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# Traveling with Socrates: Ways and Non-ways in the Phaedo and Protagoras

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*Introduction*

In this essay, I argue that Socratic or Platonic<sup>1</sup> dialectic is not a method that follows rigid structures as is suggested by for example the model of the *elenchus*.<sup>2</sup> Although the Greek *methodos* (*meta hodos*) refers to the established or public road (*hodos*), a road that is already there, I argue that unlike this traditional *methodos* Platonic dialectic is a method that is open; it does not develop through a specific plan. There is not a blueprint or a standard formula that is used by either Socrates or Plato. Encountering a dialogue therefore requires flexibility of the interlocutors, and most of all of the reader. In the following, I discuss the *Phaedo* and the *Protagoras*, two dialogues that do not follow the model of the *elenchus*. The method of the *Protagoras* might appear as a variation of the *elenchus*, but is in fact a radically different model: Socrates and Protagoras exchange positions. Their discussion evolves around the question which method to use in that very discussion. As I will argue, the exchange of positions that takes place during this dialogue is related to the change in method: the sophistic method of monologues and a method that involves dialogue, respectively. The other main dialogue discussed in this essay is the *Phaedo*, in which – if we want to use this term – a complete reversal of the model of the *elenchus* is at work. It is namely not Socrates who proves that his interlocutors’ definition of *x* is false; the interlocutors themselves show the limitations of their own theory. Instead of using the model of the *elenchus* I will provide an alternative terminology, with which dialectic can be described as what I call an “open” method. The Platonic corpus itself offers us

such an alternative terminology in metaphors that refer to labyrinths and navigation, metaphors that in the *Phaedo* and the *Protagoras* – as I will argue – symbolize the Platonic method.<sup>3</sup> Both *navigators* and philosophers deal with “things” that are not ready to hand (navigators with stars, the wind and the days of the year, the philosopher with the ideal forms) and both are dealing with these eternal truths within a world that is characterized by change or flux. In relating philosophy and navigation the guiding question will be: what exactly is the similarity between navigating through the sea, and navigating through a dialogue?

The metaphor of the *labyrinth* refers to difficulties in finding a way.<sup>4</sup> The labyrinth appears implicitly in the *Phaedo* in a reference to the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. As I argue, the labyrinth is a symbol for philosophical issues discussed in the dialogue. The architectural structure of the labyrinth is (re)constructed by different arguments and gestures made by the participants of the dialogue, as well as by the narrative structure. We, as readers of the Platonic dialogue, enter this labyrinth of ways and non-ways, through which we somehow have to find our way. In discussing this second metaphor I will provide a brief account of some of the arguments of the *Phaedo*, focusing upon the methodological proceedings. As I will argue, the construction and re-construction (through the reader) of a dialogue is similar to building a labyrinth. Likewise, finding a way through the arguments of a dialogue is comparable to finding a way through a labyrinth.

### *Finding a Method: From Sophistry to Socratic Dialectic in the Protagoras*

The *Protagoras* is one of the few Socratic dialogues dealing explicitly with method. Socrates’ discussion with the sophist Protagoras leads us, in the middle of the dialogue, into a crisis about which method is going to be used. Although this is the pinnacle of the discussion, the issue of method is already foreshadowed from the very beginning of the dialogue. Prior to the meeting

with Protagoras, Socrates warns Hippocrates, who wants to take classes with the famous sophist, against the dangers of sophistry and asks Hippocrates his famous “what” question: “about *what* does the sophist make one a clever speaker?”<sup>5</sup> This is a question Hippocrates cannot answer, and with which Socrates points to the heart of the problem: the sophist is not concerned with any issue in particular, but the sophist simply makes one a clever speaker. His technique or method, “the *how*” of his teachings is not different from *what* he teaches. The sophist is simply a persuader, a technician without a field of expertise. Accordingly, someone who is being taught by a sophist becomes a clever speaker, who can persuade others.

After Hippocrates and Socrates have met Protagoras, one of the first things Protagoras tells them is that he himself does “not conform to the method”<sup>6</sup> many other sophists make use of. Others often “disguise” their art (*tšcnh*) by making use of other arts – such as poetry, mystic rites, music or even athletics – as outer coverings. Protagoras does not cover the art of sophistry, since “the multitude, of course, perceive practically nothing, but merely echo this or that pronouncement of their leader.”<sup>7</sup> The great sophist is concerned here with the fact that most people simply repeat what their teacher tells them, without perceiving the art or technique (*techne*) that was used to get to such a pronouncement. To cover up the art of sophistry with other *technai* involves the danger of making this process even harder to perceive. Protagoras, instead, wants to make the method as transparent as possible. This “open method” is a civic science (*politik³an tšcnhn*)<sup>8</sup> with which he teaches virtue, or assists others in order to become good.

