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Gadamer's Gorgias: The Imperative of Self-Refutation

Abstract

Gadamer has written several powerful studies of Platonic dialectic. His emphasis on shared understanding, the fusing of horizons and other hermeneutic notions are partially drawn from a study of Plato's elenctic dialogues. However, Socrates in Gorgias makes a claim about the imperative of self-refutation that not only complicates our understanding of Socratic method, but Gadamer's reading of it as well.

This article is meant to explore just how the imperative of self-refutation causes difficulty for Gadamer's understanding of dialectic, especially his distinction between authentic and inauthentic dialectic. After considering the nature of 'refutation', this article will examine whether Gadamer's notions of shared understanding, the 'facts of the matter', and self-understanding help us to resolve this problem. It shall be concluded that the teacher must take any refutations of his/her own views seriously, but has no special obligation to refute (introspectively) any of their own views, even those beliefs, theories, principles or criteria that enable him to guide the argument.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gorgias, refutation, shared understanding, introspection

There is a truly perplexing passage in Plato's Gorgias. Socrates asks:

And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted (ἐλεγχθέντων) if I say anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to be refuted (ἐλεγχθέντων) than to refute. For I count being refuted (ἐλεγχζάντων) a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it. I don't suppose there's anything quite so bad for a person as having false belief about the things we're discussing right now. (Gorgias 458a-b)

What is one to make of this? Are there other passages of Plato's work that explicitly bring to mind Socrates' desire to be refuted? Are we to understand that the elenctic method involves discussion for the purpose of introspective self-refutation? Is this a special obligation for the secondary interlocutor, the teacher? What would a teacher need to do to satisfy this obligation? Wouldn't

any teacher-led discussion in which the teacher paused to refute his/her own presuppositions be eristical in practice? Wouldn't such a discussion come to center on the teacher's own beliefs and not on those he/she is ("maieutically") trying to give birth from the mind of the student? When Socrates gives birth to a notion from the mind of the primary interlocutor, in what sense is that notion Socrates' own, no matter how much he molds and refines it? Given the vital importance of refuting a refutable belief, then isn't there something akin to an imperative to seek out and refute such beliefs, if possible? Can the 'Socratic method' aim at self-refutation, in whole or in part?

Self-Refutation and the 'Paradox' of Socrates

To understand the significance of the passage, let us consider how it affects our perception of Socrates the man as well as his "method". First, we might note that this is one of those novel occasions when Socrates declares who he thinks he is. We might follow Vlastos when he writes:

Moments of self-revelation like these are rare in the dialogues. Socrates is not a character out of Chekhov, introspecting moodily on a public stage. He is a man whose face is a mask, whose every word is deliberate, and who seems calculated to conceal more than to reveal. One gets so used to this artful exterior that one is left unprepared for moments like these and is apt to discount them as irony (Vlastos 1995, 10).

We are here at the very crux of Socrates as paradox, the Socrates who "preaches a gospel" in philosophizing for the health of the soul, as Vlastos so movingly described, and the questioner, the demoralizing smasher of personal idols. It is occasioned by an emphasis on the dubious notion that "virtue is knowledge", which for Vlastos means that there is no virtue without knowledge, such that Socrates "makes you feel that the failure to sustain a thesis or find a definition is not just an intellectual defeat, but a moral disaster" (Vlastos 1995, 8). But it also means that anyone who has this knowledge would necessarily respond to the exigencies of life with perfect virtue. In any event, this evangelistic Socrates teaches that only the soul is "worth saving" and knowledge is the only way to do so. But the paradox becomes evident when we see the other Socrates, who often does not act like an evangelist. We come to the Socrates who refutes: "you say A, and he shows you that A implies B, and B implies C, and then he asks, 'But didn't you say D before? And doesn't C contradict D? And there he leaves you with our shipwrecked argument, without so much as telling you what part of it, if any, might yet be salvaged" (Vlastos 1995, 9).

How does self-refutation figure in this paradox? At a glance, the preaching of Socrates seems to imply it. One might think that self-refutation is an important way to cleanse the soul by means of the elimination of false beliefs represented as knowledge. And the "moral disaster" of not being able to sustain a thesis in dialogue must imply that one was not resolute in refuting that thesis by means of self-examination. But elenctic dialogue is clearly the vehicle for the purpose of this preaching. Socrates is not declaiming in the streets, but speaking quietly with people. The iconoclastic Socrates asks questions in such a way that his primary interlocutors (Gorgias, Polus, Callicles) shatter (or are meant to shatter) their own arguments, leaving them to sit forlorn in the wreckage of their own theoretical orientation. Or at least they would if they understood what had befallen them. Yet, it should be clear that the primary interlocutors do not meet this fate as a result of self-refutation, but rather with the active involvement of Socrates. They are not bereft because Socrates has incidentally helped them in their effort to refute their own theses. And besides, the imperative of self-refutation is not binding solely on the primary interlocutor, but on Socrates himself, the "sort of guy" who would prefer to be refuted than to refute. We might be clear that the primary interlocutor is not shipwrecked because Socrates, the secondary interlocutor, has sought to refute his own theses. On the contrary, it is the primary interlocutor's thesis that has not sustained demolition, while Socrates' own position has not even been considered for such a fate. Anyone who speaks with Socrates about weighty matters is likely to succumb to his questioning, falling into a moral disaster that Socrates himself—the masked man whose 'method' conceals rather than reveals—never seems to experience. Such moral disasters are for those whom Socrates helps, but Socrates is not able to help because he answers to any imperative to self-refutation. Thus, in respect of establishing cosmic harmony by means of truth, of the common good through the virtue that is knowledge, of fostering knowledge through dialectics for the purpose of cleansing the soul, self-refutation might play some part because a poorly supported thesis promotes disharmony, personal pleasure and empowerment at the expense of truth and "the good"; but it appears to play no role in the dialectic that serves as the means for doing so.

