of all possible meaning’, because ‘183b seems to leave us with the option of a language of pure denial’. See also Kahn 2007, 45. The commentators have rightly observed the similarities of Aristotle’s passages in the fourth Book of the *Metaphysics* with Plato’s assertions of the Heraclitean views in the *Theaetetus*. Plato, as Irwin (1988, 551 n. 28) observes, ‘relies on points similar to those Aristotle makes about the termini of change’. On these similarities and, especially, on the differences between both philosophical approaches, see Nancy 1989, 61–85, who speaks of ‘an economy of refutation rigorously opposed to that of the *Theaetetus*’ due to the ‘Aristotelian rejection of Platonic idealism’ (1989, 70).

parture used to demonstrate the role of rational thought, because Socrates' considerations are directed towards the perceptible material that should be the basis of knowledge in accordance with such a theory. Even dealing with sense perceptions such as sound and colour, Theaetetus cannot help considering whether they are different from one another or similar or, given his fondness for mathematics, what numbers, odd or even, can be applied to them (cfr.185a–d). When the *koina* come onto scene, Theaetetus has to conclude that 'it seems to me that the mind itself, by means of itself (αὐτὴ δι' αὐτῆς ἢ ψυχῆ), considers the things which apply in common (τὰ κοινά) to everything' (185e1). Naturally, these common predicates comprehend not only being (*ousia*), but also beautiful and ugly, good and bad, exactly the predicates that the dialectical examination has to address 'when we put our questions and give our answers', as Socrates says in the *Phaedo* (Hackforth trans., 75d2–3). The conclusion reached is that the pure sensual processes cannot provide 'the calculations about those things with respect to being and usefulness' (ἀναλογίσματα πρὸς τε οὐσίαν καὶ ὠφέλειαν, 186c3) that have been revealed as an essential part of knowledge. So the refutation of the definition of knowledge as sense perception means that it is true that the real subject of knowledge is reason and mind. This indirect conclusion, reached in the *Theaetetus* through the refutation of knowledge as sense perception, represents a philosophical position that was defended in the *Republic* and will reappear in the ensuing dialogues as a still Platonic doctrine. The conclusion that is explicitly established for the reader is not insignificant for it unites in a few lines the most important concepts discussed under the method of Socrates' *elenchus*. We can sum up the results remembering that it is not possible to attain truth (*aletheia*) without being (*ousia*) and that 'knowledge' (*episteme*, 186d2) 'is located not in our (sensible) experiences (*pathemata*), but in our reasoning about those things (the *koina*) we mentioned'. This triad of concepts, — knowledge, being and reason —, which are so philosophically significant in Plato's dialogues, projects us outside the mere uncertainty of the early dialogues.

These positive conclusions which I interpret as a direct result of the *peirastic* dialectic displayed in the *Theaetetus* do not completely eliminate the sense of *aporia* produced by the Socratic *elenchus*, but now this result seems to be inserted in a more positive spirit. This is why many scholars have highlighted the novelty of the image of midwifery as applied to Socrates' procedures. R. Robinson thought it was a subterfuge in order to accommodate the *elenchus* to Plato's productive personality²² and Burnyeat showed that 'where earlier dialogues had valued perplexity (*aporia*) as a necessary step towards disencumbering someone of

