

Gendlin, E.T. (1966). *Plato's dialectic*. Unpublished manuscript (15 pp.). From http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2231.html

[Page 1]

Plato's Dialectic

Eugene T. Gendlin, Ph.D.

Dialectic is the name Plato gives to his method, to the highest form of thought. In dialectic one examines one's assumptions, one's basic concepts, and one arrives at better assumptions and concepts.

It is perfectly possible, for Plato, that one would not, for the moment, examine one's concepts. One might simply be using them, keeping them static and working down from them, for example, in straight-forward mathematics.

Of course, ultimately, it isn't too satisfying always simply to use, and never to examine and improve, one's concepts. Without philosophy, without this examining and improving of basic definitions, one is simply trapped in whatever concepts one has up to a given time. Science, without philosophy, would be pretty blind.

What must I add to this axiomatic deducing from assumed definitions, to get "dialectic"?

I will organize what I have to say under the following headings:

I must add:

Our activity of concept formation or thinking;

Our pre-conceptual knowledge, our knowing already what we seek to define – knowing it sufficiently at least to recognize when something obviously isn't what we seek.

Contradiction and paradox....

Our wanting, needing, lacking, or seeking of choice, especially what I shall call "forced choice," in the face of what is presented. By forced choice I mean that, if what we have wished is shown to result in consequences we do not wish,

[Page 2]

then we are forced to choose against it, despite having thought we wished it.

These four facets of dialectic: our activity of concept formation, our pre-conceptual knowing, contradiction, and forced choice, are inter-related facets, of course. After I discuss each one, I will have put them together, because they can't be discussed separately.

In dialectic you will regularly find a definition (or answer to a question) set up, then implications drawn out from it until the definition obviously contradicts itself, then a new definition is set up, again its implications lead to contradiction; a new one is again set up, and so on. It is important to see the organization of the argument as such a series of attempted answers to the same question, each of which is drawn out to implications, thereby leads to contradict itself, hence is broken, so that a new one is set up and the whole business begins again.

Many people are bothered by Plato's way of arguing from an analogy with some other area of experience -- but this won't be troubling if we keep in mind that all concepts (just look at the word "concept" for instance) are really metaphoric. (Just look at the

etymology of most of our words.) And if you keep in mind that in dialectic we are building new concepts – hence are going to formulate what we discuss with some different pattern or model – naturally we go to some new area to get a new pattern. But that sounds as if you could use just any pattern at all. If you look closely, you'll always find that the other area of experience is like the one we discuss in that respect in which one applies the model from there to here. For example, we don't merely liken the Sophist teaching pupils to the political leader teaching the city's people. In respect of just the analogy they are the same: the analogy concerns persuading people without concern for making them better, and then complaining afterwards because they are rotten enough not to reward one. It is better to knowingly use analogies in developing new concepts, i.e., new metaphors, than to stay trapped in the old ones. The old concepts are just as metaphoric but no longer sound metaphoric because they are so familiar

[Page 3]

that we no longer actively form the concept to get at something, but only just use it.

Philosophy always questions, examines, and reformulates concepts and models.

Dialectic is an activity of concept-formation. Since we are forming concepts, new ones discarding old ones, it is not strange that our concepts and definitions of words don't stand still.

It is a famous complaint about Plato that you cannot quote some formulation you find on one page, since on the next page, you'll discover he doesn't really mean it.

But, if you want for some reason to keep whatever concepts and definitions you have steady, to do some job with them, you can do that. But then you will be doing something like mathematics, not philosophy. You will be applying concepts, but not examining and forming concepts. One can apply concepts even without oneself having formed them. But that is not knowledge. One advantage of concept formation is that one then knows one's concepts not only as such, but as how they were made. One has gone the steps to form these concepts, and one can lead someone else over these steps. One knows in the sense of being able to teach. One has not only a right opinion to apply, but one knows the activity of development which has resulted in these concepts. One knows the way to them.

Thus we are adding to the axiomatic view of concepts an activity of forming them. I am not yet explaining how this activity works. I am only saying that if you think of a concept-forming activity, then there can be a distinction between knowledge and mere right opinion and knowledge will involve not only conclusions but the knowing how to develop the concepts, hence how to teach another person to develop them.

How does the activity work? It never starts with nothing. It always starts with some statement, it can be as silly as you like. One begins with some definition or other, and one draws out its implications. (So far that sounds like the

[Page 4]

axiomatic method I mentioned before.) The implications follow necessarily, logically from the definition. Fine – but how does that get us to better, less silly, newly formed concepts?

