

Plato's Language of Dialogue as Topos of Human Existence

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Résumé : La philosophie de Platon et son langage dépassent, grâce à la traduction et aux commentaires, les frontières de toutes les langues et de tous les territoires. Dans la philosophie de Platon, le langage est représenté comme le moyen de connaissance, comme un élément indispensable du dialogue et du raisonnement, comme le moyen de l'auto-expression du philosophe même. Il est à noter que les concepts et les notions, qu'Aristote puis les néo-platoniciens ont déterminés comme les termes essentiels de la philosophie de Platon, dans ses dialogues, ont des connotations tout à fait différentes. Cette diversité terminologique permet de comprendre la doctrine de Platon de diverses manières. Dans ses dialogues, il expose un enseignement systématisé et bien construit que les lecteurs reçoivent sous forme d'images artistiques. Il est inconcevable que Platon pût ne pas être complètement conscient de sa philosophie et qu'il ne fût pas capable de l'exposer sous forme d'un système.

Chez Platon, la langue est représentée comme un phénomène unique, qui comprend à la fois la vérité et la clé de compréhension de cette vérité, mais sa compréhension n'est possible que par la révélation du mot. Pour traduire et commenter la doctrine de Platon, il est très important d'observer a) son originalité et son unité, b) son style et sa forme dialogique et c) son dialogue/sa conversation avec son lecteur contemporain.

Mots clés: Platon; dialogue; langue/langage; théorie de la connaissance

Abstract: Due to the language of Plato's philosophy in translations and comments, his philosophy, as an all-encompassing vision in itself, goes well beyond language and physical boundaries. The language in the philosophy of Plato is presented as a tool for understanding, a necessary element of dialogue and the means of self-expression for a philosopher. Notions that both Aristotle and Neo-Platonists defined as being key to Plato's work are used with various connotations. This kind of diversity of terms enables us to understand Plato's work in many different ways. In the dialogues, he puts forward the systematic and well-formed viewpoint which is presented to the reader by means of artistic characters. It is unconceivable that Plato had not fully understood his own philosophy and had been unable to formulate it in the form of a system.

The language in Plato's writings is presented as being a unique phenomenon combining the truth and the key for understanding this truth through the revelation of the word. In order to translate and comment on Plato's work, it is of utmost importance to maintain a) its uniqueness and unity, b) its style and dialogic form and c) its interaction with its reader.

Key words: Plato; language; dialogue; theory of knowledge



The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.¹ Profound idea can be read in this laconic sentence: Plato's language of philosophy as well as his philosophy as comprehensive conception, due to translation and comments, exceeds limitations of every language and territory.

Language in Plato's philosophy is represented as a tool of cognition, a necessary element of dialogue and philosophy and, lastly, as a self-reflecting mean of philosophy.

The natural theory on language origins derives from the Heraclitus' teachings. Neither the influence of Heraclitus nor the trace of his teachings in Plato's philosophy can be defined by merely copying his theories or doing superficial analysis of those theories. The impact of Heraclitus' teachings is obvious in all Plato's writings especially in those referring to the language as a means of reasoning, the language that is utilized by the author as a means of self-expression.

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1979, p. 39.

Despite the fact that Plato's teaching has been the foundation for many philosophical or theological schools, since antique times, it has been constantly changing and is still changing. According to scientists, reason of such diversity has been repeatedly indicated in literature – unlike other philosophers, Plato does not provide his teaching in a systemic way, and neither does he formulate exact terminology. Terms initially defined by Aristotle and later on by Neo-Platonists as basic notions of Plato's philosophy are used in his teaching with totally different meaning. Similar notions usually bear different meanings whereas similar events can be expressed via various terms¹. Such terminological variety makes for different interpretation of Plato's teaching. It is noteworthy that notions that were initially defined by Aristotle and later on by Neo-Platonists as main philosophical terms are used with different meanings in his dialogues. Similar notions often bear oppositional meanings whereas similar events can be expressed with various notions. This subjects Plato's teaching to various understandings. He formulates teaching in his dialogues that is systemized and current in its basis however it reaches the reader as metaphors. Surely it is no coincidence. It is hard to imagine that Plato was not completely aware of his philosophy and could not formulate it in a systematic way.

Translating and commenting Plato is a very hard task since it is crucial not to break a) the unity and uniqueness of his philosophy, b) his style and dialogic form of philosophy and c) the dialogue/conversation he has with contemporary readers.

