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Dialectic and Refutation in Plato. On the Role of Refutation in the Search for Truth

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Abstract: While refutation is usually related to Plato's early, Socratic, dialogues, this paper is aimed at exploring the link between refutation and dialectic in some of his middle and late dialogues. First, it argues that refutation assumes a constructive role in the *Phaedo*, where the best *logos* is the least refutable, and also in the *Republic*, where the philosopher is invited to fight his way through all *elenchoi*. Then, it tries to show that the *gymnasia* of *Prm.* 130a ff.

is aimed at training young Socrates to come to the aid of the theory he embraces preventing it from being refuted. He should travel and explore all the paths, by assuming a hypothesis as well as the opposite one. This methodology paves the way on which Plato advances in the *Sophist*, where the antinomic structure of the *gymnasia* gives way to a "constructive" dialectic in which the aporia is solved and a thesis is established by refutation. The last section of this paper is devoted to analysing *Sph*. 251c-252e, where the positive and constructive function of the elenchus is especially clear. Plato argues for the *symploke eidon* by exploring all the hypotheses that are open to the search and refuting those that ultimately represent obstacles to his position. The *symploke* is the truth which remains when all the hypotheses that contradict it have been refuted. The conclusion is that the elenchus does not disappear but is put at the service of the truth, as an essential part of the method for attaining a positive doctrine.

Keywords: dialectic, refutation, hypothesis, self-refutation, principles.

The link between dialectic and refutation, widely recognised in the early Platonic dialogues, has been little studied in the later ones. In this paper I aim to shed light on that link by analysing the role of refutation in two different contexts: the one of methodological recommendations addressed to the philosopher in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, and that of the argumentative strategy used in the late *Sophist*. Both contexts are related in one way or another to dialectic,[1] which, for Plato, is inseparable from philosophy. As a transition between both analyses I shall refer to the dialectical exercise of *Parmenides*, which conforms to the dialectical prescriptions

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[1] Since Platonic dialogue, as Gonzalez points out (1998, p. 2), is "a dramatic portrayal of dialectic at work", the technical descriptions of dialectic in the dialogues should be related to dialectic as actually practiced, to a greater or lesser degree, in them. In Sections 1-2 of this paper, I examine some dialectical descriptions and prescriptions offered in *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Parmenides*, whereas in Section 3, I deal with the argumentative strategy actually followed by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*.

formulated in the *Republic* and, at the same time, anticipates the refutation strategy deployed in the *Sophist*.

According to the interpretation I offer in these pages, the link between dialectic and refutation remains beyond the Socratic dialogues. Far from restricting itself to the negative and purifying function typically associated with those dialogues, refutation assumes in the later ones a key role in the search for truth. In the middle dialogues, it is the recourse to hypotheses that allows overcoming the negativity of the elenchus. However, its positive and constructive function is especially evident in the *Sophist*, where, through the refutation of adversaries, Plato establishes theses and principles that are at the heart of his ontology. Here my interpretation departs from that of Robinson, who in his valuable study of Platonic dialectic maintains that the constructive character "of the middle and late dialogues entails the subordination and partial disappearance of the negative elenchus in them. What is now required is a method for attaining positive doctrine, not for rejecting it" (Robinson, 1953, p. 61). On the contrary, I hope to be able to show that the dialectic implemented in the *Sophist* allows for the establishment of doctrines by refuting or eliminating others.

In support of my interpretation I first examine the role of refutation within the framework of the dialectical prescriptions of *Phaedo* and *Republic*. Then I deal with some methodological passages from *Parmenides*, where the character of the same name, a defender of the existence of Forms, endeavours to refute his own theory before a young Socrates who lacks dialectical training. Finally, I focus on the discussion of *Sph*. 251c-252e, where through the refutation of contrary hypotheses which present obstacles to his own thought, Plato establishes his theory of the *symploke eidon*.

1. Refutation and Dialectic in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. The need to adopt the least refutable *logos* and fight the way through all the *elenchoi*

Two passages from the *Phaedo* are of particular interest to my purpose. One is *Phd*. 85c2-d1, where refutation is linked to the subject under discussion, the immortality of the soul. Because on this subject it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve certainty, Simmias says:

> in these matters certain knowledge is either impossible or very hard to come by in this life; but that even so, not to test what is said about them in every possible way (παντὶ τρόπῳ ἐλέγχειν), without leaving off till one has examined them exhaustively from every aspect (πρὶν ἄν πανταχῇ σκοπῶν ἀπείπῃ) shows a very feeble spirit; on these questions one must achieve one of two things: either learn or find out how things are; or, if that's impossible, then adopt the best and least refutable (δυσεξελεγκτότατον) of human *logoi*.[2]

Although this recommendation is part of the discussion of a topic like the immortality of the soul, which, by its very nature, exceeds the human capacity to know, in a certain way it is applicable to every philosophical enquiry. It invites the philosopher to try to refute his theory in every possible way by putting obstacles to his position rather than limiting himself to accumulating reasons and arguments in its favour. The aim is to preserve it and to exhibit it as resistant to

[2] *Phaedo* is quoted following the translation by Gallop (1975), except that here, as in the other quotations from the dialogue I opt for the transliteration of *logos* rather than for its translation. The Greek word *logos*, plural *logoi*, has a very range of meanings and it is almost impossible to find a fully satisfactory translation. In this case Gallop translates 'doctrines' (cf. Hackforth: 'doctrine'), while others translate 'proposiciones' (Eggers Lan), 'discours' (Dixsaut) or 'discorsi' (Casertano), 'explicaciones' (Vigo), etc. I shall leave *logos/logoi* untranslated not only here but also in Section 3 devoted to *Sophist*, where *logos* is used profusely assuming different meanings ('statement', 'discourse', 'language', etc.) according to the context.

the objections to which it may be subjected, on the assumption that the best explanation is the one that wins out over criticism and survives scrutiny. The refutation strategy of the Eleatic Stranger in *Sph*. 251c-252e, as we shall see, fits in with such a criterion. It is a criterion akin to the one which in the first Platonic dialogues inspires Socrates' interrogation, who is always determined to examine opinions in order to defeat the illusion of knowing what one does not know.