Now, if we can answer that, if we do show how we get from any silly definition you please to better and better new ones, then it is a great advantage to be able to start with any, however silly, beginning definition. After all, this is supposed to be a method of examining one's assumptions and concepts, so as to get to better ones. Hence this method had better work, when our starting definition is silly or wrong.

But, our starting definition can never be entirely silly – it must be what some real person actually thinks, if only for a moment. It must be an actual person – and this is why Plato writes dialogues between actual characters. The activity of dialectic

requires actual living human persons, it isn't just the concepts as such, whatever they imply, it's not an activity of the concepts, but an activity of the speakers and thinkers, of a person. Why must it be so? Because we begin not only with a definition, soon to be shown wrong, but also with a live human, who has some sense of what he is after, some experience of the world, and the power of agreeing or disagreeing.

When we draw out the implication of a concept, or a definition, we will always find that it leads to contradictions. To do this, we use examples, we apply the concept, but not simply to use it, rather to see what its implications are. We apply it in all sorts of situations and contexts the person already knows.

Whatever we attempted to define or answer, when we apply our definition it will turn out to have all sorts of difficulties; more than that, the definition turns out in the end to imply exactly the opposite of what we meant to define. If we tried to define "power," it will turn out that our definition has defined precisely weakness. If we tried to define X, exactly non-X will be seen to be involved in it.

[Page 5]

When we have drawn out implications (you can say that's what the activity of dialectic is: a drawing out of implications) we need to have a live person, someone who can say: "Well, this, which appears to follow from my definition, is obviously not what I wanted to define, but its opposite. So, in spite of my chagrin, I am forced to choose to discard my definition."

If we had only concepts, and no person except as grinder of that concept, there would be no way of recognizing that this, which follows from the concept, isn't what I wanted to define. For example, total inability to determine what one does, may follow from my definition of power, but if it follows necessarily, then it must be power. No matter how blatant the contradiction, the logic of the concept alone couldn't correct itself. What follows, follows. Only a person can say: This obviously isn't what I meant, or wanted to define. Anybody can see, i.e., any person can see, that this helplessness is not power – although it follows from the definition I set up for power. Hence my definition must be wrong,

I have now also discussed the three other elements of this activity called dialectic: the role of contradiction, the forced choice of our respondent, and his pre-defined knowledge, the fact that he meant to define something in the first place, he had some sense of this, whatever it was, which he wanted to define. This sense is not his concepts. We heard what they were – and now he himself says that these concepts are not what he meant or wanted to define. How can he tell? Obviously he "knew" what he wanted to define in some sense, and knew it better than just by his conceptualized definition. Thus he has a pre-conceptual or pre-defined knowledge of what he wants to define – and this knowledge is sufficient for him to be able to recognize that his definition doesn't define it (now that its contradictory implications have been drawn out for him to see).

As far as his pride of argument goes, he certainly may not want to agree to change his stand. He may hate to. But he can't help recognize that the implications contradict what he wanted, despite the fact that they follow with perfectly

[Page 6]

good tight logic from his very own definition. He discards the definition precisely because these implications do follow from it, but he recognizes that what the complications lead to is not what he wanted, meant, or knew. Obviously, it isn't his wrong definition, which can tell him that.

Therefore, it is important that no matter how silly our starting definition is, that it had to be the definition that some live person actually intended as a definition or conceptualization of something he knew and meant to define.

In the MENO Plato calls our using this pre-defined knowledge "reminiscence" – that is, he invents a myth to the effect that before birth we knew everything. At birth we forget it, and so the activity of thinking, and concept-formation, is really a remembering.

Now, a myth (in dialectic) is a perfectly serious statement, but of a peculiar sort: the real facts leading to the point are too many. When you try to think out one of Plato's myths, just put the words "It really is as though" in front of it, and then consider the whole statement as really true. Of course, the facts of the myth are obviously made up; Plato wants you to be in no doubt about that. So the facts of the myth are obviously made up facts, but the point which the myth makes is intended to be true and serious. By the formula I propose, I get: "It really is as though concept formation were a remembering."

In the MENO a slave boy who was known never to have been taught geometry, is being taught geometry by Socrates. It is a fairly ordinary teaching. As we said, teaching is leading another person through the steps of the activity of forming the concepts. Teaching isn't just telling conclusions, but leading a real person over the steps of concept formation, so that he himself actually forms the concepts. (If he himself doesn't form them, he won't know how they're formed, he won't really know, and we won't really have taught him. Thus, there is really no other way to teach, or to know.) Thus, in being taught an individual obtains the concepts from

[Page 7]

out of himself, as though he had only to remember them.

