Division and its Relation to Dialectic and Ontology in Plato

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The formal divisional exercises which we meet above all in the Sophist may strike the reader as tedious. Yet it is usually said that Plato lays great store by Division as a method of philosophy, one, moreover, to which he gives the title of ‘dialectic’ and which reveals the real structure of Ideas.

I wish to discuss how far the method is to be identified with dialectic, what relation, if any, it bears to Plato’s ontology, and what Plato hopes for from it. I shall be mainly concerned with Phaedrus, Sophist and Statesman, having discussed the Philebus on a previous occasion (Phronesis 5,1 [1960], 39-44).

1. How far is Division to be identified with dialectic?

It is usual to see the first announcement of the method in the Phaedrus.1 One thing that may be noted at once is that the Phaedrus example is not dichotomic, not, at least, in the manner of the divisional schemes of the Sophist: the method briefly illustrated at Phaedrus 265 d ff. does not involve the successive rejection of one side of a single column of dichotomies. The Phaedrus example involves the division of the concept ‘irrationality’ into ‘human’ and ‘divine’; and each of these two subdivisions is pursued, at all events according to the theoretical summary of 266 a, until it yields its quarry.

Socrates declares himself (266 b 3) enamoured of the method, and a disciple of its successful practitioners. Furthermore, he says, he calls such persons, whether rightly or not, διαλεκτικοί. A moment later (c8) his respondent remarks (without strict accuracy) that in his opinion

1 265 d ff., resumed briefly at 277 b. D. J. Allan, it is true, has said: “I should be prepared to maintain that the reference to division and collection in the Phaedrus presupposes the fuller account of these processes in the Sophist...” (Philosophy XXVIII [1953] 365). But, as will be seen, no fuller account of collection and division is, in my opinion, given in the Sophist. Both dialogues give a certain amount of explanation of the method, the Phaedrus here at 265 d ff., the Sophist at 218 d ff. (the illustrative example of the Angler). Neither presupposes the other.

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Socrates was right to call the method διαλεκτικόν. Thus we have the position that Plato here in the Phaedrus is prepared to call both the method and its practitioners διαλεκτικοὶ.

What exactly are we to understand him to mean by this adjective here? Does he, for example, mean that he calls successful practitioners of the method ‘practitioners of dialectic’? and does he therefore equate the method with ‘dialectic’? The answer to these questions seems to be ‘no’: if Socrates is able to express doubt whether or not he is justified in calling the method’s successful users διαλεκτικοὶ, and if Phaedrus is able to express approval of the method’s being called διαλεκτικόν (and hence acknowledgement that the question admits of doubt), the method cannot itself be equated with διαλεκτική in Plato’s mind. Dialectic must be taken to have an independent meaning for Plato, over and above the method of Division.

In so far as Socrates’s doubt is seriously felt by him, it reflects, then, his realisation that he may be mistaken about the method’s dialectical nature, that is to say, about its being the best one for his purpose, that of enquiry into Ideas. At 266c8, where the method is called διαλεκτικόν, what Plato intends would seem to be ‘appropriate to philosophical discussion’. And if we are looking for a single adjective to cover the word as applied both to practitioners and method here, ‘philosophical’ is perhaps the best available. At all events, we cannot argue from the Phaedrus that dialectic and the method of Division are to be equated.

When we turn to the Sophist we find seven dichotomic divisions concerned with defining the sophist, and a section (253d-e) which Cornford declares to be a résumé of Collection and Division. Perhaps the first question which we should ask is whether we are meant by Plato to consider Division as outlined in the Phaedrus and as practised in the Sophist to be essentially one and the same method. Plato does not tell us explicitly, but, in view of the similar terminology employed in the two dialogues, it would be implausible to maintain that the two methods are to be distinguished.

It looks, therefore, from this brief glance at the Phaedrus and the Sophist as though Cornford might be right when he says: “The method of Division may be used for two distinct objects: (1) the classification of all the species falling under a genus in a complete table, or (2) the

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1 Cf. Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedrus, p. 134, n. 4.
3 Plato’s Theory of Knowledge, p. 264 init.