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Tackling conventions: Plato's Barbarians between Language and Ontology

Carlo Delle Donne

Abstract: A remarkable ancient attempt to conceptualize the “barbarian” is provided by Plato’s *Statesman*. Here (262c10 ff.) the Stranger from Elea gives some examples in order to show to Socrates the Young how a philosophical “division” should *not* be made. Provided that the objective of any division is to “bump into Ideas” (μᾶλλον ιδέαις ἄν τις προστυγχάνοι, 262b7), each and every “part” (τὸ μέρος) resulting from the analysis of a concept is expected to match an *eidōs*, an Idea: τὸ μέρος ἅμα εἶδος ἐχέτω (262b1). Therefore, according to the Stranger, it would be irreparably wrong to divide the human race roughly into the Greeks and the Barbarians, for the latter “are countless in number and have no relation in blood or language to one another (262d4 ff.)”. In other words, they might be considered as a “part” of the human race, but this turns out to be nothing more than a mere *linguistic* classification, since *ontologically* speaking there is no real *eidōs* to match the word “barbarian”. As the Stranger from Elea puts it, “it is only because of this single name [*i.e.* barbarian] that they expect it to be a single [real] species as well (διὰ ταύτην τὴν μίαν κληῖσιν καὶ γένος ἐν αὐτὸ εἶναι προσδοκῶσιν, 262d5-6)”. So, here Plato provides us with a sharp criticism of a widespread Greek conception as to what “barbarian” should be thought to mean. In the end, the mistake “most people in this country” (καθάπερ οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἐνθάδε διανεμῶσι, 262d1) make is to fail to distinguish between a rough linguistic custom and a philosophical division, which is grounded only on the “ideal” (and hence “truest”) reality.

Keywords: Plato, Barbarian, Language, Dialectics.

The objective of this paper¹ is to examine a passage of text from Plato’s *Statesman*² (262a ff.), where the author provides us with an interesting account of the “Barbarian Species”.³ There, a mysterious character, the Eleatic Stranger, questions the philosophical legitimacy of the “dichotomic division” of the human species (τὰνθρώπινον γένος) into the “species (γένεσιν)” of “the Greeks” and “the Barbarians”.

¹ This is a revised version of a speech delivered at the City University of New York, Graduate Center, on the occasion of the international conference *Xenoi: Hospitality and Xenophobia in the Graeco-Roman World*. I would like to thank the organizers and all the participants in the discussion for their helpful comments. A special thank to Professor Lidia Palumbo for reading an initial version of this paper and for providing me with some precious remarks.

² The Greek text is that printed by Burnet for the OCT series. The translations, if not otherwise specified, are those by Fowler for the LOEB series.

³ It should be pointed out that the Greek word *genos* means both genus, “genre”, and “race”: it is rather probable that Plato is voluntarily ambiguous in the use of the term throughout this section of the dialogue. See Battagazzore 1995.

The result of all this, compared to the widely spread beliefs of those times,⁴ proves surprising. For the “Barbarian Species” boils down to be nothing but a mere piece of language, which is irreparably deprived of any fully real referent. Moreover - were such a “full reality” to be thought of in “Platonic terms⁵” -, one could even maintain that the “Barbarian Species” lacks an “ideal” backing. But I will come back to this later. As an introductory remark, let me add that, in the following pages, I set out to provide not only an analysis of the structure and of the philosophical content of this Platonic document; I will be also trying to give a broader assessment of it in the context of other Platonic dialogues (or parts of them), which deal with analogous issues.⁶

I

Before I begin, it might be useful to expose the methodological principles I will try to employ throughout. As will soon become clear, the very heart of the question is the dynamic of Plato's authoriality and its interpretation. In particular, one must wonder whether, and in which cases, the philosophical content of the arguments proposed by *certain* Platonic characters⁷ is to be considered as one Plato himself shares, or not⁸. This is a hotly debated topic, which has led the scholars to propose radically different readings.⁹ In my opinion, the precise degree of Plato's commitment to each and every piece of philosophy he himself exposes in the dialogues is destined always to remain disputable. Nevertheless, in order to avoid a radically sceptical approach to the Platonic texts,¹⁰ a cautious way of dealing with them might be the following:

- A) Every recurring aporetic issue should be deemed as one whose importance Plato himself had to perceive distinctly.
- B) Moreover, every recursive argument (or set of arguments), which is meant to solve a certain recursive theoretical problem, also a widespread *style of thought* - I would even say - are likely to be ones Plato *does* consider as (somehow) generically valuable in philosophical terms, regardless of each specific dialogic context.¹¹
- C) When there seem to be differences (however slight) between two (or more) instantiations of one and the same problem or account, the *dialogic context* and the peculiarities of each ongoing discussion are likely to play a crucial role in order to appreciate the reasons for these same differences to occur.¹² This does not imply that every theoretical tension (or even contradiction) can thus be

⁴ As a general introduction on the matter, see Giorgini 1999; de Romilly 1993; Lévy 1984; Battezzore 1995.

⁵ On the difficulties related to Plato's authoriality, see Vegetti 2003, 66-85.

⁶ On the presence of the *barbaros* in Plato's dialogues, see Tesseirenc 2014.

⁷ Nails 2000, 15-26.

⁸ Press 2000, 27-38.

⁹ See the *status quaestionis* by Gonzalez 1995, 1-22.