Does Socrates have sufficient knowledge to be able to answer to the imperative of self-refutation? What is meant here is not that he would have knowledge of this or that subject area—justice, courage, or the price of beans—but knowledge of dialectics itself. Does Socrates know that he wants to know, which is only partly addressed by the Socratic maxim that one knows only that one knows (is wise about) nothing. At Gorgias 453b he openly professes: "You should know that I'm convinced I'm one of those people who in a discussion

with someone else really want to have knowledge of the subject the discussion's about." We might notice that Socrates is insisting that Gorgias "should know" something. But what he should know is merely that Socrates is *persuaded* that he wants knowledge, but not that he knows he wants it. He can only profess to have persuaded himself that he wants knowledge, though what role knowing plays in this persuasion is unclear. This assertion of self-persuasion is not dialectical, the internal dialectic of examining and potentially refuting the claim, an "expression of impersonal allegiance to the logos", but rhetorical (Wardy 1996, 64). The problem may be with the assertion that it would give Socrates "pleasure" to be refuted, which does not sit well with the notion of a selfless devotion to the truth (Benardete 1991, 25). "Pleasure" in the original quote cannot be discussed as merely rhetorical, as that would raise the issue of what motivates Socrates to pursue truth and accept refutation. And yet to accept that Socrates is justified by reasons to take such pleasure is not in accord with his overall unremitting pursuit of truth.

While we are still on the subject of Socrates the thinking man, we might also consider those important places in dialogue where he does not seem at all like the "sort of guy" who prefers self-refutation. What do we make of Socrates' strict adherence to the thesis that "one should never do wrong to others, even when they have caused harm" at *Crito* 49d-e. Here he declares he has "held it for a long time and still hold it now, but if you think otherwise, tell me now" but if *Crito* assents to it, then the dialogue can proceed as planned. Notice that this is a minor crux in the argument: the secondary interlocutor asserts a position in considering the belief of the primary interlocutor; if the primary assents to it, then together they can continue to discuss the belief of the primary interlocutor; but if the primary dissents from it, then the secondary interlocutor will have a chance to examine it, potentially refuting it, then somehow fruitfully return to the original course of dialogue about the thesis of the primary interlocutor. As is commonplace in the dialogues, the primary interlocutor assents to the position, so it is never examined, never submitted to the process of refutation. It is as if Socrates dangles the prospect of refuting his own position before *Crito*, knowing full well he is unlikely to reach for it.

Second, let us turn to the question of his method. One might maintain that Socrates has a set body of logical and dialogical functions used from situation to situation, as some traditional interpreters have (e.g. Vlastos 1995, Irwin 1995, 18-19); or one might adhere to any number of views to the effect that Socrates' activity differs by situation with primary interlocutors, such as Teloh's *Phaedrus* principle (Teloh 1986 and 2007, 60). In fact, it is now not unheard of for scholars to question whether 'elenchus' is even uniquely Socratic, as in the

collection edited by Scott [2002, see especially the essays by Lesher (19-36) and Ausland (36-61)]. One need take no stand on the issue of whether Socrates has "a method" to see how self-refutation causes difficulty. How might one support the role of self-refutation in Socrates' method? If adhering to false beliefs causes disharmony etc. then refutation of such beliefs is good because it promotes harmony by cleansing the soul etc. So, one ought to strive to refute one's own beliefs. However, as we have seen, neither the primary nor the secondary interlocutor actively strives to refute his/her own beliefs. If we wonder how the former is stripped of a belief and how the latter played a role in doing so, we are effectively put off with claims about 'the elenchus', or the merging of subjectivities into a single dialectic for the purpose of a dialogical pursuit of truth, or some such. In other words, we focus on the theses and beliefs proposed, examined and demolished within the dialogue, as if they were subjected to an impersonal force of the dialectic of reason. We can find no place for the very personal process of self-refutation in the work of this impersonal force.

The Uniqueness of Gorgias

Given a certain grasp of the elenctic method, one might think that the imperative of self-refutation is present throughout Plato's dialogues. Yet, one would be hard pressed to find mention of it even in those places where Socrates pauses to discuss dialectics itself. One might also imagine that it is at least implied in the many analysis of the soul, self-understanding, teaching and learning, wisdom and temperance and the like. There would be disappointment here as well. One might be forced to integrate the imperative into the subject matter, all the while wondering why, if it is so important for dialectics, it is not more explicit.

It must be acknowledged from the outset, however, that the imperative is made explicit only in *Gorgias*, which is something puzzling. *Gorgias* is one of several dialogues devoted to oratory or rhetoric, dialectics versus eristics, philosophy distinguished from sophistry. At the center of such issues is the figure of Gorgias himself, and the respects in which he is either rhetorician and sophist, or both (Tusi 2020). So why isn't the imperative more explicit in *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, *Protagoras*, *Charmides*, or for that matter a range of dialogues from *Republic I*, where refutation is at work, to *Sophist*, where refutation is a theme? For example, there is no sign of the imperative in the lengthy discussion of dialectic at 277-278 in *Phaedrus*; and although Socrates does retract his claim to knowledge of love at 257, this is not clearly the result of answering to the imperative. In *Protagoras* (350), Socrates affirms a position Protagoras forces him to retract, but there is little sign that Socrates examines the claim in the light of

the imperative. Even though Socrates says that "I don't want you to think that my motive in talking with you is anything else than to take a good hard look at things that continually perplex me" (348c), he seems to be using the dialogue as an opportunity to dissolve a perplexity, even though refutation befalls him in ways for which he was not prepared.

And when Charmides suspects that Socrates is merely trying to refute him, not addressing the real question at issue (166c-d), Socrates replies that he is impartial in the use of reasons when he refutes theses and beliefs that turn up in dialogue. Claiming to have a "fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not", he claims to be examining Charmides' belief for his own sake primarily, as if he wanted to make sure that the position he was refuting was not one he himself held dear without realizing it. He claims to be doing this secondarily for his friends and for the common good of most people. But even here Socrates is prevaricating: he is eliminating Charmides' belief from consideration, not any particular belief of his own. Charitably, we might accept that Socrates is refuting others' beliefs so as to cleanse his own soul of its contaminant, but whatever theses and beliefs led him to do so and assisted him in doing so remain unchallenged.

