PLATO'S *EUTHYDEMUS*: A STUDY ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN LOGIC AND EDUCATION

Plato's *Euthydemus* is an unlucky dialogue. Few dealt with it in its own right, not just as part of a wider discussion of Plato, and fewer still saw in it more than a topic of sophistic fallacies. Some, of course, paid attention to the constructive sections of the dialogue, but only rarely do we come across a real attempt to unify its different aspects.[1]

In this paper I propose to show how, in the *Euthydemus*, Plato tries to distinguish between the Socratic and the Sophistic conceptions of education, by tracing them to their roots in the opposing views of the Sophists — and especially those of the second generation — and of Socrates about truth and about the role of logic. And although the eristic techniques of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are obviously fallacious, they turn out to be developments of Protagoras' views and follow from philosophical positions worthy of serious examination.

The *Euthydemus* is a caricature, to be sure. But, as all good caricature, it has a serious intent. It sketches the degeneration of the Sophistic approach to education, in some of its aspects. More importantly, it distinguishes Socratic education from the methods and effects of its Sophistic counterpart.

Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, the two sophist brothers, are reminiscent of the great Sophists of the *Protagoras* in more than one way. They are polymaths like Hippias, and at one time or another have taught a variety of arts, from forensic rhetoric to armed combat. Also, they have Prodicus' penchant for linguistic analysis. But most of all, they are Protagoras' epigones, down to the smallest details: they walk around the courtyard with their entourage of disciples, who follow them from city to city; they promise to teach human excellence with speed and efficiency;

[1] In this context one should mention L. Méridier's introduction to his edition of the *Euthydemus* in the Collection Guillaume Budé, and the several works of R.K. Sprague mentioned below. Further bibliography in P. Friedländer, *Plato, The Dialogues, First Period* (New York 1964).

with the change of fashions, they have come to think of the other sciences (except for the teaching of excellence) as valueless; they deny the possibility of contradiction; they can argue equally well either side of a case.[2] But whereas Protagoras had intellectual stature and moral integrity, the two brothers are no more than unscrupulous quacks. Nevertheless, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are a direct and presumably inevitable product of Protagoras' views, much as Callicles is a product of Gorgias'.

In the hands of the two brothers, philosophy has become the science of argumentation. They are experts of verbal fight capable of refuting any position, true or false. It is significant that the brothers had previously taught the *pancration.* In this Greek variety of "catch-as-catch-can" almost anything was permitted. The brothers' type of argumentation is not much different. As in the other types of litigation which they practiced, such as forensic oratory or armed combat, victory over the opponent is the only goal, and means are evaluated solely in respect to that goal. The brothers too, like Socrates, equate virtue with knowledge. But their concept of virtue is the knowledge of how to succeed at all costs, of how to get the better of others in any circumstance. As a result they teach mockeries of the traditional excellences: litigation instead of justice, techniques of fighting instead of courage, and above all eristic instead of wisdom.

The brothers' logic is purely formal and argumentative, equally appropriate to any content or circumstance. Since the technique of argumentation is presumed to be indifferent to the content of the argument, refuting the truth is, for the Sophists, a live possibility. There is a technique of refutation that works equally well on either side of the case. Not so for Socrates: "If I am not mistaken," he says to Dionysodorus, "even you will not refute me, clever as you are."[3]

[2] Polymathy: *Euthd.* 271C 6 with *Hp. Ma.* 285B ff.; linguistic analysis: *Euthd.* 277E; peripateticism: *Euthd.* 273A 3 with *Prt.* 314E 4; instant *aretē*: *Euthd.* 273D 8–9 with *Prt.* 318A 5 ff.; disregard for other types of knowledge: *Euthd.* 273D 1–4 with *Prt.* 318D 5 ff.; denial of contradiction: cf. *Euthd.* 285D ff.; arguing both sides: *Euthd.* 275D ff. Cf. also Socrates' introduction of Clinias to the two brothers, at 275AB, with his introduction of Hippocrates to Protagoras, at *Prt.* 316BC.

[3] *Euthd.* 287E 4–5. Plato deals extensively with the question of a neutral technique in the *Gorgias.*

Socrates' elenchus is the refutation of *false* or *confused* ideas. But truth cannot be refuted. There are two sides to each argument only as long as we do not know on which side truth lies. Socrates, indeed, claimed not to know. He therefore kept both sides of the argument as possibilities. But this did not preclude the supposition that one side was right and the other wrong.

