Chapter iii: Disagreement and Agreement

The *Meno* had pointed to a way out of the purely aporetic conclusions of the earlier dialogues, but the method that was to lead to positive results was only sketched. It is in the *Phaedo* that Plato elaborates on this method and actually shows its application on a large scale. However, the description of the method in the *Phaedo* has of late become something of a *cause célèbre* in the interpretation of this dialogue and of Plato’s middle period as a whole. The precise force of Plato’s methodological remarks has been the object of lively controversy, as have been also their relation to the remarks in the *Meno* and the *Republic*, and the extent to which they are in effect applied in the course of the dialogue.

It is my contention that the methodological remarks of the *Phaedo* are an elaboration of those of the *Meno* and lead to those of the *Republic*, and that, moreover, the *Phaedo* is itself constructed throughout as a single unified example of the use of the hypothetical method it advocates. To substantiate this view, it would seem appropriate to begin by a close examination of *Phaedo* 100A and 101D, and then, in the next chapter, analyse the sequence of the argument in the dialogue and show that it conforms to Plato’s own methodological precepts.

The two passages are as follows: 100A3-7 ἀλλ’ οὖν δὴ ταύτη γε ὑρμησα, καὶ υποθέμενος ἐκάστοτε λόγον ὃν ἂν κρίνω ἐρρωμενέστατον εἶναι, ἃ μὲν ἂν μοι δοκῇ τούτῳ συμφωνεῖν τίθημι ὡς ἀληθῆ ὤντα, καὶ περὶ αἰτίας καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων [ὁντων], ἃ δ’ ἂν μὴ, ὡς οὐκ ἀληθῆ. 101D3-E1 ei δέ τις αὐτῆς τῆς υποθέσεως ἔχοιτο, χαίρειν ἐῴης ἂν καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἀποκρίναιο ἐὼς ἂν τὰ ἀπ’ ἐκείνης ὑμηθέντα σκέψαι εἰ σοι ἀλλήλους συμφωνεῖ ἢ διαφωνεῖ ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐκείνης αὐτῆς δέοι σε διδόναι λόγον, ὡσαύτως ἂν διδοῖς, ἄλλην αὖ υπόθεσιν υποθέμενος ἡτίς τῶν ἄνωθεν βελτίστη φαίνοιτο, ἐως ἐπὶ τι ἰκανὸν ἕλθοις, ...
As Hackforth translates them, they could seem to be quite straightforward accounts of Plato’s method of inquiry into the “reasons”\(^1\) (ai-tiai) of things:

Anyhow, it was on this path I set out: on each occasion I assume the proposition which I judge to be the soundest, and I put down as true whatever seems to me to be in agreement with this, whether the question is about causes or anything else; what does not seem to be in agreement I put down as false.

And if anyone were to fasten upon the hypothesis itself, you would disregard him, and refuse to answer until you could consider the consequences of it and see whether they agreed or disagreed with each other. But when the time came for you to establish the hypothesis itself, you would pursue the same method: you would assume some more ultimate hypothesis, the best you could find, and continue until you reached something satisfactory.

2. The central problem in these passages is the question about the meaning of συμφωνεῖν and διαφωνεῖν. As Sayre has summarized it in a recent book, the problem is as follows:

If Socrates’ procedure with regard to propositions that agree with the hypothesis is justifiable, then ‘agrees with’ here [in 100A] must carry the sense of ‘is implied by’. Yet if his procedure with regard to propositions that do not agree is justifiable then ‘agrees with’ must carry the sense of ‘is consistent with’. But it would appear that the term cannot carry both meanings at once, since consistency and implication are different logical relations.\(^2\)

As Socrates uses the term symphonein only once in 100A, it is improbable that it is carrying both meanings at the same time, unless one wishes to accuse Plato of “a crude logical mistake”. It is, of course, possible to conclude that Plato was being deliberately vague, in order to “preserve conversational simplicity”, and that the term symphonein is

\(^1\) Better than “causes”, though I shall be using this word too, as “reason” may sometimes translate also logos.

