Dialectics in antiquity

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It is well known that Aristotle ascribes the invention of dialectics to Zeno, and Plato seems to indirectly agree with this when, in passages from the *Parmenides*, he tells of a very young Socrates (roughly 17 years old) who, around 450 B.C., meets Parmenides (65 years old) and his disciple Zeno (40 years old) who had travelled to Athens for the Panathenaic celebrations held that year; on this occasion, according to the account, Socrates first encountered dialectics. With good approximation, therefore, it is possible that it originated from the Eleatic school.

In turn, Socrates – probably together with other philosophers, including some so-called "sophists" of the first generation – disseminated the practice of dialectics in Athens, a city that, starting at least in the 5th century B.C., was the theatre for several centuries of its evolution and consolidation as an activity with both disciplinary and heuristic-exploratory purposes and as cultural entertainment for the wealthier classes, for a period of time that was in any case limited, going through political and social events of epochal proportions. Between the 2nd and 3rd century A.D., e.g., Alexander of Aphrodisias referred to dialectics as an activity «peculiar to the ancient philosophers, no longer in use» (Alex. *Top*. 27, 13).

In Athens, dialectics had to spread and take root extensively in the city's social and cultural system, while its epistemological frame became more structured and articulated, assuming a solid autonomy even with respect to philosophy itself, from which it somehow derived. The age of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle probably corresponds to the golden period of (ancient) dialectics, and their generational breadth covers almost two centuries of its development, which had to be followed by the confluence within the Hellenistic Schools (including Skepticism), with subsequent epistemological and procedural transformation and disappearance.

Parmenides and Zeno made use of dialectics for teaching (*Gymnasía*) and for refutation (*Élenchos*, including the *Reductio ad Absurdum* variant). In Socrates it became above all the examination of the sages of his time or presumed sages (*Peiras*). Plato conceived of it in general as the very fulfilment of philosophy, as dialogue in presence. Aristotle considered it a "genus" (*Ghenos* or *Genos*) of the *Dialégesthai* consisting of a "mode of research" that was autonomous and transversal with respect to every science, including philosophy, to which many species belonged: in addition to the 3-4 already mentioned, there was also the aporetic dialogue (*Aporetiká*), the "shared research" (*Dia-Sképtomai*, or *Dia-Sképsis*) – both species with a long tradition, also present in Plato's Socratic dialogues (*e.g.*, in the *Theaetetetus* and *Symposium* respectively) –, and probably other variants or subspecies. Common elements of all

these activities for Aristotle were essentially two: (i) reliance on the *Éndoxa* and (ii) the question-and-answer method (*Erôtêseis kai Apokrisesin*) (Volpone 2015, 2018).

"Shared research", subject to due historical and socio-cultural differences, is probably the species best approached in today's rediscovery of the dialogical orality proper to the so-called Community of Philosophical Inquiry (COPI), to be found in various "Community Practices of Philosophy" as they result in a range of modes and forms used in areas of our current society, including Education, Business, Entertainment and Self-care (Volpone 2022). In this case the tones were not "gladiators", or challengers, as in the *Élenchos*, as participants started from a problem (πρόβλημα) – *i.e.*, from a *theme* or a *path of research* –, without a goal necessarily established in advance, to follow the natural flow of the speech, or the intent of those present, and moving towards the in-depth study of some of its aspects, to reach a definition, or identify key concepts on which to reflect, try to comment and deliberate around episodes of life or otherwise, possibly drawing rules and lessons, suggestions, etc. This heuristic model resembles in some ways the multi-voiced dialogue of today's dialogic orality of the COI (Volpone 2024), which Cosentino defines as "polyphonic dialogue" (Cosentino 2021: 122-123).

The Community of Philosophical Inquiry as a polyphonic dialogue

Antonio Cosentino

The Socratic-Platonic *dialégesthai* is always an interaction of two people. This way of understanding the dialogue pattern has remained unchanged over time, right up to the present day. Why did this happen? Even though, as we all know, "*dia*" means "*between*" and not "*two*" (Böhm, 2004) The answer to this question must be sought not so much on the level of communication, but on that of the organisation of thought, the "*logos*" that, according to the meaning the ancient Greek philosophers attributed to the term, holds language and thought together.