Based upon the dialogue *Cratylus*, Nino Dolidze strives to describe the conceptual foundation that defines the language and some of the other philosophic aspects of this ancient Greek philosopher. In the end, he draws the following conclusion:

Plato's language of beliefs are revealed in his dialogues not only at expense of philosophical argumentation and discussion but also via its structural system and stylistic mechanisms. We believe that Plato does not agree with either theory of origins of language. According to Plato, language is a unique phenomenon that

¹ Nino Dolidze, *Main Linguistic Tendencies in Antique Philosophy and Plato's "Cratylus"*, Tbilisi, Logos, 1998, p. 98.

entails truth and cognition mean of this truth. However, it can be cognized not directly but rather via exploration of complex inner character, linguistic game, vague metaphoric faces, unity of opposing events and last but not least, with maintenance of individuality¹.

Analyzing Plato's philosophy both in terms of external forms as well as content is of crucial importance. Philosophical cognition of a language by this Athenian thinker and thus complete dialogic structure, model of combining and co-building verb and noun, recognition of existence of true and false words and sentences, is highly recognized in contemporary philosophical circles. However, Plato's choice to write novels in the form of dialogues is not confirmed by his texts. Therefore, the question has been constantly raised in the history of philosophy on why Plato wrote in the form of dialogues. There are different approaches in this regard. We will discuss several of them.

Dialogic form of Plato's philosophy takes its origins from Socrates. Socrates used to interact with youth who were visiting Plato at Academia. Socrates used to teach youth how to reach an essence of subjects with short questions and answers, and by doing so he embarked them on the course of kindness. According to Michael Bordt, by giving dialogic form to his philosophy, Plato showed gratitude to his teacher, Socrates².

Thomas Szlezak contradicts this approach and confirms his position with the following argument: «It is not a coincidence that in *Symposium* Socrates lags behind at Agathon's door "in order to think alone". Being a philosopher, a thinker does not necessarily mean having conversation with other³». (Translated from German)

The main characteristics of Plato's dialogue can be articulated as follows:

- a) The writings of Plato are a presentation of dialogues. We might come across long monologues in dialogues though;
- b) A dialogue takes place at a certain time and place. Characters of dialogues are ordinary human beings;
- c) Each dialogue has its own *gestalt* that is being further developed during the course of speaking. At first, Socrates is one of the parties in the dialogue who is described

¹ Nino Dolidze, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

² Michael Bordt, *Platon*, Herder, Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1999, p. 51

³ Thomas A. Szlezak, *Platon lesen*, Frommann-holzboog, legenda 1, 1993, p. 29.

by the author individually. It should also be noted that even though the author also gives the descriptions of other characters, Socrates has a unique place in his earlier dialogues that is mostly expressed by his liking of the ideal world; in his later dialogues, initiators of the discourse might as well be other people;

- d) There are only two speakers in the dialogue. In some dialogues, a third character is oftentimes introduced as well, who in certain sections speaks to a single interlocutor. Three characters are never at the forefront of the dialogue. There are cases though in which the characters are imaginary and not real;
- e) The speakers do not conclude the dialogue. They discuss concrete issues, purposes and objectives. Each dialogue by Plato has its own niche where the key to the significant issue has been hidden¹.

The structure of Plato's dialogue, despite being extremely interesting, remains somewhat complex and intricate. It is interesting to note that the thread of narration is not interrupted, as if the story never ends. One story moves into another, the second story in the third, etc. As Gerhard Krüger indicates that this is a dialogue about ongoing dialogue («*Dialog über den zu erzählenden Dialog*»)².

In Plato's works, the dialogical form of reasoning is expressed by the sequence of sentences in which each sentence clarifies the previous one and gives a new meaning to the initial sentence. All these sentences make up the dialogical form of reasoning: «the latter is impossible without these sentences and it is also unfeasible to have sentences without the dialogical form of reasoning»³.

«Plato's linguistic thinking is perceived in Plato's teaching as a conversation of soul with itself. When thinking, it [the soul] talks to itself by asking a question and answering the latter – argues or rejects. The result of the conversation of the soul with itself is an imaginary sentence. However, this sentence is articulated with silence⁴». (Translated from German)

¹ Thomas A. Szlezak, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31.

² Gerhard Krüger, *Eros und Mythos bei Plato*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1978, p. 72.

³ Burkhard Mojsisch, «'Dialektik' und 'Dialog': Politeia, Theaitetos, Sophistes», dans *Platon, Seine Dialoge in der Sicht neuer Forschungen, heraus.* Theo Kobusch, Burkhard Mojsisch, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996, p. 168.

⁴ Platon, Theaitetos, *Theaitetos, Der Sophist, Der Staatsmann*, Band 6, Bearbeitet von Peter Staudacher, Griechischer Text von Auguste Dies, Deutsche Uebersetzung von Friedrich Schleiermacher, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990, 189 e 6-190 a 6.

