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Dialectical Methods and the Stoicheia Paradigm in Plato's Trilogy and *Philebus*

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ABSTRACT

Plato's *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* exhibit several related dialectical methods relevant to Platonic education: maieutic in *Theaetetus*, bifurcatory division in *Sophist* and *Statesman*, and non-bifurcatory division in *Statesman*, related to the 'god-given' method in *Philebus*. I consider the nature of each method through the letter or element (στοιχείον) paradigm, used to reflect on each method. At issue are the element's appearances in given contexts, its fitness for communing with other elements like it in kind, and its own nature defined through its relations to others. These represent stages of inquiry for the Platonic student inquiring into the sources of knowledge.

Keywords: method, metaphysics, epistemology, ontology

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I. INTRODUCTION

While Plato's *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* dialogues bear clear narrative and dramatic kinships, the relationship of the philosophical methods depicted in each is unclear.¹ The two-day period of discussion in which the dialogues are set begins with Socrates' maieutic inquiry into the views of the young mathematician Theaetetus and concludes with the Eleatic Stranger's diairetic account of the statesman as a determinate moment in the care for the human community. This dramatic procession raises many questions, such as those of why Plato chose to link together dramatically these dialectical exercises, whether and how one method or dialogue acts as a proleptic anticipation of another, and what sense, if any, we can make of their unity.²

In what follows, I seek to offer the beginning of an answer to these by arguing that Plato's trilogy exhibits a series of related methods of inquiry into the sources of knowledge, representing a set of dialectical exercises relevant to a Platonic education and the increasing philosophical maturity of the student.³ These methods include the maieutic method depicted in the *Theaetetus*, the method of bifurcatory division initiated in the *Sophist* and partially continued in the *Statesman*, and the method of non-bifurcatory division employed by the Stranger in the second half of the *Statesman*.⁴ Since the Stranger does not make the aim of this final method clear, I will here consider it with reference to the method of inquiry described in the *Philebus* and referred to in the literature as the 'god-given method'.⁵

It is difficult to track these large shifts in limited space. To understand these methods and their relation to one another, we will here follow the guidance offered by the paradigm of *letters* or *elements* (στοιχεῖα) in each instance.⁶ Plato frequently has his primary interlocutors make epistemological moves with reference to let-

ters, including in key moments in the *Republic*, and the speakers draw on this paradigm in the dramatic moments in the near vicinity of each methodological change in the trilogy.⁷ Thus the letter paradigm offers a fixed point of orientation for considering the nature of each of the three methods.⁸ At issue in these changes are, among other things, the notion of the element as part, its role in composing a whole, its recognizability as such, its appearances in given contexts, its fitness for communing with other elements like it in kind, and its own nature as defined by its relations to others like it in kind.

Ultimately, I argue that the methodological changes in the trilogy map onto three senses of account (λόγος) through which knowledge is attained. These roughly correspond to the three senses of account at issue late in the *Theaetetus* (*Theait.* 206 d 1 - 208 d 9). In his final definition of knowledge, Theaetetus hypothesizes that knowledge is "true opinion with an account" (Plat., *Theait.* 201 c 8.)⁹ Socrates then considers three possible senses of 'account,' which, I argue, correspond to the methodological moves made throughout the dialogues composing the trilogy. The first type of account Socrates considers is that in which one makes "one's thought apparent vocally by means of words and verbal expressions [...] like reflections upon water or in a mirror" (Plat., *Theait.* 206 d 1-4). This type of account is closely related to the maieutic method in the *Theaetetus*, insofar as the task in maieutic is to externalize the internal by reflecting thought in an account, exposing it in its nature and presenting it for scrutiny. At issue in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* will be the latter two types of account that Socrates identifies. The second is the account that entails "being able, when questioned about what a thing is, to give an answer by reference to its elements" (Plat., *Theait.* 206 e 10 - 207 d 2), which will be at stake in the non-bifurcatory divisions of the *States-*

man. The third, “being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things” (Plat., *Theait.* 208 c 8-9), anticipates the aim of the Stranger in practicing bifurcatory division in the *Sophist* and early *Statesman*.¹⁰ I suggest that these three types of account represent three stages of inquiry for the student of Platonic philosophy inquiring into the sources of knowledge and her means of notically grasping them with reference to parts constitutive of wholes and co-constituted by other parts like them in kind.

II. MAIEUTIC IN THE *THEAETETUS*

In the *Theaetetus*, the interlocutors seek a satisfying account of knowledge through Socrates’ familiar question and answer process. Socrates here acts in the role of the midwife, and he reflects on the maieutic method (Plat., *Theait.* 149 a 1 – 151 d 5) by describing it as helping the interlocutor to make progress by “discovering and bringing forth many beautiful things themselves out of themselves” (Plat., *Theait.* 150 d 5-9).¹¹ This corresponds to Socrates’ later consideration of one sense of account as making “thought apparent vocally by means of words and verbal expressions [...] like reflections upon water or in a mirror” (Plat., *Theait.* 206 d 1-4). He describes the ‘birthing’ process as leading to the subsequent test of the result in terms of its truth or falsity (Plat., *Theait.* 150 c 1-5). In these ways, the maieutic method entails externalizing the internal by submitting the internal to an account, and hence to scrutiny. With these goals in mind, Socrates limits his involvement to helping to give birth to the ideas of Theaetetus, rather than revealing his own.¹² Thus Theaetetus is responsible for the hypotheses that direct the discussion, while Socrates is responsible for un-

packing the entailments of each hypothesis. In other words, Socrates uses the maieutic method as a means of assisting the interlocutor in the production of the account already implicit in the interlocutor’s own thinking.