22 R. Robinson 1953, 89.

the conceit of knowledge, the *Theaetetus* treats it as a productive state'.²³ Now the *elenchus* seems to be a less personal affair than when it was strictly governed by the 'say what you believe' rule, and it has to do more specifically with the necessity of dealing with the powerful enemies of Plato's philosophy. The *elenchus* was, in the Socratic dialogues, an instrument that was devoted to the ethical improvement of the interlocutor, but now seems to have attained greater independence as a purely dialectical way of testing the philosophy of Plato's adversaries.²⁴ Moreover, the reader is now given full indications of the perspective from which the object of the Socratic *elenchus* has to be interpreted. The so-called ethical digression (172c–177c) proclaims philosophical truths that are incongruent with a standard aporetic dialogue and the destructive effects of the Socratic *elenchus* as exhibited in these works. The defence of the philosopher that we find in these pages is a clear indication to the reader that knowledge cannot be found within the limits of the definitions given in the dialogue and that the *elenchus* must permit us to go beyond them. His theoretical connections with geometry and astronomy (173e), his search for 'justice and injustice in themselves' (εἰς σκέψιν αὐτῆς δικαιοσύνης τε καὶ ἀδικίας, 175c2), his desire to become 'as nearly as possible like a god', 'with the help of intelligence' (μετὰ φρονήσεως, 176b2) or his belief in the existence of two 'patterns set up in that which is' (Παραδειγμάτων, ὧ φίλε, ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐστῶτων, 176e3) leaves no doubt about the positive background within which the *elenchus* is to be exercised.

The recommendation of Parmenides to a young Socrates, already mentioned (*Parm.* 135e9–136a1), in favour of the usefulness of supposing not only the affirmation but also the negation of a philosophical thesis seems to be recognized by Aristotle as being within the positive epistemological contributions of dialectic to the philosophical sciences (πρὸς τὰς κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιστήμας, *Top.* 101a27–28), 'because the ability to puzzle on both sides of a subject will make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise' (ὅτι δυνάμενοι πρὸς ἀμφοτέρα διαπορῆσαι ῥᾶον ἐν ἐκάστοις κατοψόμεθα τἀληθές τε καὶ τὸ ψεῦδος, 101a34–36). I do not claim to deny the differences between the Platonic

²³ Burnyeat 1977, 11. For the difference between the use of *aporia* in the *Theaetetus* and the earlier dialogues, see also, for example, Brown 2018, 94.

²⁴ For Dorion (2012, 267), the difference between the Socratic *elenchus* and the use of it in Aristotle's dialectic is that 'Aristotle's respondent is not obliged to answer as a function of his personal conviction'. Nevertheless, in the *Theaetetus* the theses examined peirastically are only incidentally Theaetetus' views for what is really important is the philosophical ideas that are being discussed. This is why I propose to include this dialogue among those others, such as the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist*, where we can perceive, as Dorion recognizes (2012, 269), 'harbingers in Plato' of the supposed 'depersonalization of dialectic'.

and the Aristotelian concept of dialectic,²⁵ but I do think that it is undeniable that the *Topics* also give us a testimony of a common practice of dialectic in the Academic tradition that lends plausibility to interpreting the *Theaetetus* in the light of it. The position of the *Theaetetus* between the middle group of the *Republic* to which it belongs on stylometric grounds and the series of dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*) in which, according to internal references, it is apparently inserted, seems very interesting for evaluating the evolution of dialectic. The keyword for the middle dialogues is hypothesis, as R. Robinson once said,²⁶ and ‘the later keyword, division’, seems to prevail in Plato’s concept of dialectic, as it is practised in the other group. What I want to suggest is the possibility of a difference in emphasis with many indications of continuity. For example, the elenctic examination of hypotheses is not only the method of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, but also of dialogues such as the *Parmenides* and, as I have tried to show, of the *Theaetetus*. We should also remember that in the *Republic* the philosophical method of *dialégesthai*, as opposed to the mere eristic practices (ἐρίζειν, cfr. 454a8) is characterised by the ‘ability of applying the proper divisions and distinctions to the subject under consideration’ (κατ’ εἶδη διαιρούμενοι τὸ λεγόμενον ἐπισκοπεῖν, 454a6–7). We would like to know, like Glaucon in the *Republic*, ‘what is the nature (ὁ τρόπος τῆς τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δυνάμεως) of this faculty of dialectic, into what divisions does it fall (κατὰ ποῖα δὴ εἶδη διέστηκεν) and what are its ways’ (τίνες αὖ ὁδοί, 532d8–e1), but Socrates does not explain this apparent plurality to which the dialogue makes reference. Nevertheless, whatever the different ways may be, dialectic seems to work through two different procedures that are closely related. One of these, as can be discerned through the vast majority of the dialogues, consist in the positive task of giving a definition, probably reached through the cooperative work of philosophical discourse and the aid of intuition. But this proposal has to face the negative side coming from objections, contradictions and refutations, which can also have positive consequences, as we have seen in the case of the *Theaetetus*. Although I cannot deny the differences in the display of dialectic in the dialogues that come after the *Parmenides* and the *Theaetetus*, in the *Sophist* and the *Philebus*, these two procedures seem to be clearly maintained as an essential part of dialectic.