In *Phaedo*, Socrates makes a claim about what Cebes would do hypothetically if one of his beliefs were challenged. We are left with a sense that this is how Socrates understands his own procedure. Socrates insists that one should ignore anyone who attacks one's claim and instead consider whether the consequences are contradictory. And it may be necessary to propose another "hypothesis" in order to determine the relation between the original claim and its consequences. In other words, rather than getting lost in the morass of a claim and its many possible consequences in response to an objection, one should control the fate of the claim by proposing what Socrates calls a "higher" hypothesis to settle the matter. This is, he insists, what a philosopher should do (101d-e). Notice that in the process of examining and weighing claims and consequences, there is no mention of refutation. And even though one is sticking to one's guns and not being distracted by objections, it is not implied that one is answering to the imperative of self-refutation.

A wider glance at *Gorgias* (and *Euthydemus*) might be helpful to sort out what is at issue with the presence of the imperative in certain dialogical situations. Perhaps what is most unique about *Gorgias* is Socrates' claim to have expertise in the art of living (*politikē*), the craft dealing directly with the good of the soul itself. It is famously divided into legislation, which fosters the health of the soul as gymnastics does the health of the body, and justice, which sustains it, much as medicine does for the body. Socrates at 521d claims that, in being

alone in his care for the good of other citizens, he is the sole expert in the art of living. Our question here is whether self-refutation plays any role in this process. Does the process of self-legislation for the good of the soul involve it? Does the process of fostering justice in and for the soul imply it? Is Socrates as legislator and justiciar of the soul the "sort of guy" who prefers to be refuted rather than to refute?

To address these questions, we could not do better than to look at the context of the quote. We are told that we ought to submit ourselves to a discussion as a patient does to a doctor (475e), which takes us to the role of the subject at hand in the dialogue. At 453, Socrates states that, in a discussion, he wants to "have knowledge of the subject the discussion's about". He suspects that Polus means something in particular by the role of persuasion in sophistical discussion, yet holds back: "And why, when I have my suspicions, do I ask you and refrain from expressing them myself?" and answers the questions himself: "It's not you I am after, it's our discussion, to have it proceed in such a way as to make the thing we're talking about most clear to us" (453c). He returns to this claim shortly in a clearer way: "I'm asking questions so that we can conduct an orderly discussion. It's not you I'm after; it's to prevent our getting in the habit of second-guessing and snatching each other's assumptions away ahead of time. It's to allow you to work out your assumption in any way you want to" (454c). It is worth pausing over this claim. In being focused on the discussion as such, in trying to get the right kind of dialogue, each interlocutor should beware of hastily assuming what the other might say and rejecting their claim proleptically on the basis of a spurious grasp of its assumptions. And then Socrates states that the point is to help the other person, the non-teacher if one likes, to work out their own assumptions. There is no sign of any effort at self-refutation. Shortly thereafter, however, his interlocutor Polus accuses Socrates of being pig-headed, refusing to acknowledge when he has been implicitly refuted, when "even a child could refute you". To this, Socrates playfully exclaims that he could be grateful to the child or anyone else who could rid him of the nonsense Polus claims to find in his approach. Refute me!, Socrates challenges (470c). But of course, Socrates is demanding that Polus refute him by working through the assumptions of Polus own position! When Polus offers a rather tepid argument involving the sort of testimony offered in a law court in order to refute Socrates, Socrates responds that he disagrees with everything Polus says and so does not feel refuted. Interestingly, in offering the kind of refutation he finds satisfactory, he claims that when discussing an important subject, it is shameful not have knowledge of it (472d, and see Cain 2008, 214-218). It would appear that someone in the discussion should be ashamed, since they have a rather heated ex-

change of "You're refuted. No, I'm not, you are" soon thereafter (473a-d). In the chaos of eristic dialogue, it can be unclear whether anyone has been refuted, since the conditions of refutation are not established by agreement.

Success in dialectic, in the overall sweep of the dialogue, means that a claim one desires to be true withstands the concerted assault of refutation. One can find this claim to success in the concluding remarks of Gorgias. The reference to "worse thing there is" in the leading quote above indicates the greatest injustice, namely not paying one's due for the harm one has done, which provides the context for the quote. In fact, in the conclusion of Gorgias Socrates claims that this is one of the few claims made in the discussion to "survive" refutation (527b). The dialogical context for this claim is worth quoting. After claiming that he and Callicles are not very talented in their deliberations over weighty matters, Socrates claims:

For it's a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present—when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that—to sound off as though we're somebodies. That's how far behind in education we've fallen. (527e)

Being poorly educated, he says, we shamefully fail to find common ground, fail to think the same things about the same subjects, so cannot see the truth of the matter. Socrates believes that one of the core tenets of Socratism provides support for the imperative of self-refutation: *not submitting an important belief to the scrutiny that could refute it is akin to not paying one's due for the harm one has done*. One should "pay one's due" by submitting one's own belief to self-refutation (Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi 2017, 277-301). Why? Because of the harm one has done? But what harm has one done? Holding a belief that has not survived the elenctic process? Is one causing harm to others by holding a belief that has not yet passed dialogic muster? Socrates alludes to a certain symmetry between the tenet and the practice, but it remains unclear what harm one has done, such that one should pay a debt by striving to refute one's own belief. It may be that we are not addressing eristics in any or all dialogue, but only the shortcomings of sophistical teaching itself. In round terms, the sophist causes harm by placing false beliefs and expectations into the minds of gullible "students". The harm they do to the student, and to truth itself, is "worse" than the harm the student experiences. But what is worst of all is that the sophist shamelessly acknowledges no debt owed for the harm that has been done by misguided teaching. If only the sophist imposed the imperative of self-refutation upon themselves! Unfortunately, if the imperative is limited solely to sophistry, it would be of little interest to us. But if it has wider application to dialectics generally, then we return to wondering why it is not explicit in other

Platonic discussions of dialectic and implicit in the broader philosophical analysis mentioned earlier.