The maieutic method used in the dialogue contrasts with a discussion of mathematical knowledge early in the text. This discussion points beyond itself to the next step necessary after maieutic, although the interlocutors will not take it up until the dramatically later dialogues. In his discussion of mathematical powers (Plat., *Theait.* 147 d 3 – 148 b 4), Theaetetus describes his goal of understanding the oneness inherent in many mathematical objects and accounting for the objects with reference to this oneness. This is what he calls the attempt to “gather together [the powers in question] into some one [term], [to] which we could address our speech”.¹³ In other words, Theaetetus’ goal in this mathematical study is to understand many in terms of their sameness, or to account for the one inherent in many. But Theaetetus ultimately fails to find a way to turn this mathematical method of gathering and sorting into an account of the means by which knowledge is attained.

The maieutic method is useful insofar as it acts as a propaedeutic to more systematic studies. The seeming *aporia* inherent in the dialogue’s conclusion is in fact provocative of further considerations, and suggests ways in which Socrates’ three conceptions of ‘account’ anticipate the turns taken the next day in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.¹⁴ The key to allowing the *aporia* to provoke further studies lies in considering the moves that Socrates and Theaetetus make after hypothesizing that knowledge is “true opinion with an account”. Here we will consider the letter paradigm, which arises in the context of spelling and the recognition of syllables and letters as one of several examples that

Socrates and Theaetetus take up in seeking to understand the senses in which a thing can be known.¹⁵ Socrates asks Theaetetus to consider the spelling of his own name (Θεαίτητος) and establishes that knowledge of the spelling of Theaetetus' name is easily demonstrated by one who is able to lay out the letters of the name in its correct order. He asks Theaetetus, though, to consider the case of the person who can spell 'Θεαίτητος' but misspells 'Θεόδωρος,' replacing the theta with a tau (Plat., *Theait.* 207a 8 – 208 c 3). Socrates demonstrates that this misspelling of the second name shows that the speller in fact did not *know* how to spell 'Θεαίτητος,' but instead merely had the *right opinion* regarding the spelling, since the speller could not reproduce the spelling of the same first syllable ('Θε-') in the new context of a second name. This invokes the senses of right opinion and knowledge at play in Socrates' description of the divided line analogy in the *Republic*, where 'right opinion' is guided by partial or mediated access to the source and 'knowledge' entails a direct noetic grasp of the source.

Socrates' observation here points to latent positive content in the conclusion of the *Theaetetus*. Knowledge of a thing, here the spelling of the name 'Θεαίτητος,' entails the recognition of the major component parts of the thing in all of their manifestations. In other words, grasp of the object of knowledge sought here, the name, has only occurred when the name's syllables, and the letters that compose them, are recognized in every instance. Knowledge, we thus have learned, entails an account of the sameness inherent in the constitutive elements of wholes, which are themselves both a one (as a whole) and many (as comprising elements). That is, 'Θε' is a one, in that it is one thing that can be known, and hence an object of a sort of knowledge. But it comprises parts, 'Θ' and 'ε,' and

hence is many; recognition of it thus requires an understanding of its parts.

The maieutic method entails treating each entity as a whole. In other words, to give birth to one's thinking into an account entails beginning with a given concept, articulating it, and interrogating the structure of the concept as it has appeared from out of one's pre-discursive thinking. This in itself is valuable, because things manifest themselves to us as unified singulars (ones) that require deeper analysis to be captured in their essentiality, or, in other words, captured in an account of their manifold being (insofar as they are many). It furthermore entails a process of developing and examining the account, testing it for strengths and weaknesses before allowing it to be assessed as a true insight or a wind egg. But the maieutic method stops short of offering a means of proceeding from the given entity *qua* the unified whole in which it presents itself into an account of the thing *qua* complex object structured by determinate elements. An employment of it does not clarify the ways in which these elements commune with other elements that are outside of it and like it in kind. Because the maieutic method does not have a mechanism by which sameness and difference between things can be accounted, it has shown itself to be insufficient for attaining knowledge in the strictest sense and hence to serve as a proleptic exercise for further studies.

We see this when we consider that the answer to the question, 'How does one spell the name "Θεαίτητος?"', cannot be ensured to derive from knowledge and not right opinion in the senses that Socrates distinguishes in the divided line analogy in the *Republic*. Knowledge of the spelling of the name 'Θεαίτητος' is only attained when each of the component parts is understood in its own nature. The speller who cannot recognize the elements in other settings, as in the case of the same letter

and same syllable in the different setting of the name Θεόδωρος, has not grasped the nature of the elements in the initial instance. Hence the speller has neither knowledge of the elements nor of the whole. Likewise, one who knows the individual letters composing the name does not have knowledge of the spelling of Theaetetus' name until she can order the letters properly relative to an understanding of the nature of the name.¹⁶ Put differently, Theaetetus is unable to apply the urge to assimilate many into oneness through an account in the case of non-mathematical objects of knowledge in the manner in which he gathered together the mathematical powers into oneness. If he is to make progress in the next day's investigation, Theaetetus will need a means of doing this. In these ways, the letter paradigm points to the next step necessary toward a more robust and exhaustive account of the source of knowledge.

