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PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

I.—PLATO'S CONSCIOUSNESS OF FALLACY.

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WHEN we read an argument in Plato's dialogues, our first impression is often that it is absurdly fallacious. Especially is this so in the early dialogues. The question therefore arises whether these arguments seemed as fallacious to Plato as they do to us, or whether he thought them valid. And this leads on to the further question what conception Plato had of fallacy as such ? To what extent did he possess words for fallacy in general, or for special forms of it ; to what extent had he a logical apparatus for dealing with it ?   This article (1) briefly surveys the types of fallacy in the early dialogues, and (2) attempts to answer the two questions thus raised.

Four sorts of fallacy are common in Plato's early dialogues : (1) fallacious question, (2) fallacious analogy, (3) fallacious conversion, and (4) ambiguity.

(1) A *question* is fallacious if it implies a falsehood. Every question implies a proposition. This is because a question expresses wonder, and wonder must be about something. It is impossible to wonder about nothing at all. In wondering we are therefore assuming the existence of some state of affairs, or the truth of some proposition. A question is fallacious, therefore, when the proposition which it implies is false.

Fallacious question in this sense is frequent in the dialogues. When, for example, Socrates asks what part of reality rhetoric concerns (*Go.* 449D), he is assuming, as the context shows, that

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there must be some part of reality that is dealt with by rhetoric and by no other science, if rhetoric is to be a science. The question of the *Lysis*, under what conditions friendship arises, assumes that there are universal and necessary conditions of friendship, and that they are very simple, perhaps so simple as to be expressed in a single word. Fallacious question is common in Plato's early dialogues in the form of offering an inexhaustive set of alternatives : " Is A X or Y ? ", where the truth is that it is neither. Such a question can be made especially plausible by a fallacious use of the law of excluded middle. If Socrates asks us whether A is X or not-X we feel that it must be one or the other ; and yet the question whether justice itself is just or unjust is probably fallacious (*Prot.* 330C ; see Theodore de Laguna, *Philos. Review*, XLIII, 450 ff.). Socrates often succeeds in getting a universal proposition accepted by representing that the only alternative is the contrary (" Is A X or not-X ? "), when the truth is that " Some A is X and some is not " (*e.g. Go.* 507A7-9, *Alc.* I, 126C).

(2) The nature of fallacious *analogy* need not be elaborated here, nor need we emphasise its apparent frequency in Plato. On a first reading of the *Gorgias*, for example, we may think it wholly unfair to compare Pericles, whom the Athenians convicted of theft towards the end of his career, to a keeper whose animals should be worse tempered at the end of his charge than at the beginning (516A). Socrates' common analogy between virtue and art or $\tau \acute{\epsilon} \chi \nu \eta$ seems responsible for many fallacies.

(3) Fallacious *conversion* is assuming that all B is A when the premise was only that all A is B. In the categorical syllogism it appears as the undistributed middle or as the illicit process. For if from all A's being B and all C's being B we infer that all C is A, it is because we have assumed that, since all A is B, all B is A ; and if from all A's being B and no C's being A we infer that no C is B, it is again because we have assumed that, since all A is B, all B is A. In the hypothetical syllogism fallacious conversion is known as " affirming the consequent ". " If X is A it is B ; X is B ; therefore X is A." We have assumed that " if X is A it is B " entails its converse " if X is B it is A ". Examples of this fallacy in Plato will be better postponed to a later occasion.

(4) The nature of *ambiguity*, and its frequency in the dialogues, are sufficiently evident for our preliminary purpose. Every reader of the *Lysis* feels that the word $\phi \acute{\iota} \lambda o \nu$ there means sometimes lover and sometimes beloved, and that much of the argument turns on this equivocation. In the *Protagoras* (332)

Socrates infers that wisdom and temperance are identical from these three premises : (1) wisdom is opposite to *aphrosyne;* (2) temperance is opposite to *aphrosyne;* (3) nothing has more than one opposite. Here *aphrosyne* means folly in the first premise but intemperance in the second.

In spite of the fallacious appearance of their arguments to us, Plato's characters often show a very high degree of confidence that their arguments are neither fallacious nor merely probable. "Either we must abandon those doctrines or these conclusions must follow", says Socrates in the *Gorgias* (480E); and elsewhere in the same dialogue he refers to his arguments as "iron and adamantine" (509A).