doing double duty. This has been suggested, among others, by Robinson.3

Sayre contends that it is possible to make good logical sense out of the passage if we assume that the negation of agreement between propositions is not lack of agreement but actual disagreement, i.e. that Plato took the negation of οὐμφωνεῖν to be not lack of entailment but actual inconsistency. Using the so-called “Polish notation”, Sayre explains: “There is no reason why Plato ... being innocent of a systematically developed logic of propositions, might not have thought of that which does not agree with the hypothesis as disagreeing with it – might not have constructed the negation at 100A7, that is, literally to qualify the verb ‘agrees with’ itself, and not to qualify the assertion of agreement between hypothesis and proposition. Not to agree with h, in this case, could be construed as disagreeing with h in such a fashion that if h is true then p is false. Failure of p to agree with h then would be asserted by LChNp. If this expedient of interpretation were adopted, LChp would assert the agreement of p with h, and LChNp would assert the lack of agreement of p with h, providing just the relationship needed to make good sense out of Socrates’ methodological remarks at 100A.”4

But Sayre himself points out three difficulties in the way of this interpretation:

a. The interpretation of the denial of agreement as disagreement is not, in his view, as natural as the interpretation that disagreement means merely lack of agreement. “The term symphoneo – he says – or its equivalent in our language, seems inappropriate as a vehicle for the sense of logical entailment.”5

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3 Robinson (1953), 128. Crombie (1963), ii 539 ff., seems to be in general agreement with him.
5 P. 19. I cannot see why the denial of agreement is “more naturally” thought of as lack of agreement rather than as disagreement. Cf. ‘You must do it’ and ‘You must not do it’, as well as ‘You can do it’ and ‘You cannot do it’; both seem perfectly ‘natural’.

There is however a further reason along these lines for not having symphoneo and diaphoneo meaning respectively ‘entailment’ and ‘inconsistency’. Any two sounds either symphonic or diaphonic, and there is no third possibility. But on the interpretation we are examining two propositions could neither entail nor be inconsistent with one another. The metaphor fails, therefore, to convey this meaning from the very start.
b. As Robinson has shown, Plato’s use of *symphoneo* and *diaphoneo* in other contexts never clearly indicates entailment or its absence, but it seems clearly to indicate consistency or inconsistency.\(^6\)

c. The most important objection brought by Sayre against his first interpretation is that in 101D it is quite implausible that *symphoneo* means ‘to be entailed by’. There one is instructed “to check the consequences of one’s hypotheses for *mutual* agreement (ἀλλήλοις συμφωνεῖ) before one turns to substantiate the hypothesis itself. Only rarely, if ever, would the consequences of a dialectician’s argument entail *each other*”.\(^7\)

Therefore, Sayre proposes an alternative interpretation. He assumes that Socrates’ audience could be relied upon “to recall the technique of geometrical analysis upon hearing his description of method at *Phaedo* 100A”. Indeed, Cebes and Simmias, as well as Echecrates, were Pythagoreans and would certainly be familiar with this common mathematical practice. They would naturally think of the hypotheses and the propositions in agreement with them as convertible propositions. Sayre is assuming here that Greek mathematical analysis was a method “in which proof of a given proposition is sought by deducing consequences from it until one is reached which is known independently to be true.” Now, “as a point of procedure, geometers typically are concerned with deductions in which both premises and conclusions are statements of equality which are mutually convertible.”\(^8\)

If this interpretation is right, two propositions are in agreement if they are consistent. This accounts for the second part of the statement at 100A: whatever does not agree with the hypothesis is posited as false. Now, the first part of the statement at 100A, i.e. that whatever agrees with the hypothesis is posited as true, “is accompanied by the assumption that members of Socrates’ audience are intended to draw upon an acquaintance with geometrical analysis in understanding that any proposition consistent with the hypothesis is also convertible with it and hence entailed by it”.\(^9\)

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6 Robinson (1953), 127. See, e.g., *Phaedrus* 270C, *Gorgias* 457E.
7 Sayre (1969), 20 n. 3.
8 Pp. 20-22.
9 P. 35.
Sayre seems to waver between the two interpretations and he suggests at the end “that *Phaedo* 100A-101D, although not at all a piece of logical nonsense, remains vague as to how exactly it should be interpreted, and that this is as Plato intended it to be”.\(^{10}\) This does not seem to me to be a much better solution than Robinson’s, although it certainly is more elaborate.