Curiously, something of the same happens in Euthydemus. After struggling with the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus throughout a lengthy dialogue, Socrates maintains not only that they are mistaken, but also that the way he is proven right illustrates something about dialectics itself. In challenging the brothers' sophistical notion that nothing one believes can be (shown to be) false, Socrates suggests that such a notion is incompatible with the imperative to refute refutable beliefs, including one's own. At 286d, it is suggested that if it is impossible to speak or even think what is false, then there is no such thing as a false opinion, and so no ignorance at all! Indeed, the sophists even challenge Socrates to refute this notion, though he rightly wonders whether any such refutation is possible if there are no false beliefs (or even ignorant people!). Thus, Euthydemus insists that there is no such thing as refutation either. Compounding this error, Dionysodorus claims to have shown up in order to teach the notion that there are no false beliefs, when it is unclear that there are any ignorant people in need of teaching, or any counter-claims in need of refutation. When Socrates ensnares him in the implicit contradiction, the sophist can only respond with silence. Later, when Socrates summarizes one of Euthydemus' notions of knowledge, Euthydemus claims that Socrates is "refuted out of his own mouth" (293d-e). In other words, when Socrates is offering a clearer formulation of his interlocutor's claim, the other person thinks that Socrates has somehow refuted his own view. Even later, at 295, Socrates strikes the head squarely by stating incredulously that, *although he is happy to be refuted*, the sophists' teaching leads him to the idea that everyone has knowledge all the time. On this score, once Socrates concedes that if one has knowledge, it is knowledge of something, and one has it by means of the soul, Dionysodorus and Socrates come to verbal blows, with the former claiming that the latter refuses to answer a question he understands but does not want to see refuted, while the latter does not want to answer the question without clarifying what is meant or intended by it. At the end of the dialogue, when asked what he thought of the brothers' skills in dialectic, Socrates states that even the common people impressed by such techniques ought to feel ashamed to defend them and use them to refute other positions (303d). Left unchallenged, such wise men feel no need to explain themselves, since their beliefs cannot be false. "Keeping clear of risk and conflict", sophists at once refuse to expose their own positions to refutation whilst insisting that they can refute any argument against their own (305d).

Ultimately, another core tenet of Socrates, that one is wise only insofar as one knows nothing, survives refutation even as Socrates uses it to challenge

the sophists contradictory notion that there are no false beliefs. Along the way, he alludes to the imperative of self-refutation, though nowhere near as clearly as in Gorgias. His interlocutors in Euthydemus are rather unskilled, even oafish, conversationalists, and so he has a challenge he did not quite have in Gorgias: on the one hand, the sophists here are too dim-witted to understand how they might benefit in helping Socrates to refute his own position, and on the other, the sophists seem to think that Socrates is actually refuting his own position when he is merely summarizing their position for the purpose of refuting it!

Gorgias (and Euthydemus, to a smaller extent) provides us with an intriguing problem, and little in the way of a solution to it. It is unlike other dialogues in that Socrates seems to acknowledge the imperative to self-refutation as important with dialectics within the context of *politikē*, an art of living involving dialogue. What is intriguing is that, where Socrates discusses the nature of dialectics itself, especially in respect of some moment or movement of dialogue, he does not even allude to this imperative. We may be left with a sense that self-refutation has no place in dialectics, since this moment in Gorgias is so exceptional. Or we may suspect that the imperative is not only commensurate with dialectics, even if Socrates makes little or nothing of it, but even necessary for it to achieve its goals. How we respond may depend on what we take refutation to mean.

The Shame in Refutation

Perhaps nowhere does Plato address the matter of 'refutation' more clearly than in Sophist. In particular, he understands it to mean a "cleansing", specifically a cleansing of false knowledge (230) and empty beliefs (231b). In fact, we are meant to understand that admonition is necessary in this process in order to cleanse the recalcitrant soul of beliefs that interfere with the process of learning (231d). Plato's Sophist thus provides us with a lead for understanding refutation in terms of admonition (and with it shaming), cleansing and learning.

What is meant by 'refutation' here? Are we to understand that refuting something just means finding fault with it, discovering it to be wanting in some respect, politely exposing its inadequacy? Perhaps that is the way Socrates often gently lets someone down. But *ἐλεγξάντων* has nothing nice about it. *ἐλέγγω* has the sense of disgracing something, shaming it. Shame is explicitly important in Gorgias, especially in the dialogue with Polus. We might do well to notice that, for Socrates, there is a distinction between two kinds of shame: shamefulness, which carries with it a sense of inhibition or internal constraint on motivation and volition, and being ashamed, the negative feeling that over-

comes an interlocutor in the moment they realize they are profoundly mistaken about a claim (Cain: 2008, 218). We may be meant to think that a sense of shame impels an interlocutor to make claims responsibly and a sense of being ashamed reminds them of the consequences of not doing so.

For my part, there is something unnecessarily excessive in the notion that refutation is a kind of shaming. There is a fascinating moment in Euthydemus in which one of the sophists, Dionysodorus, exclaims that when good men "speak ill" of bad things, there is the potential for abusing the one who holds bad things dear. But Socrates replies that ruining or destroying a person is a condition of making them good, so a good teacher can strongly admonish someone so long as they are striving to make them good. And Ctesippus adds something important to what Socrates is saying: contradiction is not a form of abuse (284d-285d). We are meant to make a connection between the often harsh effort to refute a belief and the non-abusive attitude one has towards the person who holds it. As we have heard Socrates say in Gorgias, "It's not you I am after" (453c), but something else.

Refutation, I tender to surmise, has the *qualitative strength of a shaming*: one strives to refute a false belief with the same intensity that one admonishes what is disgraceful. Socrates, then, is not merely recognizing an imperative to refute any idea that is inadequate for a task, but to submit his own beliefs to a process of refutation with the very force of conviction one has when admonishing the shameful. He might be "ironic" about the wisdom of the "wise" men from whom he seeks wisdom. He might be "ironic" about his own desire to learn from those who can only teach him by means of error. But he cannot be at all "ironic" about the imperative to refute his own false beliefs if he should do so with the intensity of condemning what is disgraceful.