Socrates, on the other hand, does not think that it is possible to teach others to become good, and thus Protagoras has to defend his *techne*. He does so by giving a couple of long discourses, which – in the middle of the dialogue – makes Socrates say: “if someone addresses me at length I forget the subject on which he is talking.”<sup>9</sup> This remark about Socrates’ bad memory is the beginning of

a discussion on which method to use. Socrates questions Protagoras' description of his "open method" – his art without outer coverings. Socrates implicitly claims that Protagoras' sophistry is not transparent at all, since his speeches are so long that his audience simply forgets what he is even talking about. Protagoras replies by stating that if he would "argue simply in the way my opponent demanded, I should not be held superior to anyone nor would Protagoras have made a name among the Greeks."<sup>10</sup> The two face a real crisis here, in which Socrates even attempts to leave the scene. The intervention of Callias, Alcibiades, Critias, Prodicus and Hippias is needed to keep Socrates and Protagoras in dialogue, or rather to get them into a true Socratic dialogue. Alcibiades states the dilemma and the solution as follows: "if Protagoras confesses himself inferior to Socrates in argumentation [διαλεχθῆναι], Socrates has no more to ask: but if he challenges him, let him discuss [διαλεγέστω] by question and answer; not spinning out a lecture on each question – beating off the arguments, refusing to give a reason, and so dilating until most of his hearers have forgotten the point at issue."<sup>11</sup> Protagoras is here characterized as the person who gives long speeches and Socrates as the person who is good in argumentation. The transition to the Socratic method is then a transition to dialectic, or dialogue, a transition to question and answer.

The dialectical method is enforced in the second half of the dialogue in a discussion of "being" and "becoming." In interpreting a poem of Simonides, one of Socrates' claims is that "to become good, indeed, is hard, though possible, but to be good is impossible."<sup>12</sup> One cannot simply be good, but one actually has to do things in order to become good. Virtue can only be pursued or taught through *praxis*. This *praxis* seems, for Socrates, first of all, to be actively involved in a dialogue. Virtue cannot be learned by simply listening to someone else, but one needs to develop one's own knowledge by actively participating in a dialogue. Virtue, thus, cannot be taught by Protagoras' *techne* – in which one listens to long monologues – but, if it is teachable, then it can

be taught by way of dialectic. I will further develop this distinction between *techne* and dialectic in the discussion of the *Republic* below.

The discussion about being and becoming eventually leads to a reversal of the positions of Protagoras and Socrates: at the end of the dialogue, Socrates believes that virtue can be taught, while Protagoras doubts this. This reversal of positions can be explained as follows: Socrates does not think that virtue can be taught if Protagoras' method is used. If virtue can be taught, it is only possible by way of dialectic, i.e., by a process of becoming. Protagoras, on the other hand, seems to be convinced by Socrates that virtue cannot be taught by his method, i.e., by sophistry, but he does not want to commit himself to dialectic. This reversal of positions has, in a sense, been anticipated by Socrates at the beginning of their discussion when he stated that "even you [Protagoras], though so old and so wise, would be made better if someone taught you what you happen not to know."<sup>13</sup> Socrates here already emphasizes the theme of becoming. Protagoras *can* be made better, he can become better, and at the end of the dialogue *is* made better by Socrates, who showed him something he did not happen to know, namely that virtue cannot be taught, at least not with the sophistic method.

Since Socrates and Protagoras have reversed positions, they both have appropriated the position of the other, and in doing so their positions are still opposed to one another. This makes Socrates say: "what strange [*ἄτοπο*...] creatures you are, Socrates and Protagoras."<sup>14</sup> This strangeness, this not being designated to a particular place (*atopos*) emerges at the end of the dialogue, but it is precisely what makes the dialogue possible in the first place. If the interlocutors are not willing to change their positions, a process or development is impossible. The interlocutors have to be willing to re-locate themselves, to change *topos*, in order to make a dialogue possible. Openness to other positions, which we could call strangeness, can be considered as a condition for the possibility of Socratic dialectic.

*Navigation: How to Distinguish Ways from Non-Ways?*

After the interlocutors in the *Protagoras* have decided to use the Socratic method – a crucial point in the dialogue – an important image comes to the fore when Hippias, who is also a sophist, advises Socrates and Protagoras, and says to Protagoras that he must not “let out full sail, as you run before the breeze, and so escape into the ocean of speech leaving the land nowhere in sight.”<sup>15</sup> Protagoras should shorten his speeches so that his listeners do not get lost in his ocean of speech. Protagoras’ “escape into the ocean” is again an indication that his method is not open, or transparent. The listeners lose sight of land, the starting-point of the discussion, and get lost in the ocean, the long speech. This image of philosophy as a voyage through the sea is one of the many references to the sea and navigation within the Platonic corpus. This might appear to be insignificant in the works of someone who lived close to the sea, but its occurrence at this point in the dialogue is striking: Plato here makes a reference to sailing and the possibility of being lost in the ocean of speech at a decisive point in the dialogue where the way how to proceed is decided. Is there a similarity between sailing a ship through the sea and making one’s way through a dialogue? Is doing dialectic an art of navigation? In the following I will discuss this metaphor in some more detail, by looking into some other remarkable uses of the imagery of sailing and navigation within the Platonic corpus.

In Book VI of the *Republic* we do find one of the most concrete references to navigation<sup>16</sup> when Socrates likens the government of a city to that of a ship.<sup>17</sup> This “allegory of the ship” – as I will call it – describes the situation of the captain of a ship who does not have a decent knowledge of navigation to begin with. When a sailor persuades the captain to turn over the helm to him, the situation on the ship becomes even worse, since the sailors do not know “that for the true pilot it is necessary to pay careful attention to year, seasons, heaven, stars, winds and everything that’s

proper to the art.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the sailors do not consider navigation to be something learnable. Instead, they consider that person most knowledgeable who is able to persuade the captain to turn over the helm, and thus gain control of the ship. From this perspective the true pilot – the one who actually pays careful attention to the year, seasons, heaven, stars, and winds – is thought to be a mere stargazer.

