

Comments on K. Sayre, “Dialectic in Plato’s Late Dialogues”

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ABSTRACT

A brief overview of Kenneth Sayre’s paper, “Dialectic in Plato’s Late Dialogues,” followed by critical discussion. I invite Sayre to clarify his views on the nature of the method of hypothesis in Plato, and on its relationships to Socratic dialectic and to the method of collection and division. I then ask whether we should think of Plato as aware, at the time of writing his dialogues, of weaknesses in the various methods of conducting philosophical inquiry he has his characters employ. Finally, I ask whether the method of reading Plato Sayre recommends at the end of his paper, to the extent it is novel, is likely to prove fruitful.

Keywords: Plato’s Late Dialogues, Socratic dialectic, method of hypothesis, philosophical inquiry.

In his wide-ranging and interesting paper, Ken Sayre advances claims both about Plato’s views on philosophical method and about the proper method of reading Plato. In fact, his paper contains *three* distinct kinds of claims. First, it advances specific interpretive claims about several particular Platonic dialogues. Second, it offers a developmental thesis about the evolution of Plato’s views across different dialogues. Finally, it recommends a general way of reading Plato. In these comments, I will focus primarily on the latter two kinds of claims. Let me preface my remarks by saying that I greatly enjoyed this paper, and that, where I disagree with Sayre, I do so in the spirit of constructive engagement, and with gratitude to him for providing us with a paper that, I have no doubt, will provoke much discussion from this audience.

In his paper, Sayre discusses no less than eight different Platonic dialogues: the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman* and *Parmenides*. Although many of his claims about these particular dialogues are interesting in their own right, I want to focus here primarily on the general thesis about Plato’s philosophical development they are meant to support. This thesis, as I understand it, runs roughly as follows. Plato’s dialogues depict two distinct methods of doing philosophy, both of which are sometimes called ‘dialectic’. First, there is the method of hypothesis, which features in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Theaetetus*. Second, there is the method of collection and division, which features in the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*. Plato develops each of these methods across several different dialogues, progressively revising each method and probing its weaknesses. Finally, these two methods are combined in the second part of the *Parmenides*. There, a philosophical method is presented that is superior to any

that has appeared in Plato before, since it does a better job of specifying both necessary and sufficient conditions for an adequate discursive definition. The method presented in the second part of the *Parmenides* therefore represents 'a suitable ending to Plato's long search for an optimal method of dialectical inquiry' (p.88).

My first question concerns Sayre's understanding of the nature of the method of hypothesis, and of its relationship to the Socratic elenchus. His official position is that the method of hypothesis is an 'outgrowth' of the Socratic elenchus (p.82). The two methods are similar, on his view, because both involve testing a hypothesis for consistency by testing its consequences for consistency: if its consequences are consistent, it remains a candidate for truth. The main difference between them, so far as I can tell from the paper, is that for the Socratic elenchus the hypothesis to be tested is supplied by someone else, whereas in the method of hypothesis one can supply one's own hypotheses. Presenting these two methods as this close together allows Sayre to claim, as he does, that the *Theaetetus* contains an application of the method of hypothesis. However, this claim about the *Theaetetus* might strike us as surprising, since, at least on its face, this dialogue appears to present an instance of the Socratic elenchus, not of the method of hypothesis. Why is it important for Sayre that the *Theaetetus* contains an application of the method of hypothesis? I suspect this is actually crucial for his developmental thesis. This is so because, if the *Theaetetus* does not depict the method of hypothesis, then the latest work to do so, according to the usual chronology of Plato's dialogues, will be the *Republic*. However, in the *Republic* Socrates expresses no doubts about the method of hypothesis; indeed he appears to positively recommend it as *the way for*

the true philosopher to proceed, at least when properly applied. However, it is a crucial part of Sayre's developmental narrative that Plato came to view the method of hypothesis as flawed. If the *Theaetetus* depicts an application of the method of hypothesis, this provides a way for him to do this; for in the *Theaetetus* Socrates fails to reach a satisfactory discursive definition of knowledge (*epistêmê*), which might be thought to reflect the failure of the method of conducting a philosophical inquiry he deploys. However, if the *Theaetetus* does *not* depict the method of hypothesis, no such conclusion can be drawn on its basis. My first question, then, for Sayre is this: how does he understand the nature of the method of hypothesis, such that the *Theaetetus* (but not, say, the *Euthyphro*) counts as an application of *it*, rather than of the Socratic elenchus?

My second question concerns Sayre's views on the relationship between the method of hypothesis and the method of collection and division. Sayre often suggests that he regards the two methods as *alternative* and *competing* ways of reaching the same goal: namely, the goal of providing adequate discursive definitions. For instance, he begins his paper by arguing that the *Republic* contains subtle allusions to the method of collection and division alongside its explicit discussions of the method of hypothesis, and describes this state of affairs as 'puzzling' (p.82). Why would this be puzzling? Sayre explains by providing disjunctive lists of the dialogues in which each method appears, and by claiming that in the *Republic* alone the methods 'somehow come together' (p.82). Perhaps he is inferring from the fact that the two methods generally feature in different works that at any given time Plato always preferred one to the other. However, we might desire a stronger and more explicit argument that Plato regarded

the methods of hypothesis and of collection and division as competing alternatives. This is because there is another possibility, namely that Plato regarded the two methods as in some way complementary, perhaps because they serve subtly different goals. For example, one might argue that the method of hypothesis is introduced in response to a specific problem – the problem of how to make progress in a philosophical inquiry in the absence of certain and secure starting points – whereas collection and division is introduced to show how one might pursue adequate discursive definitions systematically. In support of this, one might observe that in those contexts where the method of hypothesis is *explicitly* introduced (e.g. in the *Meno* or *Phaedo*), the goal is generally not to arrive at a discursive definition at all. Indeed, I might add, *if* both methods *do* appear in the *Republic*, this might seem to lend support to the view that Plato actually viewed them as compatible and complementary, not as directly competing. So, my second question for Sayre is this: does he think Plato regarded hypothesis and collection and division as competing alternative methods for conducting philosophical inquiry, such that one must always prefer one to the exclusion of the other? Or does he think Plato might have viewed them as compatible and complementary methods? If he favours the former view, on which they directly compete, why does he do so?