¹⁰ This exigence is shared also by Gerson 2000, 201-210.

¹¹ See Ostenfeld 2000, 211-220, Thesleff 2000, 53-66; Press 1995, 133-152 (esp. 144-145).

¹² Watson 1995, 189-210; Gonzalez 1995, 155-187. Otherwise, one might contemplate some changes in Plato's own thinking: see e.g. Ross 1951.

solved once and for all; rather, this might simply be a way not to neglect the *internal and specific dynamics* which determines the general philosophical perspective, and the theoretical proposals of each dialogue.

II

In light of these preliminary remarks, it should not be surprising that the Platonic passage of text here at issue has been read in (at least) three different ways, in accordance with different generic attitudes towards Plato's dialogues. As a matter of fact, the whole issue seems to depend on how one answers the following questions:

- 1) Does the *Politicus*' passage provide the reader with a mere *throwaway example*, whose aim is only to show how *not to* accomplish a philosophical "division"? For, if this is the case, its philosophical content is rather unlikely to be shared by the author;
- 2) Or should it be considered as an "only methodologically binding" piece of philosophy, Plato was, nevertheless, committed to?¹³
- 3) Or - last but not least - does it convey a *fully Platonic* (and hence, *also* methodologically valid) conception?

Regardless of the degree of Plato's commitment to the argument, another crucial question also needs to be asked, dealing with the very nature of the *objects* of the "division":

- 4) Does the argument have *ontological* implications as well? That is to say, is the "Platonic Idea" of the "Barbarian" to be described as non-existent? Or is "Barbarian" nothing but a merely *mental concept*, whose content is finally proved to be empty?

An example of the line of thought mirrored in 1) is provided by Rowe's analysis,¹⁴ who (though cautiously) argues against the possibility Plato sides with this specific result of the discussion. Rather differently, 2) is shared, for example, by Battegazzore and Gastaldi,¹⁵ who are likely to admit Plato's commitment to the argument only in as much as this has a *methodological*, and *not axiological*, meaning. On the contrary, as an example of 3), Skemp¹⁶ emphasises the anthropological and political importance of Plato's words, thus attributing the general philosophical content of this piece of the dialogue to the author himself. On this same line of thought, two more remarkable works need to be mentioned: the essay by Henri Joly¹⁷ devoted to the strangers in Plato's works, and the recent book by Dimitri El Murr.¹⁸

¹³ Thus, it could be explained the exploitation of this division by Plato himself in other dialogues; according to this reading, the *Politicus*' account should not be given any axiological value: see *infra*.

¹⁴ Rowe 1995, 182, note to d6.

¹⁵ Battegazzore 1995; Gastaldi 2000, 301-354.

¹⁶ Skemp 1952, 131 ff. (v. note).

¹⁷ Joly 1992, 84 ff. and also Joly 1990, 333-357.

¹⁸ El Murr 2014, 124 ff. See also Dixsaut 2018, 313 ff.

As for 4), the question appears to be more complicated, since it depends on *what* one thinks the “dichotomic/diaeretic method” works on: is it related to mere *concepts/classes*, thus turning out to be nothing but a logical and linguistic procedure?¹⁹ Or, is it devoted to the “division” (whatever this could precisely mean in this case)²⁰ of *fully and really existing objects*, i.e. of Platonic Ideas?²¹ As for the specific case of the “Barbarian Species”, the latest Italian commentator on the dialogue, Giovanni Giorgini,²² seems to argue for the inexistence of a *Platonic Idea* of Barbarian.

III

Be that as it may, let's start with the dialogic context of the passage. The Eleatic Stranger (hereafter the Stranger) and Socrates the Young (hereafter Socrates) discuss at length the definition of “political science”, and finally obtain it by combining different methods. At a certain point (261e7 ff.), Socrates is asked to *properly* “split” the art of herding into two “parts”:

[0] But do you see a way in which a man may show that the art of herding is twofold, and may thereby cause that which is now sought among a double number of things to be sought among half as many?²³

Despite this, Socrates makes a rather *rushed* distinction between the nourishment of the human beings and the feeding of the “beasts” (“I think one kind is the care of men, the other that of beasts”²⁴). As a consequence, even though the Stranger finds Socrates’ “courage and willingness” praiseworthy (“You made the division with perfect willingness and courage”²⁵), he cannot help but warn his interlocutor against any superficial “division”. And, to make the point more straightforward, the Stranger explains what needs to be avoided in the future:

- 1) First of all, one should pay attention “not to set one small *part* off against many large ones (μη̄ συμκρὸν μὴριον ἐν πρὸς μεγάλα καὶ πολλὰ ἀφαιρῶμεν)”;

¹⁹ E.g. see Peck 1952 and Ackrill 1965, 199-206 (esp. 205-6). See also Vegetti 2007, 123-131, and Centrone 2008, XXV ff.

²⁰ See Fronterotta 2007, 33 ff. for a *status quaestionis* of the scholarship on the relationship between the Dichotomic Method and Dialectics (and also on the possible sense in which the verb “divide” might be read as far as the Ideas are concerned).

²¹ E.g. see Cornford 1935, 262 ff.; Rowe 2015, XII ff.; Fronterotta 2007, 33 ff. and Ferrari 2018, 113 ff.

²² Giorgini 2005, 78-80.