A good example of the attitude recommended by Simmias is provided by Parmenides in the first part of the dialogue of the same name, where he directs numerous criticisms of the theory of forms. Since both he and his interlocutor, young Socrates, defend the existence of forms, those criticisms are not aimed at weakening the theory but rather at strengthening it, in line with the recommendation of *Phd*. 85c-d. In fact, Parmenides tries in every way possible to refute the theory that he subscribes to, raising difficulties and at the same time testing his interlocutor, who shows himself incapable of coming out in defence of the theory that he embraces. In this sense, if the best defence a philosopher can make of his position is to exhibit it as irrefutable, refractory to the objections to which it may be subjected, young Socrates' failure is unquestionable.

Returning to the *Phaedo*, another passage rich in methodological recommendations is 99e-101e. There, in the framework of his intellectual autobiography, Socrates proclaims his decision to take refuge in *logoi* and to assume as a hypothesis the one that is presented as the most solid.[3] The *logos* in question, which according to 85c-d will be the least open to refutation, is the one that affirms the existence of Forms.[4] Socrates decides to anchor in it the search for an answer to the problem of the immortality of the soul:

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[3] Regarding *logos* in this passage, many translations have been offered: 'proposition' (Hackforth 1994, Eggers Lan 1983, Gonzalez 1988), 'definition' (Bluck), 'theory' (Gallop 1975), 'raisonnement' (Dixsaut 1991), 'discorso' (Casertano 2015), etc.

[4] As Hackforth points out (1994, p. 142-143), Plato has no doubt whatever about the existence of the Forms: to assume this proposition as the basis of an argument

> hypothesizing (ὑποθέμενος) on each occasion the *logos* I judge strongest, I put down as true whatever things seem to me to accord with it (…) and whatever do not, I put down as not true (*Phd*. 100a3-7).

Unlike the *logos* adopted as a starting point, whose truth is not questioned, the *logoi* that depend on it are considered true or false depending on whether they agree with it or not. Beyond how we should interpret the metaphor of agreement, which has been arduously discussed,[5] it is clear that the philosopher is invited to consider as true what is in line with the hypothesis and as not true what contradicts it or at least maintains some conflict with it. Such a prescription, however, is far from the recommendation to try to refute in every possible way what we take to be true. It would seem to free the philosopher from the examination of those positions which deviate from his own, urging him to declare them false without further ado, without giving them any substance or seriously considering their implications. This explains, in my view, why Socrates admits to clinging to his convictions about Forms "in a plain, artless, and possibly simple minded way" (*Phd*. 100d3-4). If these words, as I think, involve self-criticism, Socrates would be acknowledging the need to combat overconfidence in his own position and to pay attention to possible objections. This reading fits in with *Phd*. 101d-e, which refers to the second phase of the hypothetical procedure,[6] in which a more critical attitude is imposed.

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does not in itself imply any doubt. To speak *tout court*, as is sometimes done, of the Forms in the *Phaedo* as 'mere hypothesis' is seriously misleading.

[5] Robinson (1953, p. 126-129) proposes to choose between consistency and deducibility as the meaning of 'accord', although both readings would involve difficulties. For an overview of the subsequent discussion see Gallop (1975, p. 179-181, n. *ad* 100a3-9) and more recently Casertano (2015, p. 362-363, n. *ad* 100a5). Gonzalez (1998, p. 195-196) rejects Robinson's objections and suggests the reading of 'accord' as 'consistency'.

[6] Against the assumption that this second passage (101d) describes something additional to that described in the first one (100a), Hackforth (1994, p. 139) suggests that what it gives is the detail of the process described in the previous passage.

Now the possibility is contemplated that the hypothesis assumed as a starting point will be questioned, which forces us to check what was done and to justify it by means of a higher hypothesis, considered the best, from which it can be deduced[7] and so on until something adequate is reached (ἐπί τι ἱκανὸν, 101d8).[8] This operation, unlike the previous one, is not only in line with the typically Socratic requirement to submit our beliefs to examination, but it is also triggered by an objection.[9] Through this resource the method is improved and its consistency with Simmias' suggestion in 85c-d is saved. Trying to refute in every possible way what we take for true seems to be, after all, the way that guarantees the best explanation.

If we go to the central books of the *Republic*, we see that the dialectical procedure also involves the recourse to hypotheses, but it is a special use that makes the philosopher's activity superior to that of the mathematician. The latter also starts from hypotheses, but he proceeds as if he knew them (*hos eidotes*, *R*. 6, 510c6), as if they were evident to everyone (*hos panti phaneron*, *R*. 6, 510c7-d1), without finding himself in the obligation to give any account of them to themselves or to anyone else. The philosopher instead assumes the hypotheses as what they are: assumptions that as such require justification. Unlike those who leave them immovable because they cannot give any account of them, the dialectical method is the only

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[7] For Gonzalez (1998, p. 198) deduction is *one* way in which you could relieve the doubts of your interlocutor. A 'higher' hypothesis "need not be a hypothesis that is higher in a chain of deduction, but could simply be a better hypothesis".