We come now to the first of our two questions : To what extent did Plato himself consider such arguments fallacious ?

When the conclusion of an argument is false, this may be either because the inference is fallacious or because the premises are false ; and in philosophy it is hard to say which. In geometry perhaps we can always certainly distinguish between a false premise and a fallacious inference ; but the geometrical method has never worked in philosophy. The subject-matter is too fluid or too elastic, the distinction between axiom and theorem extremely hard to maintain. In philosophy, therefore, there is always danger of mistaking a false premise for a fallacious inference ; and that is what we are doing much of the time that we find fallacy in Plato.

There is a specially good reason why we should make this mistake with Plato, and that is that we often do not at first see what his premises are. To take an example, the analogy between art and virtue shocks us only because we do not think what it really means. "Art" is our translation of $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\chi\nu\eta$, and $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\chi\nu\eta$ to Plato is identical with $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\mu\eta$ or knowledge. "Virtue" is our translation of $\mathring{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$, and $\mathring{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$ to Plato and Socrates is essentially a form of knowledge. The premise is, then, that $\mathring{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$ and $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\chi\nu\eta$ are both knowledge ; and there is no fallacy in treating them as analogous. Plato is merely saying that what is true of all forms of knowledge must be true of $\mathring{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$, since $\mathring{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\tau\acute{\eta}$ is a form of knowledge. What happens in this case is that because of the difficulty of thinking ourselves into Plato's strange world, and of remaining in it in spite of the pull of our modern conceptions, we fall back on the modern equivalents for his conceptions, and unfortunately they are not equivalent! And this is the explanation of many of the fallacies that we think we find.

Three of the four types of fallacy we have enumerated are

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perhaps more properly to be regarded as forms of falsity in the premises. (1) Fallacious question is a way of obtaining a premise. (2) All analogy is premise before it is inference. (3) When we think we find fallacious conversion in Plato, the truth is often that he assumes the convertibility of the proposition as part of the premise. Thus in *Republic*, I, 341C-342E, which looks like an illicit process of the minor term, Socrates is probably really premising the equivalence of the minor and middle terms. He is taking for granted that all τέχνη is ἀρχή and all ἀρχή is τέχνη, which very likely seemed a probable premise to him. Even in English, when we say that Aness is Bness, using abstract nouns without a sign of quantity, we think of the proposition as asserting an equivalence, and therefore convertible. Much more must this be so in Greek, whose far greater inflectedness makes word-order far less important, so that " A is B " and " B is A " tend to become identical when both are nouns, or at any rate when both are abstract nouns. A curious passage in the *Gorgias* (466A) seems to imply that in Greek if you say " A is B " you will be understood to imply that B is A, and if you wish to avoid this implication you must say " A is a sort of B " or " A is a part of B ". The translation is this : " What are you saying ? Rhetoric seems to you to be flattery ?—I said a part of flattery. Can you not remember at your age, Polus ? What will you do next ? " The same thing seems to be implied, though less distinctly, by this passage from the *Meno* (73E) : " Justice is virtue, Socrates.—Is it virtue, Meno, or *a* virtue ?—How do you mean ? —Well, take anything you like. Take, say, roundness. I should say that roundness is *a* shape, not just simply shape. And the reason why I should say so is that there are other shapes." Here Socrates seems to imply that if you say that justice is virtue you imply that virtue is justice.

In this way we can remove many of the apparently fallacious questions and analogies and conversions in the dialogues. They are not really fallacious, and therefore the question whether Plato was aware of their invalidity would itself be a fallacious question when applied to them. Nevertheless, there certainly remain in the dialogues many fallacies falling under each of these three heads ; and in addition to all of them there is the great army of fallacies in the dialogues falling under the head of ambiguity, none of which can be explained away as falsehood in the premises. The question is still legitimate, therefore, to what extent Plato was aware of the fallacies in his dialogues as fallacies.