This allegory symbolizes how people in the city think about philosophers: similar to navigators, philosophers deal with intangible objects. Their methods of navigating – through life or through the sea – raise suspicion precisely because both are dealing with intangible objects. On the ship, as well as in the city, it is considered more important to persuade others than to look behind the immediate world of experience. The sailor who is good in persuading others represents the sophist who can teach how to persuade others, but cannot teach how to become good citizens, or how to navigate through the problems of life. The navigator, on the other hand, is looking at that which is eternal in order to determine the right course of the ship in situations that are always different. Similarly, the philosopher observes “that which is eternal and not wandering between the two poles of generation and decay.”<sup>19</sup> Philosophers are “those who are capable of apprehending [τῆς ἀειπέρας] that which is eternal and unchanging.”<sup>20</sup> As the apprehension of the position of the stars has a practical application for the navigator, the apprehension of the ideal realities does, for Socrates, have a practical application since it allows one to establish “the laws of the beautiful, the just and the good.”<sup>21</sup> The knowledge of the forms (*eide*) can guide us in determining the right course in a life in which everything is constantly changing.<sup>22</sup>

However, the application of this knowledge is something different than dialectic, i.e., the process by which one can gain this knowledge. Knowledge of *the things that are* cannot be gained through leaving hypotheses untouched,<sup>23</sup> but one needs to be able to give an account of them. The dialectical “process of inquiry” destroys or does away with hypotheses “up to the first principle



itself in order to find confirmation there.”<sup>24</sup> We could say then that dialectic and navigation do have in common that they both deal with intangible eternal things within a world that is in a constant flux. However, the navigator already has knowledge of these intangible things and applies this knowledge when he determines the best course of the ship. The philosopher, on the other hand, still has to gain knowledge of the forms. Dialectic is a way by which we can gain such knowledge, i.e., proceed to the first principles. In the *Protagoras* we found a distinction between the sophistic *technē* and (philosophical) dialectic. In the *Republic*, it becomes clear that dialectic is not completely separated from *technai*, which “can be described as assistants and helpers in the turning around of others.”<sup>25</sup> The process of dialectic, therefore, can make use of *technai*, but is itself not a *technē*. Since it is a destruction of hypotheses and a search for the truth, it can be described as a journey of which the path is to be determined as we go along, here expressed with the image of navigation.

In the *Protagoras* we found the metaphor of sailing at a crucial point in the dialogue, when the method with which to proceed was being determined. This metaphor is also used in the *Phaedo* when Socrates narrates his educational “autobiography,” and turns to his famous “second sailing.”<sup>26</sup> In the prelude to this journey Simmias introduces the idea of finding the strongest vessel, i.e., *logos*, to travel with. This idea appears in the context of the discussion of the immortality of the soul. Simmias admits that it is “either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters in this life.”<sup>27</sup> What we can do instead, when we cannot find the truth – in this case the truth concerning the immortality of the soul – is to find the human *logos* that is “best and hardest to disprove.”<sup>28</sup> One has to embark upon this *logos* “as upon a raft, sail upon it through life in the midst of dangers, unless he can sail upon a stronger vessel, some divine revelation [λόγου θείου], and make his voyage more safely and securely.”<sup>29</sup> Sarah Kofman discusses the crossing of a sea as a path that has to be found each time as if for the first time: “the

sea is the endless realm of pure movement, the most mobile, changeable and polymorphous of all spaces, a space where any way that has been traced is immediately obliterated, which transforms any journey into a voyage of exploration which is always unprecedented, dangerous and uncertain.”<sup>30</sup> It is this unprecedented, dangerous, and uncertain voyage we are making with Socrates in the *Phaedo*. In Socrates’ characterization of this voyage he reiterates Simmias’ idea of finding the best possible logos: “I put down as hypothesis whatever account [λόγον] I judge to be mightiest.”<sup>31</sup> One could say then that the best possible or the mightiest *logos* has to serve as a vessel with which we can travel through the sea, that “mobile, changeable and polymorphous” space in which each way is immediately erased. There is not one way to go through the dialogue or the sea; there is, rather, a manifold of possibilities. These ways are not established, but are, rather, ways that still have to be found, or even still need to be created. This idea of a plurality of possible ways and the creation of these ways is emphasized in Socrates’ “autobiography” (96a – 102a) that leads into the second sailing.<sup>32</sup> Just like Protagoras, Socrates now tells us that he does not use the method of others. Instead, he has “randomly smushed together [εἰκῆ φύρω] another way [τρόπον].”<sup>33</sup> This way is then introduced as the “second sailing,” a nautical term referring to the use of oars due to a lack of wind. The wind, possibly a metaphor for a divine truth, is failing for Socrates, and he has randomly smushed together another method while crossing through the sea. The strongest vessel he can find to make this voyage is the theory of the forms. The journey itself, i.e., the dialogue, can make this vessel even stronger.

