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Dialectic in Plato's Late Dialogues

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ABSTRACT

Plato's method of hypothesis is initiated in the *Meno*, is featured in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, and is further developed in the Theaetetus. His method of collection and division is mentioned in the *Republic*, is featured in the *Phaedrus*,and is elaborated with modifications in the Sophist and the *Statesman*. Both methods aim at definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In the course of these developments, the former method is shown to be weak in its treatment of sufficient conditions, and the latter is shown to be comparably weak in its treatment of necessary conditions. A third method, which avoids these difficulties, is introduced in the first part of the *Parmenides* and is applied in connection with the eight hypotheses that follow. This application yields a demonstration of serious shortcomings both in historical Eleaticism and in the Eleatically-inspired theory of Forms in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, along with a demonstration of comparative strengths in historical Pythagoreanism and in the Pythagorean-inspiried theory of Forms in the *Statesman* and the *Philebus*.

Keywords: method of hypothesis, method of collection and division, early theory of Forms, late theory of Forms, eight hypotheses of the *Parmenides*, developmentalism, interpreting Plato's dialogues.

In the context of the Divided Line, dialectic is described as the ability to rise from hypotheses to a non-hypothetical first principle and thence to proceed downward to a conclusion. This description is repeated just before the sequence on the curriculum for the guardians, where dialectic is said to be the only method that advances from hypotheses to find confirmation (for its conclusions) in the first principle itself. Through reasoning (*logos*, 532A7, 533C4, 534B4) of this sort, Socrates says, dialectic enables one to perceive the essence of each thing, including the essential nature of the Good itself (*auto ho estin agathon*: 532B1). This much should be familiar to any careful reader of the *Republic*.

Interspersed within these passages, however, are hints of quite a different method that readers are more likely to overlook. This other method (*methodos*: 531D1) draws out the mutual association and kinship (*tēn allēlōn koinōnian […] kai xuggeneian*: 531D1-2) of the subjects being studied, and shows how they are collected together (*xullogisthē*: 531D2). While discussing the curriculum for the guardians a few pages later, Socrates adds that someone who can view things in their connections (*sunoptikos*: 537C7) is a dialectician. This reads like the procedure of collection practiced in several later dialogues. The companion procedure of division, moreover, is mentioned in Book V as part of the argument that women are no less suited than men to be guardians. Avoidance of eristic arguments requires the ability to divide according to Forms (*kat' eidē diairoumenoi*: 454A6). This ability, Socrates says in effect, is a necessary ingredient of dialectic.

It is puzzling to find both the method of hypothesis and the method of collection and division presented in a single dialogue. The method of hypothesis is actively pursued in the *Phaedo* and the *Theaetetus*, whereas collection

and division figure prominently in the *Phaedrus*, the *Sophist*, and the *Statesman*. But in the *Republic* they somehow come together. My purpose in this paper is to show how these two methods develop in their respective dialogues, how they interact along the way, and how they finally become a single method in the *Parmenides*. For this purpose I shall assume a general familiarity with the dialogues in question and limit textual references to specific passages that contribute directly to my argument. The argument of this paper overall represents a method of developmental analysis which I shall briefly describe by way of conclusion.

The method of hypothesis, I believe, is an outgrowth of the procedure of elenchus in the *Meno*. As practiced on both the slave boy and his master, elenchus involves leading the respondent to accept certain positions from which Socrates deduces inconsistencies or otherwise unacceptable consequences. In the *Phaedo*, the positions accepted by the respondent are replaced by hypotheses deliberately laid down by the investigator, who in this particular context is concerned with the nature of causation (*aitias*, 99D1, 100B3). The investigator's first task is to test the consequences of the hypothesis for consistency. Consistency, we are to understand, is a necessary condition for the truth of the hypothesis. If its consequences are inconsistent, the initial hypothesis is replaced by another which undergoes the consistency test in turn. This process is repeated until the hypothesis at hand (H') has been shown to be consistent and hence possibly true.

The next step is to proceed upward, as it were, to a more general hypothesis (H'') that entails H'. If H'' passes the consistency test, the process moves on to increasingly more general hypotheses each entailing the lower-level hypotheses previously shown to be consistent. The

process continues until a comprehensive hypothesis is found that is adequate (or sufficient, *hikanon*: 101E1), in the sense of its truth being unproblematic in the context of investigation. Truth of this adequate posit is sufficient for the truth of H'. The investigation is complete when H' has been shown to meet both necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. In a way far short of pellucid, this method figures in the *Phaedo*'s final proof of immortality.