This brings me to my third set of questions, which concern Sayre's understanding of Plato's goals in writing the dialogues in question. Sayre often speaks of a Platonic dialogue 'revealing' or 'demonstrating' the weaknesses of a particular philosophical method. However, it is not always clear whether he thinks we should envisage Plato as himself already aware of these weaknesses when writing these works. Let us grant for the sake of argument

that many dialogues clearly display flaws or weaknesses in the philosophical methods they employ or discuss. Should we imagine Plato applying the method in question to the best of his ability at the time of writing each dialogue, then, perhaps only later, noticing its limitations? I submit that this would be a strange and unlikely way to read a dialogue such as the *Theaetetus*. Or should we rather envisage Plato as fully aware of these weaknesses *before* writing the work in question, and then proceeding with the deliberate intention of *highlighting* them, perhaps for pedagogical purposes? But if this later way of understanding Plato's goals remains an open possibility, it seems we cannot straightforwardly base a narrative about the development of Plato's thought on differences in the philosophical methods depicted in different Platonic dialogues, or from any flaws in the depicted methods that appear.

I turn now from Plato's views on philosophical method to the method of reading Plato that Sayre's paper is meant to both exemplify and recommend. Sayre describes his preferred method of reading Plato as follows: 'First collect together all the dialogues that deal explicitly with the topic in which you are interested [...] then sift through relevant passages in these dialogues with a sharp eye for differences from case to case, dividing them into groups with obvious affinities. This can (but need not) be done without concern for chronological order. Then set about constructing a coherent narrative connecting these passages in a plausible sequence of development' (p.88). In the present case, he claims, it is 'obvious' that 'collection in the *Sophist* has been replaced by paradigms in the *Statesman*,' and that "the treatment of hypotheses in the *Theaetetus* preceded that in the *Parmenides*'. Finally, Sayre acknowledges that one's antecedent views on chronology will come into play, but

suggests that they will be open to adjustment if the narrative so demands (p.88).

In keeping with the general theme of this conference, I want to conclude my remarks by raising two concerns about this general method of reading Plato. The first concerns its efficacy. My basic worry here is that Sayre may be too optimistic about the degree to which his recommended method will typically (or ever) prove *sufficient* to determine a single narrative, or to dictate that the passages in question be placed in a certain order. Here, it seems to me, we should be wary of our tendency to find immediately compelling any account that ties disparate elements together into a coherent narrative. We should also surely be mindful of our tendency to favour evidence that supports what we already believe. As a check against these tendencies, we might always ask ourselves: could a different story be told to tie together these very same passages? Could other passages be brought into play to complicate the story that has just been told? Might a difference between two passages reflect a change of emphasis, context, or intent, rather than a change of mind on Plato's part? These are precisely the kinds of questions I have tried to raise here. My aim in doing so is not to deny that the textual evidence Sayre cites *can* support his particular developmental story, but rather to ask whether it supports this story *uniquely*, or could equally well be interpreted in other ways.

My second, related worry begins with Sayre's remarks about methods of reading Plato other than his own. Sayre seems to have in mind two main kinds of opponents: unitarians (whom he provocatively describes as the 'climate-change deniers' of Platonic studies, p.88) and interpreters who insist that we should regard every Platonic dialogue as strictly self-contained. Now, I am inclined to agree with Sayre that reading Plato

as someone who wrestled with hard problems throughout his life, and who sometimes revised his views in light of these reflections, is not only more plausible than regarding him as a god-like figure who fully worked out all his ideas even before he first started to write, but also makes him a more interesting philosopher. My goal is not to question developmentalism as such. However, there is more than one way to be a developmentalist. Many scholars of Plato compare thematically related passages from different works, while remaining open to the possibility that Plato may have changed his mind as his career progressed. I take this to be a familiar and relatively orthodox thing to do when reading Plato. However, as I understand him, Sayre recommends something more specific than this. That is, he recommends gathering together several thematically related passages from disparate works, and then comparing them based primarily on linguistic allusions and the like, with the expectation that they alone will determine a single narrative and relative order of composition. My worry with this approach is that, to the extent it is novel, it is so in the degree to which it recommends excerpting brief passages from different dialogues and comparing them with each other, in isolation from the full dialogues in which they originally appeared. This approach risks leaving us more open than we otherwise would be to the psychological tendencies towards narrative construction and confirmation bias I have mentioned. At the same time, it may lead us to neglect complex and important questions about what Plato (or one of his characters) is actually trying to do in a particular part of a particular dialogue.

In conclusion, I want to thank Professor Sayre once again for contributing such a bold and thought-provoking paper to this event. I look forward to the lively and interesting discussion I have no doubt it will provoke.