The difficulty of this question is due to the nature of dialogue. The dialogue, being a form of drama, enables the author to set

down opinions and arguments without expressing any judgment
on their truth or validity. In fact, it makes it quite hard for
him to indicate unmistakably what his judgement is. He may
use a chorus or other recognised device to talk in his proper
person ; but Plato did not. To speak through the most prom-
inent or the most sympathetic character is a much less certain
means of communication ; but it is the only one the dialogues
employ. Its uncertainty has been well illustrated in the twentieth
century by an enormous divergence of opinion on the question
how far Plato does so speak. It thus comes about that for only
a tiny fraction of the arguments he presents does Plato give us
anything like a direct statement of his own view of their validity ;
and even in these cases the statement can only consist in a subse-
quent comment by one of the *dramatis personæ*.

It is necessary to divide the dialogues into two groups, and
answer the question separately for each group. All Platonic
scholars hold that in the *Sophist* and subsequent works the
protagonist expresses Plato's own views, except that Professor
Taylor would exclude the *Timæus* from this generalisation. In
the earliest dialogues, on the other hand, Plato's purpose is
almost entirely to depict an unusual personality, and he has little
or no interest in defending the logical validity of any argument
which that person uses ; he cares only to show that the argument,
when it was used, effectually convicted of ignorance the man
upon whom it was used. It remains perfectly possible that this
conviction of ignorance took place through premises that were
in fact false, or through inferences that were in fact invalid. The
earliest dialogues aim at depicting a person who aims, not at
inculcating any positive truths, but at convicting men of ignorance
in order to make them eager to seek virtue.

We can now answer the question separately for the two groups
of dialogues that we have distinguished. In the latest dialogues,
if the protagonist offers as a serious argument what is in fact a
fallacy, then Plato himself failed to see the mistake. For example,
if the explanation of the possibility of falsehood in the *Sophist*
should seem to us a fallacy, we should be obliged to conclude
that Plato here made a logical error.

In the earliest dialogues, on the other hand, there is no general
reason for supposing that Plato was himself deceived by any
fallacy by which he makes Socrates deceive another ; and we
ought to assume this, with regard to any particular fallacy, only
if there is some special reason for doing so, as that this fallacy
deceived all Athenians, or deceived Plato all his life. In the
purely elenctic dialogues the fact that a fallacy passes for valid

is not by itself any evidence that Plato thought it was so.
Elenchus is essentially argument *ad hominem*. As the questioner
has to find premises that appeal to the answerer, so he has to
find inferences that appeal to him ; and, provided that he really
does convince him, he may sometimes use premises that he does
not himself believe, and even inferences that he himself considers
fallacious. Certainly Plato might put into Socrates' mouth an
argument that Plato believed fallacious, but Socrates had actually
used and used successfully. Probably he might think it a typical
piece of Socratic mischief to bewilder a fool or stimulate a boy
with a fallacious argument. Shorey is right, in principle at any
rate, in saying that Plato was not himself deceived by the fallacy
he set down in the *Lysis* (220E), but deliberately chose to make
the appearance of bewilderment and the antithesis between the
prime beloved and other beloveds as complete, as emphatic, and
as symmetrical as possible (*Class. Phil.* XXV (1930), 380-3).
When an early dialogue ends with a review of the argument in
which Socrates takes a low opinion of its value, that is Plato's
way of telling us that he knows the arguments are dubious. At
the end of *Republic*, I, Socrates says they have got nothing out of
the discussion because they have failed to persevere with any one
question until it was answered. At the end of the *Charmides* he
notes that they have committed many deliberate inconsistencies.
At the end of the *Lysis* he emphasises their helplessness in the
search for the nature of friendship. At the end of the *Protagoras*
he declares the argument to have been a terrible topsy-turvy
confusion (361C).

So much for the question to what extent Plato was aware of
the fallacies in the arguments he attributed to his characters.
We turn now to our other question : What consciousness had
Plato of fallacy as such ?

On general grounds we must believe that Plato, during at any
rate a large part of his creative years, was aware in some way of
the general nature and possibility of fallacy. When the greatness
of a great man expresses itself frequently in highly formalised
and explicit chains of deduction, it stands to reason that the
possibility of fallacy must occur to him in some shape. And we
may assure ourselves that this actually happened by reading his
Euthydemus, where he puts into the mouths of two sophists some
twenty arguments which he obviously believes to be fallacies.
The *Euthydemus* as a whole is a copious, vivid, concrete picture
of fallacious reasoning ; and Plato evidently means it to be such.