III. BIFURCATORY DIVISION IN THE *SOPHIST* AND *STATESMAN*

In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger becomes heir to Socrates' discourse from the preceding day. In this change, the role of the midwife is replaced by that of the dialectician. The maieutic method entails the midwife (e.g., Socrates) aiding the interlocutor in the production of the account already implicitly operative in the interlocutor's own thinking. An important shift happens here insofar as the Stranger's methods, bifurcatory and non-bifurcatory division, are oriented by receptivity. That is, the move from maieutic to diairesis entails a refocusing of the direction of the inquiry from the midwife supporting the productive interlocutor to the interlocutors receiving and accounting for the nature of the world.¹⁷ This is reflected in the shift of fo-

cus from the first to the second and third senses of account in the *Theaetetus*, which are oriented around the account-giver in the first instance and the nature of the object in the second and third instances.

In the *Sophist*, the interlocutors seek to disclose the essence of the sophist, as well as the paradigmatic example of the angler, through bifurcatory division. This entails splitting the proposed kind in two, always keeping to the right hand part of the section and holding fast to the community to which the kind belongs until stripping away all of the kind's common features and leaving it in its indwelling nature (Plat., *Soph.* 264 e 9 – 265 a 1).¹⁸ Hence, in the paradigmatic example, the angler is divided relative to binary halves before being shown to be the expert in getting, and specifically the manipulative hunting of animals, and specifically wetland-dwelling fish, who strikes by hooking in daylight from below (Plat., *Soph.* 221 b 3 – c 2). Reflecting on method elsewhere, the Stranger describes bifurcatory division as entailing the isolation of "one form extended everywhere through many things" by establishing difference among objects through taking up a single one (e.g., hunting) as a coherent, immediately intuited whole.¹⁹ This whole is then divided into parts (e.g., hunting by night and hunting by day) that are themselves further divisible. In doing so, the whole is disclosed with reference to the binary halves that compose it, and its essence is articulated through an account of the halves in which it has a share, discarding those in which it does not.

Elsewhere in the *Sophist*, the paradigm of letters again arises to signal reflection on the method at hand and anticipate ways in which its method of accessing the sources of knowledge is in some sense insufficient (Plat., *Soph.* 253 a 1-9). In the dialogue's central digression, the Stranger considers the need for accounts of

the elements themselves, with reference to the ways in which a given element is or is not fit for blending with other elements. The Stranger argues that master of the art of spelling knows, for example, that some letters are fit by nature to blend with others (e.g., 's' and 't'), that some letters are necessary for 'binding' all letters together (i.e., vowels), and that some letters require others for their instantiation and cannot be voiced on their own (i.e., the mute consonants). In other words, knowledge of the parts of the word entails more than recognition across instances, as in the case considered in the *Theaetetus*, but rather the deeper account of the nature of each part.

The need for blending of elements for self-instantiation is analogous to the insight that forms require one another for their own instantiation. The five great kinds – being, motion, rest, sameness, and difference (Plat., *Soph.* 251 d 6 – 256 c 9) – are required in all instances, and only by partaking in some combination of these great kinds can any form present itself to discourse.²⁰ That is, in their discursive intelligibility all forms require being *to be* themselves, sameness insofar as they are self-same, difference (e.g., non-being, which the Stranger establishes as a form of difference at Plat., *Soph.* 257 b 3 – 259 b 7) insofar as they are not other forms, etc.²¹ Thus, the interdependence of a form on other forms has been established, at least in a preliminary way that will require elucidation later.

The reflection on letters helps illuminate what bifurcatory division can and cannot accomplish. Like the maieutic method in the *Theaetetus*, bifurcatory division allows distinct wholes to manifest themselves as unities to be understood. Unlike the maieutic method, bifurcatory division allows a thing to be disclosed with reference to its elements. In this way, this method has begun to fulfill the promise articu-

lated by Socrates in the *Theaetetus* to deliver an account by which true opinion could be oriented. This is related specifically to the third kind of account Socrates considers in the *Theaetetus*: “being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things” (Plat., *Theait.* 208 c 8-9). In other words, this account is useful insofar as it discloses the form under investigation with reference to its participation in *difference*.²²

But the consideration of letters and the identification of the great kinds suggest the need for developing further methods by which knowledge can be established. Bifurcatory division lacks a means of yielding an understanding of the nature of the object *qua* parts and wholes and their fitness for combination. Such an account, as the analogy of letters shows, would go beyond simply displaying the elements in their order, and entails a further inquiry into their constitution with reference to the character of the parts composing them as a whole.

We should be concerned that the elements themselves have not, in all instances, been fully disclosed in their nature upon their division. For example, we can say of 'animal hunting' that it constitutes half of the notion of 'hunting', but little else. If we seek a robust account of the ways in which a given element lends itself to communing with other elements, we need to know more about the nature of the element itself. In this way, the goal of knowing the whole with reference to a full account of its parts has not been fulfilled and the account is incomplete.