How does he form the concepts, even given that he is ably led? He is shown lines, and asked questions he has never heard before. He gives a false answer. He is then asked many more questions that draw out the implications of his false answer, until he himself can see its falsity and gives up the answer. Reminiscence, then, is precisely this process of setting up a definition or concept, drawing out its implications, and then recognizing that it was false, since one knows more than one's concepts and so is able to recognize.

Of course, the implications "drawn out" aren't physically "in" the definition as a string of words. The implications are in the situations when the concept is applied to them, in the lines and squares drawn before one. When one applies the concept, one should get this and that result among the lines – and that can then be directly seen as not the case. Implications of a definition are always drawn in a given application or situation. Thus in all dialectic one must see, or know (remember) what the situations are like, one must know it, in a pre-defined, but familiar way. One must apply the concepts and recognize what one gets, even though that is new.

The steps of logic follow necessarily, but they follow not in terms of the concept as a mere pattern, but in terms of the situations when they are conceptualized with that concept or defined with that definition. Thus every single step of the dialectic needs the actual person's assent, his "yes, I see," his "how could it be otherwise," or his "yes, by Jupiter."

So we see that this pre-conceptual knowledge is necessary at the start, to first come up with a definition at all, then at each step, and then at the end, to know and recognize that the implications are the opposite of what we meant to define and that the definition must be discarded.

Therefore, Plato says that one must (in a sense) know what one doesn't know

[Page 8]

yet. It is a paradox: You can't try to think what you don't know – and you won't learn anything by thinking what you already know. It's no use searching for something if you don't know you're looking for it.

Since we are involved in concept-formation, in changing our concepts – it is obvious that we have to use something in addition to our concepts.

You can see this from the paradox that learning must involve something which in a sense we know and in a sense we don't yet know. You can see from the paradox just in what sort of a way we do know or remember, and in what sense we don't know (we lack the definitions).

Now, my next point is to show how we are led to a better concept – so far I have only shown how we assent to each step of the drawing out, and then are forced to discard the now contradictory concept. Are we left with nothing at that juncture?

For dialectic a contradiction is something very positive, generative, guiding, and informative. It isn't just the demise of our definition, but the directive for the formation of our next and better one.

I tried to show you this, just now, when I explored the paradox about how you can't think what you don't know, and can't learn anything from what you already know. It sounds like a dead end, but really it directs us quite clearly to a better and more differentiated definition than that knowing is "having a concept," "an answer." You got it or you don't. The paradox directs us to a better definition, one of concept-formation, and one which leads us to notice something which, in a sense we know, and in a sense we don't know. What would that be? The MENO stops here, with a myth: it really is like remembering: We know it in that we can produce it under certain conditions, but we don't know it as such, now, before we formulate it.

But there is not only past experience as it was, and our concept as it was defined. By drawing out how it was defined, we let the contradictions indicate

[Page 9]

how we must further reformulate it newly.

Thus Plato chides those who want only to go by what they literally remember of how it always was, what sorts of things have followed upon what sorts of other things. Such predictions based on past experience use past experience only as it was then already cut up into its (unexamined) definitions. Dialectic also uses past experience and present looking, but it forms new concepts, new ways of cutting and identifying, selecting, and defining variables, guided by the consequences we draw out in the context of nature and life, as we apply the concepts we formulate.

Our pre-conceptual experience is anything but unordered. In using it, we are using the whole order of nature. Our experience went on in nature (let's include human society, situations and the whole world) as part of the organized living of a complex creature – and so our experience has whatever that order is. And that order exceeds, by very far, the little that we have ever told ourselves, or been told, in defined concepts.

But, not only is past experience within nature, our very activity of thinking, our dialectic, is an activity within the order of nature. We cannot make sense of just anything we please, just any old way we might please. Some chains of thought make sense and some don't. Consequences follow necessarily, whether we like how they do, or not. The process of concept-formation is anything but arbitrary, and in an argument especially we notice how it can go against our wishes.

Both what we think about, and the activity of defining, are controlled and guided and corrected by an order that we don't just set up or posit,

Nowadays, listening to some people, you might think that if we vary rewards on a teaching machine, we can teach any (however false) sequence of thoughts and definitions. Not at all. On the contrary, teaching machine people work harder than others, to differentiate each step so that the sequence will make sense. No machine

can teach a sequence that isn't a sequence, that doesn't make sense.

[Page 10]

Thinking, or making sense, has a very definite nature. You might manage to memorize a false sequence, if you really had to, but you couldn't force it to make sense, you couldn't produce each step from the foregoing so that it arises out of the foregoing (so that it is a concept-formation sequence), if it isn't.

