

# The Epistemic Dialectic

1.

[Euthydemus:] And do you know by means of that by which you have knowledge, or by means of something else?

[Socrates:] By means of that by which you have knowledge. I suppose you mean the soul, or isn't this what you have in mind?

[Euthydemus:] Aren't you ashamed, Socrates, he said, to be asking a question of your own when you ought to be answering?

[Socrates:] Very well, said I, but how am I to act? I will do just what you tell me. Now whenever I don't understand your question, do you want me to answer just the same, without inquiring further about it?

[Euthydemus:] You surely grasp something of what I say, don't you? he said.

[Socrates:] Yes, I do, said I.

[Euthydemus:] Then answer in terms of what you understand.

[Socrates:] Well then, I said, if you ask a question with one thing in mind and I understand it with another and then answer in terms of the latter, will you be satisfied if I answer nothing to the purpose?

[Euthydemus:] I shall be satisfied, he said, although I don't suppose you will.

[Socrates:] Then I'm certainly not going to answer, said I, until I understand the question.

[Euthydemus:] You are evading a question you understand all along, he said, because you keep talking nonsense and are practically senile.

[Socrates:] I realized he was angry with me for making distinctions in his phrases, because he wanted to surround me with words and so hunt me down.

- Euthydemus, Plato<sup>1</sup>

Dialectic, the dominant mode of western philosophical discourse. Prominently used by Socrates, at least according to the records of Plato, his seminal work Dialogues. It is unlike a monolith, however, for the purposes of critique and creation, a categorization is required.

The Negative Dialectic, the skeptical form we are most familiar with, the one Euthydemus encounters above. Let's set the stage. There are two individuals involved, the one making the positive claim, the Answerer (A), and one refuting

said claim, the skeptic, the Questioner (Q) - old Socrates himself. Here, A puts forward a claim C, on which Q conducts subsequent enquiries. This typically consists of binary questions, a rally of yes or no's, and upon the answers certain concessions are made regarding C. The aim of Q is to seek out contradictions, a lack of internal consistency, given C and the answers to the questions. Thus, refuting A's claim.

Note that the conversation happens on unequal grounds, categorically different ones even. As Q doesn't have to defend a position, merely refute an existing one. Imagine a unique football (soccer) match. A field where one team has a goalpost to defend (A), while the other doesn't (Q). An empty stakes circumstance for the latter team, at worst they fail to refute A. Conversely, the former team is in a position where their best outcome is simply avoiding defeat.

[Socrates: ] Do you then want us to assume two kinds of existences, the visible and the invisible?

[Cebes: ] Let us assume this.

[Socrates: ] And the invisible always remains the same, whereas the visible never does?

[Cebes: ] Let us assume that too.

[Socrates: ] Now one part of ourselves is the body, another part is the soul?

[Cebes: ] Quite so.

[Socrates: ] To which class of existence do we say the body is more alike and akin?

[Cebes: ] To the visible, as anyone can see.

[Socrates: ] What about the soul? Is it visible or invisible?

[Cebes: ] It is not visible to men, Socrates, he said.

[Socrates: ] Well, we meant visible and invisible to human eyes; or to any others, do you think?

[Socrates: ] To human eyes. Then what do we say about the soul? Is it visible or not visible?

[Cebes: ] Not visible.

[Socrates: ] So it is invisible?

[Cebes: ] Yes.

[Socrates: ] So the soul is more like the invisible than the body, and the body more like the visible?

[Cebes: ] Without any doubt, Socrates.

- Phaedo, Plato<sup>2</sup>

Now, the other: The Positive Dialectic. While the Negative Dialectic appears in the “early” dialogues - Apology, Euthyphro and the like - the positive emerges in the “middle” - Meno, Phaedo and Parmenides. Unlike the refutative spirit of the former, the aim of the Positive Dialectic is to defend a standpoint.

### Methodology of the Positive Dialectic<sup>3</sup>

- a. Create a hypothesis
- b. Deduce conclusions from the hypothesis
- c. Through discourse, find if conclusions are internally consistent
- d. If not, the discussants arrive at a modified hypothesis that has consistent conclusions

2. With the foundational concepts in place, a characterization of the modern debate - the liberal idea that through a discourse between opposing positions, one reaches closer to the truth. The Questioner-Answerer of regimented Athenian debates is replaced by lawyers. Say  $L_1$  and  $L_2$ , for brevity as a  $n$  lawyer generalization is possible. Furthermore, the debate also consists of a jury, the audience, that witnesses the discourse.

Modern Debate: An interplay of the positive dialectic, that each lawyer uses to defend  $\Delta p_1$  their positions,  $L_1 \Delta p_1$ , and the negative dialectic, that each lawyer uses to critique ( $\kappa$ ) the other's position,  $L_1 \kappa p_2$ .