### *The Dialectical Labyrinth; From Pythagorean Opposites to Socratic Logos*

In the last part of this paper I discuss the dialogue, or voyage, in more detail by focusing on another metaphor, namely the labyrinth. This image is evoked in the beginning of the dialogue when Phaedo starts his narration of the circumstances surrounding Socrates’ death, by

mentioning “a vow” the Athenians made to Apollo “to send a mission every year to Delos”<sup>34</sup> if the fourteen youths and maidens were saved. Phaedo refers here to the myth of “Theseus and the Minotaur,” according to which the Minotaur (the bull of Minos, a creature half man half bull) is the result of the greed and selfishness of King Minos of Crete. When he did not sacrifice the most beautiful bull of his herd to the gods, as he should have done, the gods took revenge by letting his wife, Pasiphaê, fall in love with the bull, and after she mated with the bull, the Minotaur was conceived. Minos asked Daedalus (who first helped Pasiphaê to trick the bull, in order to mate with it) to build a labyrinth in which the beast could be kept. To keep the Minotaur satisfied Minos ordered the city-states that were occupied by the Cretans to sacrifice every year a particular number of young people to the beast. The Athenians were asked to sacrifice fourteen youths and maidens every year. Fortunately, Theseus appeared at the right time, and traveled with the fourteen to Crete. Once there, Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, fell in love with Theseus and told him how to get out of the labyrinth (according to some accounts of this myth she told him to use a thread). With her advice, he manages, after killing the Minotaur, to find the way out of the labyrinth, and to save the fourteen youths as well as himself.<sup>35</sup>

Since Theseus had saved the fourteen, the Athenians sent a mission to Delos every year, as Phaedo tells us. This mission happened to have started on the day before Socrates’ trial. Since the city had to keep itself pure, and could not execute anyone during the trip of the ship to Delos and back, and since this trip sometimes takes a long time “when contrary winds detain it [...] Socrates passed a long time in prison between his trial and his death.”<sup>36</sup> Here, right at the outset of the dialogue, is thus another reference to traveling by boat, and the difficulties such a journey can involve, such as contrary winds.

After referring to the myth, Phaedo introduces us to fourteen of Socrates’ friends who are present in the prison. This number of friends – the twice seven (*dis hepta*), as Phaedo says<sup>37</sup> – is another

reference to the myth in which fourteen youths and maidens are saved by Theseus.<sup>38</sup> If we were to map the myth upon the *Phaedo*, we could interpret the fourteen friends as being saved by Socrates, while Ariadne symbolizes Phaedo, who gives us a thread in the form of the discourse, as a sort of “father of our debate [πατήρ τοῦ λόγου].”<sup>39</sup> Such an interpretation would become immediately problematic when we try to imagine Socrates as being a Theseus, the hero who kills the Minotaur. Theseus kills a symptom or symbol of greed and selfishness, while Socrates attempts to hunt down the real causes of such a symptom.<sup>40</sup> Instead of interpreting the *Phaedo* as a philosophical copy of the myth, I will focus here on the image of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the dialectical structure.<sup>41</sup>

The first actual argument in the discussion of the immortality of the soul – or the first way in the labyrinth of discourse – is the argument that opposites generate one another. This argument, given by Socrates, is in fact a Pythagorean (or Ionic) conception of nature, and for that reason it is strongly supported by Simmias and Cebes, the two main interlocutors in the *Phaedo*, who are both loyal to the Pythagorean theories. Socrates argues here as follows: if something becomes smaller it must have been greater, otherwise it could not become smaller.<sup>42</sup> A similar movement between opposites can be found in sleeping and waking, since waking up is a transition from sleeping to being awake.<sup>43</sup> Again, something similar must be at work in the process of dying and being born. Dying is merely a transition from one state to the other, and birth is the return to the other state: being alive. Everything has to take part in this circular movement between contraries, for if there was a movement in only one direction, that is, a generation “forward in a straight line without turning back or curving, then [...] in the end all things would have the same form.”<sup>44</sup> Everything that lives would die, and if life did not generate from the dead, but from the living, everything in the end would die.<sup>45</sup> Assuming that everything living can die, the source of life

cannot be something living, otherwise it could die as well, and without this source everything would end up dead. The source of life, therefore, has to be something dead.

Although this theory is interesting, it is questionable how it can contribute to a discussion about the immortality of the soul. Why does Socrates bring up this “physics of circularity?” As Gadamer writes: “What is striking about the proof is that it is obviously unsuited to prove the point which it is supposed to prove.”<sup>46</sup> How can this argument prove that there is something immortal, something continuous that remains somehow the same in this cycle? For, it is Socrates’ claim that the soul does not *perish* when the body dies, but even *flourishes* when it departs from the body.

To answer this question we will need to understand the structure of the arguments of the *Phaedo*. Which I will lay out in the following, starting with the anamnesis-theory, which is discussed after this initial argument of the circular movement between opposites. It is striking that this anamnesis-theory is not introduced by Socrates, who is – as we are reminded here in the *Phaedo* – “fond of saying, that our learning is nothing else than recollection.”<sup>47</sup> Instead, anamnesis is brought into the discourse by Cebes. It is important to note that first Socrates makes a Pythagorean argument, and then Cebes, a Pythagorean, introduces a Socratic argument. We could then suggest that it is Socrates’ strategic plan, or method, to introduce the theory of opposites not because he agrees with it, but to entice his interlocutors into the dialogue, and more importantly to let them introduce the arguments that will eventually dismiss the theory of contraries. We could describe Socrates here thus again as strange or out of place (*atopos*). With this strange position in which he takes up the Pythagorean doctrine he can, as an infiltrator, attack the theory from the inside, or rather let his interlocutors attack the theory. In this way Socrates himself does not argue against their theory, but he will force his opponents to question and eventually dismiss their own metaphysical understanding of reality. Socrates in this way sets up a labyrinth through

which his interlocutors – as well as he himself – have to find a way, which often involves taking some steps back and making a redirection.