The method of hypothesis laid out in the *Phaedo* is the direct antecedent of the movement from the penultimate to the ultimate level of the Divided Line in the *Republic*. Both levels here are explicitly concerned with hypotheses. The penultimate level is that of discursive thought (*dianoian*: 511E1), typified by mathematics, which lays down hypotheses and proceeds downward (*katabainē*: 511B9) to conclusions. Inquiry on this level deals with consistency, coherence, and perhaps other necessary conditions for truth. Sufficient conditions are left to the ultimate level, that of intelligence (*noēsin*: 511E1), which is the faculty of dialectic. The dialectician begins with hypotheses and proceeds upward (*anōterō*: 511A6) to the non-hypothetical first principle (*archēn anupotheton*: 510B7). This first principle is non-hypothetical both in the sense of not being posited and in the sense of being the ultimate ground of truth. As such, it is sufficient for the truth of conclusions derived from it. In the context of the *Republic*, the task of the dialectician is to capture the essence of each thing it investigates in a statement (*logou*: 532A7) satisfying both necessary and sufficient conditions of truth.

Unlike the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* provides no illustration of the method it describes. Given the illusive character of the first principle, this is no cause for surprise. A method very similar to that put forward in these dialogues, however, appears to be at work in the *Theaetetus*. There is no need to speculate on whether Plato wrote the *Theaetetus* with the method of hypothesis explicitly in mind. As readers of this dialogue, nonetheless, we can profitably view its results as a demonstration of the method's peculiar limitations.

In his role of philosophic midwife, Socrates elicits from Theaetetus three provisional definitions of knowledge. Knowledge first is identified with perception (*aisthēsis*: 151E3), next with true judgment (*alēthē doxan*: 187C5), and finally with true judgment accompanied by an account (*meta logou alēthē doxan*: 201C9-D1). With a substantial amount of supporting argument, the first definition is shown incapable of simultaneously meeting two necessary conditions for truth—namely that perception, as befits knowledge, must be unerring (*apseudes*: 152C5) and must have what exists (*tou ontos*: 152C5) as its object. The second definition then is shown inadequate by the counterexample of the jurymen who arrive at true judgment in the case of an alleged crime they know nothing about. Pursuit of the third definition is stalled by a number of failed attempts to find a relevant sense of 'account', and the dialogue ends without putting that definition to a serious test. Socrates must be off to hear the indictment brought against him by Meletus, leaving both Theaetetus and reader without a viable definition of knowledge. In a word, the dialogue ends in failure.

The *Theaetetus* aims at finding a discursive definition of knowledge. In Socrates' attempts to achieve that result, the method of hypothesis amounts to coming up with a defining statement that meets both the necessary condition of consistency and the sufficient condition of being firmly grounded. The dialogue fails in being unable to meet this pair of conditions. In terms of the Divided Line, Socrates' venture with Theaetetus falls short of the level at which

ascent to the first principle could even begin. Plato may have had reasons beyond dramatic effect for ending the dialogue with Socrates leaving to face his indictment. At this point in his methodological development, I suspect, Plato's interest had already turned to another method. Be this as it may, next day's conversation between Theaetetus and the Eleatic Stranger follows the method of collection and division instead.

Like the method of hypothesis, the procedure of collection and division is foreshadowed in the *Meno*. Socrates' so-called theory of recollection is put forward in that dialogue in order to motivate continued inquiry on the part of a soul (*psuchē*: 81C5) cleansed of error by Socratic elenchus. Vague as the notion of recollection may be, the general idea is that the soul is immortal and, by virtue of its many births, has seen all there is to see both here and in the netherworld. Hence there is nothing it is not prepared to recollect. What Socrates emphasizes by way of background is that all nature is akin (*phuseos hapases suggenous*: 81D1) and that when the soul recalls (*anamnēsthenta*: 81D2) one thing it should be able to discover (*aneurein*: 81D4) all other things on its own. Although embedded in myth, this description of the kinship of all nature anticipates the account of collection in the *Phaedrus*.

Even though collection and division are mentioned briefly in the *Republic*, as noted previously, little is said there about their use in dialectic. The *Phaedrus*, on the other hand, contains the most specific description of these procedures in the entire Platonic corpus. Although they play major roles in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* as well, the *Phaedrus* also is the only dialogue in which these procedures are explicitly paired and identified by name. More than that, it is the only dialogue in which

collection is mentioned specifically as taking over the role of recollection in the *Meno*.