Furthermore, as bifurcatory division continues into the *Statesman* and the object of knowledge changes from the sophist to the statesman, the divisions become less precise. With Socrates the Younger replacing Theaetetus as the Stranger's interlocutor, the Stranger initially makes clear that he will proceed in the manner of the previous dialogue at Plat., *Polit.* 258 b 1-8. But

in the initial division in which the interlocutors seek an account of the statesman, the bifurcatory method (Plat., *Polit.* 258 b 1 – 267 a 3) causes the interlocutors to falter, forces digressions, and ultimately leads to a ‘joke’ (Plat., *Polit.* 266 c 1).

Starting at Plat., *Polit.* 258 b 1, the initial bifurcatory division of the statesman begins in the manner of the *Sophist* before Socrates’ the Younger’s disproportionate division of animals into human and non-human animals (Plat., *Polit.* 262 a 4-7) causes the Stranger to reflect on the proper method of proportionate division and the philosophical value of cutting in two (Plat., *Polit.* 261 e 1 – 264 b 8). When the bifurcatory division continues, the Stranger makes the sudden and jarring suggestion that there are in fact two possible paths (Plat., *Polit.* 265 a 4-7), both of which yield confusing and unsatisfying ‘diagonal’ motion. When the ultimate results entail the statesman “running around with the herd” and “having kept up in the race with the one among men who for his part is the most excellently trained for an easily managed life,” the Stranger deems that the divisions have yielded a “laughable” account (Plat., *Polit.* 266 b 3 – c 1).

IV. NON-BIFURCATORY DIVISION AND THE ‘GOD-GIVEN METHOD’

The Stranger will soon (at Plat., *Polit.* 287 b 3) alter his method of division in the pursuit of the statesman in response to the laughable account. The groundwork for the shift begins to be laid in the preceding myth of ages. In the myth, the Stranger describes the current state of the cosmos, in which the care for human community is no longer the job of the gods, but instead is that of the human community itself. Hence the paradigm that the Stranger then be-

gins to draw upon is ‘care’ (ἐπιμέλεια, Plat., *Polit.* 276 d 1-4), and specifically care for the human community.²³

The guidance of the care paradigm will ultimately help the Stranger to come to the final account of the statesman. Prior to this, the Stranger leads Socrates the Younger through a digression on dialectic that informs the change of method leading to the final account.²⁴ He considers the value of paradigms in inquiry with reference to letters and their ability to help young learners of spelling find their way from the known to the unknown, stating that recognizing letters brings young learners back

...first to those cases in which they were correctly judging these same letters, and, while leading them back, set[s] alongside them the ones not yet recognized, and by throwing them side by side to indicate that there’s the same similarity and nature in both intertwinings, until the letters that are truly judged have been shown as juxtaposed with all the ones about which there’s ignorance, and having been shown, thereby becoming paradigms, bring it about that each one of all the letters in all the syllables is always addressed on the same terms with itself: as other when it’s other than other letters, and same when it’s the same (Plat., *Polit.* 278 a 8 – c 1).

The Stranger concludes that in this way a paradigm through which an object can be known is derived “when what is the same in something other that’s sundered from it is correctly judged;” this allows the learner to bring to completion “one true opinion about each of them as about both together” (Plat., *Polit.* 278 c 3 – 5). This suggests steps beyond those indicated in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, as the Strang-

er here discusses letters as a means of passing from opinion to knowledge through study of the unknown with reference to the known. That is, the nature of the unknown is here described as accessible by means of the known, suggesting the ways in which an understanding of the known letter guides the learner into an understanding of the nature of that which is presently unknown.

With these notions established, and following the guidance of the care paradigm, the Stranger proceeds to divide in a non-bifurcatory manner. He says little about this new method, stating only that they will now “divide limb by limb, like a sacrificial animal, since we don't have the power to do it by two,” cutting “with an eye to the number nearest” (Plat., *Polit.* 287 c 3-6). In other words, the process of dividing will no longer yield binaries, but instead will make the number of cuts appropriate to the thing being cut. The notion of ‘limbs’ suggests that these divisions will be in response to the specific nature of the thing being divided, instead of the uniform bifurcatory cuts.

The exact nature of the final inquiry into the statesman (from 287 c 9 to the dialogue's conclusion at 311 c 5) has been debated.²⁵ I follow the interpretation worked out by Mitchell Miller in a series of articles in which Miller interprets the set of final divisions as a non-bifurcatory diairetic account of the form of care for the human community in fifteen cuts, each an independent moment within the spectrum of care bounded on each end by those arts attending to the material and spiritual needs of the community. These include the seven productive (or indirectly responsive) arts related to the *material* life of human community: producers of (1) raw materials, (2) tools, (3) containers, (4) vehicles, (5) defenses, (6) amusements, and (7) nourishment (Plat., *Polit.* 287 c 9 – 289 c 2). These are followed by the one productive and directly re-

sponsive art, (8) slavery (Plat., *Polit.* 289 c 3 – d 1). Finally, by this interpretation the Stranger identifies the seven directly responsive arts attending to the *spiritual* life of the human community: (9) merchants and traders, (10) heralds and clerks, (11) priests and diviners, (12) rhetoricians, (13) generals, (14) adjudicators, and finally, (15) the statesman (Plat., *Polit.* 289 e 2 – 290 e, 303 b 9 – 305 e 5).

This interpretation hinges on an understanding of the middle term, (8) slavery, as entailing a mix of indirect and direct care, insofar as slaves are both goods and agents, and both passively used to meet needs *qua* possession and actively engaged in the human community *qua* human agent.²⁶ In this way, the division is neither bifurcatory nor trifurcatory, but instead yields a unified spectrum bounded by these two distinct poles. In other words, each art is situated relative to the material and spiritual needs in care for the human community to different extents, and the balance between a given art's care for material and spiritual needs positions it relatively among the others.