[8] The clause 'something adequate' could mean 'adequate to satisfy an objector to the first hypothesis' or 'adequate to satisfy yourself'. Robinson (1953, p. 137) excludes the latter. However, as Gallop (1975, p. 190) explains, "in dialectic the true philosopher will be his own objector. However strong his hypothesis may seem to him, it behoves him to justify it not only to his interlocutors but also to himself".

[9] The reference to those engaged in verbal disputes (*antilogikoi*, *Phd*. 101e1) is an opportunity to clarify two important points: (i) the contrast between Socrates' behaviour, worthy of a philosopher, and those who only seek to contradict the other; (ii) Socrates is not envisaging a process of reasoning "which will satisfy a philosopher's ultimate demand, but one which will serve the purpose of proving to the satisfaction of an interlocutor some particular theorem" (Hackforth,1994, p. 141)

one, Plato states, that "destroying the hypotheses"[10] goes towards the very principle to assert itself in something stable (*hina bebatiosetai*, *R.* 7, 533d1). But the stability at which dialectic aims is not necessarily ad odds with scrutiny and testing.[11] There is an unquestionable tension between the deductive or demonstrative element proper to dialectic, which gives reason to any assumption, and the intuitive moment, necessary to apprehend an unhypothetical truth (*anypotheton*, *R.* 6, 510b7; 511b6), which is not derived from any other. Intuition, however, as Vallejo Campos (2018, p. 198-199) well explains, must not be seen as a step in the void, but as "una intelección preparada por la argumentación dialéctica", which seeks to connect the hypotheses with higher principles.

For Plato the success of the search and the type of knowledge to be attained depend on the attitude adopted in the face of hypotheses. When the precariousness of one's knowledge is recognised and the hypotheses assumed are scrutinised, it is possible to achieve genuine knowledge, not when they are left intact by assuming them as principles. In this case the conclusion and the intermediate steps are tied to what is not known (*R.* 7, 533b-c).[12] For Plato, the philosophical attitude, that of the one who aspires to knowledge worthy of the title of *episteme*, remains the Socratic attitude.

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[10] The phrase *tas hypotheseis anairousa* (533c8) is interpreters' hard task. Adam (1963, 2, p. 140, n. *ad* 533c) understands it with reference to the process of testing, revising, discarding one hypothesis after another, till in the end it reaches the Idea of Good. For Robinson (1953, p. 161), destroying hypotheses is neither refuting nor establishing them, but destroying their hypothetical character. For an overview of the different interpretations see Cross-Woozley (1964, p. 247-249) and more recently Vallejo Campos (2018, p. 229), who understands it as a positive procedure that does not necessarily lead to the elimination of the hypothesis but to its rational foundation.

[11] Against the assumption that what the ascent aims at is certainty, even when *to bebaion* could with any plausibility suggest this reading, see Gonzalez (1998, p. 222 and 365, n. 27).

[12] Plato denies knowledge to the mathematician because he leaves his hypotheses unexamined. As Cross-Woozley point out (1964, p. 248-249), he may have constructed a system that is consistent, but consistency is not enough.

In case there were any doubts that the dialectic described in the *Republic* keeps Socrates' legacy alive, in Book 7 Plato states that the dialectician, as it were in a battle, "must fight his way through all criticisms" (transl. Griffith, 2000), i.e., exhausting every elenchus (διὰ πάντων ἐλέγχων διεξιών, *R.* 7, 534c1-2), reaching the end of all obstacles with his undefeated argument. Rather than refuting others, what counts is to put one's own theory to the test,[13] in the conviction that only after having refuted all possible objections does one reach a firm point. The best explanation, Plato thinks, is the one that remains irrefutable.

Berti (2015, p. 87), when commenting on this passage, finds in the need to go through *all* refutations "il segreto del carattere costruttivo, non semplicemente distruttivo, della dialettica, e quindi la differenza, il progresso … della dialettica platonica rispeto a quella socratica". Only after having refuted all the hypotheses concerning a question will we be sure that the one that remains is not a simple hypothesis but a genuine, unhypothetical principle.[14] This prescription seems to pose a more ambitious goal than *Phaedo's*, where the best explanation is *only* the most irrefutable. In both cases, however, it is the one that has come through criticism and survives scrutiny. The dialectician's goal -something adequate as in the *Phaedo* or an *unhypothetical* first principle as in the *Republic*- is reached after exhaustively going through the difficulties involved in the search and refuting possible objections to one's own position. In this prescription from Book 7, the typically Socratic demand to submit our beliefs to examination resounds once again. The dialectician systematically exercises the refutation technique and puts it at the service of the search for knowledge. It is not surprising that Plato calls *dialectic* the method he identifies with philosophy

[13] Against the ordinary interpretation which supposes that the *elenchoi* are applied by others see Adam (1963, 2, p. 142-143, n. *ad* 534c): we apply the *elenchoi* ourselves.

[14] So this principle, for Berti (2015: 87), "non viene attinto né per intuizione, né per generalizzazione, né per analizzi, ma attraverso la confutazione di tutte le ipotesi che lo contraddicono".

itself, a term which evokes conversation, dialogical exchange and the advancement of discussion through questions, answers and refutations. Platonic dialectic is still a Socratic dialectic.