This occurs at *Phaedrus* 249B7-C3, where Socrates proclaims (1) that only souls which understand speech in terms of Forms (*eidos*, 249B8) can enter human bodies, (2) that the capacity in question involves bringing together (*xunairoumenon*, 249C1) many perceptions into a unity by reason (*eis hen logismō*, 249C1), and (3) that this process amounts to a recollection (*anamnēsis*, 249C2) of things seen by the soul during previous lives. The link with recollection is further reinforced when Socrates observes (at 249E6-250A1) that not every soul, despite its previous vision of reality (*ta onta*, 249C6), will find recollection (*anamimnēskesthai*, 250A1) of that reality an easy matter.

The process of bringing many perceptions together in a reasoned unity is redescribed several pages later as brining a dispersed plurality together and seeing it as a single Form (*Eis mian […] idean […] sunorōnta*: 265D3). Its purpose is to define (*horizomenos*: 265D4) and to clarify whatever topic one studies. This is the point at which the unifying process is explicitly designated 'collection' (*sunagōgōn*, 266B4). As far as I can tell, this is the only place in the corpus (with possible exception of *Philebus* 23E5 and 25A3) where the term *sunagogē* is used to designate collection.

Division is described in the same context as the ability to cut things according to Forms (*kat' eidē […] diatemnein*: 265E1) following their natural articulations (*kat' arthra hē pephuken*: 265E1-2) and to avoid hacking off parts like a clumsy butcher. Socrates illustrates this procedure with reference to his two previous speeches on love. Both speeches took the general class of dementia as given (*elabeten*: 266A1) and proceeded to divide it in opposite directions. The first (impious, 242D7) speech made cuts to the left until it arrived at something called

'sinister love'. The second speech (Socrates' palinode, 243B2) led in the rightward direction to a divine form of love which it praised as the source of the greatest human goods. Division in both directions was non-dichotomous, a matter of significance as we shall see vis-a-vis the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. It receives its 'official' name of *diairesis* in the same sentence (266B4) where its companion procedure is labeled *sunagōgē*.

Having identified the procedures in question, Socrates praises them for their contribution to thought and speech. He also refers to people able to apply these procedures as dialecticians (*dialektikous*: 266C1). The term *dialektikē* comes into play a second time toward the end of the dialogue when the dialectician is depicted as someone who has achieved knowledge of what is just, beautiful, and good (*dikaiōn te kai kalōn kai agathōn epistēmas*: 276C3). Eschewing words written in ink, someone versed in that art (*dialektikē technē*: 276E5-6) will sow his words in a receptive soul where they will grow and produce knowledge in that other soul in turn. A literary garden (*grammasi kēpous*: 276D1) of this sort, Socrates avows, will yield the greatest happiness (*eudaimonein*: 277A3) a human being can achieve.

Pronounced as it may be, Socrates' portrayal of collection and division in the *Phaedrus* is overshadowed by his evocative and uncannily powerful myth of the charioteer. Use of these procedures by the Eleatic Stranger in defining the sophist, by contrast, is a predominant feature of his conversation with Theaetetus. The stated purpose of the *Sophist* is to give a clear account (*emphanizonti logō*: 218C1) of what a sophist is (*ti pot' esti*: 218C1). By 'clear account' here, we are to understand a *definition* of sophistry, given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. What is necessary for being a sophist is determined by the procedure of collection, what is sufficient by the process of division. As with the method of hypothesis previously, attention to necessary conditions comes first, followed by a determination of sufficient conditions. First comes collection, that is to say, and then division.

Definition of sophistry is preceded by a 'practice' definition of angling, which serves as a paradigm (*paradeigma*: 218D9) for the main task to come. In the case of angling, collection begins with a perfunctory listing of such arts as commerce, fighting, and hunting, which yields the general class of acquisitive arts within which angling presumably is included. Subsequent division of this general class yields several sets of particular features, each set being sufficient to distinguish angling from other acquisitive arts.

