

## Collection and Division in the *Philebus*

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Readers of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* will be familiar with the idea that Aristotle distinguished roughly between definitional and non-definitional propositions<sup>1</sup>, and even that he may have recognized distinct methods for acquiring knowledge of these sorts of propositions.<sup>2</sup> I hypothesize that a roughly similar understanding of Plato provides a resolution to a longstanding difficulty in Platonic scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty arises from the following observations:

1. The hypothetical method described and practiced in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* is distinct from the method of collection and division described and/or practiced in *Sophist*, *Politicus*, and *Philebus*.
2. The hypothetical method is Plato's recommended method for knowledge acquisition in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*.<sup>4</sup>
3. Collection and division is Plato's recommended method for knowledge acquisition in the *Philebus*.<sup>5</sup>
4. Collection and division introduced in the *Phaedrus* is roughly identical to collection and division described and/or practiced in the *Sophist*, *Politicus*, and *Philebus*.
5. The *Phaedrus* was composed roughly around the same time as the *Republic*.

If these five observations are correct, we have three options. First, we might suppose that Plato endorses at roughly the same time two distinct methods of acquiring the same knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Second, we might suppose that Plato abandons one method of knowledge acquisition and proposes a new one in short order.<sup>7</sup> And, third, we might suppose that Plato distinguishes two different sorts of knowledge, one to be acquired by the hypothetical method of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, and the other to be acquired by collection and division of the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, and *Philebus*. The third option leads in the direction of my hypothesis.

I will not here defend or even develop such a hypothesis. My goal here is more circumscribed. My goal is to consider the observations that generate the difficulty that the hypothesis attempts to resolve. Specifically, it is to consider observation [4] as it pertains to the *Philebus*. I maintain that Socrates' description of the finer way at *Philebus* 16c-17a is a fairly explicit

<sup>1</sup> See *Posterior Analytics* II.1 89b24-27.

<sup>2</sup> See *Posterior Analytics* II.

<sup>3</sup> A version of this difficulty is what Stenzel (1973), 149, calls "the shibboleth of Platonic scholarship".

<sup>4</sup> I have been attempting to defend this observation in a series of recent papers.

<sup>5</sup> See *Philebus* 16c2-3 and 16e3-4.

<sup>6</sup> See Hackforth (1952), 135.

<sup>7</sup> See Kahn (1996).

reference to the method introduced in the *Phaedrus*. That is, the method of knowledge acquisition endorsed by Plato in the *Philebus* is roughly identical to the method of knowledge acquisition endorsed in the *Phaedrus*.

My argument has the form of a Moorean argument against skepticism. The allusions in the *Philebus* passages to the *Phaedrus* passages are sufficiently striking that any evidence we have against the identification of the two methods is weaker than the evidence we have in favor of the identification. While there are reasons to doubt the identification, those reasons generally depend on controversial interpretations of difficult texts, and consequently are considerably less manifest than the identity they are offered to debunk. After quickly rehearsing the evidence for the identity, I will look at the most troubling objections.

Of course, to maintain that the ‘finer way’ of the *Philebus* is roughly identical to collection and division in the *Phaedrus* is hardly shocking or unique. But it should suffice to discourage a common misunderstanding of collection and division deriving at least in part from Robinson’s groundbreaking study of Platonic method - *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic*. As title of the book suggests, the absence of any discussion in the book of collection and division is a consequence of Robinson’s view that this method characterizes Plato’s later dialectic.<sup>8</sup> Unless we are to follow Robinson and others of an earlier generation of scholarship by placing the *Phaedrus* among the later dialogues (contrary to observation [5]), we must abandon the idea that collection and division is a new method of dialectic distinct from the method of dialectic discussed in middle dialogues like the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. While Plato does indeed develop this method in late dialogues, his discussion of it in the *Philebus* indicates that the method is roughly the same as the method introduced in the *Phaedrus*.