The first redirection is given by the theory of anamnesis, brought up by the Pythagorean Cebes. It is, eventually, Socrates himself who explains this theory in more detail, by discussing first of all the example of equality. He argues here that we can recognize that two things are equal to one another because we know equality itself, or “equality in the abstract.”<sup>48</sup> We have not learned this abstraction from the sensible objects, since they all fall short of equality itself. “[I]t appears that we must have acquired it [equality] before we were born.”<sup>49</sup> The soul acquired these ideas or forms in the purest existence of the soul, i.e., in its existence without the disturbances of the body. The use of these forms, such as in the recognition of the equality of two things, is a recollection, an anamnesis, of this knowledge.

Socrates’ example of the equal itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον)<sup>50</sup> might be considered odd here, since equality is a comparison of two different things, and therefore seems to imply a relativity. The good, the beautiful or the circle itself, appear to be purer examples of these ideal forms. The example of equality has, however, another function here. It is a hint of Socrates or Plato that points us to the fact that the dialogue has made a turn. We have left the path we were on with the theory of opposites; the interlocutors have turned into an alternative way in the labyrinth. Instead of a change between opposites we are now looking for something that remains the same (*isos*), something that does not perish, and so escapes the physics of circularity. The dialogue is, thus, making a move from the opposites to something equal, a move from the Pythagorean discourse to the Socratic-Platonic *logos*. Socrates has opened the door to the two Pythagoreans by letting them hear what they wanted to hear. This door is now slowly dismissed by the Pythagoreans themselves. In doing so they assist Socrates in creating the maze of arguments and counter-arguments. Once in this labyrinth, there is no way back, i.e., the entrance through which one

came does not provide an exit. Socrates has dragged them (and us) into the labyrinth, from which no escape is possible.

Yet, Socrates wants to drag Simmias and Cebes even further into the labyrinth. After Simmias and Cebes suggest that it is only proven that our soul existed before birth (with the anamnesis-theory), and not that it will also exist after we die, Socrates provokes the two by stating: “It has been shown, Simmias and Cebes, already, [...] if you will combine this conclusion with the one we reached before, that every living being is born from the dead.”<sup>51</sup> Socrates, of course, knows that the immortality of the soul is not proven by combining the anamnesis-theory with the theory of contraries, but wants to hear from his interlocutors what is lacking in their own theory – the theory of opposites. The only true Socratic method to accomplish this is by ironically stating that the answer already has been given.

The final move of this strategy is made with Socrates’ silence after he has presented his arguments on visibility and invisibility: “Socrates himself was *apparently* [ἐφαίνετο] absorbed in what had been said.”<sup>53</sup> Socrates’ apparent absorption can be read as an invitation to Cebes and Simmias – a didactic trick – again, to let *them* ask the questions. Socrates will, apparently, have to defend himself, but in fact remains the master. He guides the others, by letting them interrogate him, which is in fact an interrogation of their own ideas. The Pythagoreans thus interrogate the Pythagorean theories; a self-reflection through the medium Socrates. This idea is emphasized another time after Socrates’ silence, during which Simmias and Cebes start to talk to one another. Socrates seizes his way to complete his strategic move, and asks them whether there is any incompleteness in what has been said. He adds:

“[I]f you are perplexed [ἀπορεῖτον] about all this, do not hesitate to speak up yourselves and go through it if it appears to you that it could have been said better. And what is more, do not

hesitate to take me along with you [συμπαλαβεῖν] if you think you will fare better [εὐπορήσειν] in my company.”<sup>53</sup>

Important here are the words *aporos* and *euporos*, the first being a negation of *poros*, the second being a confirmation (in the sense of good or well) of *poros*. *Poros* is a way through or over, a passage, but also a resource. *Poros* is opposed to *hodos*, a (public) road that is clearly laid out. A *poros* is, instead, a way that has to be found. An *aporia* is the impossibility of finding this way, or a non-way in the labyrinth, here translated as “being perplexed.” Since *poros* also means wealth or resource we can also understand *aporia* as a lack of resources. *Euporos* can then be translated as having good or better resources, or being better able to find a way. What is suggested here is, first of all, that the way is still to be found or even has to be created (no *hodos* is available). I will return to this suggestion in the conclusion. Secondly, this passage suggests that together with Socrates, his two interlocutors will be more resourceful in their attempt to find a way. In other dialogues Socrates is often presented as a resource without resources. He is the philosopher who is wise because he knows he does not know. This lack of resources is precisely his resourcefulness, because this forces his interlocutors – who mostly *think* they know – into a dialogue. Here, in the *Phaedo*, his method is different: he presents a theory that is proving the opposite of what it is supposed to prove, but by doing this he makes the others more resourceful, makes it possible for them to find ways. Socrates, thus, lacks resources, but in a different way than by simply not knowing – as is the case in many other dialogues – since he at least provides us with a theory, suggesting that he knows something.<sup>55</sup> Even while he is being questioned himself, Socrates is nevertheless the guide in the philosophical labyrinth, since he is – as described above – enticing the others in questioning their own theory; Socrates thus leads the others through the dialectical process.