Protagoras claimed to be able to teach excellence, and to make his students better "from day to day". Socrates, not less than Isocrates, doubts the claims of that "new-found art of making good men out of bad."[4] For him, education is too complex a matter to be summarized in a collection of foolproof techniques. But the two sophists promise even more: they are capable of "delivering" or "handing down" excellence "in the quickest way" (273D 8–9). Indeed, as Socrates remarks at 272B 10, "last year or the year before they were not yet wise."

Plato is drawing an exaggerated picture, but his point is valid: there are no shortcuts in education, no crash-courses in virtue. Instant wisdom is a sham; the way of education is long and difficult (presumably somewhat like the curriculum of the *Republic*), and, what is worse, its results are uncertain until one reaches the very end of it — if one ever does reach it.

It is true that Socrates seems now and then to achieve some encouraging results with his method of interrogation, but he never claims for instance, that Clinias in the *Euthydemus*, or the unnamed boy in the *Meno*, have actually attained wisdom or knowledge. He only prepared Clinias for learning, aroused his interest. It would be a good thing if excellence and wisdom could be handed down.[5] But these are not the sorts of things that can be transmitted; they can only be slowly developed by each person for himself, with some outside help and no guarantee of success.

The first question raised by Socrates, as soon as the conversation gets going, is the question of motivation. Should the student be willing to learn, or be *convinced* that he can or should learn, from his particular teacher, or is this unnecessary?[6] If teaching and education consist chiefly

[4] *Euthd.* 285B 4–5. Cf. Isocrates, *Antidosis* 274.
[5] *Prt.* 319A, *Euthd.* 274A.
[6] *Euthd.* 274D 7.

in the impersonal handing down of certain beliefs, then the student's learning is indifferent to any involvement with a teacher. Learning is then somewhat like receiving an object which is given to the learner: there need not be much, if any, activity or initiative on the part of the receiver. To hand down intellectual content requires at most suitable preparation. In such instances, arousing interest means removing the emotional or intellectual elements which block the way to new information. It does not mean bringing the student to seek or produce knowledge himself. There need, therefore, not be any personal relation between teacher and student.

When asked if the brothers would mind conversing with Clinias, Euthydemus answers that it doesn't matter to them, so long as their boy is willing to answer their questions. They merely need a respondent.[7] They are not worried, as Socrates is, by the possibility that the boy's studies may do him harm rather than good.[8] For them, all respondents are equal, and, to a certain extent, the questioners too are interchangeable. It does not matter too much who leads the questioning, the one or the other, so long as he abides by the rules of the art.[9] Socrates, in contrast, refused students. He felt that some persons would not profit from him, on grounds of intelligence or of character. A personal relationship between teacher and student was for him a necessary condition of education.[10]

Once the sophistic display was actually started, Socrates' first words stress his interpretation of the elenctic, in distinction from the sophistic, process. At 275D, Euthydemus asks young Clinias a question not unlike Meno's: "Who are those who learn, the wise or the ignorant?"[11] As Clinias seems perplexed by the question, Socrates intreats him to answer "courageously, whichever answer it seems to you. For," he says, "maybe you are to get the greatest of benefits."

[7] *Euthd.* 275BC. Sprague is right in observing, in her annotated translation of *Euthydemus*, that "they [sc. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus] merely desire to obtain a respondent for a demonstration of their eristic tricks." But she should not have compared the present passage to *Prm.* 137B and *Sph.* 217D. Parmenides and the Eleatic Stranger are no Sophists, and Theaetetus, the respondent in the latter dialogue, is certainly no fool.

[8] *Euthd.* 275AB; cf. *Prt.* 313A ff.

[9] Cf. *Euthd.* 297A.

[10] Cf. *Tht.* 150E–151B.

[11] The second horn of the dilemma is developed as a variation on this theme: see 276D.

Socrates ironically presents the two brothers' sophistry as on a par with his own elenchus. Each question requires a courageous answer, no matter which, so long as it is what really seems to the answerer to be the case. In contrast, Dionysodorus immediately makes it clear that Clinias' answers do not matter in the least. Whatever the boy says, the outcome will be the same: "And I foretell you, Socrates, that whichever way he answers, the boy will be refuted."