One final preliminary before turning to the description of collection and division in *Phaedrus*. I will be focusing on the descriptions of the method in the *Phaedrus* and the *Philebus* as opposed to its applications. Collection and division is undeniably employed predominately in Plato’s so-called later dialogues - see especially the *Politicus* and *Sophist* - rather than in the so-called middle dialogues, while its application in the *Phaedrus* is suspect. Why this should be so is an interesting question that needs to be pursued elsewhere. But if the thesis of this essay is correct it cannot be because Plato has not yet introduced and endorsed the method.

### A Quick Review of the *Phaedrus*

The following features of collection and division are immediately apparent from the three passages in which Socrates introduces the method in the *Phaedrus* (265c-266c, 273d-e, and 277b).

- Collection and division consists of two movements of thought
- [i] “seeing together things that are scattered about everywhere and collecting them into one kind (*mian idean*)”
- [ii] “be[ing] able to cut up each kind according to its species (*kat’ eidē*) along its natural joints.”
- Socrates is “an *erastēs* of these divisions and collections” (266b3-4).
- Whenever he encounters anyone able to “to discern a single thing that is also by nature capable of encompassing many” he follows him as though he were a god (266b5-7).
- He calls those who practice this method ‘dialecticians’ (266b8-c1).
- Collection and division is necessary for composing speeches with *technē* (277b5-c6).
- Socrates recommends this method and attempts to emulate it or practice it.

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps also see Kahn (1996), 298, McCabe (2000), 198–199, and Silverman (2000), 9.

### The Finer Way in the *Philebus*

After Socrates criticizes those who delight in puzzles concerning one-many in statements Protarchus asks Socrates to find a finer way to pursue the *logos*. In response Socrates offers perhaps the longest description of collection and division in the dialogues at 16c5-17a5.<sup>9</sup> Socrates follows this exposition with a series of examples of this finer way.

In response to puzzles about the one-many the gods handed down a method that consisted of two stages - positing a single form (*mian idean*) for everything and looking for it and having grasped the one, looking for two or three or however many there are. This latter inquiry does not end until the inquirer knows that the one arrived at by the first inquiry is one, many, indefinite, and how many. Plato here suggests that the finer way consists of two stages or movements - a movement toward unity or the one and a movement away from unity or the one, just as collection and division as described in the *Phaedrus* consisted of similar stages.

Lest we miss this similarity, Plato appears adamant in calling our attention to it. Plato suggests the divine nature of both methods - obviously in the *Philebus* by providing it with a divine pedigree, but only slightly less obviously in the *Phaedrus* when he testifies to following around anyone who practiced it as though he were divine. Plato also highlights the salience of both methods to *technê*. In the *Phaedrus*, he makes clear that speech making is only expert insofar as it employs collection and division and here in the *Philebus* Plato makes clear that the finer way is "responsible for bringing to light everything that has been discovered in the domain of any skill (*technês*)" [16c2-3; Gosling trans.]. And, of course, just as he calls those who practice collection and division in the *Phaedrus* 'dialectical' or 'dialecticians', so in the *Philebus* he distinguishes between those who practice the finer way incompletely and those who practice it completely by describing the former as behaving eristically and the latter as behaving dialectically. But perhaps most dramatically, just as he has Socrates describe himself as an *erastês* of collection and division in the *Phaedrus*, so here in the *Philebus* he has Socrates describe himself as an *erastês* of the finer way. It is difficult to imagine in light of these allusions that Plato does not intend the reader of the *Philebus* to have the *Phaedrus*' collection and division in mind.

### Distinct Ontologies

Nevertheless, not everyone would be sympathetic with this identification of the finer way of the *Philebus* with *Phaedrus*' collection and division. In particular, at least two difficulties stand in the way of a simple identification - first, that the ontology underlying the two methods appears to be importantly different, and second that collection may have disappeared from the *Philebus*. Exactly how the first difficulty is supposed to go is not always clear, but the general point seems to be that Platonic ontology is intimately related to his epistemology and so presumably to his method of acquiring knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, a change in ontology entails a change in methodology. Sometimes this is put by claiming that collection and division in the *Phaedrus* is ontologically committed. It is, so to speak, a method of collecting and dividing forms, or forms of a specific type. The finer way of the *Philebus*, however, does not depend on forms or forms of the relevant type. It cannot. Forms or forms of the relevant type are missing from the *Philebus*. Other times this objection is put by claiming that the finer way of the *Philebus* depends on the fourfold ontology of *Philebus* 23c-27c. Collection and