Then, a few possible conclusions exist.

1. Either  $L_1$ , by symmetry  $L_2$ , admits defeat. A statistical impossibility.
2.  $L_1$  and  $L_2$  come to a mutual consensus, modifying their respective standpoints. Not as rare as (1), however, it does happen.
3. No clear winners emerge, and typically, no winners are declared. But that leaves room for an implicit judgment by the audience, the jury who declares the unofficial winner of the debate.

The first two options do offer a resolution to the debate, thus, their epistemic validity will be discussed alongside the nature of debate itself, further down the line. Consider the third, and most common, conclusion of debates. The olive leaf crowning of the winner by the audience. It offers a possibility to critique debates,

as grounded in their actual practice, the *Is*, the structural parole<sup>4</sup> of how debates are conducted and received.

3. The Freudian Superego<sup>5</sup> - the set of rules and ideals the unconscious has borrowed, from parents, environment and general culture at large. Given that the resolution of the debate is unclear, as in who was correct, it is left to the audience to determine. Most of humanity is not capable of apprehending the truth, a statement that is perhaps uncontroversial. Almost all of humanity is incapable of truth, that is extension on my behalf, one that requires a new spiteful project<sup>6</sup>. Even with the first concession, an acceptable one, it begs the question: how does humanity decide on “truth”?

Appeal to the Superego: An argumentation strategy in which one (or both) lawyers consciously (or unconsciously) ground their arguments in “reasonable” premises, that of the Superego, such that the jury (audience) are persuaded to their side.

Consider the following debate. A rogue lawyer arguing for the non-existence of morality. The other lawyer, the one who embodies the spirit of the jury’s superego, asks - do you think Rape/Paedophilia/[Any sufficiently gruesome act for the superego] is not immoral<sup>7</sup>? An amoralist would say that the question doesn’t make sense, for it’s neither immoral nor moral, that the evaluation of such questions lie in the realm of the beyond, the *Zombie*, the affirmation of non-predicates. However, any such standpoint will be immediately discredited, for the superego only exists inside fixed rules.

Historically, the superego is encouraged in the practice, the *Parole*, of debates. When confronted with non-normative positions, the Athenian philosophical dialectic, the forefather of modern debates, resorted to evaluate arguments based on its adherence to the superego.

Now it may seem that the Answerer could always win the debate by simply objecting to any premise the Questioner might ask for. But this he cannot do, since in dialectical debates, unless they are degenerated into eristic debates, the audience expects the discussants to display reasonable behavior and to cooperate to some extent in their common enterprise (*koinon ergon*) of producing good arguments. Therefore, an Answerer refusing to concede

acceptable (plausible, reputable) premises (endoxa, singular: endoxon) would be frowned upon by the audience and might even make a fool of himself

- Classical Backgrounds, Handbook, 1987<sup>8</sup>

Propositions are acceptable (endoxos) if they are “accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise – i.e., by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and reputable (endoxois) of them

- Topics, Aristotle<sup>9</sup>

Acceptability by the majority is not an indication of truth. And the wise - oh, how the supposed wise have been wrong about the maximal creative breakthroughs of their time. Copernicus. Boltzmann. Nietzsche. After all, when have the spirits of resentment cared about truth?

4. Petītiō principīi, colloquially known as begging the question. To support a claim with a premise presupposed to be true, or more blatantly, to have a premise that assumes the claim itself. Thus, giving it the illusion of truthfulness. Now, I aim to discuss the epistemic validity of debate itself. And for that one must set the stage.

What are the meta-premises of a debate? Let us use previous notation.

1. Assume a state of affairs  $S$ .

2. For simplicity, we have two lawyers ( $L_1, L_2$ ) and their corresponding positions ( $p_1, p_2$ ).

3. The goal of the debate is to pursue the truth regarding  $S$ , say  $p^*$ , such that

- $p^* = p_1$  or  $p^* = p_2$  or  $p^* = \text{not}(p_1 \text{ or } p_2)$
- that  $p_1$  and that  $p_2$  (regarding  $S$ ) is false

Here, I claim that the lawyers are practicing Meta-(petītiō principīi). Given that (3), the debaters are here to pursue truth, aren't the lawyers already assuming truth regarding  $S$ ? Through means of their respective positions  $p_1$  and  $p_2$ . And as the debate progresses, retroactively create arguments and defend their claim - that  $p_i$  as regards to  $S$ .