The technique is so set up that the interaction of teacher and student plays no significant role in it. There is only a sequence of steps to be followed, that can be mastered with relative ease. It is, in effect, a teacher-proof and student-proof method. In the Sophistic elenchus, there is no way in which the answerer can alter the course of the argument.

Despite its superficial similarity to the Sophistic interrogation, Socratic elenchus differs from it in a crucial respect, not immediately apparent in the written dialogue. In the Socratic dialogue each of Socrates' questions brings the answerer to a fork in the road. At each point in the conversation the answerer himself must decide which way to take: The course of the dialogue is jointly determined by Socrates' presentation of, and his partner's choice between, alternatives. Socrates' emphasis on the joint search for an answer is not mere rhetoric. He leads the search, but his partner confirms or denies the suggestions Socrates makes. When this is done in good faith — and it is not always so — *both* sides are responsible for the outcome of the dialogue. Because the dialogue is always carried on within a context, not all possible alternatives are explored in one dialogue. Frequently only one proposed solution or one type of proposed solutions is examined. Alternatives not followed in one dialogue are sometimes developed by Plato in another, sometimes dropped altogether. Taken as a whole, the schema of all possible bifurcations provides a sort of matrix of possibilities to be explored. Rarely is such a schema to be found in one single dialogue.[12]

Socrates thus conceives of instruction in earnest as essentially an individual matter. It depends on the personal convictions of the learner at each stage of the discussion, and for different people the discussion branches off differently at different points. No two processes of

[12] The second part of the *Parmenides* is perhaps the best example of an exhaustive presentation of a field of discourse — achieved there at the cost of extreme formalism.

instruction can be alike, not only in regard to how instruction is conducted, but also in their content, in what actually is learned or discovered.

Socrates correctly sees the two sophists' verbal equivocations as degenerate offspring of Prodicus' insistence on the correctness of names. He considers all such linguistic distinctions mere play. They do not teach us anything about the world itself. Such knowledge allows us to make rather broad fun of others, but little else.

The brothers' view of language is none too subtle: the function of language is to designate; to speak truly is to succeed in designating, to speak falsely, to fail. But if one speaks, one obviously succeeds in doing something, namely speaking, which is supposed to be just a way of designating, like pointing. Obviously, if one points, one has succeeded in pointing. Therefore, if one speaks, one necessarily speaks truly. Such a simplistic approach is bound to break down.

Ctesippus spots the flaw in the argument. "Speaking of" is not a two-place predicate, like "pointing", but a three-place predicate, like "naming" or "identifying". Not "A speaks of x," but "A speaks of x as N" (cf. "A points at x", and "A names x 'N'", or "A identifies x as N"). To speak falsely is then not to fail to speak of x, but to speak of x as M (when x is in fact N). To call a spade a spade is to speak truly. To speak falsely is to call it something else; it is not to fail to speak.[13]

But Dionysodorus and Euthydemus will have none of this interpretation. They stick to their view of "speaking of" as a two-place predicate, and accordingly allow modifiers such as "truly" and "falsely" to be understood only adverbially, as referring to the act of speaking or designating. Speaking truly means speaking in a certain manner, like speaking slowly or loudly. Further, if to speak truly is to speak of what is as it is, then, on their view, this amounts to speaking of each thing in a manner appropriate to it, for instance, speaking badly of bad men, and tasetlessly of tasteless men.[14]

Consistent, as far as it goes, the sophist brothers' argument is

[13] *Euthd.* 284C 7–8. Cf. also *Men.* 82B 9–10, *Cra.* 429E, *R.* 477–478. See further G. Prauss, *Platon und der logische Eleatismus* (Berlin 1966), 125 ff.; S. Scolnicov, *Plato's Method of Hypothesis in the Middle Dialogues* (Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge University 1973), ch. VI. Problems notoriously do arise in further analysis, as Plato shows in the *Sophist.*

[14] 284C 9 ff. A similar doctrine appears in *Cratylus*; cf. the previous note.

nevertheless self-defeating, as Socrates points out:[15] if there is no contradiction, or alternatively, if one cannot speak falsely, then refutation too is impossible. Plato does not seem to think that there is a formal contradiction in the argument, only a circumstantial one which depends on the particular speaker. When Socrates points out to Dionysodorus that in his own view refutation is impossible, Euthydemus takes over. Since the contradiction is between Dionysodorus' utterance "Refutation is impossible", and his own demand that Socrates refute him personally, a change of speakers should take care of the problem. It should be noted that if contradiction is impossible, so is error and teaching. This is, of course, Protagoras' view. Only Protagoras is much subtler.

