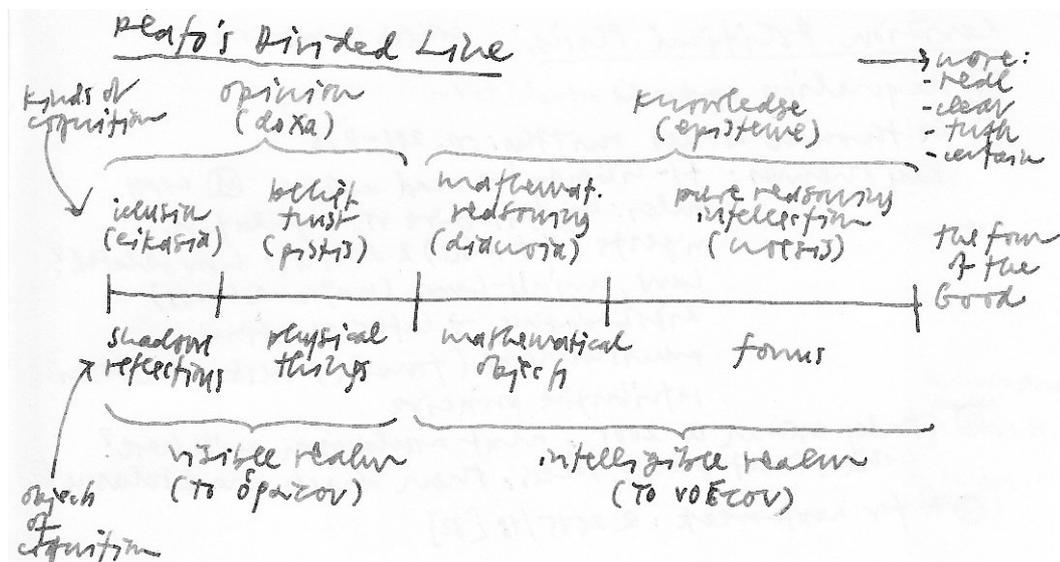


The Line, Dialectics, and the Good



Dialectic. The word λέγω (*lego*) means saying, speaking or talking, but also gathering or collecting. (The German verb *lesen* is similarly ambiguous between reading and collecting.) With the prefix *dia-*, which means ‘through’ in a temporal, spatial or means–end way, *διαλεκτική* (*dialektike*) simply means ‘discussion’. More technically, dialectics can be understood as the art or skill of rational and logical discussion aiming at true and indubitable first principles. In contrast, a *sophistic* discussion aims to shine and score points (cf. the beast passages, 493). For Aristotle, dialectics covers inductive and deductive *logic* (see, e.g., *Topics* 105a10).

Goal. Refute uncritically held beliefs. As destructive activity, dialectic relates to *elenchus* or refutation (cf. Handout 1). But dialectic is also positive: seek to establish propositions of high generality, i.e. not what this *x* is, but what *x* is as such. Hence the ultimate goal of Plato’s dialectic is the discovery of *Forms* (universals).

Dialectics at Work. At 510–1: take a hypothesis or assumption and see whether it leads to a contradiction (e.g., justice is the interest of the stronger party). If it does, abandon it, and take a next one. If it does not, accept the claim. Then, derive or deduce claims from this ‘starting point’. The *cave analogy* is also an illustration for practising dialectics (cf. 531c–532c). This technique is in play all over the *Republic*.

Plato and Descartes. The (perhaps) clearest description of dialectics is at 533b–534d, which strikingly resembles Descartes’s method. (Note that Descartes derides the dialecticians of his day.)

Descartes’s Method. “We need a method if we are to investigate the truth of things. [...] By a ‘method’ I mean reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one’s mental efforts, but will gradually and constantly increase one’s knowledge until one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one’s

capacity.”¹ “Concerning objects proposed for study, we ought to investigate what we can clearly and evidently intuit or deduce with certainty, and not what other people have thought or what we ourselves conjecture. For knowledge [*scientia*, i.e. *episteme*] can be attained in no other way.”²

Two Methods. (1) *Analysis.* Showcase: Descartes’s *Meditations*. Work ‘backwards’ to simple self-evident truths; no givens, no assumptions; proceed by immediate cognitive grasp or *intuition* of basic principles. “[I]f the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the things his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it himself.”³ (2) *Synthesis.* Showcase: Spinoza’s *Ethics*; Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*. Work ‘forwards’ in a series of deductive demonstrations to prove particular truths in *geometrical fashion*; begin with definitions, axioms, and postulates that make the conclusion inevitable if the steps are valid (preserve truth): this ‘can be done even by the less attentive’, and ‘the reader, however argumentative and stubborn he may be, is compelled to give his assent.’⁴

Clear and Distinct (Intellectual) Perception. This is an inner intellectual act of direct apprehension or immediate cognitive grasp. It is *clear*, when ‘present and accessible to the attentive mind’, and it is *distinct*, when ‘sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear’, i.e. does not contain implications that give rise to doubts (cf. *Principles of Philosophy* I §45). Process of *clarification*: a perception becomes distinct by (i) excluding from it what does not belong to the nature of its object (elimination), (ii) including in it what belongs to that nature (expansion), so that (iii) what belongs to the object’s nature is no longer confused with what does not belong to something else. Paradigm example of this clarifying and ‘defusing’ process: the *Second Meditation*.⁵

The Form of Good. The Good is neither pleasure nor knowledge (505b–e), nor power (587). It is whatever we ‘are after’, our ultimate goal, what we pursue: what motivates and explains our actions, which includes *politics* (e.g., liberty, equality, and justice). We must know the good in order to *be*, and *do*, good. For Plato, the *virtues* are good, for they lead to happiness (εὐδαιμονία, *eudaimonia*). Take *justice*: the just life is the psychologically harmonic or balanced life, where aspiration, desire, and reason work ‘symphonically’ together (do their jobs, have their pleasures), and this constitutes the flourishing of individuals and the society. Guardians need to understand the Good in order to rule for the good of all (i.e. to rule well). But individuals must also keep an eye on their ‘inner society’ (ἐν αὐτῷ πολιτείαν, *en auto politeian*) (cf. the crucial passages at 427e, 441, 581e–583a, 586a–e, 590c–591e) to live well.

1 Descartes, Rules for the Direction of the Mind, Rule Four, AT X 371–2. In Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R. & Murdoch, D. (1984) (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Vol. I (pp. 15–6). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2 *Ibid.*, Rule Three, AT X 366 CSM I 13.

3 Descartes, *Second Replies*, AT VII 155 CSM II 110.

4 *Ibid.*, AT VII 156 CSM 111.

5 For details, see Patterson, S. (2008). Clear and Distinct Perception. In J. Broughton & J. Carriero (eds.), *A Companion to Descartes* (pp. 216–34). Oxford: Blackwell.