2. Refutation and Dialectic in the *Parmenides*. The need to train to avoid being refuted and come to the aid of one's own theory

I shall now refer to the methodology adopted in the *Parmenides*, more precisely to the dialectical exercise to which Socrates is subjected at the request of Parmenides in the second part of the dialogue. It is an intellectual training (γυμνασία, *Prm*. 135c8)[15] aimed at overcoming the limitations that came to light in the preceding discussion, where the young man was unable to respond to the criticism of the theory of forms. The exercise, aimed precisely at filling this gap, responds to the conviction that "without this kind of detailed answering and ranging through everything, it is impossible to meet with truth and gain intelligence" (136d-e) (transl. Allen, 1983).

The invitation to range "through everything" (διὰ πάντων διεξόδους, *Prm*. 136e) evokes the dialectical prescription to "fight his way through all criticisms" (διὰ πάντων ἐλέγχων διεξιών, *R*. 7, 534c1-2) and at the same time anticipates the strategy of the *Sophist*.[16] The demand for exhaustiveness, considering the totality of alternatives that are open to investigation, appears in all cases as a condition that the philosopher must satisfy if he aspires to reach a firm point.

The discussion in the first part of the dialogue shows that young Socrates is unable to come to the aid of the theory he defends. Who

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[15] See also *Prm*. 135d4, *gymnasai*; d7, *gymnasias*; 136a2, *gymnasthenai*; c5, *gymnasamenos*.

[16] On the affinity between the methodology of *Parmenides* and that of the *Sophist* see *infra* n. 18.

in time will become an undisputed expert in refuting others, in this case, cannot prevent others from refuting him. The young man, however skillful he may be at questioning others, must learn to respond, training himself to succeed with his undefeated argument. The γυμνασία to which he submits himself seeks to remedy his dialectical inexperience. As in a battle, fighting himself "through all criticisms" will allow him to defend his position, a purpose that would be frustrated if he persisted in simply and naively clinging to the *logos* he considers to be true. Instead, he will have to exercise himself until the theory he embraces remains irrefutable.

This being the goal of Socrates' training, it is understandable to resort again to the method used at the beginning of the discussion by Zeno to come to the aid (*boetheia*, 128c6) of Parmenides' argument "against those who ridicule it on the ground that, if is one, many absurd and inconsistent consequences follow". Zeno refutes them showing that "their own hypothesis, that plurality is, suffers still more absurd consequences than the hypothesis of there being one" (*Prm*. 128c7-d6). Zeno rescues the spirit of controversy (*philonikian*, *Prm*. 128d7) that inspired his writing, aimed at putting a stop to those who tried to refute Parmenides rather than presenting the same thesis in another way, as Socrates insinuates.[17]

To come to the aid of the theory that the philosopher considers true requires him to confront those positions that are adverse to him and to expose their contradictions, so that his own theory is successful and remains irrefutable. This does not only conform to the dialectical recommendations of *Phaedo* and *Republic*, but it also

[17] According to Allen (1983, p. 70), by showing the absurdities of pluralism, the Zenonian method indirectly supports Parmenides' monism, since the proof that many things do not exist "entails Parmenides result that only one thing exists". However, as Barnes (1982, p. 185) points out, Zeno is not defending monism in any straight-forward way. If his aim is to show that pluralism suffers "still more absurd consequences" that monism, that is hardly the language of an ardent monist. On this basis, I think that the purpose of Zeno in the *Parmenides* is not to show the truth of the monist hypothesis but rather to protect it from possible attacks, defeating and neutralizing the pluralist adversary.

prefigures the argumentative strategy that in the *Sophist* leads, as we shall see, to the combination of the Forms with each other.

Now, Socrates' training takes up Zeno's procedure, which starts from the hypothesis of the opponent and exhibits his contradictions, but it goes beyond. The differences are in principle two. On the one hand, instead of getting lost in the visible things, he will concentrate on the intelligible ones.[18] On the other hand, while Zeno merely assumed the hypothesis of multiplicity to show that even more absurd consequences follow from it than from the hypothesis proclaiming unity (127d-128e), Socrates will need

> to examine the consequences that follow from the hypothesis, not only if each thing is hypothesized to be, but also if that same thing is hypothesized not to be, if you wish to be more thoroughly trained (*Prm*. 135e-136a).[19]

This prescription deviates from that of *Phd.* 100a3-7 in two respects: it invites the philosopher to assume not only the hypothesis he holds to be true, but also the opposite, and also, to explore the consequences that follow from each of them. The *gymnasia* that extends to the end of the dialogue is then not only in line with the characterization of the dialectic offered in the *Republic*, where the need for exercise to attain the highest knowledge is explicit,[20] but it is also in line with the ideal of exhaustiveness that Plato associates with the dialectic method.

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[18] See *Prm*. 135e1-4. According to Cornford's translation (1939), and more recently Ferrari (2016), the inquiry will range both over sensibles and over Ideas. For Allen (1983, p. 183), instead, the inquiry will *not* range over sensibles, but *will* range over Ideas.

[19] Owen (1972, p. 230) highlights the affinity of this recommendation with *Sph*. 250e-251a, where the Eleatic Stranger says that any light thrown on either being or not being will equally illuminate the other.

[20] At *Rep*. 7, 526b, some education and training (*gymnasontai*) in mathematics is part of the higher education of the philosopher.