Importantly, this has yielded an account of these elements insofar as they are constituted by *one another* in their mutual relations to the two extremes of the material and spiritual needs of the human community by which they are defined. In this way, the non-bifurcatory division undertaken here has yielded a spectrum, where each point represents an instance of limit, the identity of which is defined by the points of limit elsewhere on the same spectrum. Each of these points of limit thus indicates a ratio between, at the far end, concern with the material life of the city, and on the near, concern with the spiritual life of the city, with slavery positioned at the midpoint where the two extremes are in balance. This maps on to Socrates' second type of account from the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates had described the account in which one is able

to answer the question of what a thing is “by reference to its elements” (Plat., *Theait.* 206 e 10–207 a 2).

The Stranger says little about his intentions in changing methods midway through the *Statesman*. A consideration of the “god-given method” that Socrates describes in the *Philebus*, which seems to describe a process of coming upon knowledge through means similar to the non-bifurcatory divisions in the *Statesman*, will help to give content to the method and also to use the letter paradigm to reflect on these dialectical methods in one more important way.²⁷ At Plat., *Phil.* 16 c 8 – 17 a 4, Socrates speaks in praise of the ‘finest way’ of investigating by means of a “gift of gods hurled down from heaven by some Prometheus along with a most dazzling fire”.²⁸ Socrates explains:

...whatever is said to be consists of one and many, having in its nature limit and unlimitedness. Since this is the structure of things, we have to assume that there is in each case always one form for every one of them, and we must search for it, as we will indeed find it there. And once we have grasped it, we must look for two, as the case would have it, or if not, for three or some other number. And we must treat every one of those further unities in the same way, until it is not only established of the original unit that it is one, many and unlimited, but also how many kinds it is. For we must not grant the form of the unlimited to plurality before we know the exact number of every plurality that lies between the unlimited and the one. [...] Nowadays the clever ones among us make a one, haphazardly, and a many, faster or slower than they should; they go straight from the one to the unlimited and omit the intermediates. It is these [in-

termediates], however, that make all the difference as to whether we are engaged with each other in dialectical or only in eristic discourse. (Plat., *Phil.* 16 d 1 – e 2, 17 a 1-5).²⁹

Let us note several similarities between Socrates’ opaque account here in the *Philebus* and the Stranger’s non-bifurcatory division in the *Statesman*. First, Socrates says again here that the goal when using this method is to understand the whole with reference to twoness, threeness, or any number appropriate to the nature of the thing under investigation, as was the case in cutting the sacrificial animal with an eye to the number nearest. Second, the claim that “whatever is said to be consists of one and many” has “limit and unlimitedness” maps directly onto the structure of care for the human community that the Stranger articulated in the *Statesman*. For there, care for the human community was shown to be *one* (care) and *many* (a set of fifteen determinate moments). Furthermore, care for the human community was shown to be *unlimited* (insofar as it entails an unlimited dyadic spectrum between care for the material life and spiritual life of the city) and yet also have *limit* (the fifteen determinate points within that spectrum in which the conditions of the spectrum generate intelligible moments of care).³⁰ In other words, care is one and many, and unlimited and limited. Furthermore, Socrates’ emphasis on “the intermediates” (τὰ μέσα, Plat., *Phil.* 18 c 3 – d 1) echoes the key move in the Stranger’s analysis of care; for there the Stranger moved from the analysis of productive arts to directly responsive arts upon identifying their midpoint, slaves, which clarified the two poles of the unlimited dyadic spectrum. In this way, the Stranger’s account was able to rise to the level of true “dialectic” (Plat., *Phil.* 17 b 6 and Plat., *Polit.* 285 d 5).³¹

We can do some work to understand this new method by considering Socrates' examples in the *Philebus*. Socrates helps his interlocutors Protarchus and Philebus to grasp this method through two examples: the scale of musical tones and the discernment of vocalic sounds that are represented independently by letters (Plat., *Phil.* 17 b 3 – 18 d 2). Here he initially notes that “the sound that comes out of the mouth is one [...] but then it is also unlimited in number;” thus “if we know how many kinds of vocal sounds there are and what their nature is, that makes every one of us literate” (Plat., *Phil.* 17 b 4-7). In the case of musical sounds, the one of the form ‘tone’ is defined with reference to each pitch residing on that tone. Thus, an understanding of (e.g.) C sharp is attained with reference to C (as a lower tone) and D (as a higher tone). Understanding C and D, thus, entails understanding C flat (B) and C sharp, and D flat and D sharp, respectively. In this way, knowledge of tones as determinate points of limit along the indeterminate spectrum of tones entails understanding each of the many in its nature, and the ways in which each nature proceeds from the nature of the spectrum and its defining points on this spectrum.

In the case of tones, Socrates moves from the one (tone) to the many (the number of tones instantiated on the tone spectrum). In his second example, that of the vocalic sounds creating letters, Socrates describes the discovery of the letter spectrum by the Egyptian Theuth (Plat., *Phil.* 18 b 6 – d 2) as an example of proceeding from the many (vocalized sounds) to the one (the vocalic sound spectrum).³² Socrates explains that Theuth discovered

that the vowels in that unlimited variety are not one but several, and again that there are others that are not voiced, but make some kind of noise, and that they,

too, have a number. As a third kind of letters he established the ones we now call mute (*ibid.*).