And in what sense can Socrates be pleased to be refuted if refutation has the force of shaming? Does this suggest that being refuted results in learning something, such that one is pleased to learn it even if it was painful to be shamed for having believed otherwise? There is clearly a problem with the notion of pleasure in the conversation with Callicles (Jenks 2007, 204-207), but we are addressing the problem of whether the pleasure of being refuted and the shame of being refuted can be compresent in Socrates' participation in the dialogue. At a stretch, one might find some trace of self-refutation in some of Socrates' efforts to "examine" himself. But if self-refutation would have the force of shaming, one is unlikely to find a situation in which he is willing to undergo such humiliation. For example, if a primary interlocutor affirms a thesis or belief by which they live, then according to Vlastos some part of his

or her life has been "indicted or discredited". Seeing that refutation has the force of shaming, he asserts that

You get into the argument when you realize that this is the price you have to pay for it—that in the course of it your ego may experience the unpleasant sensation of a bloody nose—takes courage. To search for moral truth that may prove your own life wrong takes humility that is not afraid of humiliation. (Vlastos 1995, 17-18)

Of course, readers often see how primary interlocutors react to this threat: by being ignorant of it, or feigning ignorance so as not to have to "deal" with it, or hurtful accusations and threats leveled back at Socrates himself. Callicles might threaten to give Socrates a bloody nose (Gorgias 486c, also 508d), but is Socrates' ego willing to take a punch to the nose, as it were? Better yet, is he willing to deal himself that blow, courageously striving to refute his own beliefs with the very force of shaming, often with humiliating results? If, on the off chance that Socrates actually submitted himself in the way that he often casually insists he would, would he acknowledge shamefully and humiliatingly that his life would have been wrong in some important respect, a moral disaster? This would clearly have gigantic ramifications for his own life, and consequently, for his status as secondary interlocutor. Who would Socrates be if he had succeeded in humbling himself? How could he teach others how to discover truth within themselves if he himself had lived in moral disaster for so long?

Perhaps it would be possible to invert this: if we were to say that Socrates is even more entitled to guide dialectically in the way that he does because he had shamefully submitted himself to acknowledging his moral disaster, then what are we to make of the textual Socrates, the secondary interlocutor who has done no such thing? By what right does he "teach" without having undergone what he demands all primary interlocutors undergo?

Gadamer on the Internalization of Dialectic

Perhaps the primary characteristic of Gadamer's approach to dialectics in dialogue is the urgency of the pursuit of truth and the necessity of being unrelenting in its pursuit. He insists that Plato understands *phronesis* to be necessary for true dialectic, that is to say, to the practice of "holding undisconcertingly to what lies before the eyes as right, and in not allowing anything to convince one that it is not" (Gadamer 1986, 52, 54 and 41, see also Gadamer 1980, 11). In spite of the emphasis on reaching consensus by work done on the basis of shared understanding, Gadamer never loses this sense that there is urgency in dialogue.

Can Gadamer help us grapple with the imperative to self-refutation? Some commentators suggest he can, though without developing the argument. For example, Kevin Decker writes:

It is the case that one of the products of dialogue is an increasing sense of self-knowledge; overcoming mere opinion in ourselves through the realization of its inferior status can be seen as the meta-level goal of any inquiry. (Decker 2000, 13)

This claim is made in the context of a discussion of the priority of the question and a standard of truth, but is not developed. Catherine Zuckert has also directly addressed the notion of self-refutation: "If one is really to learn anything from a text or a person and so to expand one's own horizon, one has to be open to the possibility that the other view is correct and one's own is wrong" (Zuckert 1996, 90). This assertion takes place at the confluence of claims about hermeneutics and interpersonal dialogue, but it does not develop any special understanding of refutation in internal dialogue.

For the Gadamer of *Truth and Method*, the status of the question and the nature of openness to questioning determine the value of dialectic in any conversation. With sophistry in particular and perhaps rhetoric in general in mind, Gadamer makes a simple distinction between authentic and inauthentic dialogue, the former determined by the proper role of dialectic within it, the latter the lack (or perversion) of it. In inauthentic dialogue, each interlocutor seeks only to prove oneself 'right', does not seek insight, proposes questions that run no risk of not being answered, and overall does not want to know because he or she does not know that they do not know. But Gadamer is insistent that the problem is not with poor participation in dialogue alone, but with the lack of proper questioning. If an interlocutor thinks their claims are already justified, then they cannot even ask the right questions. In that sense, it is more difficult to ask the questions proper to dialectic than to answer the proper question once it has been posed. At the incipience of dialectic in a conversation, asking a question brings something into the open, at which point the answer is not settled. When the question is open, the answer is undetermined. Before justification is found, the dialectic is sustained in indeterminacy. But this indeterminacy dissolves when a question reveals a specific, material opposition between "this or that". This material opposition becomes even more determinate when counterinstances are proposed, weighed, and found to be inadequate (Gadamer 1989, 362-4). Gadamer has provided an intriguing description of the development of the form of dialectic, from the indeterminacy of the asking, the determinacy of the question when answers are proposed, to the further specificity once an answer is settled.

However, this provides only the framework of dialectic. In his much earlier *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, Gadamer offers a more detailed analysis of dialectic in respect of the subject of discussion and the roles of the interlocutors. Inauthentic dialogue here is understood in terms of a degenerate form of speech, which is a form of dialogue without dialectic. If the primary interlocutor professes to understand Socrates when he contradicts him, without addressing the contradiction, he or she is thereby "protected" from that contradiction. One is pushing the other person away in order to be unreachable oneself (Gadamer 1991, 37-8). Clearly, in such an instance one has not fostered the conditions of a shared understanding.

In order to develop his notion of authentic dialogue, Gadamer compares the development of shared understanding and "scientific conversation". Each is largely shaped in response to the "facts of the matter" as proposed and worked through in dialogue. Each interlocutor must be open to the assistance of the other to help one to gain access to the facts of the matter. Gadamer insists that the interlocutors must share an "antecedent understanding" about "things", claims about them and what qualifies as "a reason". But in conversation generally, this is not merely the result of proposing reasons that provide access to the fact of the matter, as in scientific inquiry. It is mainly determined by whether the other person's agreement or disagreement is sought.