²³ Transl. by Fowler: τὴν δὲ ἀγελαιοτροφικὴν ἄρ' ἐννοεῖς πῆ τις, δίδυμον ἀποφήνας τὸ ζητούμενον ἐν διπλασίοισι τὰ νῦν, ἐν τοῖς ἡμίσεσιν εἰς τότε ποιήσει ζητεῖσθαι; All the translations of the passages from the *Politicus* are by Fowler.

²⁴ καὶ μοι δοκεῖ τῶν μὲν ἀνθρώπων ἕτερα τινεῖς εἶναι, τῶν δ' αὖ θηρίων ἄλλη τροφή.

²⁵ παντάπασί γε προθυμώτατα καὶ ἀνδρείωτατα διήρησαι.

- 2) Moreover, any “part” should also “have an *eidōs*” - whatever such a word might exactly mean²⁶ (“We must [...] not disregard species in making our division. On the contrary, the part must be also a species”²⁷);
- 3) As a consequence, one should not “whittle off shavings (*λεπτοουργεῖν*)”, but “cut through the middle (*διὰ μέσων δὲ [...] ἰέναι τέμνοντας*)”; thus, one would be given the opportunity to “come across *Ideas* (*μᾶλλον ἰδέαις ἂν τις προστυγχάνοι*)”: that is to say, one would manage to cut off “parts” along with *eide*.

I cannot satisfactorily deal with all these complex issues here.²⁸ Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of the requirement stated in Point 2) is crucial as far as our topic is concerned. The problem is: what does it mean for a “part” to have, or not to have, an *eidōs*? What does such an *eidōs* provide every “part” with? This topic has been (and is) hotly debated. One plausible theory holds that a philosophically legitimate *genos* - i.e. a “part” (*meros*) which also has an *eidōs* - is a “class”, a “portion”, of objects which *do* share an identifying property (*eidōs*). The entities which are causally responsible for the sharing of such properties should be Platonic Ideas (see *μᾶλλον ἰδέαις ἂν τις προστυγχάνοι*). Therefore, if a “part” resulting from a division is said not to have any *eidōs*, we should suppose the members belonging to that “part” not to share any identifying property.²⁹ In other words, they do not “participate in” any unifying Idea³⁰. As we will see, this is exactly what seems to happen to the “Barbarian Species”.

Be that as it may, Socrates does not seem to understand the points made by the Stranger. This is why the latter feels somehow obliged to give some examples to clarify his previous statements. And it is precisely one of these examples that I will be commenting on hereafter. First of all, let’s read Plato’s words:

[1] It was very much as if, in undertaking to divide the human race into two parts (*οἷον εἶ τις τῶνθρώπινον ἐπιχειρήσας δίχα διελέσθαι γένος*), one should make the division *as most people in this country do* (*καθάπερ οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἐνθάδε διανέμουσι*): they separate the Hellenic race from all the rest as one (*τὸ μὲν Ἑλληνικὸν ὡς ἐν ἀπὸ πάντων ἀφαιροῦντες*

²⁶ See also Marcos de Pinotti 1995, 155-161. On the “geometrical overtone” of this wording, see Joly 1990, 354.

²⁷ μηδὲ εἶδος χωρὶς, ἀλλὰ τὸ μέρος ἅμα εἶδος ἔχεται.

²⁸ See Sayre 2006, 223-241; White 2007, 61-80; Lane 1998, 13-98.

²⁹ Teisserenc 2014, 107 maintains that the reason why the division of human beings into Greeks and Barbarians is incorrect is that the property not shared by the Barbarians – being Greek – is not an “ideally based” property at all. Therefore, according to this scholar, the illegitimacy of the division would not depend on the fact that it results from a mere negation of a property (being Greek); the crucial point would be that the negated property itself lacks any ideal/eidetic backing.

³⁰ So, as far as “sets” of objects are concerned, I take “having an *eidōs*” to be equivalent to “participating in an Idea”. Thus, the Ideas turn out to be the causes for the actual instantiation of the properties in the “portions (*mere*)”. See Rowe 1995, 6 n. 181-182, and Sayre 2006, 225 ff.

χωρίς), and to all the other races, *which are countless in number and have no relation in blood or language to one another* (ἀπείροις οὔσι καὶ ἀμείκτοις καὶ ἀσυμφώνοις πρὸς ἄλληλα), they give the single name “barbarian” (σύμπασι δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις γένεσιν [...] βάρβαρον μιᾷ κλήσει προσειπόντες); then, *because of this single name*, they expect it also to be a single species (αὐτὸ διὰ ταύτην τὴν μίαν κλήσιν καὶ γένος ἔν αὐτὸ εἶναι προσδοκῶσιν). [...] A better division, more truly classified and more equal, would be made by dividing number into odd and even, and *the human race into male and female* (κάλλιον δὲ που καὶ μᾶλλον κατ’ εἶδη καὶ δίχα διαροῖτ’ ἂν εἴ [...] τὸ δὲ αὐτῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος ἄρρενι καὶ θήλει); *as for the Lydians and Phrygians and various others* they could be opposed to the rest and split off from them (Λυδοῦς δὲ ἢ Φρύγας ἢ τινας ἐτέρους πρὸς ἅπαντας τάττων ἀποσχίζοι) when it was impossible to find and separate *two parts, each of which formed a class* (ἡνίκα ἀποροῖ γένος ἅμα καὶ μέρος εὐρίσκειν ἐκάτερον τῶν σχισθέντων).