Collection in the case of sophistry itself is more complicated and ultimately more satisfactory. Collection here comes in two stages. In the first instance, the two discussants simply assume that sophistry, like angling, belongs to the class of acquisitive arts. Five distinct definitions of sophistry follow from this assumption. Each specifies a specific branch of sophistry, but none expresses features that all sophists share in common. That is to say, although each definition articulates conditions sufficient for being a sophist, none expresses conditions necessary for sophistry in general. These five inadequate definitions of sophistry then are collected in a way that reveals sophistry in general to be a productive rather than an acquisitive art (233D-234D). Sophistry in general turns out to be the art that produces mere images of real things (*mimētēs [...] tōn ontōn*: 235A1-2). Division of the class of productive arts leads to a satisfactory definition of sophistry by the end of the dialogue.

It should be noted that collection in the *Sophist* exhibits a weakness that corresponds

to the vagueness of recollection as portrayed in the *Meno*. In order to identify the subject of the five faulty definitions as specific forms of sophistry, the dialectician must have some preliminary grasp of what sophistry is before collection can begin. In some elusive sense, the treatment of necessary conditions in the *Sophist* seems to beg the question. This shortcoming in Plato's treatment of necessary conditions comes back into play when we turn to the dialectical method in the second part of the *Parmenides*.

Division in the *Sophist*, on the other hand, is relatively unproblematic. Immediately preceding the final (successful) definition of sophistry, the Eleatic Stranger reminds Theaetetus that the divisions involved must be dichotomous (*dichē*: 264D11) and always to the right (*dexia aei*: 264E1). These restrictions are observed in all divisions pertaining directly to sophistry within the dialogue. The importance of well-executed division is emphasized at 253C-D when the Stranger playfully points out that they may have stumbled unawares upon (*empesontes*: 253C7) the 'free man 's' knowledge (see *Theaetetus* 172D1). The task of dialectic (*dialektikēs*: 253D2), he says there, is to divide according to kinds (*kata genē diaireisthai*: 253D1), not confusing different classes as being the same as each other.

The Eleatic Stranger presents a substantially altered portrayal of dialectic in his subsequent conversation with the Young Socrates. The main purpose of this dialogue, clearly affirmed at *Statesman* 285D5-7, is to make the persons engaged in it (including its readers) better dialecticians (*dialektikōterois*: 285D7). As far as collection is concerned, little remains of the regimented procedure pursued in the *Sophist*. The purpose of collection in that dialogue was to provide an auspicious start for the ensuing division by identifying features that sophists generally hold in common—that is, features necessary for being a sophist. In the *Statesman*, however, the task of specifying necessary conditions is managed by an agreement to treat weaving as a paradigm (*paradeigma*: 279A7, passim) that incorporates activities comparable to those of statesmanship. One feature of the definition of weaving that ensues is its distinction between direct and contributory (e.g., manufacture of spindles) causes of the finished product. Following this paradigm, the Stranger begins his final definition of the kingly art by distinguishing between direct and contributory causes in the domain of civic affairs.

Before moving ahead, the Stranger observes that contributory causes in this case cannot be cut dichotomously (*temein dicha*: 287B10). In this case, it turns out, there are exactly seven kinds of relevant contributions, which the Stranger then enumerates and describes in detail. Division continues with a distinction between governors and servant classes, of which latter the Stranger identifies exactly 4, proceeds with a distinction between genuine and sophistic governors, which number exactly 6 in kind, and ends with a distinction between genuine governors who rule and those who are subordinate, of which latter there are exactly 3.

Overall there are four dichotomous divisions, which it is natural to lay out along the right, accompanied by a series of non-dichotomous divisions in the leftward direction (see diagram). [diagram somewhere in this paragraph] The dichotomous divisions add up to a positive definition of the statesman as the ruling governor of a genuine polity who is directly responsible for that civic entity. This much follows the instructions of the *Sophist* requiring twofold division along the right. Contrary to the dictates of the *Sophist*, however, there is also the series of multiple divisions to the left. In the domain of civic affairs, there are 7

contributory skills, 4 kinds of servants, 6 types of sophistical rulers, and 3 classes of governing subordinates. This makes twenty classes of civic roles distinct from statesmanship itself. Assuming this classification to be exhaustive, as the Stranger apparently intended, we have a negative definition of statesmanship as well. Statesmanship is a civic role distinct from the other twenty.

This brings us to the method described and illustrated in the second part of the *Parmenides*, which also proceeds by way of negation. If you want to be thoroughly prepared to do philosophy, Parmenides says, you must consider the consequences both of the hypothesis (*hupotheseōs*: 136A1) that the thing to be examined exists and of the hypothesis that it does not exist. The hypothesis chosen by Parmenides to illustrate this method is that Unity exists (the Unity of his historical counterpart, 137B3-4). The first part of the illustration is to deduce the consequences of this hypothesis. The second part is to draw deductions from the negation of the hypothesis, which is to say from the hypothesis that Unity does not exist.