For if it is possible to contradict it, one's claim is refuted; but at the same time, each contradiction contains a new insight and thus a pointer to a correct account. The substantive productivity of conversation consists in its letting such contradictions indicate the direction of its search. (Gadamer 1991, 39)

If one does not do this, then inauthentic dialogue ensues. Gadamer understands this inauthenticity as being the result of a certain exclusion within the conversation: Socrates can exclude the other, the other can exclude themselves, and, most interestingly, Socrates can exclude himself from it. If the primary interlocutor faces Socrates' challenge with the claim that the contradiction is owed to a difference of assumptions (without discussing them), then the conversation ceases to be a "process of coming to a shared understanding about the facts of the matter" (Gadamer 1991, 40). There is the same result if Socrates contradicts the primary interlocutor's claim without being able to account for this contradiction. In that case, Socrates has excluded himself from the conversation by constantly professing to understand the other's assumptions without accounting for the contradictions of his own position. Before we proceed to the situation in which Socrates excludes himself, we ought to take note of the consequences of Gadamer's notion of shared understanding. Since the interlocutors

share a common "reason", as is necessary for the fact of the matter to be accessible, the other interlocutor is "in no way different from any other person, or better, he is needed only in the ways in which he is precisely not different from others". In other words, anyone with whom Socrates is conversing dialectically could be replaced by most anyone else. The other is a strictly formal self: an abstract self defined by its ability to ask questions properly, refer to "reason" to justify claims, etc.

Such a claim is especially interesting as we turn to the situation in which Socrates excludes himself from the conversation.

So it is the structure of this idea of coming to an understanding which explains why I am able, *even without speaking to another person*, to press forward, in a process of scientific, reason-giving disclosing and appropriating, and to arrive at the real logos. For thought that is not expressed is also speech, except that *the other person with whom I speak is in this case myself*. But the only reason why this is possible is that even in a real conversation, *the other person is not needed for anything other than what I can do for myself*: to return to an explication that has been given and to test it *against my understanding* of the facts of the matter. (Gadamer 1991, 41, italics added)

This is a shocking claim in the context of Socratic dialectics. Gadamer continues with the observation that "confronting oneself freely with contradiction" requires that one overcome one's own tendencies, much as one must overcome the tendencies of an interlocutor. Whether one is engaging with an other person or with oneself, one must "attend only to the substantive intention of what is said and not to what the speech expresses". If "conversing" with oneself, one confronts one's own logos while disregarding it as one's own. Just as the other person is actually just a formal self in the light of reason's access to the matter at hand, so is one's own self merely a formal self in the same way. Not only is one other person transposable with any other, but an other is transposable with oneself, so long as all such selves are formal in the required way. Gadamer makes the same claim about teaching: as long as the subject at hand is teachable, then any formal self could teach it and any formal self could learn it. He writes:

Thus the teachability of knowledge follows from the scientific logos' claim to address the facts of the matter in their necessity by showing how they follow from reasons.

This function of the other person within the tendency of conversation toward coming to a substantive understanding constitutes the very essence of the dialectical. For a dialectical contradiction of a thesis is not simply a

contrary thesis which someone opposes to the stated opinion as his (or her) opinion. A dialectical contradiction is not present when one opinion is opposed by another; instead, it is constituted precisely when one and the same faculty of reason has to grant validity to both the opinion and the counter-opinion. It is not a contradiction in the dialectical sense when another person speaks against something, but only when *a thing* speaking against it, *whether it is another person or myself who has stated this*. (Gadamer 1991, 44, second italics added)

Consequently, if we return to the matter of Socrates excluding himself from a "real conversation" by internalizing the dialectic, it would seem that a proper dialectical contradiction is not found between opinions, but between a thesis and a thing, whether the interlocutor's questioning and answering assists in its disclosure, or this is performed within the self in the disclosure of a claim and one's grasp of the logos.

"Strong Logos" in the Work of Refutation

Gadamer's work on dialectic is especially strong in offering *external* descriptions of the origin and work of refutation in dialogue, as is well known. But for those looking for an *internal* evaluation of the refutation, what it is that is originating and functioning in this way, there is considerably less with which to work. In respect of the external description, Gadamer puts it best in *Plato's Dialectic Ethics*: "Socrates' logical traps are not meant to be the manipulations of a virtuoso technician which are simply applied where they promise success; instead, they are living forms of a process of seeking shared understanding which always has the facts of the matter themselves before it and which *finds its criterion solely in its success in developing its capacity to see these facts*" (Gadamer 1991, 58, italics added). "Shared understanding" and "facts of the matter" are familiar enough, but the "criterion" for assessing the success of understanding in grasping such facts is likely less so.

In order to elucidate the role of criteria of refutation in dialogue, we need to move forward from this point to understand the overall purpose of dialectic in working toward the unitary purpose of the good as well as work back to a pre-understanding of this good. As we shall see, refutation in Gadamer is largely a matter of working out criteria for testing the relationship between a claim that is subjected to the work of shared understanding. In this respect, Gadamer thinks of himself as challenging a traditional prejudice about dialogue. We may think that an "I" is set over against a "Thou", as if they are distinct entities that collide in dialogue. But in order to make this distinction at all, a common understanding and even a common "accord" is first necessary for there to be any such dialogical

situation in the first place (Gadamer 1976, 7-8). There is good reason to believe that Gadamer regards this as a commonly shared pre-understanding of "the good" itself. There is shared understanding between the interlocutors, but the justification of any claim between them is only possible on the basis of a pre-understanding. Each interlocutor can only participate in a common process of "coming to an understanding" if there is already acknowledgement that the explication of a shared understanding between them is possible (Gadamer 1991, 63-64).

The matter of testing is very important here. In *Truth and Method*, we find Gadamer mentioning an "art of testing" in questioning in which the interlocutor tries to bring out the real strength of the logos, not merely to poke holes in its weak points. The art of testing is an art of such strengthening (Gadamer 1989, 367). He devotes considerably more attention to this matter in his earlier studies of Plato. As he says there, one is always testing one's explicit understanding of oneself and one's world against what one takes as a rational grounding. The search for a grounding of such understanding comes in the form of a testing by both interlocutors: together they are "testing the logos to see whether it is refutable". Testing, he avers, sets up something "in the middle", accessible to both, with neither interlocutor having any personal stake in it. Yet, each of the interlocutors experiences the testing and its results as a work of understanding itself. It has consequences for his or her self-understanding (Gadamer 1991, 64-65). The very "justification" of the person professing the claim is at stake, since the task of the work of dialectic is to liberate the person from their ignorance (Gadamer 1991, 53-54, and 57). After all, when logos is proposed in a dialogue, its distinct claim to being an item of knowledge is tested.