But the *Euthydemus* as a whole, just because it is so *concrete*,
does not settle the question what *abstract* consciousness Plato

had of fallacy. It remains to be determined whether he had any word as abstract as the English word "fallacy", and whether he distinguished various kinds of fallacy. Let us therefore inquire first into his consciousness of the generic notion of fallacy as such, and then into his consciousness of each of our four kinds of fallacy in turn.

When we search for names or definitions of the generic notion of fallacy, we are led to the conclusion that Plato has no word or phrase that means "fallacy" as distinct from other forms of intellectual shortcoming. Such a phrase as πάντα ὅσα διανοίᾳ σφαλλόμεθα (*Soph.* 229C) includes every failure to grasp reality, and does not distinguish fallacy from falsehood. Nearest to it come his words "alogon" and "eristical" and "antilogical" and "sophistical"; but each of these means some larger complex in which the notion of fallacy is only an element not yet abstracted from the rest. "Alogon" indicates the general notion of irrationality, including perverse behaviour. "Eristical" and "antilogical" are names for a whole type of philosophical or pseudophilosophical behaviour, characterised especially by contentiousness and the tendency to contradict. "Sophistical" is a still larger complex of notions with a strongly personal flavour. Even Aristotle expresses the notion of fallacy only by unsatisfactory phrases such as "sophistical refutation", "it does not syllogise", and "there is no conclusion".

If we look for some passage discussing the notion of fallacy as such, so far as that can be done without the aid of a name, we are again disappointed. Plato's dialogues have not made the abstraction of fallacy as such. They have not gone farther than the concrete presentation of particular fallacies, as found especially in the *Euthydemus*. Let us turn to our four species of fallacy, and ascertain whether the process of abstraction has risen as far as them in the dialogues.

(1) The *Euthydemus* (300C) contains a *question* that Plato obviously knows to be fallacious, although he makes no comment thereon. "What, said Ctesippus, are not all things silent ?—No, indeed, said Euthydemus.—Then all things are speaking, my dear man ?—Those that are speaking.—That is not what I am asking, said he ; I am asking you whether all things are speaking or silent ?" In the *Gorgias* (503A) the answerer says "that is not a simple question". He does not mean that it is hard, but that the answer is "sometimes yes and sometimes no". Simplicity here means universality ; a question is simple if we can answer it with a universal proposition, either affirmative or negative, but not simple if we have to descend to particulars and

distinguish them. Earlier in the same dialogue (466CD) the answerer declares that the questioner is asking two questions at once. These passages give the measure of the insight expressed in the dialogues into the fact of fallacious question. They do not amount to much. Even Aristotle recognises this fallacy only in a special case, which is not very representative of its essence. He calls it "making several questions into one" (S.E. 4, 166b27) ; and he never shows any realisation that there is no such thing as a single question in the sense of a question that makes no assumption. His partial and atypical insight is embodied in the usual names "complex question" or "many questions" ; and so far as I know the earliest person to see further was Lotze. The dialogues are roughly in Aristotle's stage, except that they have no conventional name for the thing.

(2) There are many passages in which the answerer's reply to Socrates' question is what we might call the rejection of an *analogy*. " Some painters are better than others, presumably ? —Certainly.—Now do the better ones produce finer works, that is, paintings ? And in the same way do some architects make finer houses than others ?—Yes.—Then is it also true that some lawgivers produce finer work than others ?—No, I do not think so in this case " (*Cra.* 429AB). Very often the words used are that this is " not like " that. " I somehow feel, Socrates ", says Meno, " that this is no longer like these others " (*Meno*, 73A). " As if this were like that " is the contemptuous phrase with which Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of a false analogy (*Rp.* I 337C). Once it is expressed by the proverb : " You are joining flax and not-flax " (*Euthyd.* 298C). The *Charmides* (165E) has : " You are not going about it in the right way, Socrates. This is not like the other forms of knowledge, nor are they like each other ; but you are proceeding as if they were alike." But we find no name for the fallacy, and no discussion of the conditions that tend to make an analogy false or true. Nor, as I show in my *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, do we find any very explicit discussion of analogy in general. Plato's word ἀναλογία always means something strictly mathematical to him.

(3) As to fallacious *conversion*, Socrates points out in the *Euthyphro* (12) that, whereas all that is holy is just, not all that is just is holy. He illustrates this by remarking that, whereas all that is reverenced is feared, not all that is feared is reverenced, The reason is, he says, that the fearful is wider than the reverend, that fear is a part of reverence. In this passage Plato grasps the notion of fallacious conversion to the extent that he can give

two concrete cases of it, and place them side by side so that by comparison we may feel the universal nature present in them both ; but he has no general name for this universal nature.