At 130a-135d, Parmenides unfolds a procedure that starts from his own hypothesis "if Unity is" and explores the consequences that follow from it for both the one and for the other things. He then assumes the opposite hypothesis "if Unity is not" and does the same. We do not need to go into the labyrinth of the eight – or nine – arguments that follow each other until the end of the dialogue to realise that this procedure is in line with the methodological recommendations of *Phaedo and Republic*. The philosopher should not only exclusively concentrate his attention on the hypothesis he considers to be true, but he should also subject the opposite hypothesis to careful scrutiny. This expansion of Zeno's original procedure not only guarantees better training but also creates the conditions for the refutation of one of them to establish, indirectly, the truth of the other.[21] But the *Parmenides* is an aporetic dialogue par excellence,[22] which paves the way on which Plato resolutely advances in *the Sophist*. There is an undoubted affinity between both of them in assuming that it would be a basic error to concentrate philosophical attention "on an assertion or on a concept without subjection the negation to equally strenuous scrutiny". [23] The *Parmenides* goes as far as this. Its methodology is perfected in the *Sophist*, where the antinomic structure of *gymnasia*, a labyrinth of separate deductions with contradictory conclusions,[24] gives way to a "constructive" dialectic in which the aporia is resolved and a thesis is established by refutation. For the elenchus to fulfil this positive

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[21] See Aristotle, *Top.* 1. 2, 102a28-36. On the coincidences between the procedure presented in this section of the *Parmenides* and that one practised by Aristotle see Berti (1980, p. 351-358).

[22] See Allen (1983, p. 289). Kahn (2003, p. 1-6) underlines the aporetic and enigmatic character of the *Parmenides* and he proposes to regard it as a philosophical introduction to Plato's later work.

[23] Schofield (1977, p. 141). In this, he adds, "both exhibit that same desire for a synoptic in so many of the later dialogues".

[24] Kahn (2003, p. 18) suggests that the eight deductions can best be seen as an exercise in what the *Sophist* calls *symploke eidon*, the weaving-together of forms with one another (in the four positive deductions), and in the corresponding futility of what we might call *chorismos*, the separation or isolation of a single Form from everything else (in the four negative deductions).

function, the philosopher acts like children asking for 'both' when given a choice between this or that. It is only then that the Zenonian dialectic is surpassed.

3. Self-Refutation and Dialectic at work in the *Sophist*. The positive role of the elenchus in the search for truth

It is time to address the argumentative strategy pursued in the *Sophist* by the Eleatic Stranger. I shall focus on *Sph*. 251c-252e, where through the refutation of two opposing hypotheses about the possibility and scope of a combination the *symploke eidon* is established. Plato argues in its favour by eliminating other alternatives that together exhaust the answers to the question: one maintains that no thing combines with one another different, the other that all things combine unrestrictedly. The strategy consists in showing that both alternatives are self-refuting or, at least, involve some kind of contradiction which is made evident in the act of affirming them itself (Baltzly, 1996, p. 156).[25]

While a similar strategy is used profusely throughout the dialogue,[26] I find that the positive and constructive function of refutation is especially clear in this passage. On the other hand, his analysis shows that the importance of refutation is not limited to the role Plato, in his middle dialogues, assigns to it when describing the task of the dialectician, but is equally key in the dialectic 'at work', in this case in which the Stranger puts into practice. This character, a native of Elea, presented from the beginning as a true philosopher, leads the discussion and unfolds the refutation strategy that interests our subject. Let us see to what extent it fits the dialectic prescriptions

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[25] See also Castagnoli's (2010, especially 225-236) examination of "operational self-refutation" at *Soph*. 252b-c.

[26] In the *Sophist*, as Wilmet (1990, p. 97-99) points out, Plato on at least four occasions takes on opponents by taking advantage of inconsistencies between what they say and the particular way in which it is put forward: *Sph*. 238a-239a, 243d-244a, 244b-d, 251e-252c.

of previous dialogues or, as Baltzly (1996, p. 154-157) suggests, *Sph*. 251e ff. it is an illustration of the method described in the *Republic* in the ascent to anhypothetical starting point.

One of the salient features of the Stranger's strategy is that it appeals to the *factum* of language to show the weakness of certain positions that are refuted as soon as they are enunciated. The argument develops from what the opponent says, who finds himself in difficulties when trying to articulate his position. As soon as he speaks, there emerges a conflict between the content he seeks to communicate and the conditions of his own enunciation. For Wilmet (1990, p. 97), such a method is already implicit in the early, 'definition' dialogues, where Socrates forces someone to say what he thinks, "forces him to speak, and tries to derive from that sole speech either inconsistencies or conclusions that the speaker is not ready to endorse".[27] Baltzly, on his part, links it to that of dialogues of maturity, more precisely to the prescription of "destroying the hypotheses" in the central books of the *Republic*. By showing that the truth of a thesis is incompatible with the fact that it is expressed, its contradictory is unhypothetically established. This is what Plato would have in mind in the *Republic* when he says that dialectic destroys hypothesis (Baltzly, 1996, p. 153; 1999, p. 172-174).[28]

According to my reading, which owes quite a lot to Baltzly's interpretation, there is certainly a link between the *Sophist*'s refutation strategy and the recommendations to the dialectician in previous dialogues. However, I find the connection more obvious with those that emphasise the need for the philosopher to thoroughly

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[27] In Marcos de Pinotti (2017, p. 143-148) I analyse different applications of the self-refutation argument in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*.