In discussing "inauthentic" dialogue and the degenerate speech involved in it, Gadamer takes note of an important difference between refutations. For Gadamer, refutation functions differently in authentic dialectic and in the degenerate forms of speech that contrast with it. In sophistry, it would seem, the teacher makes a certain claim to knowledge, and in doing so, a "disposition over the strongest logos". Exactly how we can characterize the "strength" of the logos deserves mention.

This "strength" is due to the impossibility of the logos's coming to grief, the impossibility of contradicting it. In this sense, every logos that wants to be knowledge has to be strong, and to the extent that it is irrefutable, it is strong. "Strength," looked at in this way, is simply an expression of the adequacy to the facts of the matter of what is said. In this way, strength is not something that is striven for for its own sake; rather it is a side effect of the striving to make what one says adequate to the facts of the matter. (Gadamer 1991, 46).

This is how the "strength" of a claim under consideration can be justified. Gadamer continues.

But it can also be separated from the idea of adequacy to the facts of the matter, and its being stronger can be striven for in the interests of ascendancy over other people. *This* way of aiming at the stronger logos is characterized by the fact that its goal is, by using possibilities that are inherent in discourse itself, to make any randomly chosen logos (even a logos that is substantively weaker, that is, one that is not adequate to the facts of the matter) into a stronger one and thus to fulfill the (otherwise unfulfillable) claim always to have the stronger logos. (Gadamer 1991, 46-7).

Gadamer is not merely making the familiar claim that the sophist aims to win arguments, to make the weaker argument seem stronger etc. The teaching sophist claims to have the strongest logos at hand and is thereby able to justify most any claim submitted to scrutiny. Why? Because of a difference in the functioning of the criterion of strength. In authentic dialogue, strength will be striven for, for its own sake, in the way that Socrates attempts, according to Gadamer. But when the strength of the logos is merely a side effect of the striving for justification and is an instrument of self-empowerment, the criterion of "strength" functions differently.

There is another equally important difference in the work of justification in authentic and inauthentic dialogue. If the (sophistical) interlocutor turns out to lack knowledge in a certain instance, if what they claim to be irrefutable is refuted,

then what happens is not that a more correct explication of the facts of the matter is developed from the substantive content of the refutation and from the logos that was initially put forward. Instead, *the place of the refuted logos is filled with a new one that is oriented toward the refuting argument, and only toward it.* Thus, each logos, when it is refuted, is *entirely dropped and replaced with a new one* that seems to be *strong enough* to stand up against this refutation in particular. Thus each logos is chosen only for the sake of its being stronger. It is meant to be definitive and not to open up a substantive discussion. So if it is refuted, it is not retained, but *disappears entirely*, without regard to whether what it said exhibited something of the facts of the matter in question or not. (Gadamer 1991, 47-48, italics added)

We might notice the behavior of the *logos* throughout this process. Once a claim is refuted, a new claim is made that is meant to withstand the argument that refuted the first claim. The interlocutor who proposed the refuted belief and now pushes a second is simply trying to get a belief, any belief, through the filter of refutation. What should have happened, according to Gadamer, is that

something ought to have been learned from the refutation that would help understand the facts of the matter. The original claim should have been posited as definitive and should have helped foster a substantive discussion. Rather than simply following through on lessons learned by refutation, the interlocutor simply switches loyalty, dropping the claim that was originally put forth and now proposing another. It is as if the whole point of the dialogue is to finally get a claim through the process of refutation, presumably for the purpose of being proven "right".

Refutation and Dialectic as a "Way of Being"

Dialectic, it should be clear by now, is an exercise in seeking "true" justification, that is to say, justification for the claims one makes, not merely justification that proves one right; but beyond this, it is justification of one's way of being. Such dialectic, whether in subjective thought or interpersonal dialogue, consists in the giving and receiving of justification for beliefs, and for the believer in believing them (Gadamer 1986, 38-39). Like Vlastos, Gadamer understands that Plato's Socrates is a philosopher fully committed to truth as a way of being, to dialectics as an art of living, in the terms Socrates proposes in *Gorgias*.

Self-understanding obviously will play a role in such justification. Socrates discloses to his primary interlocutors that they lack understanding *of* something, and do not know *that* they lack *this* understanding, and so lack *self*-understanding. Conversely, there is self-understanding in the respect that there is understanding, and a knowledge that this is understood. Gadamer writes:

Plato gives self-understanding a more general meaning: wherever the concern is knowledge that cannot be acquired by any learning, but instead only through examination of oneself and of the knowledge one believes one has, we are dealing with dialectic. Only in dialogue—*with oneself or with others*—can one get beyond the mere prejudices of prevailing conventions. And only the person who is really guided by such pre-knowledge of the good will be able to hold to it unerringly. (Gadamer 1986, 43, italics added).

We might notice again the notion that there can be dialogue with oneself alone, so long as one is examining one's beliefs and knowledge, with the additional benefit of being able to step outside of mere conventions. This understanding is not merely some grasp of conscious activity, but a "mode of the event of being", a relation in which the process of understanding is more important than its *relata*, the one who understands and that which is understood. This process is one in which the substantial self involves something very like

a loss of self, in which it is "taken up into a higher determination" in the play of understanding, the game that dialogue is. In this scenario, understanding of this or that is part of a process of overall self-understanding, not in the sense that the self comes to "realize" itself more by means of understanding, but in the narrower sense that, in understanding some subject matter, the self "happens". There is enrichment in and of the happening that the self is, without the self becoming a possession that is ever more possessed as understanding grows (Gadamer 1976, 50-51, 54-55 and 57).

The question here is whether refutation plays a role in dialectics as a way of being, whether understanding that amounts to self-understanding is arrived at on a journey in which refutation plays a role. If there is a lack of understanding, then it is not known that understanding is lacked. But if there is knowledge that understanding is lacked, is that the result of elenctic work, of refutation, specifically refutation of some belief in which one's way of being is implicated? Does the "happening" of the self involve self-refutation, the refutation of a sense of selfhood drawn from not knowing that one does not understand oneself in a truthful respect? Perhaps the convolution of questions of this kind signals the complexity of the self-understanding of a self that is "happening", or rather, the "happening" of self-understanding that is taken to be the self.