It is worth noting that Plato perceives thinking as *logos* whereas the latter is considered as *dialegethai*. Dialogues similar to the dialogical form of reasoning in Plato's writings reveal five important categories (motion, stasis, identity, distinctiveness, and the present) and the relationship between their origins. «Hence the relationship of these important categories contributes to cognition – that is the soul speaking with itself¹».

Reasoning is different from the other categories by virtue of distinctiveness, but it is at the same time interrelated with them. Hence, the dialogical form of reasoning has established itself as the most significant category. The main categories present in the dialogue enable us to ponder over the meaning of ideas like love and kindness. Thinking in a similar fashion to dialogic thinking (*dialegetai*) is unification of ideas (including basic ideas), this is an act that means recollection of the forgotten, constantly, procedurally, since dialogic thinking cannot be defined with statically formed knowledge.

Hence, Plato could elaborate on the most important categories of his theory only within the bounds of dialogical form of reasoning. The latter would contribute to the birth of these categories and also establish itself as a dialogical form of reasoning in the process. Therefore, his vision with regard to the language was derived from the aforementioned perspective: through the association of ideal givens, i.e. the category *logos* has been created for us. This *logos* makes up the dialogical form of reasoning through its identity with cognition.

Plato's dialogues that show recognition as development of *logos* are the following: *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. In order to cognize the subject, I refer to *λεγειν*. Plato talks about sensual cognition in his previous dialogues where visual and auditory organs are of a great importance. However, when referring to cognition of essence of the subject, it can be initiated with sensation. The most important still remains sensual action. According to Plato, subject/object shows itself in *logos*. «Therefore, form of cognition is realized in thinking, and the nature of thinking is revealed in *λεγειν*».

¹ Platon, Sophistes, *Theaitetos*, *Der Sophist*, *Der Staatsmann*, Band 6, von Peter Staudacher, Griechischer Text von Auguste Dies, Deutsche Uebersetzung von Friedrich Schleiermacher, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990, 264 a-b.

Every sensual cognition is realized with non-sensual. In particular, with cognition of logos by the soul¹»

The second and third parts of *Theaetetus* refer to the nature of the logos. Here one can read the following – thinking is conversation – λεγειν. Plato's philosophy does not endeavor to free the thinking from language but rather develop the former by the latter. The thesis regarding “thinking is a conversation” is a basis of Plato's cognition theory.

This is how the dialogical form of Plato's writings turned into the central issue of his philosophy – cognition. What is cognition and how is it practiced? «When reasoning a person does nothing but ask a question and then answer it himself²».

Reasoning is a conversation, it is an uttered sentence told not to the other and aloud but rather in a low voice and to oneself. It is not a monologue but an active dialogue, statements and negations, questions and answers, an exchange of *logoi*. «As the result of this conversation we form a sentence without the voice commonly referred to as λογος [logos] by Plato³».

What does Plato create with his dialogical form? Expression with dialogic form means understanding of the crucial method of Plato's philosophy, such as dialectics. Discussing origins of dialectics in regard to Plato's novels will be very interesting. Plato's philosophy was developed from Socrates' dialogues (διαλογος), out of Socrates conversation (διαλεγεσθαι) as an independent dialectics, as dialectic method of knowledge and cognition that is directed towards its object, its essential being and its predecessor, towards the idea of kindness.

Socrates' conversation is characterised by the following methodological and substantial aspects:

1. Socrates tries to convince his opponent and not to win him/her over. Conversation ends in aporia;
2. Socrates' style is to talk shortly and laconically;

¹ Rudolf Rehn, *Der Logos der Seele, Wesen, Aufgabe und Bedeutung der Sprache in der platonischen Philosophie*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1982, p. 64.

² Rudolf Rehn, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Socrates conceptually contradicts his own theory in his conversations. That was happening when he endeavored to convince interlocutors that they did not know anything. Moreover, he used to state that he knows that he does not know everything. «'Socrates as a man who knows nothing' should try his best to familiarize the co-speakers with the instance of knowledge. The co-speakers knew nothing about knowledge as such, but unlike Socrates believed that they possessed it¹».