The first part duplicates the first step in the method of hypothesis in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, which lays out conditions necessary for the truth of the hypothesis in question. What distinguishes Parmenides' method from this earlier version is the way it arrives at sufficient conditions. Whereas the earlier version prescribes something vague (and probably unachievable) like moving upward to a non-hypothetical first principle, Parmenides tells the dialectician to deduce consequences from the *negation* of the original hypothesis. If the original hypothesis is H, then its negation is –H; and if –H entails C, then –C entails H. Falsehood of the consequences of –H, that is to say, is sufficient for the truth of the original

H. As far as the practical pursuit of dialectic is concerned, Parmenides' treatment of sufficient conditions is far superior to the treatment of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

Parmenides' method is more effective than the methods of the *Sophist* and the S*tatesman* in its treatment of necessary conditions as well. As observed previously, collection in the *Sophist* presupposes prior knowledge of the thing being defined, and in this sense is a carry-over from recollection in the *Meno*. The same shortcoming also undermines the Stranger's use of paradigms in the *Statesman*. Both dialogues featuring the Eleatic Stranger, that is to say, are weak in their treatment of necessary conditions. This weakness is overcome in the dialogue led by the Eleatic master himself. In upshot, Parmenides' method remedies both the faulty treatment of necessary conditions in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* and the faulty treatment of sufficient conditions in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

Harking back to the *Republic*, furthermore, we can read the results of applying Parmenides' method in his namesake dialogue as an advance from hypotheses to non-hypothetical principles. Readers who continue past the first quarter of the *Parmenides* will probably be aware of the long-standing controversy over how the eight hypotheses of the second part relate to each other. The standard reading pairs the hypotheses in order of occurrence (H1 with H2, H3 with H4, etc.), which results in a surfeit of contradictions that intrepid commentators delight in deciphering.

There is another way of pairing the hypotheses, however, which is closer to the text and which removes these apparent contradictions. With this pairing at hand, the second part adds up to a masterful critique of metaphysical systems prominent when the dialogue was written. According to this pairing,

H1 and H6 are read as positive and negative counterparts and as entailing the same set of consequences. In similar fashion, and with similar results, H2 pairs with H5, H3 with H7, and H4 with H8.