That is, Theuth divided vocalic sounds into three categories: the voiced, the unvoiced but sounded, and the mutes. These he then subdivided based on the number appropriate to the kind of each. Here the spectrum is bounded on the one side by voiced letters (the vowels), the intermediate letters that are unvoiced but sounded, and the mutes.

Importantly, Socrates notes that Theuth “realized that none of us could gain any knowledge of a single one of [the letters], taken by itself without understanding them all” (Plat., *Phil.* 18 c 8 – d 2). In other words, a letter is only understood in its nature when the co-constitutive parts like it in kind have been understood in their own natures. Thus the method of non-bifurcatory division has provided a way of understanding each element in its nature with reference to the other elements that situate it and define its character as such. And the consideration of this distinction with reference to letters points to an important takeaway regarding the method when we return our attention back to the account of care for the human community. For this suggests that something like material production of raw goods is understood *only when it is apprehended with reference to* the other points that constitute its being on its particular spectrum. In other words, no one determinate moment of care *is* without the other determinate moments by which it is co-constituted; likewise, it cannot be *known* in the fullest sense prior to being understood in its context within the spectrum of care. Thus, analyses of, e.g., the letter Eta, or C natural, or the art of producing raw goods, will fail when they are conducted only with reference to these elements *as such*. Instead, it is only when these elements are understood as points

of limit within their co-constitutive many and the one that comprises the many can the elements be known and analyzed.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude and take stock of where our investigation of these methods has taken us, let us review our steps with reference to the notion of the letter. In the consideration of the *Theaetetus* we encountered the provocative suggestion that one only *knows* the spelling of a word (e.g., ‘Θεαίτητος’, or, more precisely, the first syllable of this word, ‘Θε’) if one recognizes its component parts when they appear elsewhere (e.g., the appearance of the first syllable in the name ‘Θεόδωρος’, or, more precisely, both parts composing the many that is the one syllable ‘Θε’). We saw that in the *Sophist* the Eleatic Stranger both seeks to understand with reference to structure and argues that knowledge of a concept (here a letter) entails an account of the further concepts (letters) like in kind with which the element is fit to mix. In the *Statesman*, the Stranger indicates the ways in which known letters can direct the learner toward not-yet-known letters by allowing the learner to begin to grasp the nature of the unknown through its fitness to combine with other known elements like it in kind. This process further reveals previously concealed aspects of the known to the learner as well, insofar as it draws out newly revealed aspects of the known element’s nature. In the account of the ‘god-given method’ in the *Philebus* with reference to its application in the non-bifurcatory division in the *Statesman*, we saw that Socrates uses letters to explain that knowledge of a concept (letter as vocalic sound) is derived only when its situation among all the other concepts (i.e., the other letters) to which it owes its composition has been understood. Our knowledge

of the constitutive structure of the form has provided insight into the being of the form as a one and as a many, both limited and unlimited. This understanding of the one as subjected to both an unlimited plurality and a limited many through the imposition of limit represents a further nuance offered by the dialectical methods that unfold over the course of the trilogy. The unity of these methods that has emerged from our consideration of these methods can act as a provocation towards further considerations of the Platonic education, and aid in the turning of our souls from becoming to being as Socrates describes in the central books of the *Republic*.³³

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- Archon's court, occurs between the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* and *Statesman* on the following day. For a discussion of the dramatic and philosophical connections between the *Euthyphro* and this trilogy, see Wiitala 2014, *passim*. Furthermore, it has been argued that the *Cratylus* might also have been set on the day of the trial, e.g. by Sallis 1996, 225-230. Others, e.g. Nails 2002, 312-313, argue that the *Cratylus* is in fact set some two decades prior. In any event, we should notice that the conclusions and apparent *aporia* of other dialogues, including at least the *Euthyphro* and maybe the *Cratylus*, give further context to the progress made between the *Theaetetus* and the *Statesman*. I will not develop this point here, but it should be remembered that philosophical methods are employed here under the dramatic backdrop of Socrates' impending trial and execution, including that the philosopher had not properly been differentiated from the sophist by the citizens of Athens. Thus the methods are given a political and historical framework as well.

- 2 For a general overview of proleptic in Platonic dialogues, see Kahn 1988, *passim*, but especially 541-542 and 547-549.
- 3 This is not a claim about Plato's development, but instead a claim about the relationship between dialogues independent of the chronology of their composition. I generally take it that Plato's dialogues are intended as pedagogical exercises for students of the academy, not expositions of doctrines, and hence assume that these methods are intended for pedagogical purposes.
- 4 In this paper I follow Ambuel 2007 38-39, and Miller 2016, 6 in reading *only* division, and not 'collection and division' as is often named in the literature, at play in *Sophist* and *Statesman*. Sayre 2006, 36-37 offers a helpful discussion of the terminology and the absence of 'collection' (*sunagōgē*) in 'titular' references to division in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (i.e., Plat., *Soph.* 235 c 8 and 253 d 1; Plat., *Polit.* 284 a 4 - 5 and 286 d 9). Miller argues that 'collection and division' is a term imported from the *Phaedrus* (Plat., *Phaid.* 266 b 4-6) and not clearly at play in the "Eleatic" dialogues. Ambuel argues that collection cannot be at play in the *Sophist* due to an unresolved ambiguity between appearance and reality. Other commentators have argued that collection is at play in the *Sophist*; see, e.g., Bluck 1975, 33-40, Notomi 1999, 2 fn. 75, and Ionescu 2013, *passim*. Cornford and Klein each hold middle positions, as Cornford argues that collection is not at play in the method of the interlocutors but is nonetheless exhibited throughout the movement of the text (Cornford 1935, 171), while Klein holds that each articulation of the preceding divisions counts as a collection (Klein 1977, 14ff).
- 5 E.g., in Miller 1990, *passim*.