Circumstantial contradiction can be ignored if one is stubbornly prepared to disregard the need for consistency in one's several utterances or between one's utterances and one's actions. The price would seem too high. But Dionysodorus sees himself at liberty to disown what he had said before. He considers each argument in isolation. There is no overall coherence (or even consistency) in his argumentation and no commitment to the issues that he raises.[16]

Socrates too changes his views in the course of many a dialogue, at least apparently (for instance, in the *Protagoras*, or in the *Meno*), and he certainly causes his respondents to change their minds, but he always stresses the consistency of the argument as a whole and the commitment to finding out what the case is. When one changes one's views, this should be done in honesty and with responsibility for one's utterances, not merely because of expediency in argument.

Because Dionysodorus' approach is purely verbal and formal, with no regard for either the coherence of the argument or for the matter discussed itself, the discussion degenerates into personal insult. If one is not committed to one's answer, and conducts the inquiry on a purely verbal level, without paying attention to things as they are, then there is nothing ridiculous, or shameful, or absurd, one cannot say. Once

[15] 286E 2 ff. One has to presume a sullen silence on the part of Dionysodorus after Socrates' words at E2–3, and before Euthydemus takes over.

[16] 287A 5 ff. Contrast with Socrates' insistence on the coherence and the unity of the personality.

semantic criteria have been discarded as not formal enough, even the rules of syntax are not of much help. Language itself breaks down.[17]

The consequences of such an education are obvious — a spurious art of argumentation. Its results can be seen in the exchange of insults between Ctesippus and Euthydemus, earlier in the dialogue.[18] Ctesippus makes progress indeed in the argumentative art, and manages in a short time to master it well enough to engage the sophists in their own game. His youthful impetuousness prevents him from reaching Clinias' stage of proficiency, however. Ctesippus can see through the sophists' tricks, but because of his psychic make-up he is unable to participate in serious discussion.

In contrast, Socrates gives an example of conversation which will move a mind to pursue wisdom.[19] As usual he begins with the obvious and close-at-hand. All men desire happiness. He at first describes this happiness in conventional terms: the possession of the goods of the body, such as health and beauty; good birth, power and honour; the virtues such as temperance, justice and courage. But on further examination it is found that only wisdom brings success. All the so-called goods turn out not to be good or bad in themselves.[20] If accompanied by wisdom they are good and bring happiness; without it they are liable to be misused. This is an example of the protreptic argument Socrates had asked for at 275A.

Clinias is now at least initially moved to philosophize, to seek wisdom, insofar as he thinks it is to his advantage. The question, whether wisdom is teachable, is passed over (282C), since it would require a full examination of the nature of wisdom and its relation to happiness — to which a great part of the *Republic* is devoted.

Even without going into so long an inquiry, a second, more limited question now arises: Is wisdom the whole of knowledge or is it a specific knowledge? In other words, is there a science of happiness and excellence, or is the aim of education encyclopaedic knowledge? The *Republic* will claim that these are not alternatives, but that wisdom, the

[17] 303A 7–8.
[18] 298B ff.
[19] 278E ff.
[20] This was later to be an accepted Stoic doctrine.

knowledge of the right conduct of one's affairs and of the affairs of the state, is in fact synoptical (but not encyclopaedic) knowledge. The difference between encyclopaedic and synoptical knowledge will be made clear only in the *Republic* and in the *Phaedrus*.[21]

Now philosophy, Socrates summarizes, is the acquisition (or possession)[22] of knowledge. He does not explain how this acquisition comes about, or what such a possession consists of. He implies such an acquisition occurs not as a result of the handing over of information, but in the process Clinias is undergoing at that very moment. Some analytical discussion of this process — one of Socrates' few successes in educating an interlocutor in an early dialogue[23] — is undertaken in the *Meno*.