Ultimately, the paramount question issue is this: does Gadamer think that dialectics can be an internal matter involving self-understanding without any external interlocutor? Does he think that the self can, in its work of understanding and its way of being, examine and refute a belief, without the influence of any external interlocutor. The Gadamer of *Plato's Dialectical Ethics* certainly thinks so, though the Gadamer of "Socratic knowing and not knowing" is less forthright. Even the Gadamer of *Truth and Method* may defend such an internal dialectic 'hermeneutically', so long as there is a stress on texts, and the notions such texts convey, and the tradition in which such texts convey such notions; but in terms of his representation of Socratic dialogue as such, he is more reticent about the possibility, as it is in such dialogue that "shared understanding", the "fusion of horizons" and other Gadamerian concepts help us to unpack interpersonal matters. Dialectic, as an art of life in which one's way of being is as much formed as it is at issue, involves the internal dynamic of proposing, examining and if necessary, refuting beliefs in a work of understanding in which the happening of the self is implicated. This may involve texts, their content, and their tradition, or it may simply involve introspection that treats one's belief as if it were "like" a text, with content, and even with a tradition.

Conclusion

Does Gadamer help us to understand the original problem? Which Gadamer? The Gadamer of *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, who may be silent about the imperative of self-refutation, but at least acknowledges that there can be an internal dialectic structured much like an interpersonal one? Or the Gadamer of *Truth and Method*, who contrasts Socratic dialogue with hermeneutics, noting however that they are equally though differently dialectical. In this case, dialogue and reading texts in a tradition are equally game-like, though there is little suggestion that such gaming could be akin to an internal dialectic. The point is not that the development of a mature hermeneutic theory enables Gadamer to reject his more youthful admission that an internal dialectic (of self-refutation) is possible; on the contrary, internal dialectic, mediated by the text, has been raised up into a hermeneutic context. At first, all dialectic is interpersonal, unless one has an inner "dialogue" with oneself about some "fact of the matter". But later, dialectic is hermeneutic, so that whether one is speaking with others or with oneself, the relation is akin to reading a text.

Although Gadamer makes much of other Socratic dialogues and little of Gorgias, there are interesting points of correspondence. For example, when he emphasizes the importance of persistence in inquiry and the clarification of claims, this is supported not only in Protagoras and Phaedo, but also Gorgias (e.g., 453c). In his discussion of the role of non-knowledge and the discovery of facts of the matter that become benchmarks of dialogue, we find this not only in Charmides but also Gorgias (e.g., 472d and 527e). And surely no dialogue better illustrates the degenerate speech of inauthentic dialogue than Euthydemus (see for example, 293d-e). One could only wish that, given the matter of self-refutation, this engagement was a bit more explicit.

What we need from Gadamer is a solution to the problem posed by Gorgias 458-a-b. Given the other-directed nature of Socratic dialectics, specifically the practice of guiding the primary interlocutor through their own beliefs, can the secondary interlocutor strive to refute their own beliefs? Indeed, is there an imperative to do so, since the pursuit of truth, the elimination of false beliefs, and the acquisition of knowledge seem to imply it? In other words, refutation is not simply something that "happens" in dialogue, exigently emerging on occasion, but something that the secondary interlocutor, who is guiding the dialogue with questioning, should willfully strive to do.

Gadamer's "later" work on dialogue and dialectic provides us with a unique external description of interpersonal relations. It emphasizes the role of understanding, specifically, on the one hand, the shared understanding out of

which proper dialectic emerges and on the other hand, the pre-understanding of the good—the good at which the inquiry aims—that impels each interlocutor into the dialogue in the first place. The possibility of refutation can be found in the former in terms of the nature of the facts of the matter at stake in that dialogue, and in the latter in terms of the criteria for testing claims proposed in the dialogue. One might conceive of a myriad of ways understanding might benefit from refutation, but little of this is made explicit in Gadamer's work.

We might also take note that the distinction between authentic dialogue (in which understanding figures correctly in dialectic) and inauthentic dialogue (which has little or no dialectic) offers little more help. In particular we can see this in the fate of the refuted claim. In inauthentic dialogue, the secondary interlocutor can propose an irrefutable claim that proves to be refutable. He or she then drops the claim and strives to propose another claim that would satisfy the criteria that found the first claim wanting. This tells us little about self-refutation, since the secondary interlocutor, with a false sense of mastery of dialogue, refuses to acknowledge refutation. Even in authentic dialogue, where the secondary interlocutor presses on to find out the truth behind the criteria that enabled a claim to be refuted, we learn nothing about whether there is an imperative to refute one's belief, only loosely what to do once it has been.

We are also faced with the question whether the self-refutation of the secondary interlocutor requires the presence of the primary interlocutor at all. Once the "early" Gadamer proposes the notion of formal selfhood, such that it is not the specific, empirical "other" but a formal other that ideally participates in the dialogue, then not only can one "self" be replaced with another, but the "other" can be transposed into the "self". Consequently, it seems that dialectic can take place in the absence of the other's presence altogether. So long as it has the same formal structure as an interpersonal dialogue, there is no reason why there cannot be a dialectic internal to the formal self of the secondary dialectic. This has little place in Gadamer's "later", hermeneutic work, where emphasis is placed on conversation and interpretation.

Where Gadamer's work is helpful on the subject of self-refutation is in its development of the importance of criteria for testing claims. Sadly, we can see *that* there are such criteria and to some extent how such criteria "behave" in the course of dialogue, not what those criteria are and how they are modified. One might think that such criteria would stimulate the work of refutation, but the connection remains somewhat unclear. It is evident that such criteria are implicated in the work of accessing the facts of the matter, but whether some claim can be refuted precisely because criteria adequate to the task of refuting it are developed, is left open. This is doubly troubling since the very "justification" of

the self is at stake. Gadamer occasionally asserts that refutation is at work in the play of justification of a belief, and indeed the believer; but nowhere does he show what refutation consists in. Generally speaking, we learn much about the dialectical framework of dialogue and the role of shared understanding, and somewhat less about the nature of the self in respect of its self-understanding. However, whether there is an imperative to self-refutation in the former and self-refutation in the latter remains open to further inquiry.

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