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1.

There is no doubt that dialectic is one of the central subjects of Platonic thought, and yet those who attempt to explain it find this task to be quite difficult. A common approach in the scholarship is to simply point to a variety of procedures that differ from dialogue to dialogue depending on the context, the time of writing, and the object of inquiry. However, this type of answer does not satisfy those seeking a synoptic view of Platonic dialectic, even when one accepts that the dialogical format gives rise to a variety of renderings of one (in a sense) way of investigating reality.

At first glance, *New Perspectives on Platonic Dialectic: A Philosophy of Inquiry* appears to be a collection of essays with no greater connection than being dedicated to elucidating the nature of Platonic dialectic. The lack of classifications in the index confirms this: the essays are simply arranged by alphabetical order of the authors (16). There seems to be no claim of exhaustivity, either from a textual perspective (by reviewing all passages on dialectic in the Platonic dialogues) or an aspectual perspective (by pre-establishing the salient questions in the most recent research), and this differentiates this collection from a typical collection of essays on Platonic topics. It is a mistake to think, however, that the absence of these unifying criteria makes *New Perspectives...* a collection of essays with little interconnection. What holds them together is, in fact, a criterion more unifying than exhaustivity: these essays –albeit with nuances, and not to the same degree– share a common diagnosis of the narrowness of the dominant interpretation of the Platonic "method", and they attempt to challenge this interpretation in different ways. Likewise, even though most of these essays focus on a specific dialogue

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(*Euthydemus*, *Meno*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*), overall they are propelled by a unitarian view of Platonic dialectic.

2.

Before going into the details of the essays, it is necessary to consider the controversial backdrop that inspires this collection. As is clearly explained in the introduction (4-5), and also, as we will see, some of the essays, a developmental interpretation of Platonic dialectic has become a dominant and rarely challenged position in the scholarship. This interpretation is undoubtedly linked to the modern fixation on a chronology of the Platonic dialogues. The application of the stylometric method to the comparative analysis of the Platonic dialogues has contributed to the exegesis of the Platonic work and has made it possible to explain apparent contradictions between different doctrines defended in the dialogues.[1] However, despite its benefits, this chronological fixation has had negative consequences for a comprehensive understanding of Platonic thought. This is especially evident in the case of understanding dialectic. The accepted distinction between three periods of production of the dialogues –early, middle and late– brought with it the methodical distinction between three forms of "dialectic": *elenchus*, hypothesis, and collection and division. The narrow fixation on this methodical distinction (whose precursor is the work of Julius Stenzel and Richard Robinson in the first half of the 20th century[2]) has introduced into the scholarship a counterproductive dogmatism that eschews a unitarian understanding of the Platonic method and overlooks the interaction of these "methods" in dialogues from different periods of the philosopher's work.

To this controversial backdrop, I would like to add two difficulties that are typical of Plato's thought and that hinder a unitarian understanding of his method. In the first place, the difficulty identifying a comprehensive view of the Platonic dialectic is not only due to its methodical diversity, but also the apparent indeterminacy of its object. Although there seems to be a consensus that the transcendent Forms are the object of the dialectic in the middle dialogues –in particular, in books VI and VII of the *Republic*–, it is not clear if this "method" is also applicable to the "universals" and it stops there, or if it even extends to the sensible realm. This problem clearly replicates the methodical differentiation introduced by the developmental reading: it seems, thus, that the three "dialectics" are not only distinguished by their form, but also by their object. The apparent indistinction of the object of the dialectic can lead, in my opinion, to two errors: (i) interpreting Platonic dialectic as a "modern method", that is, as a set of procedures that can ensure the result of the investigation in a sense *in spite of* the investigator; (ii) confusing dialectic with Aristotelian logic, that is, conceiving it as a materially indeterminate discipline. In second place, Platonic scholarship tends to forget the complex relationship between theory and praxis in Platonic thought when it examines the nature of the dialectic. The later distinction between dialectic, ethics, and physics (in the Stoics, but also in Plotinus' Neoplatonism) is not easy to draw in the Platonic dialogues. Indeed, the dialectical investigation in the famous allegories of the *Republic* begins with a vital experience of liberation from a deep state of self-deception and culminates with the knowledge of the Idea of the Good, knowledge that undoubtedly has consequences for the determination of personal and political

praxis. On the other hand, what we find in most of the Platonic dialogues is not so much a reflection on dialectic (which we undoubtedly also find in some key passages), but rather its exercise or putting into practice. In this sense, the originating moment of dialectic –the *dialegesthai* or Socratic conversation– can be more or less accentuated. Thus, it is not clear whether Platonic dialectic is always dependent on Socrates' vital praxis or rather emancipates itself from this origin as Platonic thought gains in density and dogmatism.