Teachings of Plato about knowledge is presented as anamnesis i.e. the theory of remembrance, implies that there is a difference between the knowledge about a specific issue and knowledge about existence. Perception, imagination and mathematical reasoning are unable to comprehend existence, while the knowledge about existence enables sciences and subjects to exist. How is it possible to perceive existence itself (episteme)? Plato's answer to the question is straightforward: the knowledge of existence can be attained through dialectical thinking, which transcends itself and aspires towards its origin in order to put forward the idea of kindness through existence and knowledge. It perceives the idea of kindness as its own principle. By virtue of the idea of kindness, it is possible to exercise knowledge based on primary perception, imagination and cognition. Knowledge as dialectical knowledge refers not only to existence, but also to knowledge about one's own self. To be more precise, it is a way of cognition achieved through the existence and by virtue of self that aspires towards its own content.

It should be noted that in the dialogue between Socrates and his students, politicians, artists and scientists, nothing was left of this kind of dialectics. His dialogue is made up of short questions and answers which refer to concrete issues and strive to gain concrete knowledge. The necessity of posing this thesis is created by the following factors. At first it should be mentioned that if the dialectical knowledge is relevant to the existence, then it should also be different from the existence. This distinctiveness in Plato's writings is never verbalized.

¹ Burkhard Mojsisch, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

Existence as such is never identical to itself (the latter characteristic of eternity) in Plato's works. It can be deducted that motion is a way of getting away from existence since the eternal existence which is also identical to itself should not be in need of motion. But after existence has been perceived, motion can also be known. Existence cannot be devoid of motion even though it is motionless. Motion like the existence and stasis is also an idea in the philosophy of the ancient Greek philosopher.

Due to the fact that existence is always being identical to itself, we face the necessity of speaking about the idea of identity as well. We may tolerate the idea of existence as being identical to itself only through the perception of identity as being an idea.

In his later works, Plato strives to establish five various categories as ideas. These categories are as follows: immobility, motion, present, identity and distinctiveness. To be more precise, this means that Plato would like to show us that these categories are different from one another. If this is true, then in the theory regarding the five most important categories/ideas, distinctiveness stands out as being the most significant idea. Different is always different from the different. Hence, each idea is both different from the others and also related to them. Each idea based on the idea of distinctiveness is both different from all other ideas and also connected to them (the rest of ideas) by means of necessity. We should also not forget that in Plato's writings all ideas are identical to themselves.

External dialogue of Socrates turned into internal dialogues of the soul with itself since development of an idea is possible through the dialogue, through the exchange of sentences, and *logoi*. The theory of the soul speaking with itself is articulated in dialogues *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*.

In *Theaetetus*, when speaking about the essence of knowledge, Plato poses questions about cognition. Knowledge in Plato's works is not reduced to perception even though the perception is essential to the knowledge. The soul, as an idea, combines different and various perceptions in itself. When reasoning, The soul utilizes perceptions as tools for the purpose of perceiving things that are worth being perceived. Perceptions possessing different and various content are then integrated and made whole in terms of content.

This means that the soul, along with the function of perception, took on the function of reasoning as well. The function of reasoning, in Plato's works, is not the trait of the soul but rather the possibility that enables the soul to investigate and to think while some things are deciphered through the body's abilities. Hence, this is the capacity for the human being to perceive and think over transcended contents of perception and turn them into immanent ones through the abilities of the soul and body. The issue refers to essential existence and non-existence, identity and distinctiveness, one and many, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, good and bad.

Knowledge is never gained through perception and sheer thinking; multiple cognitive contents are needed in order for them to relate to single impression of perception. We might as well talk about the usefulness of knowledge after that.

The most important cognitive contents, often referred to as different identities, are as follows: essential existence and non-existence, identity and distinctiveness, one and many, motion and immobility.

To Plato, knowledge is not merely a perception, an impression or a cognition. Knowledge – true knowledge is presented as the dialogue that goes back to its own content.

It should not be argued today that, in *Sophist*, Plato further elaborates on the issues put forward in *Theaetetus*. The dialectics, in *Sophist*, is presented through dialogue. The dialogue as cognition, as the soul's internal conversation with itself, is a task to follow the process of developing and cross-referring important categories and ideas, to show each category as being identical to oneself and at the same time connected to each other by means of being different from one another.

The main purpose of Platonic dialogical thinking is to prove that the non-existent exists. The Athenian philosopher backs up the argument by discussing the most important categories. As for the arguments they are of two types: at first, the difference between the categories is shown and then through the example of motion, the process of necessary interrelation between the categories is presented.

According to Plato, the different, often associated with the non-existent, is not opposed to the non-existent but rather dissimilar to the existent. Nothing can be said about an absolute non-existent. But as it is different from the existent, it also refers to the existent as non-existent. One can draw the following conclusion based on what we just said: existence is the guarantee that non-existence exists and is closely linked to existence. Hence, if the different is nothing but different from the different, self-identity is to point at the other. If this is right, then one should not be surprised to discover that motion and immobility are not completely detached from each other; they are merely different and hence related to each other. Therefore, motion and immobility, despite being different, are never completely disconnected from each other.