²⁵ Although I would agree, in certain aspects, with those that have highlighted the differences between Plato’s and Aristotle’s concept of dialectic (see Moreau 1968, 80–90; Solmsen 1968, 49–68), I cannot accept Moreau’s conclusion when he states that ‘the critic reflection that allows the Socratic *exetasis* is not this general and common knowledge where, in accordance with Aristotle, dialectic is practised’ (1968, 90).

²⁶ R. Robinson 1953, 70.

In the *Sophist*, within the sixth definition of the sophist, the Eleatic Visitor mentions ‘the sophistic of noble lineage’ (231b8) which describes the practice of refutation (ἔλεγχος, 230d7), attributed to Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, as ‘the greatest and chiefest of purifications’ (Cornford trans.). Although Kerferd thought that the practitioners of this art were not Socrates but the sophists, the Visitor warns us that it would be a mistake ‘to ascribe to them too high a function’ and to confuse a dog, the tamest of animals, with a wolf, the fiercest (231a). As a matter of fact, many other interpreters agree on taking this text as a description of the *elenchus* practised by Socrates.²⁷ Even the terms used to describe the positive effects of this practice are reminiscent of those used in the *Theaetetus*, for the Visitor says that the person who is subject to this operation ‘grows gentle toward others’ (ἡμεροῦνται, 230b9), just as Theaetetus will become (ἡμερώτερος, *Tht.* 210c3) in the event that he remains barren as a consequence of the Socratic examination.²⁸ The conclusion of the passage underscores the importance of the *elenchus* as an intrinsic part of the art of separation (διακριτική τέχνη, 231b3), perhaps not only as a mere preliminary stage of the positive method of discovering the truth, but also as a necessary accompaniment of all dialectic discussion. This is the impression that the reader receives from the *Philebus*, for in the preliminary stage of the discussion Socrates asserts the power of refutation (ἐλεγχόμενοι) in order to reveal whether the title of the good is to be given to pleasure or to intelligence or to some third thing (*Philebus* 14b3–4). The dialectical nature of the conversation in fact examines the definition of the good as pleasure and, as happens with the first definition of knowledge given by Theaetetus, Protarchus has to recognize that pleasure has received ‘a beating’ from the force of the arguments (22e4–6) in a way that makes it unnecessary, in Socrates’ view, to subject pleasure to a more thorough refutation (23a7), thus opening the discussion to other possibilities. Despite all the differences that the practice of *elenchus* undergoes throughout Plato’s dialogues, from its destructive character in the early dialogues to its more positive use in the late ones, the *Seventh Letter* seems to certify the need to contrasting the philosophical definitions with an examination based on ‘benevolent refutations’ (ἐν εὐμενέσιν ἐλέγχοις ἐλεγχόμεν, 344b5) or on a critical assessment ‘by the use of question and answer’ that for the author of the *Letter* is consubstantial to the practice of philosophy.

²⁷ See Nancy 2007, 196–198 and recently Dorion 2012, 252–3, who gives many other bibliographical references (see n. 3). For Dorion (2012, 258), Aristotle probably borrows the conditions of validity of the *elenchus* specified in these passages of the *Sophist* from Plato.

²⁸ Brown 2018, 94–5.