NOTES

- 1 The three dialogues take place in a two-day period, probably in spring 399 BCE as argued at Nails 2002, 320. The trilogy is situated definitively within Socrates' life by Socrates' mention of his plans to meet the summons of Meletus later on the day of the *Theaetetus*, setting the dialogues in the months before his trial. It bears noting that the exchange depicted in the *Euthyphro*, set outside of the King's

- 6 Other discussions of the role of letters in the dialogues include Gómez-Lobo 1977, Miller 1992, Notomi 1999, Gill 2006, Sanday 2015a, and Smith 2018.
- 7 For example, Socrates situates his city-soul analogy in the *Republic* with reference to small and large letters (Plat., *Rep.* 368 c 7 – d 7) and its grammatical aspect with reference to the recognition of letters (Plat., *Rep.* 379 a – d).
- 8 For the interpretation of Platonic paradigms that I follow, see Sanday 2017, *passim*, and Smith 2018. For the conflicting view that the notion of paradigms changes in different dialogues, see Gill 2006, *passim*.
- 9 Theaetetus describes this account in hazy terms, and Socrates later characterizes it as a ‘dream’ (Plat. *Theait.* 201 d 9), suggesting that the definition derives from a hazy and pre-discursive source. For a thorough account of the implications of this account’s ‘dreamlike’ status, see Burnyeat 1970, *passim*. For the influential challenge (given in 1952 but unpublished until 1990) to the view that knowledge of forms could be at play in the dream theory, see Ryle 1990, *passim*. Ryle’s view is rebuked by Lesher 1969, *passim* and Miller 1992, especially 87-90.
- 10 Other commentators have also suggested that Socrates’ dismissal of his descriptions of ‘account’ are not as definitive as they might initially seem. Gómez-Lobo 1977, 31, and Desjardins 1981, 11, both argue that these definitions foreshadow elements in the “Eleatic” dialogues. Miller 1992, especially 94-104 and Miller 2016, especially 321-322, also discusses the ways in which the final two senses of ‘account’ in the *Theaetetus* correspond to the methodology in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.
- 11 *Theaetetus* translations taken from Sachs unless noted otherwise. Consistently throughout this paper I replace ‘articulation’ with ‘account’ in translating ‘λόγος’. I follow Fine 1979, *passim* in interpreting Plato’s use of ‘λόγος’ as stronger than that entailed merely by the English ‘statement’. For further discussion of interpretations of ‘λόγος’ in Plato’s writing, see Burnyeat 1990, 136-149.
- 12 Snyder 2016, *passim* has recently done work to show that Socrates’ midwife role in the *Theaetetus* entails Socrates’ use of epistemic failure to increase the efficacy of his methodology. Snyder argues that the bi-product of this experience is creating, within his interlocutors, wisdom regarding the use of this method to generate a sort of provocative *aporia* (Snyder 2016, 8). These points are helpful to consider the positive gains of this method, that is, the important step of *aporia* that acts as a provocation toward further investigations.
- 13 With minor alterations to Sachs’s translation. In this way, Theaetetus demonstrates that he has not made the final step of knowledge of mathematical objects to knowledge of forms described in the middle books of the *Republic*.
- 14 As mentioned above, commentators who have argued this include Gómez-Lobo 1977, 31, Desjardins 1981, 11, Miller 1992, especially 94-104 and Miller 2016, especially 321-322. For a helpful discussion of the *Theaetetus*’ ‘ending well,’ see Haring 1982, *passim*.
- 15 Spelling is at issue in various ways throughout this passage, but is discussed explicitly at Plat., *Theait.* 202 e 7 – 204 a 9, 206 a 3-8, and 207 a 8 – 208 c 4.
- 16 Here I am using my own example of moving from parts to whole to maintain the letters example. Socrates’ analogous example at Plat., *Theait.* 207 a 4 is the description of the wagon as “wheels, axle, box, poles, crossbar”. For without an account of the inner-workings of these parts, we have merely a heap of parts, or a heap of letters in my example.
- 17 Whether division entails discovery or demonstration has been a debated subject since antiquity. Crombie 1963, 2:382 articulates an influential argument that the method is concerned with demonstration, not discovery. Here I follow Ionescu 2013, *passim*, who argues that division entails discovery (acquisition) and can take up objects of knowledge ranging from images to forms, corresponding to the objects of knowledge discussed in the divided line analogy.
- 18 *Sophist* and *Statesman* translations are taken from the Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem editions, with minor modifications noted.
- 19 This explanation comes in the midst of the Stranger’s description of what exactly the dialectician discerns, from Plat. *Soph.* 253 d 5 – e 3, which has been notoriously divisive among commentators. Here the Stranger says that the diairetic dialectician “...has an adequate perception of one form (εἶδος) extended everywhere through many things, each of which lies apart, and also many forms which are other than one another and are embraced by one external to them; again, he perceives one unified form composed of many wholes as well as many forms marked off as entirely apart. But to know this is to know how to discern, according to kind, where each is able to commune and where not” (Plat., *Soph.* 253 d 7 – e 3, substituting ‘form’ for Brann, et al.’s term ‘look’ in translating ‘εἶδος’, to use the term consistently with previous renderings above.) These lines have been interpreted as (i) a description of collection (d 5 – 7) and division (d 7 – 9) respectively, as by Cornford 1953 and Sayre 2006; (ii) an anticipation of the discussion of the five greatest kinds, as by Gómez-Lobo 1977; (iii) as something of a hybrid (albeit earlier) version of (i) and (ii), as by Stenzel 1964; and (iv) as pointing both to non-bifurcatory division (d 5 – 7) and bifurcatory division (d 7 – 9), as by Miller 2016. I remain agnostic on this issue here due to spatial limitations, but suggest that my interpretation does not hinge on a commitment or lack thereof to any of these lines of interpretation.