<sup>9</sup> Plato exemplifies the method at length in the *Politicus* and the *Sophist* (and perhaps in the *Philebus*), but he does not describe the method to the extent he does here in the *Philebus*.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas (2006).

division of the *Phaedrus*, however, does not. Again, it cannot. The fourfold ontology is missing from the *Phaedrus*.<sup>11</sup>

On behalf of the first version of this difficulty it must be admitted that the language of forms is abundant in the *Phaedrus* passages. In two of the three *Phaedrus* passages Socrates describes the collection stage as culminating in one form (*mian idean*; *mia idea*), while all three passages mention dividing according to forms (*kat' eidê*). But similar language occurs in the relevant passages of the *Philebus*. At 16d1 Socrates describes the first stage as positing one form (*mian idean*) and at 20a6 and 20c4 Socrates appears to be referring to the second stage as distinguishing forms (*eidê*, *eidôn*).<sup>12</sup> So, language alone does not require a different ontology and so methodology.

Nevertheless, the obscurity of the phrase at 16c9-10 with which Socrates introduces the finer way may suggest that the objects on which the two methods are employed are importantly distinct. The things that are said to be one and many here in the *Philebus* have been variously interpreted as ordinary sensible objects,<sup>13</sup> forms,<sup>14</sup> both,<sup>15</sup> and a variety of other things.<sup>16</sup> So, if collection and division in the *Phaedrus* is restricted to forms, and if the *Philebus* phrase is taken to be referring to anything other than those forms, then the two methods will depend on distinct ontologies. But each conjunct of the antecedent of this conditional is controversial. The allusions in the *Philebean* description to the *Phaedrus*'s description are considerably more straightforward. So, if the major premise of this objection is to be believed, viz. distinct ontologies entail distinct methodologies, the allusions ought to provide some evidence against those antecedents. So, we should not yet deny the identity of the two methods as a result of distinct ontologies.

On behalf of the second version of the distinct ontologies objection, the reference to the *peras/apeiria* distinction in the obscure *Philebus* phrase might be thought to introduce an important ontological difference between the two dialogues and so the two methods. Certainly, the fourfold ontology of *peras*, *apeiria*, mixture, and cause introduced a few pages later in the *Philebus* at 23c-27c appears not to be anticipated in the so-called middle dialogues, and one would assume that the *peras/apeiria* distinction made use of in the finer way passage is identical to that distinction made use of in the fourfold ontology passage. But, despite the plausibility of this assumption, difficulties here abound.<sup>17</sup> So, once again we should hesitate to deny the identity of the two methods based on the denial of the identities of the two ontologies.

Finally, the major premise on which both these versions of the distinct ontologies objection depends, viz. distinct ontologies entail distinct methodologies, is hardly self-evident. It is certainly true that Plato, especially, recognized a close relationship between ontology and epistemology and so presumably between ontology and methodology. Moreover, it is difficult to deny at least a subtle difference between the ontology of the *Phaedrus* and the ontology of the *Philebus*. But methodology identity conditions that require an identical ontology are too restrictive. More importantly, we have fairly good evidence that Plato would not require such restrictive identity conditions. Plato does not distinguish the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* from that method found in the *Phaedo* and/or the *Republic* simply because, as many

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Waterfield (1980), 282, and Sayre (1983), 120.

<sup>12</sup> See also 18c2 where Theuth is described as distinguishing a third form (*eidōs*) of letter.

<sup>13</sup> See Gosling (1975).

<sup>14</sup> See Crombie (1962).

<sup>15</sup> See Sayre (1983).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Benitez (1989), 42.

<sup>17</sup> See most recently Dancy (2007).

commentators believe, the ontologies of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo/Republic* are different. Further, the elenctic method as practiced in the early dialogues is the same method described in the *Sophist* as incapable of achieving positive results even though Plato's evaluation of the elenchus may be different in these dialogues and even though the ontology underlying the method has changed. So, Plato allows the method of hypothesis and the elenchus to be employed on distinct ontologies. Why, then, should we think that he would not permit collection and division to be employed on distinct ontologies? If it is thought that collection and division is essentially in some way tied to a specific ontology the allusions in the *Philebus* to collection and division in the *Phaedrus* and the differences in the two ontologies underlying these two dialogues ought to disabuse us of this thought.