Here is the simple logic that leads to these results. If both H and –H entail the same C, it follows that C is true unconditionally. Beginning with positive H1 and negative H6, Parmenides shows that the truth of their shared consequences does not depend upon the truth of the original hypotheses. The non-hypothetical upshot alluded to but never achieved in the *Republic* becomes an accomplished fact in the *Parmenides*. This strikes me as a suitable ending to Plato' s long search for an optimal method of dialectical inquiry.
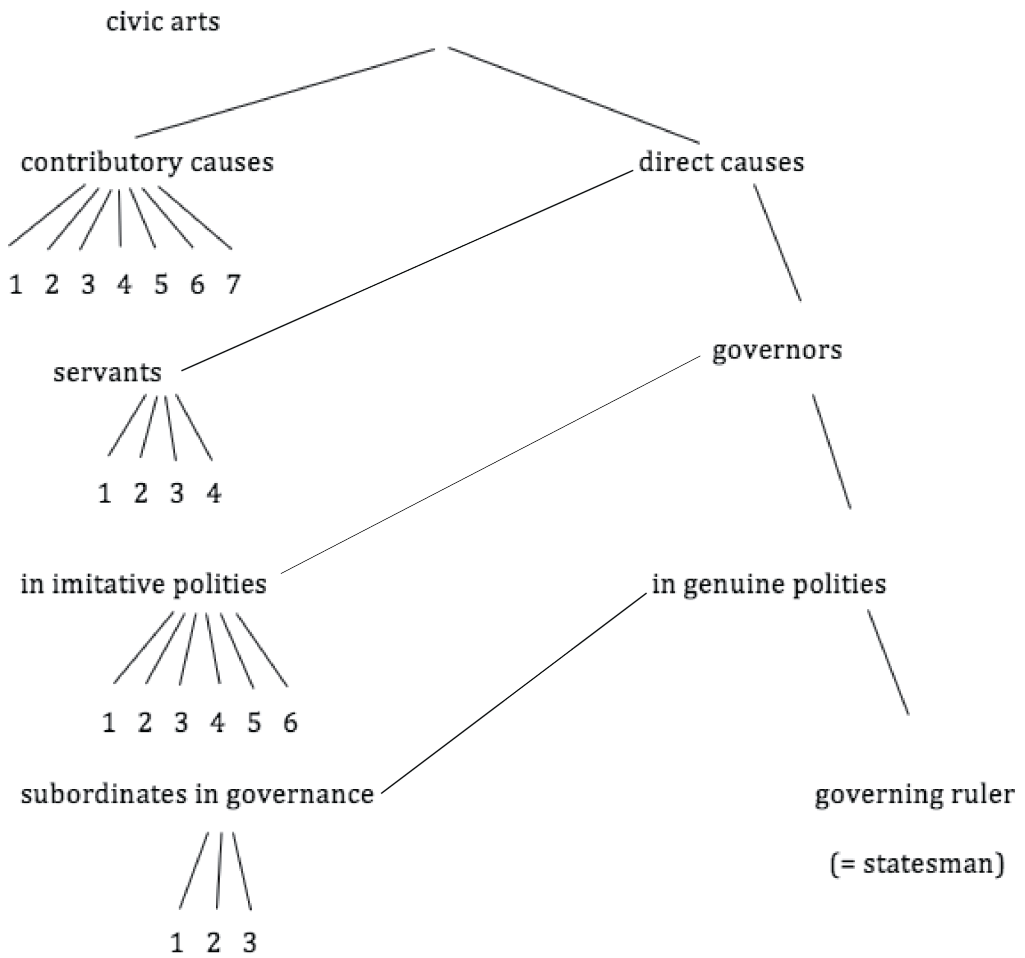
At the beginning of this talk, I promised a few remarks about ways of approaching Plato's dialogues. Any approach that denies development through successive stages of composition, I am fully convinced, has little interpretive value. In my view, so-called unitarianism is the 'climate-change-denier' of Platonic studies. My approach obviously is a version of developmentalism. In the foregoing presentation, moreover, I have attempted to expand the thesis of developmentalism into an interpretive method.

Here is a brief synopsis of how the method goes. First collect together all the dialogues that deal explicitly with the topic in which you are interested. In the present case, the topic is philosophic method. Then sift through relevant passages in these dialogues (taking context into account) with a sharp eye for differences from case to case, dividing them into groups with obvious affinities. This can (but need not) be done without concern for chronological order. Then set about constructing a coherent narrative connecting these passages in a plausible sequence of development. In the present case, for instance, it is obvious that collection in the *Sophist* has been replaced by paradigms in the *Statesman,* and that the treatment of hypotheses in the *Theaetetus* preceded that in the *Parmenides.* One's antecedent views on chronology at some point very likely will come into play, but in a way compatible with an adjustment of these views if the narrative demands.

In the present case, the narrative begins with the *Meno,* and moves ahead with the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and the *Theaetetus*, with their respective treatments of hypotheses. It then moves directly from the *Theaetetus* to the *Phaedrus*, the *Sophist*, and the *Statesman*, with their respective treatments of collection and division. The writing that brings the story to its climax is the second part of the *Parmenides*. To be sure, there is always the possibility that Plato altered key passages in a given dialogue after making it public. So chronology of the dialogues as we know them is never a settled matter. Having been through the present exercise, however, I am fully convinced that Plato's thoughts on methodology progressed from elenchus and recollection in the *Meno* to the exceptionally elegant and powerful method demonstrated in the *Parmenides*.

In this regard, my talk constitutes an illustration of what I have dubbed the developmental method. Other worthwhile applications of this method might treat Plato's ethics and political theory, as well as his elusive ontology. By way of conclusion, I may say that the Plato revealed by this method is far more interesting than an author whose thoughts remain static throughout his career. Whatever you may think of the method itself, it seems obvious to me that the interpretive approach behind it is a beneficial approach to Plato's dialogues.

civic arts

contributory causes　　　　　　　direct causes

1　2　3　4　5　6　7

servants　　　　　　　　　　　governors

1　2　3　4

in imitative polities　　　　　in genuine polities

1　2　3　4　5　6

subordinates in governance　　　governing ruler

1　2　3　　　　　　　　　　　(= statesman)

Alternative Definitions of Statesmanship:
Dichotomous to Right, Non-Dichotomous
by Negation to Left