- 20 It bears noting that the Stranger does not claim that this list of five great kinds is exhaustive. It is possible that there are others. Plato's character Parmenides in his eponymous dialogue describes likeness, unlikeness, oneness, and multitude (Plat., *Parm.* 129 d 2 – 130 b 8) in such a way as to suggest that these kinds are co-constitutive of forms in a similar way; but I lack the space to develop this connection here. For more on this possibility, see Miller 1986, especially 176-185, and Sanday 2015a, especially 154-165. Regardless of the list of great kinds, the important takeaway here is that structure of a given form requires its participation in other forms, and an understanding of a given form requires an account of the ways in which its nature requires participation in other forms.
- 21 For a discussion of the senses in which forms have been understood to be in motion and a novel interpretation of the communing of forms as the sense of motion, see Wiitala 2018, *passim*.
- 22 The value of bifurcatory division in Platonic education has been debated. Crombie 1963 and Ryle 1966 both argue that the method is valuable only to philosophical amateurs, while Brown 2010, 168 argues that although the method is unsuccessful in the *Sophist* (since sophistry is not a *techne* but is instead amorphous) it remained a viable method for students in Plato's academy. For discussions of the value of non-bifurcatory division and its relevance to Platonic metaphysics, see Miller 1999, Ionescu 2014, and Ionescu 2016.
- 23 For more on the ways in which the myth of ages prepares the way for the digression on method (Plat. *Polit.* 277 a 2 – 287 b 2) and the role of the care paradigm in the subsequent non-bifurcatory division, see Ionescu 2014, especially 42-45, and Ionescu 2016, especially 95-99. For more on the role of paradigms in the dialogue, see Sanday 2017, *passim* and Smith 2018, *passim*.
- 24 For more on the components of this digression – the notion of paradigm, the paradigms of care and the weaver, and the notion of due measure – and their role in allowing for the change of method, see Smith 2018, *passim*.
- 25 Miller articulates his view in depth at Miller 1990, 343-346, and expands upon it further in a 1999 article reprinted at Miller 2004, 141-161. Of the numerous differing interpretations of this passage, noteworthy are Goldschmidt 1947, *passim*, who holds that the passage has a bifurcatory structure, and Ackrill 1970, *passim*, who argues that some divisions throughout *Sophist* and *Statesman* exhibit a non-bifurcatory structure.
- 26 Miller 1990, 345 discusses slavery and its position in the spectrum composing care for the human community in more depth.
- 27 For more on the connection between the final, non-bifurcatory division and the god-given method, see Miller 2004, 141-161, Ionescu 2014, *passim*, and Ionescu 2016, *passim*. For a broad and helpful overview of the notions of science, method, and truth at play in the *Philebus*, see Harvey 2012, *passim*.
- 28 *Philebus* translations taken from the Frede edition.
- 29 The exact nature of this method has been debated. For the view that the 'god-given method' entails both collection and division, see Benson 2007, *passim* and Fletcher 2017, especially 184-191.
- 30 For a discussion of the distinction between 'unlimited' in this technical sense and its usage elsewhere in the dialogue, see Sanday 2015b, 367 f.11.
- 31 At Plat., *Polit.* 285 d 5, the Stranger asks Socrates the Younger whether the analysis of the statesman is for the pursuit of knowledge of the statesman only, or the pursuit of skill in dialectics more broadly. Socrates the Younger picks the latter.
- 32 The relationship between the types of investigation indicated by the tones and letters example has been controversial. Hackforth 1945, 26 understands the two as fundamentally unified by an initial intuition into the unity of the object of inquiry. Harte 2002, 204 offers helpful discussion of the sense in which the imposition of structure upon tone provides the tone scale with its identity. For the interpretation of this passage as marking the distinction between the 'learning procedure' and 'discovery procedure' in the 'god-given method,' see Fletcher 2017, especially 188-189.
- 33 For extensive, helpful feedback on and contributions to previous drafts of this paper, I am indebted to members of the University of Kentucky Philosophy Department, the participants in the 2nd annual University of Chicago Graduate Conference in Ancient Philosophy, including commentator Amber Ace, and anonymous reviewers for *PLATO JOURNAL: The Journal of the International Plato Society*.