(transl. by Fowler, with modifications)

So, the mistake made by “most people in this country (οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἐνθάδε)” can be summed up as follows. They are used to *saying* (προσειπόντες) that, as far as their “species (γένος)” is concerned, “the Greeks” are to be split from “the Barbarians” (τὸ μὲν Ἑλληνικὸν ὡς ἔν ἀπὸ πάντων ἀφαιροῦντες χωρὶς [...] σύμπασι δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις γένεσιν [...] βάρβαρον μιᾷ κλήσει προσειπόντες); moreover, “because of this denomination alone (διὰ ταύτην τὴν μίαν κλήσιν)”, they “expect (προσδοκῶσιν³¹)” the Barbarians also “to be one species (καὶ γένος ἔν αὐτὸ εἶναι)”. Now, it seems to me that the “division” of the human species into Greeks and Barbarians is said to be wrong inasmuch as it automatically mirrors not only a custom, but also a merely *linguistic* one.³² The fundamental point stated here is: current language is not fully reliable in philosophical terms.³³ It may be the case that an already existing word matches a really existing referent (that is to say, “what is name in itself”, αὐτὸ ἐκεῖνο ὃ ἔστιν ὄνομα, and the “form of name naturally appropriate to each thing”, τὸ ἐκάστῳ φύσει πεφυκὸς ὄνομα, as Plato puts it in the *Cratylus*, 389-390);³⁴ and in the *Timaeus* (78e), we are told that “god” established names for the things he had shaped, thus playing the role of both an *onomatourgos* and a cosmogonic force.³⁵ Those “ancient” words – one should infer –

³¹ Maybe, one component of this verb is worth highlighting, for the employment of *dokeo* is revealing in Plato’s language. It alludes to a weak form of knowledge, i.e. *opinion*, which needs to be “strengthened”, should it turn out to be somehow <<binding>>; see *Polit.* 309c7 ff.: τὴν τῶν καλῶν καὶ δικαίων πέρι καὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ τῶν τούτοις ἐναντίων ὄντως οὔσαν ἀληθὴ δόξαν μετὰ βεβαιώσεως, ὅποταν ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἐγγίγνηται, θεῖαν φημί ἐν δαιμονίῳ γίγνεσθαι γένει.

³² On the relationship between language and reality in the *Politicus*, see Casertano 2018; Casertano 1995; see also Casertano 1996, 215-312.

³³ See Palumbo 2014, 35-52.

³⁴ See Ademollo 2011, 129-137.

³⁵ τούτῳ δὲ δὴ τῷ γένει τὸν τὰς ἐπωνυμίας θέμενον ἀναπνοῆν καὶ ἐκπνοῆν λέγομεν θέσθαι τοῦνομα. On this binomial, see Burkert 1970. The identity of this τὸν τὰς ἐπωνυμίας θέμενον is not immediately clear. According to Soulez 1987, 167, this “*nomothetes*” must be one of the θεοὶ θεῶν who are charged with the fulfillment of the cosmic demiurgy. This reading would be true, were Plato to be a fully coherent dialogue-writer. Nonetheless, the determinative article before θεός (see 73b8, 74d6, 75d1, 78b2) seems to refer to the cosmic

cannot be deprived of real referents, given that their producer is a god. Sure enough, it is not explicitly said that this cosmic god would “look at” ideas, when posing those first names; nonetheless, this is highly likely, in light of the metaphysical principles set out at the beginning of the dialogue (28c-29a: the whole cosmogony is nothing but a tentative reproduction of the ideal dimension onto the *chora*, by means of the skilled intermediation of the demiurge). There is also a section of the *Cratylus* (388-390) where an incredibly gifted (though not divine) namegiver is said to put the “generic form” of the name and the “specific form” of each name “into sound and syllables” (390d5-6); if Plato is outlining here a method to forge new philosophically valid words,³⁶ the philosopher would end up imitating the cosmic gods when coming up with new words for newly discovered eidetic entities.³⁷

Be all that as it may, such a correspondence between language and reality cannot be taken for granted: men have often come up with new words that happen to refer to simply non-existent things. The reason for the occurrence of such mistakes is found in the quality of ordinary men’s knowledge, which tends to be merely doxastic (see e.g. *Crat.* 411b-c). But how to identify the semantically empty words and the full ones? The *Cratylus* is revealing on this matter. According to the final pages of the dialogue (esp. 439b), a preliminary dialectical inquiry into *ta onta* is in order, when it comes to evaluating the adequacy of *onomata*; once you rely on a rigorous mapping of reality, only then you can look into *onomata*, in order to appreciate the matching of the latter to the former. In other words, you need to be a philosopher to know the truth about the correctness of names. And, if a division results in the absence of a *genos/eidos* of *barbaros*, for example, that implies that the existing word ‘barbaros’ is nothing but a verbal product of men.