Exactly the same stage of insight reappears in the *Protagoras* :

> You asked me whether brave men are confident, and I admitted it. But whether confident men are also brave I was not asked, and if I had been I should have said that they are not all so. My admission was that brave men are confident, and you have done nothing to show that it was wrong. You point out that those who know have more confidence than those who do not, and you think that proves that bravery and knowledge are the same. You could prove in this way that strength is knowledge. You could ask me first whether strong men are powerful, and I should say yes. Then, whether those who know how to wrestle are more powerful than those who do not, and more powerful than they themselves were before they learned, and I should say yes. And when I had made these admissions it would be possible for you, using the same proof, to say that according to my admissions knowledge is strength. But I am not for a moment admitting that the powerful are strong, only that the strong are powerful. For power and strength are not identical. Power comes both from knowledge and from madness and anger, while strength comes from nature and from good care of bodies. Similarly, in the other argument, confidence and bravery are not identical. Whence it happens that, while brave men are confident, not all confident men are brave. For confidence comes to men both from skill and from anger and from madness, like power, whereas bravery comes from nature and good care of souls. (350-1.)

Here as in the *Euthyphro* we are given concrete insight into the nature of fallacious conversion by being invited to see the identity in two juxtaposed cases of it ; but we are not given any name or definition of this identical element. There are no other passages that express as much consciousness of the thing as these two.

(4) That Plato was sometimes conscious of the fallacy of *ambiguous terms* is certain from the *Euthydemus*, where he first makes the brothers commit this fallacy in a crass form with the word μανθάνειν, and then makes Socrates explain at length that the argument works by taking this word in two senses. Moreover, Plato comes nearer to having a name for ambiguity than to having names for fallacious question and analogy ; for in this

passage of the *Euthydemus* he calls it " the difference of words "
(τὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων διαφοράν 278B), and elsewhere he once has
the word " amphibolous " (*Cra.* 437A). Only on these two
occasions, however, does he almost give a name to ambiguity.
He often uses the word " homonymous ", but never in Aristotle's
sense of a species of ambiguity.

This survey of Plato's consciousness of our four species of
fallacy shows that it was very small. There is no discussion of
fallacious question or analogy, only one passage discussing
ambiguity, and only two discussing illegitimate conversion. The
discussions of conversion juxtapose cases, but extract no name or
definition. The only trace of names for any of the four are two
names for ambiguity, each appearing once only.

We have now obtained a preliminary answer to our question
what consciousness Plato had of fallacy. This answer is at
present a mere sketch, very incomplete and yet at the same time
too definite. It treats the problem too much as an affair of all
or nothing. The assumption that Plato either was or was not
aware of the notion of fallacy, and that there is no middle possi-
bility between these two extremes, ought to be replaced by the
assumption that a given man's awareness of any given concep-
tion can vary indefinitely in degree. There is no such thing as a
complete grasp of an idea ; and there is no such thing as a zero
grasp of an idea ; and between any two degrees in the grasp of
a given idea are others. On this assumption the comparatively
simple question whether So and So had realised such and such
idea must be replaced by the much harder question to what
degree he had realised it. We have no established scale for
such degrees, and therefore our answer to such a question can
only consist in a long and laborious accumulation, piling up
descriptions of the stage of the idea in this thinker, and com-
parisons of it with other thinkers. In the rest of this article we
shall attempt this process for one species of fallacy only, namely,
ambiguity. The choice of this species is indicated both by its
frequency in the dialogues, and by its importance in philosophy,
and by the fact that, unlike our other three species, it cannot be
explained away as a falsehood in the premise.