[3] I think, nevertheless, that there is no need to surrender so quickly. It seems to me that what vitiates the interpretations of both Robinson and Sayre is their assumption that the hypothetical method is related to mathematical analysis in being deductive and assuming convertible propositions. Robinson says that in the *Phaedo* it seems that Plato regarded the method of hypothesis, at least for mathematics, as consisting of nothing more than deduction.\(^{11}\) Sayre seems to think so too in his first interpretation and even more in the second.

But I have already argued that Greek geometrical analysis was not deductive and was not intrinsically concerned with convertible propositions. If this is so, then Sayre’s second interpretation, which anyway leaves too much to the understanding of the listeners and the readers, lacks all foundation. On the other hand, if *symphonein* at 100A is supposed to mean ‘entailment’, then ἀλλήλους συμφωνεῖ at 101D cannot be understood but on the assumption of convertibility, the very assumption that led Sayre to abandon his other interpretation. What I am suggesting is that the interpretation of *symphonein* in both its occurrences should be rid of the misconceptions about Greek analysis that played such a great role in it.

*Symphoneo* in Plato means in other contexts mere consistency.\(^{12}\) Why should it not mean the same here? The Platonic myth of the horror of precision will not suffice as an explanation. As a matter of fact, at 100A Plato is saying that whatever is consistent with the hypothesis (and is relevant to the subject under discussion) is provisionally *protithec*\(^{13}\) as true (ἀληθῆ ὄντα), and what is not – as not so. The important

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\(^{10}\) P. 39.

\(^{11}\) Robinson (1954), 253.

\(^{12}\) See n. 6 above. Plass (1960) makes Plato sound even vaguer.

\(^{13}\) For the meaning of *tithemi*, see Robinson (1953), 93 f.
and primary notion is here – as in the Socratic elenchus, of which the method of hypotheses is an avowed derivation – the notion of inconsistency. So, e.g., in Republic 436-7, 610A, in Sophist 259A, in Gorgias 457E, the main stress is always on the refutation of the hypothesis. In effect, no hypothesis ever receives a positive proof; there is only a lack of refutation. The hypothetical method by itself can only disclose inconsistencies, but it cannot, by its own nature, give us the truth. Only demonstration proves, but demonstration, if it does not follow from an unhypothetical beginning, is valueless.

Sayre’s difficulty stems from the fact that he wants a positive conclusion to be implied in 100A5 τίθημι ὡς ἀληθῆ ὄντα. But there is no need to look for it at the expense of being entangled in grave exegetical confusion. For symphonein is a relation weaker than entailment but stronger than consistency. It is in fact consistency between propositions relevant to the case in discussion, which is certainly more than mere consistency between two propositions whatsoever. An important feature of Plato’s method as disclosed here is that he works within a restricted universe of discourse, and the limits of this universe of discourse are left for the hearer or the reader to understand from the context. This is not unlike Plato’s assuming a background of “standing assumptions” against which he proposes his hypotheses. Every proposition which is relevant to the case in discussion is either consistent or inconsistent with the hypothesis and its consequences. If it is inconsistent, one cannot affirm both this proposition and the hypothesis, and one must choose between them. If there is no contradiction between them, the new proposition is provisionally held as true. The same is said in the second passage: before one comes to the establishment of the hypothesis itself, one must check its consequences to see whether there is any inconsistency in them, or between them and our “standing beliefs”.

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14 Robinson himself was quite aware of this fact. See, e.g., (1954), 255. Cf. further pp. 209-212, above.
15 Cf. Republic 533C, Cratylus 436D.
16 See, e.g., Phaedo 92Bff.
17 On the consequences of the hypothesis conflicting with standing beliefs, see Robinson (1953), 133.
Up to this point the hypothetical method is very much akin to the Socratic elenchus. The final departure from it takes place at 101D5: If the proposed hypothesis remains unrefuted, then one should try to ‘establish’ it, to give it a reason, “in the same way”, namely in the same hypothetical way, by trying to justify it by a “higher” hypothesis.