3.

Overall, the essays presented here maintain a critical distance with respect to the developmental distinction between three methods clearly delimited by the period of production of the Platonic work. However, this distance does not prevent the authors from recurring to, to varying degrees, the chronological division of the dialogues or the distinction of three periods of Plato's literary production. Nor does it prevent them from recognizing, in many cases, the methodological predominance of *elenchus*, hypothesis, and collection and division in certain dialogues or periods of production. Rather, this critical distance implies an awareness of the narrowness both of the strictly chronological perspective and of the sharp distinction between methods clearly circumscribed to a given dialogue or period of production, and the freedom to present approaches, connections and analysis that go beyond this narrow framework.

The freedom from the developmental interpretation of dialectic is manifested in three types of research, which can be used to classify the essays in this collection: (i) unitarian or comprehensive readings of the nature of the dialectic (Gonzalez, Mesch and Politis); (ii) complementary and transversal readings of the methods of *elenchus*, hypothesis, and collection and division (Ausland, Ionescu) and; (iii) an expansion of the understanding of the dialectic beyond the three aforementioned traditional methods (Politis, Haralsen, J. K. Larsen, P. Larsen, Rowett and Vlad; to a lesser extent also the articles by Austin, Sabrier and Vlasits).

(i) The comprehensive readings deserve special attention, not only because they undertake the hermeneutical challenge of approaching the varied universe of Platonic dialogues from a synoptic perspective, but also for the exceptional quality of these essays, which in a sense constitute the fundamental pillars of this collection.

Francisco J. Gonzalez's essay "Dialectic in Plato's *Parmenides*: The Schooling of Young Socrates" approaches the *Parmenides* dialogue with the question: "what exactly does Socrates learn about "dialectic" in Plato's *Parmenides*?" (70). Gonzalez wants to avoid asking this question from a developmental perspective and instead examines the literary aspects of the dialogue itself, in particular, the fact that here we are presented with a young and inexperienced Socrates, whom the elderly Parmenides intends to teach a lesson. Once we take this as the starting point, it is not possible to simply accept that the exercise Parmenides deploys in the second part is mere "gymnastics". This perspective is confirmed by Parmenides' own understanding of his method as a "path to the truth" (*Prm*.136c4–5). Gonzalez thus links the question of Socrates' learning with the central question of the exegesis of the dialogue: to what extent do the dialectical proceedings of the second part *lead to the truth*? (71). To answer this second question, Gonzalez looks at the third (supposed) hypothesis, the only

one, as the author rightly points out, that is numbered (*to triton,* 155e4). As is well known, in the second part of the dialogue we find eight hypotheses that consider "whether the one is or is not", and these consider both the consequences for oneself and the consequences for other things. The so-called *false third hypothesis* is usually understood as an "anomaly" in the hypothesis scheme, as it seems to function more as an explanatory appendix to the first two hypotheses. Gonzalez recognizes in this anomaly an interpretative key to understanding the complete series of hypotheses (74). Learning dialectic for the young Socrates consists both in the acquisition of the "completeness" that "wandering" (*planomai*) from one hypothesis to another provides, and in the grasp of the truth in the "instant" that is reached in the "switching" or in the "between" of the hypotheses examined. In this sense, the third thing that is "between" the first two hypotheses –and that can be "iterated" for the next three remaining pairs of hypotheses– points precisely to the dialectician's need to overcome the strict dichotomy between apparently contradictory hypotheses and to accept the "ambiguity" of any object of investigation (76). This thesis can only be fully understood if it is exemplified. And that is what Gonzalez does: he proposes a reading of different dialogues from this perspective (76-81). Gonzalez thus seeks to show that Socrates has correctly learned from Parmenides the lesson of wandering between different hypotheses, pursuing exhaustiveness as an ideal that is unattainable through human effort and partially reaching that which transcends the hypotheses themselves and which is obtained in the wandering inherent to shared examination (86).