Last but not least, what to do with potentially new eidetic entities, which can crop up during the dialectical inquiry? I mean, how should one name them? As I have indicated above, the *Cratylus* provides an answer also to this question. The dialectician is to play the role of the namegiver (*nomothetes*, *onomatourgos*, *onomastikos*),³⁸ relying on his acquaintance with the appropriate forms. Thus, the already traditional character of a namegiver (see the divine Orpheus in the Derveni Papyrus,³⁹ or the mysterious, yet superhuman entity alluded to by Aeschylus in his *Agamemnon*, 681-692)⁴⁰ turns into an *alter ego* of the philosopher in Plato’s philosophical appropriation.⁴¹

IV

But, if this were the case, one should wonder whether it is legitimate to consider this negative reason (namely, the wrongness of the division because of its merely linguistic

demiurge, and not to one of his helping gods; sure enough, this would be a serious inconsistency in Plato’s overall narrative, but it wouldn’t be the only one.

³⁶ Palumbo 2008, 334-364.

³⁷ The theme of ὁμοίωσις θεῶν is rather relevant in Plato’s dialogues: see Lavecchia 2006.

³⁸ On this character, see Sedley 2003.

³⁹ See Baxter 1992, 130-139.

⁴⁰ See Medda 2018, II, 393-396.

⁴¹ On Plato’s way to deal with tradition, see Ferrari 2019.

basis) as fully Platonic – as one Plato is committed to. In light of the principles A) and B) stated at the very beginning, I think we can answer affirmatively. For there are other dialogues (or passages of text from them) in which the criticism of any language-based analysis emerges in full clarity. In the *Cratylus*, for example, Socrates⁴² maintains (439a ff.) that is not possible to know “the things that are, the realities (τὰ ὄντα)” (whatever all this actually alludes to) by means of simply putting language under scrutiny.⁴³ In other words, the linguistic dimension, at least in its everyday use,⁴⁴ is likely to be “unhooked” from a full ontological counterpart.⁴⁵ As a consequence, the language people generally rely upon might not “mirror” (and hence, give a proper clue to) any Platonically real object. Therefore, one is expected to start with “things themselves” (τὰ ὄντα [...] πολὺ μᾶλλον αὐτὰ ἐξ αὐτῶν) rather than with “words” (ἢ ἐκ τῶν ὀνομάτων), should a fully Platonic *episteme* of the former ones ever be reached.⁴⁶ So, if one were to enumerate the multiple reasons⁴⁷ for depriving “Barbarian” of a properly ontological backing, its being the mere product of an inference from everyday *language* to reality would be surely one of them.

Moreover, as the Stranger clarifies soon after (263c8 ff.), the product of a division which is merely linguistic is nothing but a “part”:

[2] And it was clear to me at the time that you removed a part and then thought that the remainder was one species because you were able to call them all by the same name, “beasts” (καὶ ἔμοιγε δὴ τότε ἐφάνης μέρος ἀφαιρῶν ἡγεῖσθαι καταλιπεῖν τὸ λοιπὸν αὐτῶν πάντων γένος ἓν, ὅτι πᾶσι ταῦτὸν ἐπονομάζειν ἔσχεες ὄνομα, θηρία καλέσας).

⁴² It is true that some significant differences can be detected between the characters of Socrates and that of the Stranger,: see Blondell 2003, 247-266; and Gonzales 2000, 161-181. See also McCoy 2008 and Zuckert 2000. Nevertheless, I think that, as far as their *philosophical* messages are concerned, some revealing and recurring similarities can be pointed out, and these are likely to allude to Plato’s “commitment” to them.

⁴³ See 438e5 ff.: ὄντινα μὲν τοίνυν τρόπον δεῖ μαθάνειν ἢ εὐρίσκειν τὰ ὄντα, μείζον ἴσως ἐστὶν ἐργωκέναι ἢ κατ’ ἐμὲ καὶ σέ: ἀγαπητὸν δὲ καὶ τοῦτο ὁμολογήσασθαι, ὅτι οὐκ ἐξ ὀνομάτων ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον αὐτὰ ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ μαθητέον καὶ ζητητέον ἢ ἐκ τῶν ὀνομάτων. As for τὰ ὄντα, the expression might allude to the Ideas; see also Ademollo 2011, 444 ff.

⁴⁴ Here it is to be seen the reason for Socrates’ desire, in the *Cratylus*, for a philosophically perfect language, which could be able to perfectly represent the objective reality. See Silverman 2001; Robinson 1969, 100-117; Robinson 1956.

⁴⁵ To the extent of my knowledge, the first to emphasise the autonomy of language from its external referents is Gorgias: see Ioli 2013; Nicolai 2014; Nicolai 2015.

⁴⁶ How to know ideas? Is it possible to have an acquaintance with them without language and words? This question is a matter of controversy among contemporary Platonists. It is perhaps possible to reduce the wide number of accounts to two main theoretical options: 1) the ideas can and should be known directly, by means of something like an intuition. In fact, in the dialogues, the act of knowing the forms is often described as a vision, or even as a tactile grasping. That intuition might be carried out by the soul either before the corporealization, or during corporeal life; 2) the ideas can be known only by means of language, and in language, for it is impossible to properly know anything not linguistically. On this controversy, see e.g. the debate between Trabattoni 2006, Parente 2007 and Trabattoni 2007.

⁴⁷ It goes without saying that these reasons can be sharply distinguished only in exegetical terms, for in Plato’s text they are inextricably intertwined.