It is probable that all language is ambiguous, for it is probable
that no statement whatever is or can possibly be accurate enough
for all the purposes that may arise. In Whitehead's words,
" any verbal form of statement which has been before the world
for some time discloses ambiguities ; and . . . often such am-
biguities strike at the very heart of the meaning ". But if all
statements are ambiguous, much more so are all words ; for a

word as such is vaguer than a statement as such, and gains de-
finition on each occasion from the sentence in which it appears.
And we must understand the word "ambiguous" to mean not
merely meaning two things but meaning an indefinite number of
things. All language is ambiguous, then, in the sense that every
sentence and every word has an indefinite number of meanings ;
and the range of these meanings is usually much wider for words
than for sentences.[1]

We have already noticed a reason for believing that Plato had
some consciousness of ambiguity ; but we now require some
more special reasons indicating that he realised to some extent
the peculiar subtlety and formidableness of this type of fallacy.
The passage in the *Euthydemus* is no evidence for this ; it is one
of those crass ambiguities out of which puns are made.

In the first place, there is an argument from the general
character of the early dialogues. Shorey remarked that the
Lysis "reads precisely as if its philosophic purpose were to
illustrate the mental confusion that arises when necessary and
relevant distinctions are overlooked or not clearly brought out"
(*What Plato Said*, 115). It is surely true that the great and
salutary lesson the early dialogues have for us is ambiguity and
again ambiguity—that our ordinary moral terms are profoundly
ambiguous and confused. Is it possible to study these works
philosophically without carrying away this conclusion, without
deciding that we must not do what Socrates is always doing
there, namely taking common terms into philosophy at their
face value ? If these works really drive home this important
conclusion, is it not what Plato meant them to do ? A book is
a machine to think with, as I. A. Richards has said ; and Plato's
early dialogues are admirably designed to stimulate us into
thinking.

In the second place, we may point to the discussion of λόγος
at the end of the *Theætetus*, and urge that Plato is there distin-
guishing three senses of the word. Λόγος, he says, is either the
reflection of thought in words (206D), or the recital of the elements
of a thing (206E ff.), or the statement of a mark that distinguishes
the thing from everything else (208C). The discussion is elaborate
and self-conscious.

In the third place, we may appeal to the discussion of not-
being in the *Sophist*. Shorey, for example, there finds Plato
"explicitly distinguishing the copula from the substantive *is*"

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[1] For a development of this thesis, and for a discussion of the general
power of ambiguity and some of the forms in which it most troubles the
philosopher, see my article in MIND for April, 1941.

(*WPS*, 298). Surely, we may say, the following passage is the detection of a subtle ambiguity in the verb " to be " :

> Let no one say that we are presuming to assert the being of not-being represented as the opposite of being. We have long ago said goodbye to the question whether there is any opposite of being or not, either explicable or completely inexplicable. But as to our present account of not-being, let a man either refute it and convince us that we are wrong, or, so long as he cannot, let him say as we do that the kinds mingle with each other ; and that, since being and the other traverse all of them and each other, the other shares in being and *is* because of this sharing, while yet it *is not* that in which it shares, but, being other than being, is clearly necessarily not-being. (*Sophist* 258E-259A.)

And surely the following is the detection of a subtle ambiguity in the phrase " . . . is the same " :—

> We must overcome our distaste and admit that motion is both the same and not the same. For we are not speaking similarly when we call it the same and not the same, etc. (*Sophist*, 256A.)

Fourthly, we may appeal to the distinction drawn in the *Statesman* between a part and a kind or species or form. Plato there says (262-3) that it would be a mistake to divide animals into men and beasts, because " beast " is only a part of " animal " and not also a kind of animal. That this is a way of indicating that " beast " is an ambiguous word appears strongly from the following sentence : " You seemed to me to be merely subtracting a part, but to suppose that all that were left constituted a single kind because you could apply to each of them the same word ' beast ' " (263C). Plato here clearly indicates his opinion that the fact that we apply the same word " beast " to each of a set of things is no guarantee that there is some " form " common and peculiar to this set. This amounts to a recantation of his earlier belief that we could safely posit a " form " wherever there was a common word (*Rp.* 596A). In other words, whereas in the middle dialogues the theory of " forms " included the naïve assumption that most words are univocal, Plato is now beyond that stage, and realises that we must do more than trust to language in order to discover " forms ".

