

Hearing Voices, Doubt, and Other Troubles

What is Plato('s) Thinking?

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There is a curious feature of the *Theaetetus* that has gone (relatively) unremarked by commentators upon this dialogue: Plato has Socrates provide a description of the process of thinking:¹

. . . [thinking is] a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering. (189e)²

This subject and subsequent definition arise again in the *Sophist*, in this case from the mouth of the Eleatic Stranger:

. . . thinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound. (263e)

It is strange that these attempts to define thinking should have gone without extensive commentary and review, as it would seem that the very process upon which Plato founds his philosophy (and indeed, which founds any philosophy of mind) would be ripe for examination. Indeed, it is surprising how easily both definitions are offered and left standing without extended interrogation in either dialogue. Only in the *Theaetetus* is any sort of caveat provided, one characteristically Socratic in its excess, especially in light of the *Sophist's* presentation of the same material without equivocation; following the above quoted statement, Socrates inserts the qualifier "You must take this explanation as coming from an ignoramus" before continuing on to

describe thinking as a sort of question-and-answer dialogue. If the claim that the *Sophist* was composed after the *Theaetetus* is correct, it would seem that between the two dialogues, for whatever reason, Plato did not further his investigation of this matter. Regardless, we are left with a description of thinking that is far from unproblematic, as a closer examination of the definition reveals.

Of the two dialogues, the *Theaetetus* provides the most detail concerning the activity of thinking. In his explanation to Theaetetus, Socrates specifies that there are two voices, which consist of the mind talking to itself. These two voices are engaged in a question and answer exchange that includes yes-no questions (though it is not clear that the answers are thus limited). When (and it is not clear that this could be qualified by "if") the two voices are past doubt and "affirm the same thing," the thing being affirmed is the mind's judgment (190a). This judgment is pronounced "silently to oneself." This, then, is a paraphrased picture of the thinking process from having in mind a doubted claim to the resolution of that claim. Notably, it does not incorporate a description of the start of the process, which would outline the means by which a contestable idea is identified and then comes to be addressed by the mind in dialogue, and would make clear whether this dialogue is internally audible some, all, or none of the time.

The account of thinking, then, begins *in medias res*, with a (potential) claim of some kind being addressed by the two voices of the mind. That the account starts this way is due at least in part to the context in which it appears. Just prior to Socrates' explanation, Theaetetus has affirmed his belief that false judgment is mistaking one thing for another (189d). Socrates then confirms with Theaetetus that this would require having two things in mind, whether simultaneously or sequentially (190a). As his disquisition on thinking immediately follows, Socrates' purpose in addressing thought is to disprove Theaetetus's notion that the mind could judge one thing to be another. After he distinguishes thinking from judgment, Socrates demonstrates that in thinking of one thing as something else, a person "is affirming to himself that the one is the other" (190a). By "affirmation" we are to understand that the two voices of the mind have, following an internal dialogue, concluded together that the one is the other (i.e.

rendered judgment from thought). Socrates goes on to ask Theaetetus whether he has ever set about convincing himself that something is something else, even in a dream (190b). Naturally, Theaetetus confirms the master's intuition that he has not. Socrates then goes so far as to inquire whether his young interlocutor supposes "anyone else, mad or sane" has ever attempted to convince himself "that an ox must be a horse or that two must be one" (190c).³ Again, Theaetetus agrees. What Socrates is arguing, then, using his description of thinking, is that it would require the two voices of the mind to concur upon a false identity claim in order for one to mistake something for something else. As the two voices would (apparently) never affirm the claim that one thing is another, it is impossible for false judgment to arise from mistaking one thing for another.⁴

Ultimately, then, the burden of establishing the difference between two things rests upon the dialogic questioning-and-answering of the two voices of the mind, and presumably this dialogue never fails to correctly differentiate things. As noted earlier, it is not certain whether this process is conscious, unconscious, or both, variously. Clearly, as Socrates suggests that one would have to argue oneself into mistaking one thing for another, this activity has at least the potential to be conscious. Yet it is difficult to imagine that he means to say that all (or any) such judgments take place at the conscious level; successfully identifying Fred the frog as Fred the frog, when one has known Fred all of one's life, is experienced not as an internally audible dialogue but, if anything, as the silent judgment resulting from that dialogue (i.e. "That's Fred!"). Of course, this presupposes that the mind experiences any doubt about Fred's identity, something implied by Socrates' model of thought, and a problem that will be discussed later.