Like each and every category being different from the rest of categories and, at the same time, is related to them, similarly dialogical form of reasoning, though being different from the other categories, is still associated with these other categories. Dialogical form of reasoning has been recognized as one of the most important categories. There is no philosophy without the dialogical form of reasoning. The latter developed alongside the other categories and, at the same time, enabled the other categories to develop. Reasoning is the process of understanding that is reached through asking and answering questions about content.

Based on the above-mentioned discussions, one can conclude that dialectics for Plato like the dialogical form of reasoning is a process and not knowledge born statically; motion and immobility are related to each other through their differences; existence and non-existence are also related to each other by being different. Dialogic reasoning and all other categories, although being different from one another, are still related. This can be explained by the fact that being different always implies relativity, to be more exact, it does not mean anything else but relativity.

According to Plato, the dialogical form of reasoning and imagination – and fantasy too, respectively, are essentially different from one another: the dialogical form of reasoning is used for cognition. If anything is to be understood, it should be learned through dialogical reasoning. One should also mention that reasoning implies difference but is no different from itself.

It is only different from other important categories, just as these categories are different from reasoning. If the dialogic reasoning was different from itself then nothing would be left of Plato's monological-dialogical reasoning – the soul's talking with itself – but the dialogue of the dialogical reasoning and nothing else.

While discussing Plato's dialogic thinking, the language theory represents the pattern by which problems concerning dialogic thinking can be explored and solved. Language is composed of sentences that can either independently or interdependently be discussed. As sentences are created with thinking, thinking is also formulated with sentences. Different sentences in dialogic thinking are still conceptually related to one another.

«The soul recognizes ideas whereas the latter acts in similar way in regard to the soul, i.e. ideas are characterized with passivity whereas the soul is active¹». This active soul cognizes ideas or families with short questions and answers. It is that philosophic soul whose activity is revealed in directing conceptual process. Characteristic of soul is cognition.

«Dialogue that is constituted with conversation by the thinking soul is one of the crucial ideas or families along with immovability, mobility, being, similarity and difference. These families, as it is developed argumentatively by Plato, differ from one another, but in the same time they entail and are correlated with one another. It is clear that dialectics of ideas is complex but argumentative²».

Marsilio Ficino's Love Theory represents a certain interpretation of Plato's «Symposium» as well as comments on speeches made by various well-known citizens. Ficino's dialogue is represented in certain imitational form. In addition to that, he suggested the most successful interpretation of Plato's «Symposium». It should be noted that Ficino's comments that move along with Plato's text is a global interpretation of philosophy. Ficino's comments are absorbed with discussions of Neo-Platonists and Platonists of antique

¹ André de Muralt, « De la participation dans le *Sophiste* de Platon », *Studia Philosophia*, 17, 1957, p. 105.

² *Ibid.*

times, in particular, by the ideas of Plato and Pericles, Saint Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite. Ficino is tasked with a great mission by translating and commenting Plato's *Symposium*. On the basis of his inheritance of Orthodox and Pagan Platonism, he has to rediscover and develop a thesis about absolute harmony of Plato's philosophy. The mentioned thesis about absolute harmony which by Ficino was analyzed in the perspective of rich Latin traditions and Byzantine philosophical experience can ultimately be expressed by the statement that Platonism along with Christianity is a universal philosophy.

Surprisingly, Ficino manage to do it. By transferring Greek and Platonic language into Latin notions and expressions, he exquisitely and argumentatively articulated the main idea of Plato's philosophy: Dialogue of the soul with itself. The main element of the dialogue is love. In Plato's teaching, this is love of logos, philosophy, whereas according to Ficino, human has to have love towards God foremost. One who will be detached from God would not be a true person since he or she will move away from the idea and the form. Love makes a human soul closer to the idea and the form. United with our own ideas, we are creatures of full value. We will be able to see God through subjects. Love of subjects will allow us to see that everything is in God. We will get to the universal truth by walking on this road – by loving God, we have loved ourselves:

Cumque hic discerpti simus et mutilati, idee tunc nostre amando coniuncti, integri homines evademus, ut deum primo in rebus coluisse videamur, quo res deinde in deo colamus, resque in deo ideo venerari, ut nos ipsos in eo pre ceteris amplectamur, et amando deum, nos ipsos videamur amasse¹.

¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Über die Liebe oder Platons Gastmahl*, Lateinisch-deutsch, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 2004, p. 300.

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