After Simmias compares the soul to the tuning of the lyre, Cebes compares the soul to a weaver who can wear out many cloaks but who will eventually die himself as well. Cebes' argument is referring precisely to the lack of continuity that is provided by the theory of opposites: it only provides a continuous movement, without the possibility of stability in this flux. Cebes therefore rightly suggests that the soul might last longer than the body – as the weaver lasts longer than his cloaks – but at some point the soul might perish as well. It is then interesting that Cebes' counter-argument, as opposed to the easily dismissed argument of Simmias, is never referred to as an *aporia*. This might indicate that Cebes' argument is in fact not an *aporia* precisely because it provides a new way, and shows us that in fact the idea of a circular physics was not the right way; it blocked the way, or was a dead end. The weaver-argument problematizes the theory of opposites and, as such, is not a blockage, not an *aporia*. Instead, the theory of opposites is now considered to be an *aporia* while the new theory provides new ways, opens up new possibilities. This new voyage is Socrates' "second sailing" which is first of all Socrates' own attempt to find "the cause of generation and decay" after Anaxagoras and others disappointed him. Secondly, it is a new way within the dialogue, to prove the immortality of the soul, after Cebes has shown that the first attempt (the theory of opposites) did not lead us anywhere, but was – so to speak – a roadblock. Thirdly, as discussed above, the ideal realm of forms – Socrates' own sailing – is the best possible *logos* for Socrates. Approximating the divine truth it is the most secure and safest vessel to cross the sea, or the best way one can find through the labyrinth.

The development of the above-described arguments shows that the labyrinth of ways and non-ways is in a constant flux: ways turn out to be non-ways; non-ways can become ways. The flux of the dialogue can be intimidating. As discussed in the *Republic*, the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedo*, many people develop a fear for dialectic. This is a fear for falling into a labyrinth like Tartarus, described at the end of the *Phaedo*.<sup>55</sup> Tartarus is a labyrinth in which no progress is possible; no

distinction can be made between better and worse ways since every way will lead back to the same point. This is the fear that one can have of philosophy: the fear of not being able to get anywhere; the fear of not getting out, or the fear of not finding anything stable, but only a flux in which navigation is impossible.

Socrates addressed this problem earlier in the *Phaedo* after Simmias and Cebes gave their arguments, and everyone – including Echebrates to whom *Phaedo* narrates the last day of Socrates' life – seemed to be at a loss about the direction that they had to take now. They first thought Socrates' arguments were sound and stable but now Simmias' and Cebes' arguments, which dismiss the earlier arguments, are very convincing as well. Echebrates phrases the fear for a flux in which nothing is stable by asking, “What argument shall we believe henceforth?”<sup>56</sup> Before discussing Simmias' and Cebes' arguments Socrates first – as if he hears Echebrates' question in the frame-dialogue – discusses with *Phaedo* the possibility of *misology*, hatred of arguments. Socrates wants to prevent us from thinking that “there is nothing sound and sure in anything, whether argument or anything else, but all things go up and down, like the tide in the Euripus, and nothing is stable for any length of time.”<sup>57</sup> In a dialogue such as the *Phaedo* we encounter many conflicting arguments and, consequently, we could easily become either relativists or postmodernists, or – as Socrates fears – *misologists*, for whom there is no possibility of a *logos* that is “true and sure and can be learned.”<sup>58</sup> What we are left with then is dialectic itself in which one does not argue in the way “quite uncultured persons” do, who “do not care what the truth is in the matters they are discussing, but are eager only to make their own views seem true to their hearers.”<sup>59</sup> Instead of this persuasion of others, the true dialectician wants to convince himself. Yet, precisely this “selfish attitude” – as Socrates calls it – requires a partner with whom to talk things through. In order to find one's way one needs company. Socrates himself is the ultimate example of this “need for company.” It is true that Socrates is a guide who

leads the others into and somehow through the labyrinth, and as this guide he is resourceful for others, but in order to be this guide Socrates too needs company; he needs dialogue. He can only be resourceful in the company of others; he can only find his way by way of a dialogue.

### *Conclusion: The Dialectical Voyage*

The need for dialectic is emphasized in the *Protagoras*, when Socrates cites Homer “when two go together, one observes before the other; [Iliad, x. 224] for somehow it makes all of us human beings more resourceful [εὐπορώτεροι] in every deed or word or thought.”<sup>60</sup> This “going together” that makes more resourceful is in the *Protagoras* an opposition of positions of the interlocutors that leads to a reversal of their positions. Protagoras is made “better” – he becomes more resourceful – by learning from Socrates that virtue cannot be taught by way of long monologues. In the *Phaedo* the interlocutors “go together” since Socrates takes up the theory of his opponents. In this way Cebes is able to dismiss his own metaphysical ideas through an ingenious dialectic in which he revalues his own values. The Pythagorean theory of opposites is an *aporia*, is therefore dismissed, but is at the same time at work within the dialogue as a non-way that provides a way precisely in being a non-way. In a sense, we could say, the Socratic-Platonic dialogue is the embodiment of the physics of circularity, discussed in the theory of opposites. Although dialectic – like navigation – looks at a world beyond the physical movement between opposites, dialectic itself does belong to the world of flux. The reversal of positions of the *Protagoras*, and, in the *Phaedo*, the presentation of the theory of opposites, which in the end is not supported by any of the interlocutors, are precisely examples of this flux or circular movement. Through dialectic – a philosophical navigation – a way can be found through the movement of ways and non-ways that one (either as a reader or as an interlocutor) encounters in a dialogue.

The image of the labyrinth shows us that to run into an *aporia* is not only a running into a blind alley, but is rather a re-direction indicating a detour, or to start all over again. In this way poverty – the poverty of an argument – becomes resourcefulness. Similar to *Poros*, in the myth told by Diotima in the *Symposium*, who can only be resourceful in the company of *Penia*, Socrates can only be resourceful in the company of poor arguments that do not prove what they are supposed to prove. In the *Phaedo* he provides poor arguments, and by doing so he makes his interlocutors much more resourceful than they could have ever been without his company. Socrates' poverty is his resourcefulness. This ambiguous resourcefulness, though, works only in the company of others; he is in need of a partner.<sup>61</sup> Dialectic is a *logos* in which one can change positions in an attempt to find a way through the labyrinth. As a philosophical navigator the dialectician establishes, or smushes together, a way as he goes along. The labyrinth through which one tries to find a way is thus itself established in the process of doing dialectic. By way of questioning the different theories, hypotheses will be destroyed in order to make progress. In finding and constructing a path, the dialectician constructs the labyrinth, and in doing so s/he gazes at intangible things, in order to determine a course that will hopefully lead in the right direction. What we learn from Socrates is *not* primarily some *logos*, some theory, account, or doctrine. We rather learn the method to get to such an answer, that is, dialectic, the process of finding ways (*poroi*), finding non-ways (*aporias*) and finding new ways through a labyrinth.