But, as the methodological principle stated in 2) above requires, we should always cut “parts” along with *eide*, “forms”, if a really philosophical division is to occur. So, regardless of the precise meaning of *eidos* in ontological terms, we can now affirm that a way not to deliver on the requirement in 2) is to “divide” on the basis of mere linguistic conventions. Thus, we are given a second reason for the Barbarian’s lack of a real ontological status, and this reason is both *methodological* and *ontological*. Again, it is rather probable that Plato shares this point. For also in the *Phaedrus* (265e1 ff.) it is clearly stated that, when “dividing”, one should always pay attention to act “in accordance with the natural joints”.⁴⁸ In other words, one should avoid any cut which could result in arbitrary “portions”, i.e. in portions lacking the “natural joints (*eide*)”.

But this is not the whole story. There is also another problem with setting “the Greeks” off against every other “Barbarian” people. This time, the question is merely *political*, and it is to be identified with “Greek-centrism”.⁴⁹ The Stranger blames this approach for the following reason:⁵⁰ it is typical of Greeks as classifiers to forget that they represent just *one* perspective among the multiple others. Nevertheless, we are told that it is not peculiar to Greeks alone. As the Stranger puts it, that is a regrettable characteristic of human beings in general, in as much as they are able both to *opine* and to *express* their opinion. Paradoxically, one could suppose (263d4-e2) a case like this one: given that the cranes too are able to *think and speak* (“if there is any other animal capable of thought, such as the crane appears to be, [...] and it perchance gives names, just as you do”⁵¹), they might divide the species of the animals into “cranes” (“it might [...] oppose cranes to all other animals”⁵²) and “beasts” (“and group the rest [...] under one head, calling them by one name, which might very well be that of beasts”⁵³). They might even get to the point where *mankind* (μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων) would be included among the “beasts”. Now: it goes without saying that all this would prove seriously mistaken. For it would be the product of nothing but a “pride of self” (σεμνῶνον αὐτὸ ἐαυτό) of *one* point of view as if it were the *only* existent, or legitimate, one.⁵⁴ In Plato’s own words:

[3] But indeed, my most courageous young friend, perhaps, if there is any other animal capable of thought, such as the crane appears to be (εἴ που φρόνιμόν ἐστί τι ζῷον ἕτερον, οἷον δοκεῖ τὸ τῶν γεράνων), or any other like creature, and it perchance gives names (ὃ κατὰ ταῦτα ἴσως διονομάζει καθάπερ καὶ σύ), just as you do, it might in its pride of self oppose cranes to all other animals (γεράνους μὲν ἐν γένος ἀντιτιθὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις ζῴοις), and group the rest, men included, under one head (τὰ δὲ ἄλλα μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων συλλαβὸν εἰς ταῦτό), calling them by one name, which might very well be that of beasts

⁴⁸ Τὸ πάλιν κατ’ εἶδη δῦνασθαι διατέμνειν κατ’ ἄρθρα ἧ πέφυκεν, καὶ μὴ ἐπιχειρεῖν καταγνῶναι μέρος μηδέν, κακοῦ μαγείρου τρόπον χρώμενον.

⁴⁹ See Dixsaut 2018, 313.

⁵⁰ See *infra* for other Platonic passages of text where this “division” is employed.

⁵¹ εἴ που φρόνιμόν ἐστί τι ζῷον ἕτερον, οἷον δοκεῖ τὸ τῶν γεράνων [...] ὃ κατὰ ταῦτα ἴσως διονομάζει καθάπερ καὶ σύ.

⁵² γεράνους μὲν ἐν γένος ἀντιτιθὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις ζῴοις.

⁵³ τὰ δὲ ἄλλα [...] συλλαβὸν εἰς ταῦτό [...] ἴσως θηρία προσείποι.

⁵⁴ See El Murr 2014, 125.

(οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν ἴσως θηρία προσείποι). *Now let us try to be on our guard against all that sort of thing* (πειραθῶμεν οὖν ἡμεῖς ἐξευλαβεῖσθαι πάνθ' ὅποσα τοιαῦτα).

So, the third reason for denying a properly ontological status to the “Barbarian Species” turns out to be both *political* and *anthropological*. But is this reason imputable to Plato as well? At least on the face of them, some passages of text from other Platonic dialogues (notably *Resp.* V 470c5 ff. and *Crat.* 383b1 ff.) seem to extensively exploit such a Greek-centric perspective. So, in light of principle B), one should be rather sceptical as to the real degree of Plato's commitment to the *Statesman's* argument (at least in its strictly political implications). Nevertheless, delivering on principle C), one should first examine the dialogic context in which the other passages appear before concluding that they are peculiar. For, even though different accounts cannot be possibly turned into equivalent ones, one should appreciate whether such differences may be due mainly to the dialogic context (and, particularly, to its ongoing development) or not. In light of this, I think that the case of the *Cratylus* is rather unproblematic, after all. In the *Cratylus*, the category of “barbarian” seems to be employed in a rather loose and commonsensical way, as if it could refer, together with “the Greeks”, to the entire community of speaking human beings. Besides, such an unphilosophical use is likely to depend on the imprecision of everyday language, whose deficiency is the very core of the whole discussion throughout the dialogue.