Walter Mesch's essay "Between Variety and Unity: How to Deal with Plato's Dialectic" does not focus on a particular dialogue, but tries to provide a unitarian notion of dialectic throughout the different Platonic dialogues. To do this, the author openly goes against the developmental reading (169). While it is possible to recognize thematic and methodological differences between the dialogues, "it is extremely important not to overestimate and misinterpret these differences" (170). Mesch counters this developmental perspective by understanding the varied treatment of dialectic in the different dialogues as the application "in a highly context-sensitive way" of the same method that runs throughout the Platonic work (170). In this sense, the author questions the strict distinction between methods according to periods of literary production (even when a method may have a predominant place in certain dialogues), the categorical difference between dialogues that reconstruct the thought of a historical Socrates and dialogues that are properly Platonic, and relatedly, the opposition between aporetic and dogmatic dialogues (though *elenchus* itself can serve a destructive or constructive purpose). Faced with these distinctions, it is key, on the other hand, to take into account that the critical attitude towards the Sophists –both explicitly and indirectly through the dialectical practice itself– and the connection between dialectical investigation and the good life are constants throughout the Platonic work. In the central part of his essay, Mesch, taking on this hermeneutical perspective, focuses on the determination of the object of dialectic (175). Here the author maintains two fundamental theses: (i) that, although the dialectic may have other objects, the transcendent Forms are its primary object and (ii) that, in the consideration of each one of these dialectical objects, the hypothetical method operates jointly with the methods of *elenchus* and of collection

and division (175-176). The conception of the transcendent Forms as the primary, but not exclusive, objects of the dialectic (i) allows him to explain the unity and variety of the Platonic method throughout the dialogues. To prove his point, the author analyzes the central passages of the middle and late dialogues that thematize the dialectic itself as a theoretical object (181-184). While I will not delve into the details of this analysis here, the author's fundamental idea is, on the one hand, to argue that the transcendent Forms constitute the focal point and the ontological foundation of the dialectic, and, on the other hand, to include as part of the dialectical investigation the attention to other objects (perceptible participating things, universals reached by induction, knowing souls) that contribute to the knowledge of the Forms (179). One can recognize the articulation of the dialectical methods (ii) by considering that each one of these has as its objective the definition of a Form, and each one of these contributes in a complementary way to this task. The emphasis on one method or another does not prevent (as will be seen in more detail in the essays that focus above all on methodical interaction) the methods from revealing a unitary conception of the dialectic that spans the different dialogues (185). In this way, Mesch is able to propose an interpretation that combines a systematic reading with the context-sensitive nature of the Platonic dialogues.

Lastly, I will discuss Vasilis Politis' essay: "Dialectic and the Ability to Orientate Ourselves: *Republic* V–VII". Here, the author analyzes the treatment of the dialectic in the central books of the *Republic*. This treatment, perhaps the most important of the Platonic dialogues, plays a fundamental role for understanding the articulation of the dialectic within the Platonic pedagogical and political project. The author's central thesis distinguishes, on the one hand, two characterizations of the dialectic –as knowledge of Forms and as a search for this knowledge–, and, on the other hand, how these originate from an ability in us, namely, the "power of the dialectic" (193-194). To demonstrate this thesis, Politis analyzes different passages related to dialectic. In particular, the description of dialectic in the Allegory of the Line (511b) and the later description from the last stage of the philosopher's curriculum (532b-d) present dialectical ability (*hē tou dialegesthai dunamis*) as the ability to know Forms, while in the Allegory of the Cave (515b-c and 518c-d) Socrates speaks of an "ability of the soul" (*dunamin en tē[i] psuchē[i]*, 518c4-5) or art of reorientation (*technē tēs periagōgēs*, 518d3–4) that is enabling the soul for the "dialectic" described in the other passages (198). Politis insists that this "ability" is one and the same, operating both in the preparatory or enabling phase and in the properly knowing phase of the "dialectical journey" (532b4) (201-202). The credibility of this thesis, however, is grounded on the supposition that this preparatory phase (that is, the mere search for knowledge before having truly grasped the essences or Forms of reality) is motivated by a "radical aporia". In other words, the ability that allows the soul to recognize the illusory character of our familiar relationship with the world cannot come from this same familiarity with the things of the world. And this is precisely what Socrates does with his interlocutors by leading them to aporia through his *ti estin*-questions (205-206). In this way, Politis helps to explain the continuity both between aporetic investigation and the positive knowledge of reality, as well as between the early or Socratic dialogues and Plato's mature work.

