

## Language and dialogue in Plato

SAMUEL SCOLNICOV

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Israel

TÍTULO. *Linguagem e diálogo em Platão.*

RESUMO. Platão tem dois modelos da linguagem: o binário (a palavra significa diretamente o objeto) e o triádico (alguém significa o objeto por meio da palavra). Para uma linguagem não-ideal o modelo binário é inadequado. Palavras não podem significar por si sós; o significado depende de quem as usa. Portanto, em uma linguagem não-ideal, Platão se opõe ao modelo binário e à conseqüente lógica de proposições independentes de quem as enuncia. Sua alternativa é uma lógica de enunciados inextricavelmente contextuais, que põe em questão a própria comunicabilidade de uma linguagem não-ideal. Tal lógica necessita uma forma dialógica e preclui uma filosofia formulada em tratados. O diálogo, sempre aberto, reconhece a dificuldade e tenta superá-la, ou pelo menos — dependendo do interlocutor — pô-la em evidência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE. Platão; diálogo; linguagem; lógica; proposições; Eutidemo; Crátilo.

πότερον οὖν ψυχὴν ἔχοντα νοεῖ τὰ νοοῦντα, ἢ καὶ τὰ ἄψυχα; — τὰ ψυχὴν ἔχοντα. — οἶσθα οὖν τι, ἔφη, ῥῆμα ψυχὴν ἔχον; — μὰ Δία οὐκ ἔγωγε. — τί οὖν ἄρτι ἤρου ὅτι μοι νοοῖ τὸ ῥῆμα;

‘Do then things that have soul mean, or also those without soul? — Those that have soul. — Do you then know any phrase that has soul? — By Zeus, not I! — Why then did you ask me just now what my phrase means?’ (*Euthydemus* 287d7-e1).

As usual with Plato, where he is most playful, he is also most in earnest. Dionysodorus is not just horseplaying and equivocating. He is raising a serious problem, to which tentative answers are still being given: How can words *mean*? What is the relation, if any, between a word (or a series of words) and its meaning or reference? As Plato shows at length in the *Cratylus*, there is no obvious direct, unmediated link between word and object: Any name can be adapted to any object (cf. 414d). Words in themselves do not mean. Only souls can mean, only souls can have directedness towards other objects

— which will eventually be developed, within quite a different philosophical framework, into the concept of intentionality. Thus, in the *Cratylus*, the cause that gives names to things is the mind (διάνοια) of gods (who are good and name truly) or men (who often go astray in naming or distort words) (416c). Without the soul's activity of meaning, words would not mean. Unsurprisingly, the attempt fails, in the *Cratylus*, at deciphering the meaning of words and establishing a direct link between words and objects.

Plato has two models of language and of knowledge (or, more generally, of cognition) expressed in language. The simplest model is binary: on the one hand there is a speaker (or a knower) who signifies (or knows), and on the other hand there is an object that is signified (or known). Alternatively, there is a word, which, by itself, signifies an object. In this model, it is redundant to specify both speaker and word. If the speaker succeeds in naming the object (and naming it correctly is equivalent to knowing it), he obviously names it by its name. If he does not name it by its name, he does not succeed in naming it (and, *ipso facto*, he fails to know it). One cannot signify falsely, just as one cannot know falsely. And, accordingly, if a word signifies an object, it does so irrespective of speaker. Using words falsely is making sounds in vain, signifying nothing (*Cratylus* 430a4-5). To speak or to know is to *do* something (*Euthydemus* 284b5), analogous to seeing or grasping — the metaphors are alive to this day. On this model, there is no seeing or grasping falsely. One can only succeed or fail in seeing or grasping, and one can only succeed in naming (or knowing) or fail to do it. Error in naming, as in knowing, is impossible (cf., e.g., *Euthydemus* 286d, *Cratylus* 429d).

The second model is the triadic model: A speaker *x* names the object *A* by its name 'A'. This model is surreptitiously introduced, for the first time, at *Meno* 82b9-10: γιγνώσκεις τετράγωνον χωρίον ὅτι τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν; 'Do you know a square area, that it is like this?' Here there are three factors involved in the situation of knowing: a knower ('you'), an object ('an area like this') and a name ('square').