Complex as it is, Socrates' use of the thought process in his argument seems to be a rather roundabout way of defeating Theaetetus' claim that false judgment is mistaking one thing for another. What he needs to demonstrate, whatever the approach, is that if one is aware of both the thing that is and the thing it is being mistaken for, or one is only aware of one of the two things, then one cannot confuse them, for either the distinction is self-evident or there is no distinction to be made. It is not clear that a definition of thinking, especially to the point of describing the

activity of the two voices, is essential to making this argument. Indeed, if one eliminates the text from 189e, where Socrates inquires whether Theaetetus accepts his description of thinking, through 190d, where Theaetetus agrees that no-one judges one thing to be another, though there is clearly a gap in the argument, it is not as wide as one might imagine:

SOCRATES: According to you [Theaetetus], then, it is possible for the mind to take one thing for another, and not for itself.

THEAETETUS: Yes, it is.

SOCRATES: And when the mind does that, must it not be thinking either of both things or of one of the two?

THEAETETUS: Certainly it must, either at the same time or one after the other.

[. . .]

SOCRATES: So long, then, as a person is thinking of both, he cannot think of the one as the other.

THEAETETUS: So it appears.

SOCRATES: On the other hand, if he is thinking of one only and not of the other at all, he will never think that one is the other.

THEAETETUS: True, for then he would have to have before his mind the thing he was not thinking of.

To improve this concatenation, one would simply need to alter Socrates' first statement following the gap to read something akin to "So long, then, as a person is thinking of both, he is thinking of two things, and to be thinking of two things he must know them to be different. Therefore he cannot think of the one as the other." Emendations notwithstanding, the point of this exercise is to demonstrate the peculiar positioning of Socrates' description of the process of thinking; further, it does not appear to be essential to the *Theaetetus*. Even if the above change is insufficient to fully establish the argument, it seems unlikely that the best or only other way to do so required an excursus into internal dialogues and doubt. Nor does this material appear to have any relation to the wax tablet analogy that immediately follows. Regardless, it is evident that the

immediate context created the parameters for the discussion of thinking that follows from it, and they in turn explain why the thought-narrative as presented lacks a beginning.

The absence of a clearly demarcated starting-point for the thought process results in several problems, not least of which is that the description of thought as we have it would seem to limit thinking to operating only upon things that are uncertain. To paraphrase the process again:

- 1) the mind begins thinking
- 2) the two voices dialogue
- 3) "when doubt is over and the two voices affirm the same thing," judgment is rendered

As the process ends in judgment, the implication is that one cannot or does not "think" about that which is certain, a category of things that have been already established by the affirmation of the two voices. For the mind to think about something, for the two voices to dialogue, the thing must be held in doubt; Socrates' description makes clear that the discourse of the voices takes place in what may be called "the space of doubt." Although there may be a way to make this acceptable, at first review it appears to effect a regression, such that any given act of thinking would require an immediate series of prior acts of thinking to establish everything necessary for the later act to take place. Thus, even if Socrates says that no-one would think "the ugly is beautiful," before that claim could be thrown out, there would be a moment in which the thinker would be in doubt about both "ugly" and "beautiful." An alternative would be to say that the mind is only "thinking" about the relation contained in the claim, and that the subjects of the claim are not themselves the subject of thinking. However, this conflicts with Socrates' later claim that so long as a person is "thinking of two things" he cannot confuse them, unless we are to ascribe the phrasing here to loose terms (or loose translation) (190d).

We are presented with another difficulty if the things themselves are the subjects of thinking: what does it mean to think about only one thing? That is, when only one thing is the subject of thought, it is not clear as to what the implied claim is that the two voices are investigating. Nor is it obvious in what way the thing is subject to doubt. The only immediate

answer would seem to be a self-identity claim, i.e. "Fred is Fred," for in any other claim the relation would involve two things, as in "Fred is green." If this is the case, it would seem to correspond to the regression identified above, in which each thing that is the subject of thinking would itself be called into doubt before being affirmed for use in resolving the primary claim.

If the relation of things to thinking is problematic, Socrates' description of the two voices is possibly more so. Setting aside the issue raised earlier concerning their internal audibility, we are still faced with fundamental questions regarding the nature(s) and operation of these voices. It is evident that these voices are distinct from each other, that they possess difference; yet the nature of this distinction is unclear. How are the two voices differentiated? Unless the mind actually possesses a kind of duality, in which both voices are independent and real, it would appear that one of the voices would have to be generated by the original voice pretending to be other than itself. That the mind is singular is implied by Socrates' phrasing, which indicates that the mind is talking to itself (190a). However, if one voice is merely produced by the other pretending not to be itself, it is questionable as to how useful the latter voice is in determining judgments; does the mere act of pretending to be other grant the second voice the ability to meaningfully respond differently than the first? That is, if the first voice offers the claim "black is white" and affirms it, how is the second voice capable of recognizing and responding to the falsity of the statement that the first did not? For this model to function effectively, either the two voices must possess some kind of real independence, or we must claim that the act of pretending to be other than what one is grants one knowledge or understanding not shared by one as one knows oneself to be.