As a fifth and last argument, for the view that Plato appreciated the pervasiveness of ambiguity, we may remark that he had a pupil whose contribution to the study of ambiguity was

certainly the most original ever made, and is probably still the
best. In at least four different ways Aristotle advanced this
matter enormously. He persistently noted and analysed and
listed the various meanings of important philosophical terms.
We have a substantial collection of these analyses in *Metaphysics*
Δ ; and they enter intimately into the texture of all his ontology.
In the second place, he introduced illuminating descriptions of
the various kinds of ambiguity. Thirdly, he listed six forms of
fallacy dependent on language ; and all of these are in reality
forms of ambiguity, as he implies when he says that they are the
ways in which we mean different things by the same words and
sentences (*SE*, 4, 166b29). The most important of them is the
fallacy caused by what he calls the σχῆμα λέξεως or grammatical
form. He points out that we use one grammatical or syntactical
device to express many different realities, and that we use more
than one grammatical device to express a single reality. This
concept of the absence of one-one correspondence between the
grammatical structure and the object, even in true statements,
leads directly to his greatest achievement of all in this sphere,
the famous doctrine of the categories, which is the theory that
being is an ambiguous word with ten different meanings. In this
theory the pervasiveness of ambiguity is clearly suggested for
the first time ; for it means that the basic linguistic formula
" X is Y " has a different meaning for every category to which
X may belong. It is a great pity that Aristotle did not elaborate
the concept of analogical ambiguity mentioned in the *Nicomachean
Ethics*, I, 6. It is a great pity that he has not left us a full-
dress treatise on ambiguity as such, something more general
than *Metaphysics* Δ and the *Categories*, and something less bound
up with questions of controversy than the *Sophistical Refutations*.
But surely, it may be argued, what he has given us justifies us in
believing that his teacher saw more of ambiguity than any
punster must.

Such are the arguments that can be made in favour of the view
that Plato appreciated the seriousness of ambiguity. Turning
to those on the other side, we may begin by rejecting the argu-
ment (number one above) that Plato must have intended the
early dialogues to enforce the lesson of ambiguity. Surely the
degree of irony thus attributed to him is superhuman. Do these
dialogues suggest important truths about ambiguity to more
than a tenth of the people who read them ? Did they to more
than a tenth of the readers whom Plato expected ? We may
doubt whether many Greeks could have profited by them in this
way until Aristotle had done his work. It is easier for us than

for them to see ambiguity in these dialogues, not only because
we have Aristotle behind us, but also because we look at them
from another language in which the ambiguities are different.

A second consideration strongly supporting the view that
Plato was mostly unconscious of the subtler forms of ambiguity
is stated in an article on ambiguity (MIND, L, 140-141), but
had better be repeated here. In the typical procedure both of
the early and of the middle dialogues there is a point where it is
very important that the question of ambiguity should arise ;
and it never does. The typical procedure of the early dialogues
is that Socrates puts a question of definition, the answerer mis-
understands it and Socrates explains it, the answerer gives an
answer, Socrates refutes it, the answerer gives another answer,
Socrates refutes that, and so on. The question of ambiguity
should arise before the question of definition. Before asking for
the definition of X we should ask whether X always means the
same ; at least we should remember the possibility that X does
not always mean the same during our search for its definition.
In the *Meno* (74D) Socrates says to Meno : " Since you give the
same name to each of this multitude of things ", what is the one
element that you find in all of them ? He does not raise the
apparently prior question whether we give the same name to each
of the collection in the same sense. The essence of the Socratic
search for definitions is the insistence that the word *must* some-
how mean the same in all its uses, however various they at first
sight appear.

In the middle dialogues the typical procedure is to find an
Idea wherever there is a common name. It is clearly expressed
in the *Republic :* " we are accustomed to assume that there is
some one Idea related to each collection of things to which we
give the same name " (596A). Evidently this is the same mistake
in method as that with regard to definition in the early dialogues.
We ought to bear in mind the possibility that the name is
ambiguous ; but the dialogues never do.

Against supposing Plato conscious of the subtleties of
ambiguity we probably ought to put, thirdly, his contempt for
those who seem to him to concern themselves with words instead
of thoughts. Again and again he laughs at Prodicus for dis-
tinguishing closely related meanings ; and one of these passages
is specially interesting (*Euthd.* 277E) because it perhaps implies
that Prodicus used to lay down the principle that you must
learn about verbal correctness first, where first presumably
means before you can learn about things. In the *Gorgias* he
scorns what he calls word-hunting (489B and 490A). In the

