Socratic *Elenchos* and Diagonalization: Plato/Frege [Note]

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Someone was recently justified in asking me, "What does all of this textual work you've been doing on the Socratic *elenchos* have to do with diagonalization?"[1] Here's a brief answer, taking Frege, somewhat contingently, as the middle term.[2]

Recently, I've been assembling evidence for the thesis that the *ti estin?* and *peri tinos?* questions are

1. equally fundamental (*not* subordinated), and
2. distinct from each other (*not* identical), but also
3. systematically connected (*not* separable)

in the pattern of questioning that has come to be known as the Socratic *elenchos.*

It's the side of difference that turns out to need the most emphasis at the outset, given the current state of "Socratic Studies", so I have been working first of all to show that these inseparably-interrelated questions are intractably different, in that they resist subordination to each other and assimilation to uniform treatment, instead defining a polarized structure in their singular relation. Because this relation, as it holds the two questions simultaneously together and apart, is articulated in terms of some fundamental *negations*, I think it is apt to refer to it as *duality*, but the point of this note is not to justify that identification, which involves various interpretive details. What follows, though, if the demonstration (1-3 above) is successful?

1. At minimum, it reconfigures or replaces received understandings of the *elenchos*, and puts "Socratic studies" on a philosophically interesting foundation, perhaps for the first time. I intend to score some scholarly points here, but they're preliminary to my main point.

2. If the two questions really are equally fundamental and distinct operators of the *elenchos*, this fact indicates a deep appreciation of the difference in logical form between, as we might say, concept and object, or sense and reference[3] - whose first formulation is usually attributed to Frege, particularly in the Anglophone analytic literature. In notable contrast, Frege himself - a real philosopher - credits Plato with an understanding of the difference,[4] though not, of course, with his own contribution - the

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[2] The choice of Frege in this note provides one (particularly simple) way of spelling out the connection, but Frege is far from the only essential node through which to factor the arrow from Socrates to diagonalization. Equally imperative connections can be made through Hegel, Peirce, and Heidegger, even before arriving at a more explicit consciousness of the relations with Lacan and Badiou.

[3] Of course, these are not simply "the same" difference, but the very articulation of the difference between these differences involves us in problems that point back to the *elenchos* and forward toward diagonalization. The sense/reference difference, one says, is drawn with respect to a concept, while the concept/object difference....isn't. Except that both sides of this distinction are unstable. On the concept/object side, one has Frege's paradox by which it's impossible to mention a concept at all, so that "concept" seems to be the worst possible name, precisely because it is a name. The concept/object distinction thus proves to be only a distinction on the side of the object, and not one that succeeds in indicating the concept. The difference, then, is not external to the concept. Is it then internal? No, for the sense/reference scheme envisaged relies on the correspondence schema of Basic Law V: the internal claim to distinguish sense from reference dissimulates a vicious circle properly called ideological, that is, the distinction of sense and reference proves to be only a distinction on the side of the concept, which does not succeed in indictaing the object. It would not be too much to say that the gathering of this infinitely bifurcating difference between object and concept into a single univocal difference is the project of systematic philosophy. The post-systematic alternative is that the referent, taken not as corresponding to but as subverting and generating sense at the diagonal, is more real than the internal object called "external".

[4] Frege, [Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter], written, Beaney notes, "seventeen years after the emergence of the contradiction that undermined Frege's logicism". *The Frege Reader* 362 [273]

invention of a formal notation for tracking it.[5] So a second, still-scholarly, point is to hyperlink ancient and contemporary logical reflection by recovering and amplifying Frege's acknowledgment against the historical forgetfulness of Frege's heirs; to fill out the case for Plato's appreciation of the difference more thoroughly than would be possible solely on the basis of Frege's offhanded remark. (In fact it's the other way round: Frege's acknowledgment will not strike a reader as particularly significant who has not learned to see the difference operating not only in a brief exchange in the *Hippias Major*, but in each instance of *elenchos*.) But again it's possible to go further. A "Plato anticipates Frege" historical thesis, though probably offensively radical to historians of philosophy, and possibly consequential for narratives about philosophical progress, is not my central philosophical point either.[6]