If the second voice is simply a projection of the first, and we are in search of a model by which to claim that the second voice forms a useful part of the thinking process, one rough analogue lies in the dialogues themselves.⁵ The majority of the interlocutors in the dialogues do little more than provide prompts to facilitate the primary speakers' inquiries, many of which are of the "yes-no" variety identified specifically as part of the mind's dialogue in Socrates' description (190a). Yet these primary speakers can and do change their arguments over the

course of the dialogues, all the while guiding their interlocutors' responses. If the relationship between the primary speakers and their interlocutors strikes a parallel to the relationship between the primary voice and its secondary projection, then we have one existing model that demonstrates how a single guiding voice can use others to interrogate claims and ideas. The difference, of course, is that the interlocutors do not provide any effective disputation, whereas the second voice seems to have to be capable of preventing the first from affirming in error.

Another interesting issue concerning the relationship of the two voices arises when known false statements are considered. For example, when Socrates offers the hypothetical "what is beautiful is ugly" in the course of proving that no-one mistakes one thing for another, the way in which this statement is potentially rendered in thought has odd results. For if the statement "what is beautiful is ugly" is subjected to thinking, then the result must be that one voice will entertain the claim while the other voice denies it. Both voices, obviously, cannot affirm it, or it would be a false judgment of the sort that Socrates denies; conversely, if both affirm the negative, judgment will be rendered and it will no longer be the subject of thought. Yet if one voice claims it while the other does not, the resulting state of mind is doubt, and the subject of that doubt is the known false statement. The thinker, in thinking of the false statement, will be uncertain that it is false until both voices affirm that it is false. This case fits under the larger umbrella cast by the notion that all thinking begins in doubt, which appears to mean that all previously affirmed things are doubted anew in the course of the thinking process.

Ultimately, then, Plato's model of the thought process as internal dialogue whose end is judgment presents a number of difficulties. At worst, the present analysis may take the description of thinking as internal dialogue too literally, more seriously than Plato himself took it; yet given that it appears twice without alteration suggests that Plato entertained it as a viable explanation at least to some degree, even if it did not end up the subject of extended investigation. Ideally, even if a formal and coherent process cannot be extracted from what Plato has provided, further review should be able to construct relationships between this model and the larger context of Plato's thought.⁶

In two recent (1997) essays, Plato's depiction of the thought process has received some additional critical attention, one of which begins the work of integrating this model into another framework. Monique Dixsaut's "What is it Plato Calls 'Thinking'?" begins with an examination of the description of thinking in the *Theaetetus*, though her larger project is to use the definition to recuperate the Line in the *Republic*.⁷ As the latter is not part of the present concern, only the first part of her analysis proves relevant to the questions raised here. Regarding these, she affirms the same reading of the definition, though she provides an interesting twist. Where the present review has suggested that the dialogues themselves provide a model upon which to found an understanding of the function of the internal dialogue of the mind, Dixsaut analyzes the use of *logos* and *dialogos* in the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*, concluding that

. . . the model works quite the other way round to the way in which we might at first have thought it would. It is not at all, I would suggest, spoken, outward dialogue which acts as a paradigm of thought, but quite the opposite. *Spoken dialogue is but the sensible image of true dialogue, and true dialogue is thought.* (italics mine, 4-5)⁸

She goes on to claim that spoken utterance and the presence of interlocutors are "dispensable accessories," citing a passage in the *Philebus* for support. Given Plato's emphasis on the power of reason, it would seem sensible that spoken dialogue would model itself after the internal processes of the mind, of which we have primary and immediate experience. Her argument, of course, implies that significant philosophical activity takes place primarily at the level of solitary contemplation, rather than at the level of interpersonal exchange. Indeed, in an appended response to critiques of her paper, she affirms that she believes these dialogues were wholly formulated and written down by Plato, and that they in no way represent dialogues that actually took place (23). If this is correct, then it is fair to say that though the interlocutors are dispensable in one sense, they represent an essential part of the thought process, the second voice of the mind.