Robinson, faithful to his interpretation of analysis as deductive, stresses the first part of Plato’s hypothetical method and underestimates the importance of the second part. The method of hypothesis, he says, is a method of approximation, in that hypotheses are corrected in the light of the contradictions they might raise, and are thus gradually made more and more adequate. He seems to consider the establishment of the hypothesis as a sort of psychological enlightenment, a sudden apprehension of the particular hypothesis as clara et distincta, following months and years of hard work trying to refute it. The failure to refute the hypothesis seems to him to be the ultimate basis of its acceptance.

In this interpretation intuition is underplayed. This is not to say, as Robinson himself reminds us, that intuition has no place in the hypothetical method. But it is restricted here to the repetition of one single sort of intuition: the intuition that this proposition logically entails that proposition. (Robinson does not mention another kind of intuition no less important in the method he is presenting: the intuition that this proposition contradicts that proposition.)

But this interpretation of Robinson’s does not account for the fact that the text gives us two stages of the hypothetical method: the first stage is the verification of our hypothesis, much in the way described above; the second stage is the ‘giving of a logos’ to our hypothesis, by means of yet another hypothesis (and not only “correcting” or “revising” it). From this further process (logon didonai) it is clear that the establishment of the hypothesis is not merely negative, but that the failure to refute the hypothesis must be followed by a ‘giving of a reason’, without which the hypothesis cannot reach certainty. This logon didonai is prima facie the same procedure described in the Meno as “binding opinions αἰτίας λογισμῷ”.

How do we arrive at this ‘higher hypothesis’? If my interpretation of geometrical analysis is correct, by the same way used in analysis – by intuition. But there is an important difference between this intuition and
the Heraclitean intuition: this intuition does not give the truth, let alone self-contained truth. It gives us only a hypothesis, another doxa that must be given a logos, and can never pretend to be knowledge without being given such a logos. Plato stresses several times the difference between right opinion and knowledge. Right opinion, he says, e.g., in the *Meno*, is always right insofar as it is right opinion and will never be false. But, still, it is not knowledge. Poets, seers, politicians can all have right opinion, but they do not possess knowledge. Only the philosopher transforms his irrational intuition, his mania, into knowledge which can give an account of itself.

Mere failure to show a contradiction is not enough. A homologia, says Plato in the *Republic*, will never be science. There is need of an intuition that will carry us ‘above’ our present hypotheses. But this intuition by itself will not give us knowledge. It will only provide us with yet another hypothesis, another doxa, which itself needs to be established.

It should be noted that the term ‘intuition’ has acquired in my present usage a rather peculiar meaning: this is not an intuition that presents us with truth, it is an intuition that presents us with opinions to be tested. Nevertheless, I keep the term in order to stress that here we have an ‘irrational’ (non-deductive, non-inferential) feature of the method. The way you come to your hypothesis is irrelevant: you can take it out of a poem (*Meno* 77B), you can borrow it from religious myths (*Meno* 81A), you can believe in it from authority (*Meno* 73C), it can be suggested to you by your interlocutor (*Meno* 84E). It is all one. The genesis of the hypothesis is itself outside the hypothetical method. This is why Socrates does not seem to be perturbed very much by the fact that it was he that suggested to the slave in the *Meno* the answer that was to be proved right. It makes no difference for the method whether Socrates or the slave proposes the hypothesis to be tested. In either case it is only a doxa that must be fettered αἰτίας λογισμῷ.

There is therefore in the hypothetical method another kind of intuition besides what is acknowledged by Robinson, not unlike the Heraclitean intuition in that it presents itself with a prima facie credibility. But it is unlike it in that this credibility is open to attack because it does not purport to give us self-certifying truth, but only opinions to be
tested.\textsuperscript{18} If our intuition survives the attack and does not raise any contradiction, it still has only its \textit{prima facie} credibility to rely upon, as Socrates says very clearly in the \textit{Gorgias} (527A): the reason why Socrates is right is that three among the wisest men in Greece could not offer a suitable alternative.

