ABSTRACT: In this paper, I will show the deep roots of dialogue in Plato’s thought, in order to examine the validity of the so-called ‘esoteric Plato’. The confrontation between dialogicity and unwritten doctrines is the main theme of this article. These two views — Hermeneutics and Tübingen School — are not far away on concrete contents, with more or less variations. But it must be noticed that both conceptions of Platonic thinking are contradictory and that is reflected in their explanations of Plato’s own philosophical project.

To begin with, I will not compare each point of the Hermeneutic and Tubingen School positions. I will explain, so far as I can understand, why the explanation of the Tübingen School is unsatisfactory. (1) These insufficiencies are not related to its deep analysis of the Platonic oral tradition, exactly to its interpretation. (2) The question is wholly hermeneutical and refers to the pretension, extension and value that this oral doctrine can have in Platonic philosophy. I will avoid the content questions, because they are far away from the purpose of this paper. The implicit question in these two trends is the following: can Plato’s own philosophy be reduced to a metaphysical system? (3) The affirmative answer to that question holds the whole account of the Tübingen School. But I consider that this assumption is not correct and that it supposes the projection of alien elements to Platonic philosophy. And my task in this contribution is to show why.

Plato’s thought has two axes: thematical and formal. Thematically it moves around the Good, and formally, around the dialectic. Both themes are the ground of his whole work and the ideas are not more than the attempt of joining them. The dialectical access to ideas is fully congruous with the question of the Good, at all levels. This is clearly exposed in the beginning of Philebus, (4) where it is necessary to reach the truth about the good through dialogue, with all required efforts. But dialogue is not a combat between enemies to win one position, but the battle between allies supporting the truth.

Dialectic is not another thing than the ability to guide a conversation, that is, the capability to dialogue. (5) Because of that, language —exactly λόγος (6) — has no secondary position in Plato’s philosophy. Even one of his works is wholly dedicated to that theme — Cratylus —, and there it can be seen that language is neither pure nature nor complete artifact. The discourse about the whole belongs to the dialectician, that is, to the philosopher, and in this
discourse are found truth and falseness. (7) The dialectician knows, due to his ability to answer and to distinguish between authentic answers and seeming ones. (8) His ability does not depend upon the knowledge of systematic metaphysics. (9) Philosophy is the articulation of an answer, not knowledge previous to all queries.

In this manner, dialectic is not properly something previous to interrogation. In another case, the questioning as such would have no sense. To give account — λόγοι διδομένοι — a property that belongs to the dialectician, (10) is not the know how to build a system. The universal claim of philosophy —using a wholly foreign expression to Plato’s vocabulary— is global, as a partial discourse has no sense. (11) What prohibits the dialectic to be a systematic philosophy, is that the dialectic verses on reality, and this is first in relation to λόγος. This global view — συνωμοσία — belongs to dialectician (12) and it is the articulation of a question whose elements are previously dispersed. (13)

There is another ground because Plato’s dialectic does not look for building a system. As I have written and Plato expounds in many places, dialogue is essential for the learning of philosophy. It is not founded in a more or less pedagogical reason, as we can understand it today, (14) but in a truly παιδεία, that the very same philosophy needs to exercise it, that is dialogue. The way of philosophy is always personal and that implies that nobody can go another way than one’s self. But some orientation is necessary to be able to walk. Philosophy is not an individual activity, because it always needs dialogue. If conversation were not possible, that would be due to the possession of complete wisdom, which is fully impossible for mortals. The conversation is the way to overcome the limitations of language. (15)

Here lies an indirect critique to the sophist movement, contemporary to Plato. The impression, which he transmits to us, is that the sophists are the only educators in Athens who earn money by learning rhetoric professionally. Due to the money, they looked for the fastest and most effective method of success for their pupils. All in their teaching is subordinated to success, and that produces a clearly instrumental usage of the rhetorical art. (16) For the sophist persuasion, success is the most important and everything depends upon it. Therefore truth is subordinate. (17) The sophists are great figures of the Greek culture and Plato admires them sincerely, although the differences between them and the philosopher are totally irreconcilable.

Philosophy is the acquisition of some knowledge (18) and not of some logical tricks that guarantee success, as happens in the sophist case. Philosophy cannot be fed with fallacy. (19) From that follows the worst consequence for philosophical souls, as Plato says: skepticism. (20) That prohibits completely the dialogue and, in this way, all possible philosophy. Instrumentally-used rhetoric provides success, but makes absurd the whole love to wisdom. (21) This is a calculated usage of reason, but it has no faculty for truth (22) and it must replace true arguments for sophisms. (23)

All that I have said is Socrates’ pursue of virtue. (24) His fundamental care is the find of the Good, absolutely essential theme, where lies the end. (25) But this search is not something easy, and its difficulty exceeds the ability of one man. (26) An alliance is required, and that makes the query fruitful. That is true dialogue. Dialogue consists simply in making a common λόγος. Hence the great dialecticians too are great philologists. (27)

This is clearly stated in Euthyphro, where the discussion about piety takes place. And this question is not easy, because it is not simple to decide whether to accuse one owns father in a court belongs to piety or not. Euthyphro has done that, because he believes that he knows what piety is. After having a conversation with Socrates, it is clear that the problem is more complicated than it once seemed and its solution is not indifferent.
I think that these constants are in the whole Platonic work. On one hand, the interrogations that philosophy inquire are not trivial and need more time. On the other hand, all questions need an answer, which cannot be given beforehand. (28) Plato says in *Epistula VII*, that philosophy is to live with the problem and be intimate with it, and suddenly the truth takes place in the soul. (29) That is dialogue too, because thought is the silent and inner conversation of the soul with itself. (30) In that sense, it can be considered as a synopsis, viewing that the multiplicity of elements of our thought is related to a unity in reality. Synopsis is too what Plato calls as νος, whose own nature is not discursive. (31) Strictly speaking, νος is ineffable and this does not suppose any sort of mysticism, but this considers that νος does not fit the nature of language, that intellect and speech do not hold the same nature. The ineffability does not mean total unspeakableness, and it is possible to talk about it, considering that language is not the perfect approach to refer to νος.