Much false thinking is false because it isn't detailed enough to reveal what a right sequence might be.

The new and better definition is usually more differentiated, more detailed with more distinctions, than the earlier ones. The drawing out activity of dialectic is, in a sense, an activity of drawing the distinctions which the contradictions demand and direct. For example, we moved from "either you know the concept or you don't," to a further distinction: Something you in a sense know (without concepts), and in a sense not, i.e., not in concepts.

But another way of saying this "increasing differentiation" is to say that we relate whatever we are discussing to other things, thus drawing more and more things into the scope of our considerations: more situations to apply it to, more concerns relevant to it to look at, etc. Thus, this increasing differentiation is also an increasing and unifying thing, as more and more previously unrelated aspects of the world are brought into relation with our definition, each time leading to a reformulation of it. Thus our definition becomes more and more encompassing, as it becomes more differentiated and internal to itself.

From this point of view, perhaps I shouldn't have called dialectic a process of drawing out – as if all sorts of things were already "in" the poor definition, but a drawing in, as we draw more and more facets of the world into it, each leading to a differentiation.

Contradictions will occur for every definition, since we can always find some other aspect of the world, of situations, of how we might need to apply the definition, so that now, for this new aspect, the definition doesn't work, it contradicts itself and thereby directs us to a new differentiation which will

[Page 11]

make it able to fit also this case, also this new aspect which until now hadn't been brought into relation with it.

Thus, no matter how good a definition is, it always can be brought to contradict itself because we can always find some aspect of the whole world which, in some way, can be made to relate to it, but which it hadn't yet been prepared to encompass.

In this sense, too, you already know everything: not really, but in this sense of being capable of the recognition of the contradiction that will ensue, you are ready to recognize in all things, if we apply the definition, whether what we get is, or isn't what you meant to define.

Of course, it takes our still doing this – (as Socrates [Jowett] put it: "Nothing prevents you from remembering all things, if you desist not from your labors"). Only in the activity of concept-formation carried on, do you have this knowledge of all things.

But now, let us try to go all the way. Let us say we have related our definition to absolutely every single thing and aspect of everything. Our definition now includes all things related to it and in it to each other. It is now what you wanted, truly the thing you wanted.

The answer we seek may never yet have been invented at all, but its nature isn't indeterminate.

In dialectic there is no ultimate difference between the true and the good, facts and values, nature and law, ignorance and evil. I may think I want X, just as I think such and so is the definition of X. But, when I see what is involved in X, what its consequences are as we draw them in, I realize that X isn't what I want at all! And my definition of X is really a definition of not-X. It isn't the case that I change from wanting it to not wanting it. Before, already, when I thought I wanted it, I really didn't. I knew what I did want, and that I still want, but unfortunately that isn't what X is. X happens to be something I don't want and never wanted.

[Page 12]

But now, what exists which is what I really did want? It isn't X, so what is it? I may not know, precisely, and yet, I want it. I could recognize it if it turned up. And it is wantable, it's something a person might want, and not only before he knew what all is involved in it, but after he knows all its consequences, then too, he'd still want it. This is the "what I wanted" really – knowing all that's involved in it, I'd still want it.

But, we say, that, to know all that is involved in anything would be to know everything (as it relates to that, and in that, to each other).

Thus, everyone wants (and in a sense he knows that he wants) the good, i.e., that which people would still want when they know what it involves – and so everyone wants the good, meaning by that this ultimate completely differentiated and all-encompassing totality.

This guides our choices and is what we want and forces our agreement at every step – as we say, oh, if that's what is involved, I don't want it and never did....

Yet, this totality isn't known by us in concepts, all shaped out.

It was not legitimate, earlier, when I said "all things and all aspects," as if these were already cut up in a finite number of ways right now. Dialectic is concept formation; it is that very cutting up, as an activity we do within nature.

Dialectic is controlled by and within nature's order. This is an order which controls concept-formation. So it isn't itself concepts. Rather, it includes activity, pre-defined, experiential knowledge, wanting and choice, and it controls what leads even our best definitions to contradict themselves as more aspects of the world are drawn in.

Thus, when I want something, or want to know something, I want that which would be what I want, that which IS what I seek to know. Of course, I'll only get this or that, which under some circumstances will be exactly what I didn't want...but "what I want" includes whatever modifications in my definitions I

[Page 13]

would have to make, whatever additional differentiations and relationships I would have to discover, to make it possible. My wanting has all this for its object. Thus the aimed-at is the object of the dialectic, (the aimed-at not as defined this way or that, but in a way in which it would never turn out to be what I didn't at all want). This aimed-at we want controls our forced choices at every juncture of every discussion.