[28] Castagnoli (2010, p. 231-233) raises numerous objections to this interpretation, in particular questioning the lack of correspondence between the sole unhypothetical first principle of the Republic and the principles which, according to Baltzly, would be established in a non-hypothetical way. However, apart from the fact that this author anticipates such an objection and gives, in my view, a satisfactory response to it (pp. 157-159), I find his interpretation convincing and philosophically stimulating. The main merit is to detect connections between Platonic passages that are often addressed independently.

explore the difficulties and objections he is faced with. I refer to prescriptions such as testing what is considered true "in *every* possible way" (*Phd*. 85c5), fighting his way "through *all* criticisms" (*R*. 7, 534c1) or ranging "through *everything*" (*Prm*. 136e1). They unanimously point to the demand for exhaustiveness, exhorting the philosopher to develop a difficulty in every sense and to test both his own position and those who dispute the truth with him. Although this methodology is present in the *Parmenides*, as we have seen, it is here improved in such a way that the refutation serves a constructive purpose. For this purpose, *all* the hypotheses that are open to the search are explored instead of settling the question between opposite hypotheses, emulating Zeno's method.

At *Sph*. 251d4-e1, the Stranger raises the question:

> Are we to attach neither being to motion and rest nor anything else to anything else, but on the grounds that they are immiscible and it's impossible for them to partake of one another, are we to set them down in just this way in the speeches we use? Or are we to bring them all together into the same on the grounds that they' re capable of sharing in one another? Or some do and some don't? Which of these, Theaetetus, shall we say they would choose? (Transl. Bernadete, 1984).

The notion of combination works at two different levels in the dialogue. There was an ontological combination, between the beings themselves, whose capacity for mutual relationship is posed as a problem, and another that occurs in language, involves names and, unlike the other, depends in some way on us.[29] As for the relationship

[29] According to Peck (1962, p. 59, n. 1) the combination of the *eide* is beyond our control, we mere recognise it when it is there, and it is permanent. On the other hand, *symploke* of noun and verb is within our power, we may put together any noun and any verb we like. Some of them are true, others false, or they may be true now, false later. Heinaman (1983, p. 178-179) distinguishes two types of combination or communion between Forms. When the Stranger asks whether we should refuse to conjoin Being with to Motion he would be speaking of combining Forms as predicating one Form of (communion1) another. But he also speaks of

between both of them, the Stranger suggests that one should adjust one's use of language to the ontology to which one subscribes. If we assume that no thing combines with one another different, we shall avoid connecting them in our speeches, whereas if we give credit to the opposite hypothesis that all things can be blended with each other, we should bring them together indifferently into a unity. To what extent, however, are both linguistic prescriptions feasible? Plato considers both simply impracticable. Let us see why.

As for those who claim that things are unblended and incapable of having a share of each other, 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). In the same instant in which one says 'P', a voice within says 'no P'. 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. He claims that nothing combines with anything, but if this were indeed the case, *he could not even say that nothing combines with anything*, a statement which, by requiring the combination of terms at the level of discourse, makes it clear that some combination is possible. Whoever tries to deny that there is a combination is condemned to silence or, if he speaks, to an irremediable falsehood.[30]

The opposite hypothesis that everything is mixed with everything else without restriction does not have better luck. If it were true, things would be drawn into a mutual blend that would plunge them into the most absolute indifference. Motion itself would be at rest and

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communion of Forms when this is a relation that holds Forms themselves quite independently of us (communion2).

[30] According to Baltzly (1996, p. 153), when the content of a claim is such that, "were it true, it couldn't be expressed, this is ample reason to think that it must be false". For Castagnoli (2010, p. 228), instead, this kind of argument does not prove a thesis is false but that there is no way of coherently presenting it. See also Wilmet (1990, p. 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)".

rest itself, in turn, would be in movement (*Sph*. 252d6-8). Since it is absolutely impossible for motion to rest and rest to move, the second hypothesis is eliminated. For Baltzly (1996, p. 155), this argument is not, strictly speaking, a self-refutation, but "some sort of self-refutation argument might be lurking in the background though". There would be no definite properties, nothing would be this rather than that, and it would be impossible to enunciate something rather than its negation. The fact, however, that the advocates of everything being blended with everything can say and mean this and not the opposite puts them in contradiction with themselves.[31]

Both of these arguments show that any attempt to stick the language to the theory that we consider to be true, as suggested in 251d-e, is doomed to failure. Both the theory of those who deny any combination and that of those who affirm it unreservedly would be refuted in the very act of its enunciation. The key to this refutation strategy is the *factum* of language, the practice of which makes it clear that some combination is possible.

The only viable alternative after the rejection of the previous ones, then, is the third one:

> Str. And it's necessary that it be at least some one of these: either everything or nothing, or some are and some are not willing to mix together.
>
> Tht. Of course.
>
> Str. And it was two that were found to be impossible.
>
> Tht. Yes.

[31] According to this reconstruction in terms of self-refutation, the argument shows the falsehood of the thesis that everything is blended with everything. As Baltzly (1996, p. 156) explains, "that they can say, and thereby mean, their thesis and not its denial is itself proof that the thesis is wrong".

> Str. So everyone, who wants to answer correctly, will set down the one remainder of the three.
>
> Tht. Yes, certainly (*Sph*. 252e).