(ii) A second type of essay in the collection is that which seeks to prove, in a more detailed way, the transversality of the methods of *elenchus*, hypothesis, and collection and division throughout the Platonic dialogues, as well as the complementary nature of these methods. Within this effort, it is worth mentioning, first of all, the introduction written by the editors of the collection, which gives examples of *elenchus* (v.g. *Soph.* 231b2–8), the hypothetical method (*Prot.* 361b7–c, *Soph.* 237b–249d, *Prm.* 135e-136d) and collection and division (*Eutiph.* 12c10–d10, *Gorg.* 463e5–464b1, *Rep.* 453e1–454a8) in dialogues in which, from a developmental reading, these methods should not be present (6-10). Based on this transversality, the authors try to prove that (i) the differences in method do not depend so much on the period as they do the topic to be investigated, that (ii) none of these methods is identified as dialectic, but each one of them is a resource that only a true dialectician can use well, and that (iii) none of these resources on their own fully expends the resources that the dialectician must deploy to achieve his or her goal. Hayden W. Ausland ("Socrates' Dialectical Use of Hypothesis") defends, in particular, the use of the method of hypothesis (and, in part, that of collection and division) in the early or Socratic dialogues, extending the use of this resource even to the historical Socrates (if we consider the testimonies of Xenophon and Aristophanes in addition to the Platonic testimony) (26). Without entering into a debate concerning the hypothetical method's apparent dependency on the Forms (which is confirmed in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, but is questionable if we consider the *Meno*), the author tries to show that the different references to "supposing or hypothesizing" in Socratic conversations do not correspond, as Robinson argued, to a proto-scientific use of the hypothetical resource, but to a use of the hypothetical resource that is methodically conscious of the verification by its consequences of postulates with some level of common agreement (33; 36). Cristina Ionescu ("Elenchus and the Method of Division in the *Sophist*") contributes, for her part, to the complementary analysis of the methods, concentrating on the function of *elenchus* in the *Sophist*. Faced with interpretations that see here the hegemony of the collection and division method (like Stenzel) or an opposition between the Socratic method of *elenchus* presented in the sixth definition of the sophist (230b-e) and the division method of the Eleatic Stranger (like Ambuel), the author defends the presence and complementarity of both methods in the dialogue (116-117). To show this, Ionescu tries to prove in two stages that the *elenchus* method is not only present in the sixth definition of the first part of the *Sophist*, but that we can recognize it in practice, first, in the critique of dualist, monist, materialist and formalist doctrines (239c-249d) and, second, in the implicit testing of which greatest kinds can commune with one another (249d-259d) (121-122). In this way, Ionescu questions the idea that the *elenchus* method cannot be constructive nor be applied to Forms, and likewise that the division method cannot be applied at a pedestrian level, as Socrates, especially in the earlier dialogues, applies it when he tests his interlocutors (126-128). In the *Sophist* these methods support and enhance each other for the grasp of the greatest kinds.

(iii) Finally, it is worth considering the essays (most of the collection) that focus on broadening the understanding of dialectic. Jens Kristian Larsen and Peter D. Larsen highlight, for their part, the methodological function of "examples" in Platonic thought.