In the *Theaetetetus* (189-e), Plato defines thought as «a statement that the soul makes to itself about whatever it is considering» and adds that «when the soul is thinking of anything it simply converses with itself, asking itself questions, and answering, and affirming or denying» (Plato, 1906:189e). The Socratic dialogue fits into this paradigm. In its typical form it looks like an examination rather than an interchange. In fact, Socrates, even in Plato's *elenctic* works, dialogues very little: it is always himself who asks the questions to which his interlocutor is called upon to answer.

I believe that this practice faithfully reflects the meaning of Plato's words in the *Theaetetetus*. Basically, it seems that Socrates' endeavour is to arouse and guide that "inner conversation" of the interlocutor's soul with itself, without, however, taking part in it. This is his expertise as an ironic midwife.

A polyphony of discourse must have different premises from those of the Socratic-Platonic dialogue, premises that have to do with the way of conceiving knowledge and its relation to language and communication. The principle of "*dialogicity*" crossed a broad movement of thought during the 20th century that made dialogue not only a communicative paradigm, but also an ontological and ethical one (Gadamer, Buber). In particular, the sense we give to *polyphonicity* can be traced back to Michail Bakhtin's poetics of dialogism. Since, in order to communicate effectively, one cannot all speak at the same time as in a choir, then a dialogue can be considered polyphonic to the extent that it approaches the architecture of a story by Dostoevsky, the author who, together with Dante Alighieri - according to Bakhtin - interpreted the poetics of dialogism in an exemplary manner, leaving great freedom of interaction between the characters and between the characters and the author himself.

The COI, insofar as it assumes the form of polyphonic dialogical communication, clearly distances itself from the Greek dialectics. Of which, however, it retains two essential features: 1) the co-presence of the dialoguers in a shared context and 2) orality face-to-face as the prevailing communicative medium. There is, in this case, no Socrates who asks the starting question and, moreover, the questions do not necessarily take the form of "*Ti estì*". The figure who corresponds to Socrates in the

COI is, no doubt, a gadfly; but he is also a facilitator of the inquiry processes and a guarantee of its philosophical value.

The so-called philosopher-facilitator, insofar in philosophical practice is confronted mostly with voices of common sense (as also Socrates did), pursues the goal of shaking unexamined certainties, of giving birth to a critical and constructive confrontation between different *doxai* (Cosentino, 2021a).

Polyphonic dialogue, as we understand it, is not a widespread and spontaneous social practice, like conversation. The work of the philosopher-facilitator and gadfly is essential for a community of practice and conversation to become a community of inquiry in philosophical style.

To initiate the heuristic dialogue, it is necessary to start from the showcase of opinions, but not to stop at the exhibition of everyone's beliefs and knowledges. The COI must move towards unexplored landscapes, towards contents that have not yet been thought through. Dialogue is to be considered a common (polyphonic) construction in the same way as a collective drawing or the group invention of a story. If the dialogue is going on in this way, then what each person says takes shape during the dialogue itself: it is influenced by what has been said before and, at the same time, by a foreshadowing of future developments.

It is clear that, in order to realise this move, a gesture of decentralisation is needed, a distancing from the subjectivity as a necessary condition to inaugurate an experience of exposure, which does not mean simply showing oneself to others or endangering a position. It is not, in fact, to expose oneself to each other in competitive terms, but to be exposed to a public space (*agorà*), to think and act as an individual which offers itself in a public arena, reconstituting itself, from time to time, as a knot in a web in which it is the reticular dynamic that matters most.

It is only when one no longer feels the danger that personal identity may be threatened, that one opens the way to distance oneself from personal beliefs, enough to accept the idea that these are just particular points of arrival of cognitive pathways and life histories, of belonging to other communities.

When the COI begins to think as a crew about the not-yet-thought, starting from a (even only provisional) suspension of the personal beliefs, then the inquiry can be directed towards the "rock" of tacit assumptions, implicit premises and certainties based on custom that constitute common sense (Cosentino, 2021).

Only then the ways of fixing belief that are based on tenacity, on the authority of a dogma, or of some transcendent entity can be critically faced and then, eventually, be discarded (Peirce, 1931-1935).

Dialogue, entirely reconstructed in its semantics, syntax and pragmatics, is expected to be a positive-sum game. In other words, in this "win-win" scenario no one wins at someone else's expense. This means, that the pre-eminence of the "I" is replaced by

that of the "We". Inside the COI, there is no competition between individuals, there is no clash for power or jostling for visibility. We win or lose together.

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