As for *Resp.* V 470c5 ff.,⁵⁵ things seem to be more complicated, at least on the face of it:

[4] We shall then say that Greeks fight and wage war with barbarians, and barbarians with Greeks, *and are enemies by nature*, and that war is the fit name for this enmity and hatred. Greeks, however, we shall say, are still by nature the friends of Greeks when they act in this way, but Greece is sick in that case and divided by faction, and faction is the name we must give to that enmity (Ἕλληνας μὲν ἄρα βαρβάρους καὶ βαρβάρους Ἕλλησι πολεμεῖν μαχομένους τε φήσομεν καὶ πολεμίους φύσει εἶναι, καὶ πόλεμον τὴν ἔχθραν ταύτην κλητέον: Ἕλληνας δὲ Ἕλλησιν, ὅταν τι τοιοῦτον δρῶσιν, φύσει μὲν φίλους εἶναι, νοσεῖν δ' ἐν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ τὴν Ἑλλάδα καὶ στασιάζειν, καὶ στάσιν τὴν τοιαύτην ἔχθραν κλητέον).

The inconsistency between the passage from the *Pol.* and the one just quoted above is rather striking. Nevertheless, some explications can be proposed (and have been proposed) in order to come to terms with this oddity. For example, (a) one might think that, at a certain point, Plato changed his mind.⁵⁶ If this were the case, one could imagine that Plato discovered the adequate philosophical method (i.e. the dichotomic one) only at a certain stage of his philosophical career, so that he could come to a different conclusion as far as the status of “barbarian” is concerned only at that moment. This explication is rather reasonable, even though maybe it is too simple. Actually, it presumes a *development* in Plato's own philosophy when Plato's commitment to either of these arguments is still to be proved. Alternatively (b), an *internal and dialogic reason* might be thought to have kept Plato from arguing for the inexistence of a “Barbarian Species” in the *Resp.* For example, one could maintain the following: in light of the *previously agreed* impossibility for the city not to fight at all (see *Resp.* II 373d1

⁵⁵ On this text, see Gastaldi 2000, 301-354.

⁵⁶ Joly 1992, 81.

ff.), Plato might have thought it better to emphatically describe the Barbarians as “natural enemies” *only in order to keep his city from fighting against other Greek cities*.⁵⁷ This explication could seem to be in line with principle C); besides, it would prove even more reasonable if one thought of the Plato’s *historical context*, and particularly of the tragedy of the Peloponnesian war.⁵⁸ Last but not least (c), a certain result, which is reached at a certain point of a dialogue, should not be considered as absolutely valid, but as one a deeper (and more focused) analysis could always (actually, in this case, *did*) put into question.

Be all this as it may, Plato’s commitment to the political implications of the *Statesman*’s argument is meant to remain at least probable, given that it is not at odds with any other undoubtedly “Platonic” piece of evidence.

But, again, this happens not to be the whole story. As for the alleged “Barbarian Species” other problems come to light. And this time they are likely to be, so to speak, *a latere objecti*. Let’s read again a few words from the [T1]: “and to all the other races, which are countless in number and have no relation in blood or language to one another they give the single name ‘barbarian’”.⁵⁹ I think that this segment of text enables us to detect other reasons why the “Barbarian” might be said not to “have an *eidos*”. The first difficulty with it is that it is potentially “indeterminate (*ἀπείριστος*)”, in as much as whoever happens *not to be* Greek, *ipso facto*, is considered as a “Barbarian”. But to postulate a “species” without a *definite number of kinds* is, *dialectically* speaking, a serious mistake. As we know also from the *Philebus* (16d7 ff.), “one should not attribute the character of indeterminate to the plurality until one can see the complete number between the indeterminate and the one (transl. after Gosling).”⁶⁰ The philosophical point is that it is highly incorrect to directly move from a potentially indeterminate set of kinds of objects to an eidetic unity, which should be able to hold that set together. As also the *VII Epistle* makes it clear (344b), the dialectical enquiry requires a serious effort; and the path from the eidetic unity to the sensible multiplicity and back needs to be properly articulated, whatever it takes in terms of commitment. So, in accordance with Principles 1) and 2) above, it seems legitimate to conclude the following: in the eyes of Plato, an ontological misconception is likely to lie below the idea of an *eidos* of “Barbarian”, in as much as this turns out to be *indeterminate*.

Moreover, ethnologically speaking, the alleged “Barbarians” are said to lack strongly identifying properties, should they turn out to be a real “species”. For, there is no “mixing” (or, more precisely, “mating”: *ἀμείκτοις*⁶¹) between the different peoples that should be included in the “Barbarian Species”. Moreover, these peoples are also unable

⁵⁷ Gastaldi 2000, 327 points out that the «Barbarian» who is at issue at this point of the dialogue has a highly *ideological* meaning.

⁵⁸ See Gastaldi 2000, 320 ff.

⁵⁹ σύμψασι δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις γένεσιν, ἀπείριστος οὖσι καὶ ἀμείκτοις καὶ ἀσυμφώνοις πρὸς ἄλληλα, βάρβαρον μὴ κλήσει προσειπόντες etc.

⁶⁰ τὴν δὲ τοῦ ἀπείρου ιδέαν πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος μὴ προσφέρειν πρὶν ἢ τις τὸν ἀριθμὸν αὐτοῦ πάντα κατίδη τὸν μεταξὺ τοῦ ἀπείρου τε καὶ τοῦ ἐνός. On the matter, see Gill 2010; Benson 2010; Bravo 2010; Kahn 2010.