Dixsaut also comments fairly extensively upon these two voices, discussing them in

terms of "a doubling of the self or a splitting of the soul, since the soul is speaking to itself" (6). She describes the fact that thinking, though a solitary activity, requires a person to be "two in one" as a paradox; unfortunately, she does not attempt to consider how these two voices are differentiated or produced. Where she sheds additional light upon something only tangentially discussed above is in her assertion that "not everything that goes on in the soul, even if it involves words and language, can properly be called thinking, and the conflicts that arise between different parts are certainly not dialogues" (7). She further discounts performative utterances as being any part of thinking, thus eliminating "commands, insults, encouragements" from discussion, among others. Although this kind of exclusion is not established in the respective passages in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, it would seem necessary to try to establish such limits given that the description of thinking does not indicate what the subjects of thought are, as highlighted in the earlier analysis concerning whether thinking involves things and/or the relations between them.⁹ Dixsaut does affirm that thinking begins in doubt, concurring with observations made earlier; however, she specifies that thinking starts only "at the moment when we stop perceiving distinctly" (8). Setting aside the complex of issues concerning perception and knowledge, Dixsaut's analysis here appears to support the notion that self-identity claims make up a fair part of thinking activity.¹⁰ As she describes it, ". . . there are occasions when the soul is not certain of seeing what it sees, of hearing what it hears, of feeling what it feels . . . The soul, then, has to ask *itself* what it sees, hears or feels" (8).

As noted earlier, if the emphasis on doubt is retained, there is the threat of a kind of regression in which everything must be doubted and affirmed anew before claims that depend upon antecedents can be resolved. While Dixsaut does not arrive at this notion, nor, for that reason formally address it, she does emphasize the importance of doubt within the thinking process, and suggests that judgments are indeed unstable, as implied by the above analysis. She asks (and answers): "What, therefore, can justify the shift from a state of doubt and perplexity to the forming of an opinion that, for the moment at least, stands firm? Nothing" (10). The implication is that thinking is a constant activity that continually renews the status of the many

things the mind is considering, and that each judgment is contingent upon its renewal.

While Dixsaut's essay is unique in its careful attention to and analysis of the description of thinking that first appears in the *Theaetetus*, John Preston's introductory essay "Thought as Language" represents a more common approach to Plato's model of thought, one with broader implications and appeal. Preston quotes the relevant passage in the *Theaetetus* as part of his opening remarks on a series of papers originally presented to the annual conference of the Royal Institute of Philosophy held at the University of Reading in 1996. While he is not interested in Plato's model *per se*, the remarks he makes situate Plato's concept within a larger philosophical context, specifically that of lingualism. Emphasizing the conventional lingualist position that "whatever we are capable of thinking, we are in principle capable of saying, and vice versa," he observes that this implies that "the number of thoughts we can have (if this notion makes sense), their syntactic complexity, and the systematic relationships between those thoughts which are possible for a given thinker, are all mirrored in similar features of things one can say" (1). This notion bears significantly upon certain concerns already expressed about Plato's explication of his model. Certainly, if thinking consists primarily or exclusively of potential utterances, it would seem that much of this dialogue of the mind would have to take place subconsciously, for the sheer volume of thinking that appears to have to go on could never be sustained at the (relatively) slow speed of conscious thought. Otherwise, we are left with the approach Dixsaut takes, which is to limit severely the things which can be the subjects of thought. Later in the same volume, Hans-Johann Glock, citing *Theaetetus* 189e as an example of the linguist position, provides a comic example highlighting the problem:

. . . it is implausible to suppose that mechanical activities like driving have to be accompanied by the words we would use in subsequently expressing out thoughts (e.g. 'You fool; there is a radar control behind the bridge, you had better slow down to fifty!'). (163)

Of course, Plato would never have included this as an example of thinking, for as has been previously noted, his model of thought begins in doubt, and the anecdote, however amusing,

does not possess this feature.¹¹ Nevertheless, one can imagine a series of suitable examples that would threaten to overwhelm the conscious thinking mind unless severe constraints are established upon what qualifies as material for thought.