At *Republic* 5.477a10 (repeated for emphasis at 478a6), the triadic model is slightly different, adapted to the interests of that passage: ἐπιστήμη μὲν ἐπὶ τῷ ὄντι πέφυκε, γινῶναι ὡς ἔστι τὸ ὄν, 'knowledge is of what is, to cognize what is as it is'. Here too three factors are involved: a knower (the subject of γινῶναι), an object (τὸ ὄν) and a manner of knowing (ὡς ἔστι). The second part of that sentence, γινῶναι ὡς ἔστι τὸ ὄν, is regularly dismissed, explicitly or implicitly, as a redundant gloss on ἐπιστήμη [...] ἐπὶ τῷ ὄντι πέφυκε. But on closer inspection, its importance should become clear. A function (δύναμις), Socrates goes on at 477d1, is characterised by two factors: of, or about, what it is (ἐφ' ᾧ) and what it accomplishes (ὁ ἀπεργάζεται). 477a7 and 478a1 fill in the schema: knowledge is of *what is*

and accomplishes its cognition *as it is*. To know something is to identify it correctly. The first factor or condition (ἐφ' ᾧ) correlates knowledge with its *prima facie* object, and the second (ὃ ἀπεργάζεται) distinguishes between *episteme* and *doxa*, which may be true or false. At *Euthydemus* 284c7-8, to say a falsehood is to speak of an object, but not as it is. So too, at *Cratylus* 385b7-8: ἄρ' οὖν οὕτως [sc. ὁ λόγος] ὅς ἂν τὰ ὄντα λέγῃ ὡς ἔστιν, ἀληθής; ὅς δ' ἂν ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν, ψευδής; — ναί. 'So would not that [sc. *logos*, interchangeable with the subject of λέγειν at b2] which says things that are as they are be true; and that which says them as they are not, false? — Yes.' Cf. also *Sophist* 240e ff., 263b ff.

The *Euthydemus* makes abundantly clear that meaning is in the speaker, not in the words. Words, indispensable as they may be, are inadequate vehicles for conveying meaning: 'What then, said I, if you ask me with one thing in mind, and I understand you otherwise and answer you accordingly?' (295c4-5). Ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης (277e4) and ἀκριβεία λόγων (288a6-7), 'correctness of names' and 'preciseness of speech' will not take us very far. The same word may be used in opposite, or at least in different ways (278a6-7). So, e.g., men sometimes call 'learning' the acquisition of knowledge and sometimes its possession (277e5-278a1, cf. 284c7).

In all cases, the triadic model is introduced within the context of error and *doxa*, error being nothing else than false *doxa*. In fact, this model is brought up in order to provide the necessary foundation for the Platonic distinction between *doxa* and *episteme*. On it, *doxa*, whether true or false (as contraposed to *episteme*), is not a failure to grasp its object. It is of, or about, its object, but in an inadequate way, which is not directly dependent on that object. The introduction of the knower (or speaker) severs the supposed direct link between cognition and object, or between name and reference, thus making possible non-void *doxa* and error.

Only now can error be defined not as failure to attain the object, but as ἄλλοδοξία (*Theaetetus* 189b11, d5; cf. *Sophist* 263b11), 'opinion about something else'. (Incidentally, the model of the *Theaetetus* is insufficient to account for it, for reasons not of our concern here, until it is rectified in the *Parmenides* and in the *Sophist*.) *Doxa* is now inadequate cognition. To take the many beautiful things for the beautiful or the tracteries in the sky for the real object of astronomy is not to fail to apprehend them; it is to cognize them inadequately. By contrast, the philosopher who returns to the cave knows the sensible world for what it is (*Republic* 5.476c9-d3, 7.517d7-e2), as the shadows of justice and the εἰκὸς μῦθος of the *Timaeus*. Inadequate cognition is possible because *doxa* depends on the soul, not on the object. Otherwise the opinion-like cognition of the ideas by the mathematician or the only-partial mistake of the *philodoxoi* of *Republic* 5.476d8-9 would be impossible.

As the *Phaedo* notes (103a) and the *Parmenides* shows us, contradictions are impossible between ideas in themselves. But they are possible between them as attained by the soul. (Of course, they are possible also between ideas inasmuch as they are reflected in the sensible world. But we shall not occupy ourselves here with that aspect of the problem.) In effect, the soul in its incarnate form, is, *par excellence*, the *locus* of contradictions. And for Socrates, the possibility of contradiction is of paramount importance, as shown in all the dialogues. The purification of the soul from its contradictions is its purification from its non-ideal status, its 'rehearsal for death', in the *Phaedo*.

Therefore, as it emerges from the *Euthydemus*, Plato is opposed to a logic of propositions. Propositions are disembodied entities, severed from their speakers. Terms in an Aristotelian-type logic of proposition mean what they mean until reason be shown to the contrary. Instead, Plato insists on a logic of utterances. Unlike propositions, utterances cannot be detached from their utterers and from the conditions of their performance, and are thus eminently context-sensitive.