Although the use of analogy or examples is found throughout the entire Platonic corpus, it is only in the *Statesman* that we find an explicit thematization of this method. J. K. Larsen ("Using Examples in Philosophical Inquiry: Plato's *Statesman* 277d1–278e2 and 285c4–286b2") analyzes in detail two central passages of this dialogue in order to show that the use of examples (*paradeigmata*) is a fundamental part of the dialectical art (134). In a very convincing way, the author explains that examples are not only used for a pedagogical purpose –to illustrate, as in the learning of letters, what is most complex and unknown based on what is simplest and closest–, but that this resource also requires the exercising of two fundamental dialectical skills: recognition of similarities and recognition of differences between a known paradigm and the object of investigation (141). The dialectical ability is, in this sense, not so much a specific ability of philosophers as a universal ability that is stimulated even in the analogical illustration that can be found in the simplest pedagogy (144). In this way, the analogical resources used by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* not only resemble the practice of the Socratic dialogues of giving everyday examples, but also show the flexible nature of this procedure, through which the examples do not deplete the point of reference, but rather show one aspect or another of it (146-147). For his part, P. D. Larsen ("Examples in the *Meno*") also examines the Platonic recourse to examples, this time considering passage 73e3-76e4 of the *Meno*. In this case Socrates presents two definitions of shape and one of color as a way of illustrating to Meno how to define virtue. Faced with the most common interpretations (which either consider the first definition of shape to be false or do not take into account that it responds to a *ti estin*-question), Larsen aims to explain the change in definition (from "that which, alone among existing things, always follows color" to "limit of a solid") by a change of the *definiendum* (from visible shape to invisible shape) (156). This operation cannot be considered an eristic practice, the author thinks, since the objective of this excursus is not to arrive at a clear definition of figure and color, but rather to illustrate that the dialectical search for definitions must proceed from familiar and everyday things to later move towards more difficult and obscure concepts (159).

Catherine Rowett and Marilena Vlad examine, for their part, elements of the dialogues that tend to be considered anti-dialectical or, if not anti-dialectical, as nothing more than accessories to the dialectical exercise. On the one hand, Rowett ("Another Platonic Method: Four Genealogical Myths about Human Nature and Their Philosophical Contribution in Plato") proposes to show that the "genealogical myths" used by Plato (in particular, the myth of *Protagoras*, the origin of cities in *Laws* III, the myth of the *Statesman* and the myth of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*) fulfill a fundamental dialectical function as heuristic tools that may even constitute a form of proof (213). Genealogy myths make it possible to explore the relationship between nature and culture and, in particular, in the case of Plato –unlike the modern thinkers who also often use myths about the origin of civilization– they recognize the limitation of political activity and the incompleteness of the human condition (230). Vlad ("Dialectic as Philosophical Divination in Plato's *Phaedrus*"), for her part, maintains, based on the *Phaedrus*, that dialectic consists of a "philosophical divination", which means, ultimately, that it does not consist of a "purely rational human enterprise" (256). To defend this, the author turns to both the divine origin

of the dialectic (as madness: "*manikē*" and divination: *mantikē*), as well as the divine character of its object (the transcendent Forms) and the task of the dialectician as that of an "interpreter of a divinely inspired message" (257). Turning the focus to the "inspired" character of dialectic not only complements the properly scientific task of the philosopher, but also reveals the limits of this task.

Platonic dialectic tends to be interpreted, particularly in the middle and late dialogues, as a technical or scientific capacity exercised exclusively by philosophers. Vivil Valvik Haraldsen ("Dialectic as a Paradigm in the *Republic*: On the Role of Reason in the Just Life") challenges this interpretation, arguing that in the *Republic* the "just person" is not one who satisfies the scientific curriculum of books VI and VII, but one who exercises his or her rational part (*logistikon*) (92) without necessarily leading the characteristic life of a philosopher. With this, the author not only questions the interpretations that view Platonic ethics as elitist (only philosopher kings satisfy the initial question of the *Republic* regarding the just person), but also those that establish a two-level understanding of virtue, according to whether the habituation of character is or is not accompanied by a dialectical foundation (94). Haralsen proposes, instead, that we distinguish between two senses in which this same dialectical or philosophical ability can be exercised (in this her proposal bears similarities to Politis' thesis) (100, 109). In a first sense, the dialectical or philosophical ability consists of an attitude and a choice of a way of life oriented towards the search for truth. This "existential" sense of philosophy is distinguished from the stricter and more intellectually demanding sense in which a philosopher is one who practices dialectical science (111). The "just person" is, then, universally speaking, the one who leads his or her life "philosophically", a condition that could be satisfied by both philosophers and non-philosophers.