Preston later cites Frege on thinking, recognizing his point of view as lingualist because it "construes thinking as coming to stand in a relation to 'objects of thought', these objects being the 'senses' of sentences, those things which are true or false" (3). If this is a lingualist position, it furthers the argument that Plato shares much with lingualists, for this description of thinking in many ways mirrors Plato's own. For Plato, it is clear that thinking operates upon objects of thought with the purpose of coming to arrive at a judgment about them, a judgment that is affirmation of one kind or another by the two voices of the internal dialogue. The only apparent distinction between the two models is Frege's identification of the objects of thought as being the senses of sentences; however, if these sentences are equated to the products of self-identity judgments established prior to adjudicating relational claims, then the models remain parallel. That is to say, if the objects of thought in the question "Is Fred green?" are not "Fred" and "green" but the a priori judgments "Fred is Fred" and "green is green," then these objects are in fact the senses of sentences.

Preston concludes his essay with the observation that the majority of the participants in the conference emphasize not the lingualist position, but rather a "problem-solving" point of view in which thinking is limited to the domain of problem-solving. In this case, their positions are in fact closer to Plato's own than many of them realize, and indicate the difference between a pure lingualism and Plato's model of thought. For Plato, as we have seen, does emphasize the poles of doubt and judgment in the thinking process, and these imply that it is a problem of some kind, be it self-identity or relational, that is the ultimate subject of thinking. In his claim that one never tries to convince oneself of things that are not, Plato further emphasizes the purposive, even directed nature of thinking, bringing it yet closer to models that stress the problem-solving qualities of thinking.

Taken together, Dixsaut's essay represents the direction in which study of Plato's model

of thought needs to continue to progress, and Preston's essay and the thinking it embodies demonstrates how necessary a better understanding of Plato's model is, if only to counter the facile reductionism that sums up Plato's model to one line in the *Theaetetus*. The analysis contained within the first part of the present essay, if it accomplishes anything, at least demonstrates how much work needs to be done to fully appreciate the role, whatever it may be, of Plato's model of thinking within the larger framework of his own thinking. As Dixsaut concludes:

When Plato calls thinking a dialogue of the soul with itself, he raises more questions than he answers, more questions no doubt than he ever meant to answer.
(20)

And, appropriately, we are left with questions, in a state of doubt. So begins the delightful process of thinking anew.

Notes

¹Cornford, for example, in his volume on the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, does not address this passage specifically save in footnotes that point out the corresponding passages in each dialogue. In a more recent commentary, Ronald M. Polansky's *Philosophy and Knowledge: A Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus* (1992), this passage is wholly ignored in the corresponding gloss. Obviously, further research would probably turn up some additional texts that address the material in question; nonetheless, the fact that it *can* be ignored suggests that it has never been the subject of any sustained critical dialogue. Finally, the bibliography to Dixsaut (1999), whose paper is the most substantive treatment of this material yet, lists no other major contributions.

²All translations, unless otherwise noted, from Cornford as reprinted in Hamilton and Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, New Jersey: Princeton, 1989.

³Socrates' effort to establish that neither dreamers nor madmen could falsely judge one thing to be another is curious in light of the fact that it is precisely these two categories of persons that are cited in the critiques of

perception as knowledge in the *Sophist*.

⁴Interestingly, this allows for the possibility that one voice will affirm a false (proto-)judgment.

⁵One may take this analogue to another level, and argue that Plato as author of the dialogues found it useful to project characters (voices) in order to work through his philosophy; even though they are in fact mere projections of Plato's mind, they may have served a useful purpose in the kind of interrogation represented by the dialogues.

⁶The above analysis was performed prior to any reading of the two texts discussed below; any ideas that are shared were arrived at independently.

⁷In Klaus Brinkmann's commentary on her essay, he observes that she is attempting to "restore continuity between the two realms of the visible . . . and the thinkable or the intelligible" (28).

⁸Huntington Cairns, in his introduction to *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, observes that "Plato nowhere offers an explanation of why he cast his writings in the dialogue form rather than in that of the reasoned treatise" (xiv). If Dixsaut is correct, then the explanation is self-evident: the dialogues are the best model for that which takes place in the thinking mind. Dixsaut herself acknowledges this when she asserts that any account of the dialogical form must be grounded "in his [Plato's] conception of thought as inner dialogue" (25).

⁹In the course of her discussion, Dixsaut brings up Burnyeat's "preliminary comment" concerning the passage on thinking, noting that he too observes that the kind of thinking being described does not account for all forms of thinking, including that "with which an athlete runs, an artist paints, or a child reads a story" (qtd. in Dixsaut 8n13).

¹⁰In preparation for her discussion of the Line, Dixsaut works through some interesting material dealing with how perception relates to this model of thinking, an issue raised specifically in the *Sophist's* presentation of the model.

¹¹Glock's use of Plato in this fashion does establish one thing: *Theaetetus* 189e is cited more often than it is studied.

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