### Jettisoning of Collection

Of course distinct ontologies is not the only reason for denying the identity of collection and division in the *Phaedrus* with the finer way of the *Philebus*. Another common objection to this identity is that the finer way has jettisoned collection.<sup>18</sup> Now, whatever the subtleties of methodology identity conditions, one method that consists of two movements of thought - roughly from plurality to unity and from unity to plurality - and another method that consists of only one movement of thought - from unity to plurality - can hardly be considered to be substantially identical. But has the finer way of the *Philebus* been jettisoned collection?

I think not. At 18a6-b4, when Socrates moves from the examples of letters and music to the example of Theuth, Socrates distinguishes two stages or movements of thought - a movement from unity to indeterminate nature which has been exemplified from 17a6-e5 and an opposite (*to enantion*) movement from the indeterminate to unity. (See 18a6-b4.)

It is this opposite movement that the example of Theuth is supposed to illustrate. According to Socrates, Theuth began by "notic[ing] the indeterminacy of vocal sound" (18b6), and after distinguishing the vowels, from the semi-vowels, and from mutes, named them all 'element', the single link that makes them all one and knowledge of which is called 'grammatical *technê*' (18c3-d2). Contrast what Socrates says in the Theuth example, with what he says about the example of music which precedes 18a6-b4. In the case of music the process apparently began by noticing sound as one (17c2), but leading to distinctions, e.g. low, high, and equal pitch, before arriving directly at the indeterminate plurality. These examples together with the transition passage between them suggest that Plato means to be contrasting two movements of thought - one from unity to indeterminate and one from indeterminate to unity.

Having said this, I confess to running roughshod over a number of difficulties. Let me offer only the briefest response.

First, *phone*, the *terminus a quo* so to speak of all three examples, is explicitly described as both indeterminate and one at 17b3-4. But that is precisely Plato's point, if the finer way is to be plausibly seen as a response to a one-many problem. Things like knowledge, pleasure, and *phônê* are both one and many/indeterminate. To resolve this apparent contradiction one should employ the finer way by considering the thing as a unity and moving toward the plurality until all of the intermediates are completely laid out and determined, or one can start by considering the thing as an indeterminate plurality (as Theuth did) and moving toward the unity, again until all of the intermediates are completely laid out and determined. Resolving

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<sup>18</sup> See all of those commentators who refer to the method of the *Philebus* and *Politicus* as division. Sayre (2006), 48–51 and 73–91, explicitly maintains that collection is replaced by paradigms in the *Politicus*.

the apparent contradiction requires getting hold of the intermediates between the thing as a unity and the thing as a plurality. Whether one begins from the unity or the plurality is unimportant

Second, I have without argument identified the indeterminate with plurality. The short answer to this is that if one does not, the finer way will be irrelevant as a solution to the one-many problem.

Third, the familiar words for collection are absent in the *Philebus*. Two quick responses. First, while the language of collection is absent from the Theuth example, Theuth must collect the indeterminate *phônê* into groups of vowels, semi-vowels, and mutes, and ultimately these intermediates into elements. Second, the language of collection is not wholly absent from the *Philebus*. As Sayre (2006:49) has pointed out “collections are called for by name no less than six times in the discussion of” the fourfold ontology at 23c-27c; (see 23e5, 25a3, 25d5-6, 25d6-7 (twice), 25d8). There are further issues here, of course, but for now this must suffice.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope to have encouraged the belief that the method of knowledge acquisition described at *Philebus* 16c5-17a5 - the finer way - is the same as the method endorsed in the *Phaedrus* - the method of collection and division. Consequently, we can no longer read Plato as endorsing one method of knowledge acquisition in the so-called middle dialogues which he goes on to abandon in the later dialogues. Rather, Plato appears satisfied with endorsing two different methods of knowledge acquisition at roughly the same time. This calls for an explanation about which at present I can only speculate. So I won't.