In a sense, meaning *is* use. But this is not Wittgenstein of the *Untersuchungen*. Meaning is not to be spirited away as use within a community of speakers. There *is* a meaning to words. Only, it is not in them but in the speaker, at each utterance. Unlike Wittgenstein, Plato does not take for granted the communicativity of language. Much on the contrary, it is precisely this communicativity that Plato questions. Speakers use words to attempt to convey their meaning, but words can do no more than arouse in the hearer the recollection of what he already has, at least implicitly, within his soul.

Language, at least everyday language, is, for Plato, inextricably contextual. Meaning is always dependent on the concrete situation. Hence the absolute necessity of the dialogue form. The Platonic dialogue, with its detailed setting and life-like characters cannot ever be disentangled from its context. It is always and inescapably situational. Given his views on language as fundamentally contextual, Plato cannot but write dialogues, in which nothing that is said can claim unconditional validity.

When the dialogue is detached from context, it is either a mere abstraction or little better than a charade. The *Meno* is a case in point. The slave boy in the 'geometry lesson' does not even have a name and we are given the barest personal information about him, the minimum necessary for getting the process of *anamnesis* going. The 'geometry lesson' is a mere sketch rather than a full dialogue, thus allowing for cut corners and speedy solutions. And although *Meno* himself is a full-fledged character, the dialogue begins, uncharacteristically for Plato, straightaway with its main question, detached from any specific context, as if the question could be answered on its own, by an answer unconditionally valid for all. No wonder the dialogue

is doomed to failure from its first line. No solution can be forthcoming out of the mere enunciation of the question in general terms, detached from any setting and purpose, and from any existential situation.

In a true dialogue, words are used and understood differently by different interlocutors. 'Learning' or 'knowledge' for Meno or for Protagoras do not mean the same as they do for Socrates in his better moments, when he is not ironically using words as his interlocutors would use them. Socrates spends much of the so-called 'early' dialogues in disabusing his interlocutors from their understanding of the words in question, more often than not without success. Thus, in any dialogue, words may have different meanings for different speakers at different times. Words cannot be interpreted without much attention being given to the subtle and not so subtle changes of meaning undergone by them over time and across speakers. (I plead guilty of not doing it here, in the interest of brevity.) And Socrates is a master of double-talk, meaning one thing by a crucial term, but letting his interlocutor be misled into his own common-sensical understanding of that same term. Witness, *e.g.*, his use of 'learning' *vis-à-vis* Meno.

Later dialogues are a case apart. There, for the sake of convenience, the respondents are mostly — but not always — assumed to arrive quickly at an adequate, or at least a Socratic, understanding of the terms. But the early dialogues, at least, are impelled by misunderstanding. From this point of view, one could differentiate between types of dialogues, according to Socrates' use of language. In the so-called aporetic dialogues, Socrates is often trying to veer his interlocutors away from their meaning/use of words, notoriously with no success. In other dialogues, he aims at moving forward in the dialectical investigation, in accord with his interlocutor. But this is a rather mixed type. As in the *Phaedo*, in the *Republic*, and elsewhere, Socrates has first to bring round his willing interlocutors, albeit not without some effort, to his own meaning of the terms. Only then can the 'positive' dialectical process begin.

But this is not quite disambiguation, as it is sometimes supposed to be. It is not the case that there are two distinct pre-existing meanings of the word and Socrates disambiguates it. Rather, Socrates is using words in a new, idiosyncratic meaning, which he claims is their 'true' meaning. But this meaning was not there beforehand. Socrates is *inventing* his meaning as he goes along. Before Socrates, *andreia* did not quite mean knowledge of the things to be feared and *dikaiosune* did not exactly mean doing one's own. It was Socrates who introduced these meanings, although claiming he was but uncovering them.

Does then Plato envisage an *ideal* language, in which words mean what Socrates tries to convince us they mean? Or is Socrates' use of language no better than that of any one of us? The question is not whether the sounds

imitate the objects (*Cratylus* 434a), but rather whether there is such a thing as speaking truly or falsely, having true or false opinions, knowing or not knowing. There must be true and false sentences first and foremost for moral reasons. It cannot be truly said and it cannot be known that good men are unjust (*Euthydemus* 296e). This is true not only for Socrates, but for any speaker or knower. In an ideal language, the individuality of the speaker would be fully neutralised. Such language would not be dependent, if such a thing were possible, on speaker or context. It would refer directly and unequivocally to the ideas. The binary model of language is not wrong; it is just not appropriate to an empirical language. As in the *Cratylus*, it is the ideal model that all languages strive to imitate.