[5] What is the relation between the ‘higher’ hypothesis and the lower one? The interpretation that sees analysis as deduction will naturally suppose that the higher hypothesis is higher in that it implies the hypothesis to be justified and that, since the propositions concerned are mutually convertible, is implied by it as well. But, although this might be the case in geometry, this seems not to be Plato’s actual procedure in the dialogue. I have already argued that less emphasis should be put on the implication between the premises and conclusion of a demonstration and more on their relation as cause and effect.\textsuperscript{19} The same is true of Plato. Plato’s hypotheses in the \textit{Phaedo} are not sufficient conditions. But they are not necessary conditions either, as 98B ff. shows very clearly. Plato’s hypotheses are \textit{aitiai}, brought in in order to διδόναι λόγον. What exactly this means can be seen only from a close examination of the dialogue in its entirety.\textsuperscript{20}

The only way out of this seemingly endless string of hypotheses is to arrive at something ‘sufficient’. Whether this is supposed to be sufficient in relation to a given situation only, or it is intended as sufficient absolutely, is not made clear. There is indeed no open promise of an unhypothetical beginning. But this seems to me irrelevant. The hypothetical method is by its very nature dialectical, or should we say ‘situational’. It starts from a given concrete situation and follows its unique course according to the actual responses of the persons involved. The level of the philosophical discussion at each stage of the dialogue, the meanders of the analysis, the scope of the ethical or metaphysical outlook are dictated by Socrates’ interlocutor. Meno, being who he is, cannot carry the discussion further than it went. His inability to distinguish

\textsuperscript{18} Against Vanhoutte (1949), 47: “... D’autre part ... [in the initial theory of ideas] ... les Idées se justifient par leur intelligibilité propre. Chacune d’elles est un ἵκανον.
\textsuperscript{19} Cf. pp. 61-66., above.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. also ch. ix, pp. 207 f., above.
between learning as acquiring new doxai and learning as ‘recollecting’ puts a limit to Socrates’ attempt at attaining a satisfactory account of virtue and knowledge. It takes Theaetetus to raise the discussion to a higher level.  

Even in the Phaedo the relativity of the τι ἱκανόν is very marked. Simmias and Cebe see the case for the indestructibility of the soul as “sufficiently proved”. But not Socrates. What suffices for Simmias and Cebe does not suffice for Socrates. The τι ἱκανόν can, therefore, be interpreted situationally. And within the Phaedo there would be no reason for demanding an absolute principle. Socrates in the Phaedo had set before himself a task: to produce an apologia of his way of life before his friends. This, as any dialectical conversation, is fragmentary and is tied to the here and now. What is required of him is to satisfy his friends in this particular situation.

But even when the discussion comes to an end, Socrates points further. The dialogue conducted here and now has reached a point that is psychologically sufficient for the characters involved in this particular conversation. But if the dialogue can be satisfied with interim premises, Dialectic cannot. Socrates-Eros always pushes the discussion still further, to a point that is not anymore what Aristotle would have called ἱκανὸν πρός τινα but ἱκανὸν ἁπλῶς.  

This transcendence from the existential limitations of the dialogue is clearly implied in Socrates’ remark at 107B. As a matter of fact, the corner-stone of Plato’s epistemology, as expressed as early as in the Meno, is the firm distinction between opinion and knowledge. But knowledge is possible only on a foundation that is sufficient absolutely. In any case, even if this absolute foundation is humanly unreachable (the text in the Republic seems to be against this view), still it exists as a real foundation of being and knowledge. Knowledge is really distinct from

21 There is, of course, the further, fundamental irony of the dialogue as a premeditated work of art. As such, it is not in fact a live discussion. But as a written dialogue it strives to be the nearest possible approximation to it. The whole of Plato’s attitude towards the written word is implied here. See, e.g., Friedländer (1958), i, “Dialogue”. Rosen (1968), Introduction.

22 Simmias had done it before, at 77A5, and also at 72A4-8.

23 On τι ἱκανόν see Verdenius (1958), 231, and references there. But Verdenius’ adopted solution seems to me not to do justice to this dynamic aspect of the τι ἱκανόν.
opinion, i.e. the distinction between them is founded in the nature of things. There is in Plato no possibility of making the absolute principle into a Kantian idea, a point in the infinite towards which our approximative analyses tend. All the stages of the analysis are equally devoid of epistemic value, unless they be related to an absolute beginning. Although Plato’s philosophical analysis starts from opinions, it is grounded in the ultimate distinction between opinion and knowledge.