Here Plato is interested in the nature of the knowledge that constitutes wisdom, i.e., of the knowledge they had earlier agreed was worthwhile. Socrates resumes the utilitarian line and suggests that knowledge worth acquiring is knowledge that will benefit us. So far this is nothing but an explication of the utilitarian assumption of the argument. But the interlocutors had earlier agreed that nothing is beneficial unless wisely used. Knowledge worth acquiring must, therefore, be knowledge of using things, not of making them, or getting them.[24]

The argument now turns to the need for a hierarchy of crafts and sciences. Such a hierarchy makes it possible to distinguish between the encyclopaedic knowledge of the sophists, and the synoptical knowledge Plato favours. The organizing knowledge is the art of kingship, identified with politics. Individual education thus becomes inextricably linked with political thinking. There is here a prefiguration of the *Republic*: not only is the Philosopher-King presented both as the final outcome of education and himself the educator, but also there are hints of the

[21] *Men.* 81D 1–4 briefly enunciates the Platonic counterpart of *Euthd.* 294A 2–3: if only one knows one single thing, one knows all.

[22] *Ktēsis.* The Greek is ambiguous.

[23] Socrates' brief interchanges with Clinias in the present dialogue and the "geometry lesson" in the *Meno* are probably the two only examples. The *Theaetetus* is apparently not an early dialogue.

[24] Cf. Aristotle, *EN* 1098b 32.

hierarchical relations among the sciences, dialectic and the political art.[25]

The art of the Philosopher-King as the art of educating men, however, occasions some difficulties. For one thing, unlike the other arts, it does not seem to have a product of its own. The ruler as educator gives the citizens a share of knowledge.[26] His art consists in infusing the state with knowledge, in the different degrees which the capacities of each citizen allow. The art of kingship is to make others good. There can be no separation between politics and education, no ideologically neutral education.

In what way does the art of kingship make us good? In what way is it different from the "newly discovered art of making good men out of bad"? We cannot answer that it makes us capable of educating others, and these still others, etc., for such an answer does not help us find out what the art is. A characterization of education in terms of "initiation" or preservation and continuation of the patterns of the society or of the culture will not do without further specification. Plato is after the *content* of such art.

But apparently the analogy to the other arts, which leads us to look for the content, is misleading. Its content cannot be universal, "carpentry, and cobbling, and all the rest," and it cannot be the knowledge of itself.[27] These questions cannot be adequately discussed in the context of this dialogue and they are merely hinted at, as a demonstration of the Socratic method.

Socrates' inquiries in the *Euthydemus* reach an impasse, and seem to lead nowhere. The Sophists' tricks too lead nowhere. Yet, these two negative conclusions are of different types. Socrates' *aporia* shows the need for further investigation, and incites the partner to such investigation. The sophistic quandary puts down its victim and makes him despair of inquiry.

The aim of the *Euthydemus* is to set out the difference between the Socratic and the Sophistic method. But Plato is well aware that the

[25] For a discussion of the Philosopher-King in this passage and in other dialogues, see R.K. Sprague, *Plato's Philosopher-King: A Study of the Theoretical Background* (Columbia, S.C., 1976).

[26] "To give a share" translates 292B 8 *metadidonai*; contrast 273D 8 *paradidonai*, "to hand down".

[27] Cf. *Lysis*.

difference is not easy to grasp. Many felt Socrates too put down people, led them in circles by means of sophistic tricks and in the end paralyzed them with questions from which there was no escape. At the end, when the dialogue returns to the frame-story, Crito tells of an outsider to whom Socrates appeared ridiculous and embarrassing. Crito himself — no fool, but a man seriously concerned with his sons' education, and Socrates' friend — agrees, to some extent, with this appraisal of Socrates.[28]

It takes a keen eye — the eye of Plato presumably — to spot the difference between Socrates and the Sophists, and to be aware of the problems in the Socratic method. The Socratic method can often be misused or mistaken for ridicule. Socrates more than once, not the least in the *Euthydemus*, was taken to be indulging in such ridicule.[29] An educational approach which uses irony is bound to be limited to the few. For Plato, the political man, the difficulties would be obvious. But Plato could also appreciate the positive value of Socrates' irony when properly understood.[30]

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[28] 305A ff. Cf. 307A 1–2. It is difficult not to suppose that the reference is to Isocrates, although other identifications have been proposed. Crito himself is, of course, quite close to the description of the anonymous critic.

[29] I cannot follow Leo Strauss' analysis ("On the *Euthydemus*", *Interpretation*, I (1970), 1–20) which leads to the conclusion that "In the *Euthydemus* Socrates takes the side of the two brothers against Ktesippos and Kriton."

[30] The draft for this paper was prepared in the National Humanities Center, North Carolina.