But the postulation of such an ideal language, which can support dialectical inquiry, does not do away with the need for dialogue. The respondent in the dialogue establishes the inter-subjectivity, limited and situational as it may be, of the dialectical exchange. Philosophy is done by people in the empirical world and it is the function of the dialogue to keep the leader of the dialogue and the reader, as much as possible, from slipping back into their own private *doxai*. But this is never guaranteed and never completely realised within the dialogue itself. It is realised, if ever, in the reader, not in the text.

Plato's views on language are fully coherent with his conception of philosophy. As is well known, philosophy, for Plato, is not doctrine; philosophy is an activity, it is a mode of life. As activity, it cannot be fully stated or expounded. Ultimately, it can only be displayed. Statements lose their meaning once detached from the activity of enunciating them. Philosophy 'in no way can be put in words like other studies' (*Letter VII* 341c5-6). It can only be engaged in. At most, it can be shown. But it cannot be put into propositions, written or oral, except for reminding us of what we already know.

Because dialogue is always situational (not as a literary device, but as an existential requirement), it is of necessity particular, valid for the moment and for those who participate in it. Utterances in them cannot be severed from their speakers and from the moment of their speech. How then can the philosophical lesson be learned?

This is why Plato's dialogues are open. They are either aporetic or, when they are not, they have always about them a tone of scepticism and reservation. They describe a situation that is not self-contained or they puncture holes into their own historical veracity or they express misgivings about their ostensive conclusions. And in any case, their conclusions can be valid only there and then. As Socrates remarked to a startled Meno, at *Meno* 89c8-9: 'But it must seem to us well said not only just now, but also now and later, if we want it to be sound.' The *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, mostly and explicitly

not dealing with matter appropriate to dialectic, can be, in fact must be, ex-postulative. But, as a rule, the reader is left to engage the dialogue beyond what is given in the text.

In the openness of the dialogue, Plato continues with us the activity of philosophy. He cannot teach us philosophy any more than Socrates could. But he can *show* it to us. It does not follow, however, that Plato has no firm convictions. He is not a sceptic. 'The unexamined life is not worth living for man' (*Apology* 38a5-6). There, in the acceptance of the normative character of reason, in the recognition that reason is not only nor primarily instrumental but, as in the *Symposium* or the *Phaedrus*, has interests of its own, is the lynch-pin of Plato's philosophy. But the meaning of this too cannot be explained. It must be shown to us. Those present at Socrates' death could see it, as through a glass darkly. Plato hopes to make that situation present to us too. The literary trappings of the dialogue, of any Platonic dialogue, are no mere expendable embellishments. They are part of Plato's attempt at letting us see for ourselves the situation that gave meaning to those words.

This is why Meno's paradox, misguided as it may be, goes to the root of the Socratic enterprise. If there is no learning, the examined life is impossible. Meno's paradox has to be overcome, or Socrates' way of life is an illusion. The *hypotheses* of Socrates' way of life have to be established. And this is Plato's project. But cannot *these* be enunciated and transmitted, if not in writing then perhaps in an unwritten *Prinzipienlehre*? In a strict sense, no, they cannot. For their proper understanding depends on the previous acceptance of the absolute value of the examined life, of the normativity of reason. Only if this is accepted, only if one is already convinced that *arete* is *episteme*, that there is a crucial difference between knowledge and opinion, that Protagoras' relativism is wrong — only then can one grasp the full meaning of the metaphysics Plato presents Socrates with.

TITRE. *Langage et dialogue chez Platon.*

RÉSUMÉ. Platon a deux modèles du langage: un modèle binaire (le mot signifie l'objet directement) et le modèle triadique (quelqu'un signifie l'objet par le mot). Le modèle binaire est insuffisant pour un langage non-idéal. Les mots ne peuvent pas signifier en elles-mêmes; la signification dépend de celui qui les emploie. Donc, pour un langage non-idéal, Platon s'oppose au modèle binaire et à la logique de propositions indépendantes de celui qui les énonce, qu'en suive. Son alternative est une logique d'énonciations inextricablement contextuelles, qui met en question la communicabilité même d'un langage non-idéal. Une telle logique nécessite une forme dialogique et prévient une philosophie formulée en traités. Le dialogue, toujours ouvert, reconnaît cette difficulté et essaie de la surmonter, ou du moins — selon l'interlocuteur — de la mettre en évidence.

MOTS-CLÉS. Platon; dialogue; langage; logique; propositions; Euthydème; Cratyle.