If it is false that nothing is blended with anything and it is also false that everything is combined with everything, some things will necessarily admit to be mixed and others will not. This conclusion soon leads to the *symploke eidon* to be established as a firm truth by refutation of two unworkable, intrinsically inconsistent positions.[32] If they were true, language would be impossible, but since there is language, as soon as they are articulated in a *logos* their falsehood becomes apparent. The *factum* of language, while bringing to light the contradiction between the content they proclaim and the conditions of possibility of such enunciation,[33] points which is the way for those who wish to answer correctly, which is none other than the dialectician (*orthos apokrinesthai*, *Sph*. 252e6; *R*. 7, 534d9-10: *apokrinesthai epistemonestata*). It is a path between two extreme alternatives whose conjunction defines the point of view of the philosopher, who knows that the truth is suspended from both

[32] It is not easy to establish with whom the Stranger is debating in this passage. As far as the hypothesis that nothing blends with anything is concerned, there are too many candidates (Antisthenes, Lycophron, the Megarians Euclides and Stilpo, the Cynics, even sophists such as Dionysodorus and Euthydemus). However, it should not be forgotten that in the dialogues it is frequent that the philosopher -for example Socrates, or the Eleatic Stranger- faces conceptual rather than real opponents, associated with positions which, although they have a certain historical anchorage, are built by Plato with a dialectical rather than a historical interest. In Marcos (2014, p. 123-128) I refer to the Platonic operation of the construction of opponents in the *Sophist*, embodied in a sophist whose figure would be inspired by Gorgias and, on the other hand, that of the one who is evoked by the Stranger as "our father Parmenides" (*Sph*. 241d5). To both opponents, as I argue later on, we must associate the positions refuted at *Sph*. 251c ff.

[33] Those who declare that there is no combination, in doing so, combine terms in their speeches, that is to say, they do what they say cannot be done. Those who proclaim that everything blends indifferently with everything else, in doing so, say something definite, which would be impossible if what they proclaim were true.

extremes. He will do as children do, who, when asked to choose between this or that, answer 'both' (*Sph*. 249d3-4).[34]

The combination of the Forms with each other is established in the *Sophist* as firm truth, unhypothetical, a truth which remains when all the hypotheses that contradict it are revealed to be unworkable. The refutation strategy that leads to it shows that this combination cannot be consistently denied because it is presupposed in every speech, quietly accepted even by those who seek to deny it. This is possibly the sense in *Sph*. 259e4 ff., which founds in this *symploke* the *factum* of language: "it's on account of the weaving together of Forms with one another that (the) *logos* has come to be for us".[35]

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the multiple interpretations to which this passage has been subjected, the precise meaning of which has been widely debated.[36] Instead of asking ourselves how the weaving together of Forms founds the *logos*, we can try to clarify what sense it makes to say here that such *symploke*

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[34] In the *Sophist*, written under the impact of criticism of Plato's own theory in the *Parmenides*, there is no room for the standard formulation of dominant dualism in the dialogues of maturity. The relationships between Being and Not-Being, between philosopher and sophist, or between original and image, to mention only a few examples, are not conceived in terms of opposition but as otherness, a link that is established between different but mutually connected factors. To this is added the assumption that the one cannot be illuminated without the other (Owen 1972, see n. 18), which dominates the central discussion of the dialogue.

[35] Moreover, thanks to the *symploke eidon* it is possible to exercise philosophy, since deprived of *logos*, Plato says, one would be deprived of philosophy itself.

[36] Fronterotta (2007, p. 460-463, n. 259 *ad Sph*. 259e) offers a detailed overview of the debate. A long discussed question has been how to make 259e4-6 compatible with the two instances of *logoi* about Theaetetus a few pages later, at 263 a2 and 8. The problem which seems to present itself is that these examples of *logoi* do not illustrate what is presumably said in that sentence, that a *symploke eidon* would be contained, asserted or involved in some way in every *logos*. Peck (1962), through a critical examination of the main solutions offered up to that moment (Cornford, Ross, Ackrill, Bluck), shows that such difficulty is fictitious. *Sph*. 259e4-6 tells us nothing about the intrinsic character of *logos*, it merely points out that we can now be assured that there is such a thing as *logos*. My interpretation of the passage assumes this conclusion from Peck, but without sharing his explanation of the sentence.

is a precondition of the *logos*. The answer, in my opinion, arises from the context in which this statement is made and which the Stranger himself is concerned to reconstruct. This statement is reached, as we have seen, through the refutation of those who "try to set apart everything from everything" (*Sph*. 259d9-e1), whose attitude is now branded as "unmusical and unphilosophic". They were fought against in the dialectical arena, making them talk to force them to recognise "the mixing of another with another" (*Sph*. 260a1-2). In that sense, the moral of Platonic argumentation for the *symploke* is that the philosopher, rather than reforming language according to his theory concerning the way things are, uses dialogue to test this theory and to make language reveal the nature of things. Yet this operation carried out by the philosopher is possible only because being and language do not constitute separate, mutually transcendent fields, but are interwoven with each other. To this *symploke* which is a precondition of all use of language, I suggest, the Stranger is referring in *Sph*. 259e4-6.

On the other hand, while this statement seems to be directed only against those who claim that nothing is mixed with anything, I believe that it also reaches those who claim the opposite by maintaining that everything is mixed with everything. They are two opposing ontologies that, as far as I can see, converge in the separation of being and *logos* that the theory of the *symploke eidon* is called upon to combat. The proposal of the Stranger in *Sph*. 251d4-e1 shows, in fact, that both hypotheses, despite being opposed, assume that being and language practice are on separate tracks, hence the presumption that language can be freely manipulated and subordinated to the ontology that is subscribed to. Against this assumption common to the two positions that were self-refuted, in my view, the statement of *Sph*. 259e4-6 is addressed.