From dialoguicity as perspective, many references to an early or later discussion on the same topic can be understood and it is not necessary to call in cause an esoteric teaching. I think it is unequivocal that Plato does not attempt — nor even does he want to — to conclude any genuine philosophical problem. That is certainly impossible. (32) I believe that the esoteric interpretation of Plato is too one-sided, and in order to show that, I will take two positions called up by the esoterists as justifications of an unwritten doctrine.

The first one is when Socrates speaks about the Good in *Respublica*, he says that this time is not the only chance to speak about it, because there are so many opportunities. (33) Evidently, Plato can refer here to the inner activity of the Academy. Such a difficult theme and such a fundamental question as the Good, it is the ontological inquiry par excellence, cannot be resolved in a pair of words. But another thing is to suppose that this topic is avoided in the dialogues to be treated only in the academic lectures. Strictly speaking, that cannot be proved. (34) Socrates is concerned of the most metaphysical problem, and conversation about it is not something casual, as somebody could think, but it is the only way to overcome the complexity of absolute non-trivial philosophical problems.

In order to finish my contribution, I would like to comment on the sentence, which can be considered the slogan of Tübingen School: the philosopher can show the poverty of the written word, (35) as Plato says at the end of *Phaedrus*. That alludes immediately to the ability of dialogue, that Plato simply calls it διαλεκτική, dialectic. Here it can be seen a hidden system or a series of inner lessons, but that supposes something that is not exposed in the text. Maybe it is only the recognition of the great figure of Socrates, and to follow the same path of truth forged by him: namely, dialectic.

**Notes**

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(1) I think that, without overlooking the decisive contributions of Gaiser and Krämer to the research on this field, Reale is the alma mater in divulgence of this trend. I consider his book *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone. Rilettura della metafisica dei grandi dialoghi alla luce delle "Dottrine non scritte"* (Vita e Pensiero, Milano 199114), to contain an excellent exposition on the ground points that the so-called ‘Tübingen School’ holds.

(2) The recourse to Kuhn’s ‘scientific paradigms’ is unsatisfactory. They are intended to explain the hermeneutical value of the scientific theories. But this model is not adequate, if it is applied to human sciences other to a less objectivised theme as the history of the
Platonic reception. It is better to invoke the concept of prejudice or perspective, which needs a different conceptual articulation.

(3) It is not casual that the pretension of Platonic philosophy as a system is not explicitly suggested before Leibniz.

(4) *Philebus*, 11C-14B.

(5) Actually, "dialéktik" is the art referred to "dialógos".

(6) I am aware that λόγος has such a semantic field, yet partly lost in its Latin translations. Any translation will be partial, but I cannot avoid the necessity of using one.

(7) *Cratylus*, 408C.

(8) Philosophy is a vague aspiration, if error and falseness are not longer possible; *Euthydemus*, 287A.

(9) I mean here what Reale calls as protology. It is possible to say that the dialogues are directed to a different thematic which is not contained in them, and this interpretation is coherent, but finally this is not a solution of the problem, it is only a change of place. That the Platonic work is not a closed whole, that does not imply the find of its possible key in another place.

(10) *Respublica*, VII, 531E.

(11) In this point, it can be seen the close parenthood that Plato establishes between philosophy and literature, because the poetry is a certain whole; *Io*, 532C.

(12) *Respublica*, VII, 537C.

(13) It belongs to the nature of knowledge, what is it synoptic. It is wiser; who sees more with fewer propositions. It is another way to describe the deepness of knowledge.

(14) *Grosso modo* it could be said that contemporary education is not a true dialogue, because the child is not an equal. That does not signify properly that a child cannot be a valid interlocutor in many cases.

(15) In this manner, it could be noticed that the mediation of language is always present for Plato, but it is not an insuperable condition. Language cannot be self-referential; *Cratylus*, 388B-D. Therefore the λόγος can show realities that have not his being, throughout dialogue.

(16) *Gorgias*, 503A.

(17) Here is the distinguishing ground between philosophy and rhetoric; *Euthydemus*, 287A.

(18) *Euthydemus*, 287A.

(19) *Gorgias*, 495A.

(20) Maybe its worst manifestation is the aversion to reasoning; *Phaedo*, 90D.

(21) *Euthydemus*, 305A.
(22) Menexemus, 247A.

(23) Respublica, V, 454A.

(24) Apologia Socratis, 38A; Menexenus, 80D.

(25) Gorgias, 456A.

(26) Because it is not possible for one man to know all; Sophista, 233A.

(27) In the sense of ‘lovers of the λόγος’; Phaedrus, 236E.

(28) Due to these two grounds, Plato cannot be considered a dogmatic philosopher. That could happen only if Plato thought a truth before all that could not be discussed about.

(29) Epistula VII, 341C. This is the reason because he avoids writing a book on these themes. That does not refer directly to a supposed oral doctrine, but it implies that the truth must be discovered by oneself and nobody can be replaced in that work; Epistula VII, 341E.

(30) Sophista, 263E.

(31) Epistula VII, 342A-E; Respublica, VI, 511D.

(32) I do not mean that it is impossible to reach any truth, but only that there is something like the last word about whichever theme.

(33) Respublica, VII, 532D.

(34) All the testimonies on this topic have an Aristotelian origin and they do not mention anything about that.

(35) Phaedrus, 278C-D.