Philosophy is a loving of knowledge, and a loving is a lacking, a wanting. We could have emphasized the negative aspect of the paradox just as well. Instead of saying we are guided by what we (in a sense) know, I could have said we are guided by what we want, seek, i.e., don't yet have, i.e., lack. To say that my recognition of a problem guides me in thinking, is to say that the not "yet" had, the needed, guides even though we don't have it yet. We don't have it formulated yet, but it guides – the object we seek guides. No one may ever yet have defined it, it may be a brand new problem, still the answer which we lack guides. Dialectic, being concept formation, breaks the concepts it begins with, and is guided by the concepts it moves toward. It is guided from ahead of itself, from what we (in a sense) don't yet know and which

has perhaps never as yet been defined. A contradiction is such a lack, provided you realize that along with the lacking, broken, self-contradictory definition we still have our seeking, what we intended and wanted.

In dialectic there is no difference, basically, between practice and theory. If you know, you know how to form the concepts – which is the same as knowing how to form the thing (if not, then the concept is inadequate). You don't really know what justice is, if you can't produce it, teach it – not as a verbal definition, but so as to make your pupils just. In making something we may well meet many facets that our theory was blind to, but this only says our theory was inadequate. No one may ever before have made a good object of that kind, but from need and trouble alone we know what it must satisfy. Thus the practical needs and

[Page 14]

and lacks will guide to a knowing making, through however many steps of discovering new lacks. How we need it to be in practice controls also what respects of nature we will discover and have to formulate. Man, both as animal and as person, is, with all his practice and life situations, within nature, within this pre-defined but ordered whole. Choice doesn't come added on, after some useless monstrosity is made – choice provides the forced steps of discovery, controlled by what we love, lack and need, within the nature and world in which we want, love and need.

A new line of argument starts when a new character is drawn in, since we then have a different person, pre-defined knowledge and experience. Gorgias already knows that it isn't more rewarding to be a rotten person, but Calicles doesn't yet. Gorgias did want his activity to somehow include justice, to include its own aims, to have the power to determine its own aims, but Calicles thought he would be content without the power to determine aims, or to choose among various pleasures, or to direct his life, himself. Thus, a different respondent means a new line of argument (though it will build on the earlier).

The questions asked, and the whole line of argument will depend on whom we talk with, since it depends completely on what he really thinks, not just on what he says. He can be very cooperative or very recalcitrant, but no argument is the least bit interesting if it doesn't involve some live human's actual choices and pre-defined knowledge, where he is hung up really, what he thinks he is committed to really, since without that the possibility of critically examining and developing concepts drops out and only verbiage is left,

Thus dialectic is self-knowing, its knowledge is its own steps, how it develops its concepts. In contrast, a merely blind or rhetorical use of concepts we haven't made would be an activity that wouldn't know itself, wouldn't be able to say what it was. Such a rhetorical activity wouldn't know its own aim either.

[Page 15]

It would be using the concepts but it wouldn't know for what. It could be for anything since the choices are not examined any more than the concepts, but merely assumed. Furthermore, the choices are made separately and on different grounds than the concepts. Thus merely using concepts and conclusions cut off from how and why they are developed by persons, this cuts facts and values apart, letting one use the knowledge of facts for any values whatever. Such activity seems to have no objective of its own and no way of choosing one except arbitrarily.

Thus the problem of being able to use some knowledge or power so it can result in either good or evil for me is a contradiction resolved only if knowledge and questions of good and evil are being examined. Then they develop together, for the critical examination of concepts requires our forced choices and wanting, and vice versa. Of dialectic there can be no "wrong use."

Who, in all this, is the real judge or witness? It is you, the individual himself, but only

as implications are presented to him, i.e., only as he engages in examining and developing concepts. Thus he might fail to judge rightly because he still has much of that left to do, and only in the ongoing dialectic is there a standard.

The judges in courts, and the public generally, are even farther away as a group, from being a good standard.

How can we express this? The further along one has come on this dialectic path of examining one's meanings, the better one is and the more natural and personally desirable one's life is. But no live judges are unbiased or far enough along – even Socrates says he doesn't know, he only seeks knowledge, engages in dialectical activity.

It is really as though the value of our lives can be judged only by someone who is already at the total all-inclusive end, not someone alive, really as though what best expresses the value of our lives is what such all-knowing non-living judges would evaluate after we have finished living.

©Eugene T. Gendlin