The interpretation I propose makes sense in the light of the purpose of the dialogue: to refute the sophistic thesis that denies the possibility of the false *logos* by showing that it is possible to say falsehoods, i.e. things that are not, without this being contradictory. Taking into consideration this purpose and the context that leads

Plato to affirm the *symploke eidon*, it is possible to advance some conjectures about the historical figures that could have inspired the discussion of *Sph*. 251c ff. The key, in my opinion, is the Parmenidean genealogy that Plato attributes to the problem of the impossibility of falsity. Its solution demands to refute both the sophist who denies that there is falsity and "father Parmenides", who denies not being. The opponent is therefore twofold and the perspective on which the discussion of the whole dialogue is oriented, let us not forget, is that the philosopher proceeds like children asking for 'both' when given a choice of this or that. Well, if the negation of the false *logos* is embodied in the figure of a sophist that in this case relies on Parmenides,[37] Plato may well have been inspired by Gorgias,[38] who in *On Not Being* had assumed Parmenides' principles, reaching conclusions that were diametrically opposed to those that the Eleatic proclaimed in his poem. The truth is that neither of the two positions, by virtue of their radicalism, gives room to falsehood: in the case of Gorgias because there is nothing except the *logos*, to which being and thinking are subordinated, and in the case of Parmenides because there is only being, in which thought and discourse are submerged. The affirmation of *Sph*. 259e4-6 points against both opponents, whom the argument of 251c-252e forced to recognise that there is *symploke* of being and *logos*.

The argumentative strategy analysed, which discovers in the *symploke eidon* the condition of possibility of *logos*, is the appropriate one when it is a question of founding certain truths on

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[37] Just as in *Theaetetus* Protagoras is presented as a defender of the Heraclitean flow. In both dialogues we find a sophisticated opponent of Platonic manufacture.

[38] On the other hand, as I argue in Marcos (2014, p. 128), the vocabulary used in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* to refer to the spell and magic of *logos* reappears in the description of the imitative technique at *Sph.* 233a ff. The same notion of production (*poiesis*) that Plato considers an essential feature of the technique of the sophist, a kind of child's play (*Sph*. 234a7, a10, 235a6) that makes him capable of "making and doing all things", would be inspired by Gorgias, who strips the *logos* of any revealing pretension by proclaiming its power to produce persuasion and its playful character.

which everything else depends without them being followed from anything else. It should not be surprising that it is used in the *Sophist*, a dialogue which aims to show that it is possible to say falsehoods, i.e. things that are not, refuting the sophist's position that denies such a possibility by arguing that it is impossible to say what is not. In order to do so, Plato needs to battle his opponent in the realm of language, to make him speak, so that in his denial the implicit affirmation of what he intends to deny should emerge. The demonstration proceeds by refutation of a radical opponent who puts himself in contradiction with himself as soon as he speaks. In such sense, *Soph*. 251c ff. contains an application of the peculiar methodological strategy that guides the discussion of the whole dialogue and governs a good part of its arguments, a strategy that is even projected in the demonstration by refutation (*apodeixai elenkhtikos*, *Metaph*. 4, 1006a12) later used by Aristotle.

If the examination offered is correct, refutation plays for Plato a key role in the philosophical quest, but not only in its negative and purifying function, associated above all with his first dialogues, but for its positive and constructive role. The passages analysed leave no doubt about the importance of examining all opinions in order to free ourselves from error, incorporating the voice of the other as an essential part of the philosophical inquiry. In this sense, it can be said that the Socratic legacy remains valid beyond the first dialogues.

In *Phaedo and Republic* Plato emphasises that the philosopher must try to refute his own theory in every possible way and fighting his way through all criticisms. His practice of the elenchus is not intended to defeat foreign positions but rather to establish the truth by testing even one's own position, that is, what he himself considers true. The method for attaining truth is not therefore at odds with scrutiny and testing but it has refutation as its essential constituent. The search for truth does not exempt, but rather demands that one's own theory be questioned and scrutinised along with those that dispute the truth with him. The philosopher, just as he seeks to persuade himself to be in the truth rather than to persuade others (*Phd*. 91a7-b1), is "his own objector" (Gallop, 1975, 190).

As for Plato's insistence on the need to exhaust all the alternatives that are open to the search, it responds to a criterion of exhaustiveness that undoubtedly contributes to the synoptic vision that in the *Republic* is attributed to the dialectic and inspires the *gymnasia* of the *Parmenides*. In it, the philosopher's apprentice is invited to travel and explore all the paths, to assume a hypothesis as well as the opposite hypothesis, carefully examining the consequences that follow from one and the other. The other's voice, again, is constitutive of the philosophical quest.

Finally, we find that the methodology of the *Parmenides* is refined and improved in the *Sophist*, where through the refutation of contrary hypotheses that ultimately represent obstacles to his thought, Plato establishes key theses and principles of his ontology. In the *Sophist*'s ontology there is no room for dualism, which is the target of most of the criticism of Forms in the *Parmenides*, and the philosopher proceeds like a child begging for 'both'. The negative dialectic of the *Parmenides* thus gives way to a constructive dialectic where refutation not only continues to be the engine of the search, but also reveals its theoretical impact on the architecture of Plato's own thought. Even his theory of the *symploke eidon* is established by refutation.[39]

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[39] I am indebted to an anonymous referee of *Archai* for the reference to Barnes interpretation of Zeno's refutation of the pluralist hypothesis (see *supra* n. 17).

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