3. Rather my point is to learn from Plato's appreciation of the difference in form between these questions (the duality, the first instance of the thought of the Two in philosophy) - not as a stepping-stone to Frege, but as the way to an alternative, perhaps a radical alternative. If I'm right, Plato appreciates some aspects of the duality *more* deeply than Frege does, and appreciates that it sets philosophy its proper problem - to conduct the only experiment that has ever been properly its own (call it the experiment of the Absolute, if you like, or simply that of Truth) namely, to see to what extent it is possible for concept and object to *correspond*. Significantly, Plato seems aware of the difficulty of the problem *before* attempting to solve it, while Frege gives us his solution first in the form of Basic Law V, the schema for the correspondence *a priori* of intensions and extensions. He never recovers philosophically from the discovery of the problem, the discovery that the scheme, rather than being an empty but sovereign logico-grammatical law, was a falsifiable thesis making a claim upon the Real. (One that the Real rejected, though in its refusal the Real is elicited in truth beyond Frege's imagination or desire; in this Frege's greatness in failure recapitulates that of the early Pythagoreans.) The true nature of the scheme is made apparent only in its simple but nontrivial refutation. This is Cantor's diagonalization, which reaches Frege in the new form articulated by Russell - his "paradox", or more correctly the theorem, known to Cantor, that there is no set of all sets. For Frege, the failure of the correspondence is the failure of his project, and of his vision of philosophy, and Russell in turn will not escape the experience of wanting to plug the hole in the system, only to fail on the side of completeness where Frege failed on that of consistency. Plato too, of course, wants the correspondence to work out, wants the one-all of cosmic harmony to obtain "as far as possible".[7] Those who have considered Plato the font of ontotheological thinking are not simply wrong or crazy; the desire is there in him, as it is in everyone.[8] But while nearly all philosophers who follow him in the West will cheat, appealing to his authority or to that of Christianity, Plato will (at least) let the problem of the duality be as hard as it

[5] The latter is Frege's own modest conception of his aim and primary contribution to philosophy. Plato's inscription of this duality is, I will argue, not formal in Frege's sense but metalogical, which involves throwing mathemes into direct contact with the semantically and pragmatically rich language latent in the "ordinary" human situations from which philosophy arises.

[6] The root of this scandal seems to me to be the implied mathematics of the professional historians' approach to history. Historians appear to be professionalized to distrust grand narratives, and to adopt the apparent alternative, *viz.* to use unmodified linear space and time as a metric of relatedness. On such a linear scale, the Socratic *elenchos* and diagonalization are distant. But it's a *logarithmic* scale that's perhaps most appropriate for studying certain developments of interest to philosophy. That is, historians' justified refusal of metanarratives that claim to give theories of everything can blind them to structures that are not *total* but simply *large*, particular processes (now sometimes called "big-historical") that might develop according to an *exponential* law. On a logarithmically scaled axis analogous to the one on which we might most appropriately graph fundamental developments in computational capacity (one, say, on which the emergence of language, writing, printing, the integrated circuit, and the internet are successive clicks) Plato lies, I suggest, just a click away from diagonalization. We can understand the interval of that click, in which the history of western philosophy is encompassed, neither as progress ("Plato anticipates Frege") nor as a succession of incomparable systems ("Plato's world *vs.* Frege's world") - both of which flatter the human scale of the generations, be it as an iterative accumulation or as sovereign difference, the equally humanist myths of progress and of "incommensurable" worldviews - but only as the link between question and answer. The interval is what joins, by virtue of its formally verifiable truth and not of history in either of these ordinary senses, the Platonic question to what we can now recognize as its proper, Cantorian, answer. Complicating matters, the refutation of modern philosophy at diagonalization, the inauguration of the technological age, has been late in coming to philosophical self-consciousness. This is the standpoint from which the curious ambivalences of twentieth-century philosophy, and its obscure but obsessive awareness of a closure of metaphysics, become intelligible.

[7] The qualification is important, not only in the *Timaeus*.