Lastly, I turn to the essays by Emily A. Austin, Pauline Sabrier, and Justin Vlasits. Although it is more difficult to classify these essays in the collection's overall endeavor to expand and critique the developmental reading of Platonic dialectic, it is possible to find in them a unitarian vision of method in Plato. Austin ("The Dialectician and the Statesman in Plato's *Euthydemus*") defends, first, the possibility of resolving the aporia of the second protreptic of the *Euthydemus* (289b-292e) if attention is paid to the introduction of the idea of the Beautiful in the third eristic part of this dialogue (52). The aporia, in particular, consists in showing that it is impossible for a ruler to be capable of producing a genuine benefit for his or her subjects. However, the author suggests, if the proper object of the ruler's knowledge (that is, the Beautiful) is determined and it is accepted that the wise person and the statesman can be the same person, the aporia can be resolved (62). The eristic section of the dialogue provides elements to justify these two theses and, therefore, all the pieces to reconstruct the doctrine of the philosopher kings of the *Republic* would be found in the *Euthydemus*. Sabrier's essay ("Plato's Method of Enquiry in the *Sophist*: The Relation Between the Question 'What is Being?' and the Question 'What is There?'") tries to clarify, for its part, what kind of question the fundamental question of the investigation about being in the *Sophist* is (242c-259d). The author challenges the influential reading that recognizes here the primacy of the question 'what is there' over the question 'what is being' (233). To show this, Sabrier first analyzes the Eleatic

Stranger's critique of the dualists (242c6). Here, one can recognize that their error lies precisely in thinking about the question 'what is there' (hot and cold) without methodically and ontologically assuming the question of 'what is being' (236). The indistinction (or simply identification) of both questions is overcome when we reach the end of the critical discussion (249d3-4): Theaetetus and the Stranger agree here that, although all things are either in motion or at rest, being is "something third" other than motion or rest (237-238). According to the author, the famous and controversial passage 253b9-e2 can be interpreted, in the light of these passages, not as the coining of a new method, but as a description of the investigation process as a whole. In short, in both the priority of the question about being (*ti estin*-question) and in the aforementioned procedure of dialogical clarification, Sabrier recognizes not so much a methodological innovation of the *Sophist* as a continuity with the dialectical procedure that we find in other dialogues (243). Finally, Vlasits ("Plato on the Varieties of Knowledge") defends the unity of the treatment of dialectic in the *Philebus* against the interpretations that consider the investigation method called a "gift of the gods" (16c-17c) to be different from the dialectic that appears as the "purest kind of knowledge" in the division of knowledge that we find towards the end of the dialogue (55c-59c) (264). The author's main strategy is to distinguish in the division between production as a constitutive task of an art and the education or teaching of that art (275). This distinction would make it possible to recognize both the exhaustive nature of this division, which is one of the conditions of the "divine method", as well as the presence of this double nature (productive and educational) in the divine method itself (277). In order to justify, ultimately, the breadth of the divine method versus the strict character of the pure dialectic that we find in the division of knowledge, Vlasits proposes distinguishing two functions of dialectic: first, as a universal methodology that is the paradigm of all knowledge and, second, as a science that deals exclusively with unchanging entities (278).

4.

As I have attempted to show, *New Perspectives on Platonic Dialectic: A Philosophy of Inquiry* presents in its different essays a broad and open conception of Platonic dialectic, according to which the different methods of *elenchus*, hypothesis, and collection and division complement each other, and where the experience of a practical, universal and daily search for truth is in continuity with a strictly philosophical investigation. The Platonic dialectic reveals itself, thus, in effect, as a "philosophy of inquiry", which is founded on the human orientation towards understanding the essence of things and which is free from a strict methodical fixation. An essay collection of these characteristics seems to me a valuable contribution to Platonic scholarship and an important challenge to the hegemony of the developmental reading in debates on Platonic methodology.

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ENDNOTES

1 Cf. Lutoslawski (1897), Ritter (1923), Brandwood (1976). More recently, cf. Kahn (2002).

2 These works do not, however, have the same focus: while Stenzel's work defined the method of collection and hypothesis as a method characteristic of the late dialogues, Robinson's book looks at the methodical delimiting of the early and middle dialogues by the corresponding use of the methods of refutation and hypothesis. Cf. Stenzel (1917) and Robinson (1953).