Meta-(petītiō principīi): Assuming truth regarding a state of affairs  $S$  in a debate, that truth being a position. Given that one aims to pursue truth through the debate, a meta-premise, any context with it can only exist when

the participants assume no truth regarding  $S$ . However, in debates the lawyers already occupy a position. Thus, contradicting the contextual meta-premise.

Note that debates without any intention to pursue truths are plausible, for instance, as modes of persuasion. Appeal to the superego can be an effective tool in satisfying your want, although there exists a high chance of such persuasion being inauthentic. The truth of debates, it is rhetoric, a mode of persuasion, battleground of populists and politicians, not the venue of truth-seekers. Alas, one remembers: that lawyers don't have the best reputation for honesty.

5. Epochè, the suspension of judgment. A technique employed by the ancient skeptics, of both major traditions, the Academics and the Pyrrhonians. For the Academics epochè was negative dogmatism, an affirmation that nothing can be apprehended. In contrast, the founder of the Pyrrhonian tradition, Pyrrho of Elis, refrained from asserting that nothing can be apprehended, a maximal embodiment of the epochè.

The dogmatic philosophers at the time, like Plato and Aristotle, asserted positions of the form *that p*. The Academics, the negative dogmatists, asserted positions of the form *that not p*, where p included any possible knowledge. Contrary to both, Pyrrho asserted a position of infinitely regressive uncertainty, that he knew not whether p or not p, and whether that statement or not, and so on. Thus, the Pyrrhonian position of absolute epochè -

Absolute Epochè:

$\circlearrowleft$  let  $p' = \text{that } p \text{ or not } p$ . Then, that  $p'$  or not  $p'$

where  $\circlearrowleft$  signifies the perpetual repetition of the epochè<sup>10</sup>

An absolute epochè isn't possible. While the Pyrrhonian spirit is maximally embraced and necessarily relevant to the state of philosophy now, one must figure out the limits of epochè, that is the maximal point until which we can suspend judgment. As shown in *Truth, Certainty and Language*, the maximal epochè of the human condition reaches the limits of language, the limits of our world as Wittgenstein mutters from the grave.

Maximal Epochè: The suspension of judgment under the limits of maximal skepticism, that is skepticism until one cannot skepticize anymore. Thus, one

reaches the limits of language itself, and finds that as the limit of the maximal epochè.

If a person were to embody absolute epochè, the act of speaking itself, of utilizing language in any manner, would be incoherent. Given that maximal epochè has language as its limits, the study of knowledge must start from there. Similarly, given a consensus state of affairs S, the contextual epochè must only assume the unavoidable limits of S. And pursue truth thereafter.

Contextual Epochè: A maximal skepticism, however, localized to the state of affairs S. Skepticize until S transforms into not-S, and use that as the limit to ground contextual epochè.

6. What is the, if any, epistemically valid method of discourse? I aim to formulate that here: the Modified Pyrrhonian Discourse. Initial foundations as procured from the contextual epochè, and a subsequent elimination of positions and opinions regarding S for all participants. However, an increased clarity of epistemological-logical procedures is still lacking. A question still left to be studied. However, the starting point seems inevitable: the Maximal Epochè, to rewrite epistemology through language.

In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari answer the titled question as follows - Philosophy is the discipline that involves creating concepts. An intuitive sense that it could be the answer, but, I will not assume. Do away with all intuitions, keeping only those that prove inextricable. Do away with all presumed truths, retaining only those unavoidable ones. The next overcoming of philosophy is about to begin.

## Footnotes

1. Plato (1997), p. 733  
- Handbook (1987)
2. Plato, 1997, p. 69
3. Handbook (1987), *Classical Backgrounds*, p. 5 (of 76)

4. Parole, as borrowed from Sussure's division of Language: the one in practice, Parole, and the abstract structure that underlies, the Langue. Parole as the normative practice of debates until now.
5. Schacter, Daniel (2009), p. 481
6. Krishna, Niranjana (2023), *Truth, Certainty and Language*. Furthermore, the word capacity produces a sense of ambiguity here. Capacity as the state of culture, not the potential, for that would be outside the grasp of any analysis. Credits to Rey for pointing it out.
  - Rey's Substack - <https://substack.com/@atemporalmemories>
7. To be clear: I don't think a psychologically healthy person would conduct rape. The beyond-realm of such evaluation is the psychological, the ontological, the sphere of the new Ethical.
  - Krishna, Niranjana (2023), *The Ethical Imperative*
8. Handbook (1987), *Classical Backgrounds*, p. 10 (of 76)
9. Aristotle 1984, Vol. 1, Topics I.1, 100b21–23
10. The symbol is also used in Krishna, Niranjana (2023), *The Non-Regrettable Tattoo*
11. Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix (1991). p. 5

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