[8] I follow Sartre here: desire is, prereflectively, desire of *being-in-itself-for-itself*, the synthesis of lacking and lacked.

is, certainly harder than Hegel admits, perhaps even harder than Frege or Heidegger allows it to be.[9] He - practically alone up to Sartre, Bataille and Lacan - makes a true experiment of dialectic, *i.e.* asks a question to which the answer has not been determined in advance, despite the clear evidence of his desire.[10] [11] Everyone knows what Plato lets himself desire the answer to be; what's underappreciated is his writing of the question. Where his successors will allow the presupposition of correspondence to guide in advance what can be expressed, experienced, and experimented philosophically, Plato achieves (at least) a staging of the problem in its own proper expressive complexity. How much complexity is that? As little as necessary, quite little mathematically, but just enough, for it's apparently as difficult as the dialogues themselves to force that little bit of formal difference into reflective awareness in philosophical contexts recognizably relevant to human beings. To have inscribed this little lower bound on the complexity of the problem is a great achievement - it's enough to make Platonic dialectic cross the threshold of nontriviality. Accordingly, Plato's questioning is not simply an anticipation of what lies beyond the limits of the correspondence of concept and object, *i.e.,* diagonalization, but also the best *model* of its existential and ethical significance available to us, for it shows the roots in ordinary human cares out of which the question grows to which diagonalization truly and recognizably responds, and in this way is more closely related to it than all the philosophical "interpretations" of diagonalization that frame it with concepts whose significance is tied to their origin in the interval between Plato and Cantor, the interval of fantasy between the question and its truth. So the point is not merely, "Plato anticipates diagonalization" but, "Plato gives us, in his anticipation (something before the formalism) the coordinates of an interpretation (something after the formalism)."

[9] Plato wants ontotheology to work - in the sense that he *thinks* he wants this. (The limits of this substitution are the limits of the personality/ego.) This is normal. But it's exceptional that Plato also knows that what philosophy wants is *never* simply identical to what it thinks it wants any more than these are identical in any other human activity. (In this context he repeatedly takes up the Pythagorean injunction against petitionary prayer, developing it into a theorem.) Plato, then, is reflectively interested in the difference between the truth of desire and its self-representation - and so he does not cheat, most of the time, in order to make his own (ontotheological) desire work out. The experience of the precise expression, and thus immanent failure and self-refutation of ontotheology which can be observed in his dialectic makes possible a much more radical departure from ontotheology than that *transposition* of it (into Nature, History, or Spirit) found in modern, apparently secular, thought. The elenctic difference, in contrast particularly with Aristotelian logic, contains that minimum expressive power necessary to carry through with the experiment honestly, and the logical expressiveness of this writing has such a force that the consequences exceed their author's desire and get themselves written simply because they follow, and show not what was imagined and wanted (the perfect) but something *better than the perfect,* which we might rightly call *the form of the good.*

[10] Philosophy transforms desire, even its own, by crossing the prereflective relation to value with a second relation to truth. Truth is not automatically or in every instance desirable. Truth is even first an object of anxiety, not of desire; so this crossing, rather than naively presupposing that "value of truth" to which Nietzsche was right to object, introduces unbearable torsion into the subject as its anxiety and the desire first determined as flight are forced into interaction. Here *beauty* and *form* play essential roles in the dehumanization of the subject, the triumph of desire over fear, that need to be clarified. In Plato's case, it's certainly fidelity to the capture of desire by the Socratic event that gives thought this ability (not automatic but rare and as evanescent as it is transformative) *to prefer truth, for a moment, even to what it prefers.*

[11] Of course, Plato has difficulties about self-reference that he has not overcome (and says so!) Yet, the work of the dialogues provides the difficulties themselves with models that are lost on the moderns, for whom the difficult is simply the name of an obstacle, and not the description of something true, (perhaps even of what is most true for thinking). The result of this difference is that for us, after diagonalization has become explicit, Platonic thought still presents a great opportunity. It is structured by the difficulties themselves as much as by dated efforts to overcome them. It can be read as a welcoming of diagonalization. This is even its ethics of writing, as of prayer - not to cheat, not to wish for what you *think* would do you good, not to write simply what you *think* you would prefer to be true. Plato's modified desire - modified by the relation to truth - is for the truth about the ideal of reflexivity. Diagonalization is the form by which this truth appears. So *extensionally* (and, just as in logic, it's only by allowing both intension and extension their competing rights *in desire* that something interesting can happen) Plato's desire is for diagonalization.