This paper started with the presumption that there is such a thing as a Platonic or Socratic method. Here at the conclusion of this paper the question should be answered whether dialectic indeed is a method, and what sort of method this is. What exactly have the metaphors of sailing and navigation told us about Plato's method, besides that the dialectical process could be described as a journey? First of all, we have seen that, specifically in the *Phaedo* and *Protagoras*, Plato lets Socrates entice his interlocutors in the dialogue. The dialogue is a labyrinth in which

the interlocutors and the readers of the text become entangled. Plato lures his readers by presenting several conflicting theories and arguments. These conflicts (and the urge to resolve these conflicts) draw the reader into the dialectical process.

Secondly, I have discussed how that dialectical process is analogous to navigation.

Philosophizing by way of dialectic is not a standard procedure that can be learned and applied. It is, rather, a method that is always different, depending upon the circumstances. The ocean of speech is constantly changing, and as the navigator adapts to the movement of the stars, the seas and the winds, so should the philosopher adapt to the movement of the arguments.

The way in which the philosopher finds “truth” has shown to be not an established path or road, not a *hodos*. The dialogue lays out a journey as a *poros*, a path that has to be created while it is being taken, an endeavor closely resembling sailing through the ocean, which is never the same. As a metaphor for dialectic, navigation tells us that dialectic is applied differently each time it is used.

Can dialectic then be called a *meta ta hodos*, or *methodos*? For, if there is a lack of a standard way (*hodos*), dialectic is never a standardized journey. Dialectic as navigation is a finding of the way, either through a sea that is constantly changing, or through a labyrinth in which a way or resource (*poros*) can become a non-way (*aporia*) and vice versa. Human beings can approximate the truth by trying to find the best possible vessel to cross the sea, and this vessel is, for Plato, dialectic. Dialectic is both the development of this vessel and this very vessel itself. The metaphor of the labyrinth, similarly, has illustrated that the unfolding of the dialogue itself is the construction of a multiplicity of ways and non-ways. It is thus my claim that the development or construction of the dialogue lacks a standard method. Method is not pre-established, but the result of dialectic, the dialogue itself, can once it is established be called a method, i.e. a thinking through of different positions either with a real or an imaginary partner.

## NOTES

1. This essay reexamines the question of Socratic-Platonic dialectic by taking into account the dramatic and literary context of the dialectic at work in the *Protagoras* and *Phaedo*. Hence, this paper discusses Socratic-Platonic dialectic.

2. The *elenchus* is often used in describing the Socratic dialectical method. This model in its simple form can be sketched as follows: Socrates lets one of his interlocutors pose a definition of  $x$ , after which Socrates will interrogate the interlocutor up to the point where the latter has to admit that his definition was, indeed, wrong and that he does not know what  $x$  is. This model of the *elenchus* can indeed be found in some dialogues – I think especially in the “early” dialogues. Discussions about this model are often focused upon the outcome of the *elenchus*: scholars such as Gregory Vlastos argue that the outcome is positive, i.e. there is an actual result (see, for example Vlastos’ article “The Socratic Elenchus: Method is all” (1994)). Others argue that there is no positive outcome possible, and that only a deprivation of knowledge can be acknowledged (see for example Robinson’s *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* (1953). For an elaborate discussion of these positions see: Francisco Gonzales, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato’s Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*, Northwestern University, SIEP studies in Historical Philosophy, Evanston, 1998, pp. 1-16.

3. Metaphors referring to sailing and navigation are used throughout the Platonic corpus. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all these references, although I have attempted to include all sailing and navigation metaphors that refer to method.

4. The term “way” is – I would say – one of the crucial terms in: John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, Third Edition, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996. Sallis’ “way” leads out of the city and back into it, up and down. Although the “way” I describe is not first of all one of “logos” or – to or from – “being,” it can, indeed, be

characterized by such a double directionality in the sense that the ways of philosophizing are never stable and can even change from ways into non-ways.

5. Plato, Protagoras, in: *Plato II, Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*, W.R.M. Lamb (tr.), Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, 1977, further: *Protagoras*, 312e, my emphasis.

6. *Protagoras*, 317a.

7. *Protagoras*, 317a.

8. *Protagoras*, 319a.

9. *Protagoras*, 334d.

10. *Protagoras*, 335a. This reference to his reputation hints at one of the problems the two are struggling with in the entire dialogue: who is giving the class, or leading the discussion, Protagoras or Socrates? So far, obviously, Protagoras has been the teacher since he gives long monologues. A transformation to the Socratic method is, therefore, a serious threat to Protagoras, who might lose control over the discussion, which again might hurt his reputation.

11. *Protagoras*, 336c/d.

12. *Protagoras*, 344e.

13. *Protagoras*, 318b.

14. *Protagoras*, 361a.

15. *Protagoras*, 338a.

16. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly what the Greeks knew about navigation. In Homer's *Odyssey* the ships seem to be navigated more by the gods than anything else. However, we have to take into consideration that the stars and the winds are not necessarily differentiated from the gods. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle characterizes navigation, along with ethics and medicine, as an art that does not have "exact precision" in which "the agents themselves have to consider what is suited to the circumstances on each occasion" (II, ii, 4). The passage from the

*Republic* that I discuss here gives us a more concrete indication about how they actually navigated.

17. Plato, *Republic*, Allen Bloom (tr.), Basic Books, 1991, further: *Republic*, 488b – 489a.

18. *Republic*, 488d.

19. *Republic*, 485b.

20. *Republic*, 484b.

21. *Republic*, 484d.

22. Although this is speculative, we could assume that the metaphor of sailing through the sea refers to Heraclitus' idea of flux.

23. *Republic*, 533c.

24. *Republic*, 533c.

25. *Republic*, 533d.

26. Plato, "Phaedo," in: *Plato I, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, tr. H.N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, 1971, further: *Phaedo*, 99d.

27. *Phaedo*, 85c.

28. *Phaedo*, 85c.

29. *Phaedo*, 85d.

30. Sarah Kofman, "Beyond Aporia?" In: *Post-Structuralist Classics*, Andrew Benjamin (ed.), Routledge, New York, 1988. Original title: *Comment s'en sortir?* Editions Galilée, Paris, 1983, further: *Beyond Aporia?* p. 10.

31. Plato, "Phaedo," in: *Plato's Phaedo*, Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, Eric Salem (tr.), Focus Classical Library, Newburyport, 1998, further: Brann, 100a.

32. Much has been written about this "autobiography." Reale identifies it in his magnificent *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato* as "[o]ne of the most famous and magnificent passages



that Plato has left us” (Giovanni Reale, *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato*, John R. Catan and Richard Davies (Tr.), The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1997, p. 95). Even though what is at stake here in the dialogue are causes of generation and destruction, I here do not want to focus on causality, as discussed, for example, by Sallis (1996, pp. 38-44) and Gonzales (1998, pp. 188-208). Instead, I want to emphasize the change in method that is symbolized by the “second sailing.”

33. Brann, 97b.

34. *Phaedo*, 58b.

35. Much more can be said about the myth, but since it is not certain which version(s) of the myth was/were known to Plato, I have tried to summarize the basic elements of the story.

36. *Phaedo*, 58c.

37. *Phaedo*, 58a-b.

38. In fact, there are more people present in the prison, but only fourteen people are named here by Phaedo. Interestingly, the fourteen names are, when Phaedo enumerates the names, grouped in a set of seven Athenians, two additional Athenians and five foreigners. This could be seen as another reference to the “twice seven.”

39. Plato, “Symposium,” in: *Plato III, Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, W.R.M. Lamb (tr.), Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, 1996, 177d.

40. Socrates is not the slave-doctor, but rather the “free-born doctor” of the *Laws*. He is the free-born doctor who tries to find the real cause of such illnesses, the origin from which nature unfolds (ἀρχῆς καὶ κατὰ φύσιν (*Laws*, 720d)).

41. In the whole Platonic corpus the word “labyrinth” is used only once, at least explicitly: “at this point we were involved in a labyrinth: when we supposed we had arrived at the end, we twisted about again and found ourselves practically at the beginning of our search, and just as

sorely in want as when we first started on it” (*Euthydemus*, 291b-c). The image of the labyrinth here suggests the difficulty, or in fact the impossibility, of finding ways that lead to the truth. In the two dialogues discussed here we can find a similar idea. In the *Protagoras* Socrates and Protagoras are at the end of the dialogue still opposed to one another and in the *Phaedo* we are left with nothing more than good hopes about the immortality of the soul.

42. *Phaedo*, 70e.

43. *Phaedo*, 71c.

44. *Phaedo*, 72b.

45. *Phaedo*, 72c.

46. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980, p. 25.

47. *Phaedo*, 72e.

48. *Phaedo*, 74e.

49. *Phaedo*, 75c.

50. *Phaedo*, 74a.

51. *Phaedo*, 77c.

52. *Phaedo*, 84b-c, my emphasis.

53. Brann, 84c-d.

54. It is this peculiar character of Socrates to which Kofman alludes in her *Beyond Aporia?* when she makes her famous analysis of the figures of *poros*, *penia* and *eros* as we find them in Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*. *Eros* is the child of *poros* and *penia*; *poros* is the father, the resourceful, who has possibilities to find ways and *penia* is the mother, who is poor. The child of these parents, *eros* is “[n]either mortal nor immortal, Love is a daemon, an intermediary being. Neither wise nor ignorant, he is a philosopher [...]” Kofman, *Beyond Aporia?* p. 26.

55. *Phaedo*111c-114c.

56. *Phaedo*, 88d.

57. *Phaedo*, 90c.

58. *Phaedo*, 90c.

59. *Phaedo*, 91a.

60. *Protagoras*, 348d.

61. We can see this, for example, in the *Symposium* where Socrates is supposed to give a eulogy, but starts off with a short dialogue with Agathon. He eventually does give a eulogy on love, but in the form of an (imaginary) dialogue with Diotima. In order to give an account, to provide a *logos*, Socrates thus needs dialectic, possibly even with an imaginary interlocutor. Since his imaginary eulogy can be seen as a continuation of his dialogue with Agathon, we find here again a reversal of positions in which Socrates adopts the position of Agathon, and Diotima adopts Socrates' position.