⁶¹ But the word might have here a more generic meaning, something like “who do not have any reciprocal relationships”. I think it is not possible to rule out this semantic reading, even though I find the other one (the one I elaborate on above) more convincing.

to *speak* to one another (ἄσυμφώνοις), since they do not share any common linguistic system of communication. Now, the necessity for a unitarian human group to share a language (were it to be a fully unitarian group) is rather commonsensical: the etymology of *barbaros* itself is, in this sense, revealing.⁶² But, what about “mating”? Is this requirement likely to be “Platonic”? I think it is, as the *Politicus* itself and the *Respublica*⁶³ show us. For example, at the very end of the former dialogue (310b1 ff.), we are told that, if a *unitarian* political entity is to be obtained, the real politician is expected to promote *marriages*⁶⁴ between the members of the two different “psychological prototypes”⁶⁵ the city is made up of.⁶⁶ Therefore, we can legitimately consider “mating”, like marriages, as the Platonically legitimate means to guarantee the unity of a human group. Of course, this is not to say that the perspective of the *barbaros* example and that of unity through marriages (later in the same dialogue) are identical; rather, what I am suggesting is that the absence of any kind of intersubjective bonds or links (like marriages or language) among the species which should form part of the alleged Barbarian *eidōs* might have seemed, to Plato’s mind, as another sensible reason to rule out the existence of such an *eidōs*. Besides, throughout the dialogues, it is perceptible similarity between objects which leads to the postulation of an ideal unity responsible for that very similarity to occur.⁶⁷

V

Now, it should be possible to draw some conclusions. First of all, the previous examination has highlighted the complexity (in the etymological sense of the word) which characterises any piece of Platonic philosophy. It is anything but straightforward to isolate each of the multiple reasons that might have led Plato to claim for a certain philosophical account. Nonetheless, by means of an analytical approach towards a multilayered dialogic section like that of *Pol.* 262a-263e, it is possible to maintain what follows. At least when writing the *Statesman*, Plato was likely to have the following reasons to consider the “Barbarian Species” as nothing but an *empty word*:

- 1) From a *philosophically broad* point of view, it is not correct to take a current linguistic custom as the legitimate basis for drawing inferences as to what really exists; but it is exactly a perspectival (and even localistic) *way of speaking* that

⁶² See Battagazzore 1995, 7 ff. and Lévy 1984.

⁶³ See Campese 2000 e Vegetti 2000.

⁶⁴ The so called “human bond”: see Giorgini 2018.

⁶⁵ See Rowe 2018.

⁶⁶ 310e5 ff.: τοῦτο γὰρ ἐν καὶ ὅλον ἐστὶ βασιλικῆς συνυφάνσεως ἔργον, μηδέποτε εἶν ἀφίστασθαι σώφρονα ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνδρείων ἦθη, συγκερκίζοντα δὲ ὁμοδοξίας καὶ τιμαῖς καὶ ἀτιμίας καὶ δόξαις καὶ ὁμηρειῶν ἐκδόσεσιν εἰς ἀλλήλους, λείον καὶ τὸ λεγόμενον εὐήτριον ὕφασμα συνάγοντα ἐξ αὐτῶν, τὰς ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἀρχὰς αἰεὶ κοινῇ τούτοις ἐπιτρέπειν.

⁶⁷ See e.g. *Pol.* 285b: δέον, ὅταν (b) μὲν τὴν τῶν πολλῶν τις πρότερον αἰσθηταὶ κοινωνίαν, μὴ προαφίστασθαι πρὶν ἂν ἐν αὐτῇ τὰς διαφορὰς ἴδῃ πάσας ὅποσαι περ ἐν εἶδεσι κείνται, τὰς δὲ αὖ παντοδαπὰς ἀνομοιότητας, ὅταν ἐν πλῆθεσιν ὀφθῶσιν, μὴ δυνατὸν εἶναι δυσωπούμενον παύεσθαι πρὶν ἂν σύμπαντα τὰ οἰκεῖα ἐντὸς μιᾶς ὁμοιότητος ἔρξας γένους τινὸς οὐσία περιβάλληται.

- leads “most people in this country” (as Plato puts it) to expect the “Barbarian Species” *also* to exist;
- 2) Furthermore, from a mainly *methodological* point of view, it is not correct to “split” a species like the human one into a small “part” and a far “bigger” one; but the “Barbarian” would be an incomparably “bigger part” than the Greek one;
 - 3) Analogously, from a strictly *ontological* point of view, every “part” resulting from a philosophically correct “division” is required also “to have an *eidōs*” (i.e. to take part in an Idea); but the “Barbarian part” proves deficient in any such ideal backing, since it is said to be *only* a “part”;
 - 4) Moreover, from a *dialectical* perspective, there cannot be a *genos/eidōs* with an indefinite extension, as also the *Philebus* shows; but the “Barbarian” *genos* would be irreparably *apeiron*;
 - 5) Even from a *political* (and *anthropological*) perspective, the division of the human species into Greeks and Barbarians mirrors a sort of a flawed Greek-centrism;
 - 6) Last but not least, from an *ethnological* point of view, it is not correct to collapse a multitude of peoples into a single species, if these peoples neither share a language, nor promote marriages (or, have any other reciprocal relationships). But the alleged “Barbarians” turn out to be deprived of any unifying bonds.

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