Cratylus he lays it down that the study of words is not the way to a knowledge of things.   In the *Euthydemus* Socrates says that, even if a man knew many ambiguities such as μανθάνειν, or all there are, he would be no nearer knowing the truth about reality. In *Republic*, I, the notion of strict speech is introduced by an unsympathetic character as a desperate defence of an un-sympathetic doctrine.   Plato seems to hold the opinion, common also today, that we should despise nicety in the use of words, or at any rate intellectual as opposed to aesthetic nicety ;   that the truly original and liberal thinker attends only to things.   The unnoticed implication seems to be that the good thinker can think correctly whatever words he uses as his symbols ;   and that he can understand what you are communicating to him however haphazardly you use your words.   Such an attitude surely involves serious misapprehensions about the nature of language and our dependence thereon.   No one maintains it after he has seen the range and power of ambiguity ;   and its presence in Plato is therefore a sign that he had not.   The force of this argument is, however, somewhat lessened by the fact that Plato's utterances about language include many of another sort.   The passages about the folly or difficulty or even impossibility of writing philosophy down seems to express a despair about words very different from the careless confidence implied in the passages we have just been recalling.   Can it be that he thought that on the one hand communication by the written word is so pre-carious as to be hopeless, but on the other hand communication by the spoken word is so sure that elaborate precautions are needless ?

Against the argument from Aristotle (number five above) we may say that Aristotle seems to forget his doctrines of ambiguity when he comes to ethics, and ethics is Plato's preponderating subject.   The *Nicomachean Ethics* does, it is true, begin by declaring that good is an ambiguous word ;   but this doctrine does not permeate the book as the ambiguity of being permeates the *Metaphysics ;*   on the contrary, it is impossible to see any respect in which the rest of the book would have been different if he had not laid down this doctrine at the beginning.   On the word ἀρετή, which is much more important to the book than the word good, he casts almost no suspicion ;   and most remarkable of all is his uncritical attitude to the word καλόν.   This word is essential to his account of right action, for it is frequently invoked as being what the really virtuous man really aims at.   Yet it is never related to happiness or to contemplation, both of which are also said to be the end ;   and it is never examined or discussed as such in any way.   If, then, even Aristotle, who has so many

and such good things to say on ambiguity, seems to forget the whole matter when he talks on ethics, we can perhaps easily believe that Plato did not have it in mind in his ethical dialogues. Throughout the history of philosophy ethics seems to have resisted the resolution of its terms much more than the other disciplines.

With regard to the second argument above, it is hard to say whether in the *Theætetus* Plato is distinguishing three meanings of the word *logos*, or three species of the genus *logos*, or three hypotheses as to what the one thing *logos* is. *Logos*, he says, may be the reflection of thought in speech (206D), or the recital of the elements of a thing (206E ff.), or the statement of a mark that distinguishes the thing from everything else (208C). In favour of supposing that he regarded this as a case of ambiguity we observe that it is hard to see how the first could be either a co-species or a rival hypothesis to the other two. We observe also certain phrases that make this way. " What does the word logos mean ? " is surely the right translation of τί ποτε βούλεται τὸν λόγον ἡμῖν σημαίνειν ; (206C), especially in view of the strange accusative. And the next sentence seems to be : " For it seems to me to mean one of three things ". *Ἴσως γὰρ ὀλέγων οὐ τοῦτο ἔλεγεν* (206E) probably means " The man who asserted this definition perhaps did not mean this ". Thus Plato's language in introducing his first and second accounts of logos suggests that he thought he was dealing with an ambiguous word. On the other hand, what he says about his third account suggests rather that he thought he was dealing with rival hypotheses.

> Perhaps someone will define it not thus, but as the remaining kind of the three, one of which, we said, will be laid down to be logos by him who defines knowledge as right opinion with logos.—You did right to remind us. Yes, there's one left. One was an image as it were of thought in speech. The other that we just mentioned was a path to the whole through the elements. And what is your third ? —What most people would say ; being able to name a mark by which the subject of inquiry differs from all things.

Here the phrase " what most people would say ", and the verb θήσεσθαι or "lay down", with its close connection with ὑποτίθεσθαι or " hypothesize ", suggest that Plato thinks he is dealing with rival theories about the nature of the one thing logos.

These conflicting appearances indicate the following view of the passage. Plato here is not clearly separating the discrimination of the senses of an ambiguous word from the discrimination of theories about the nature of a thing. He passes from the

former to the latter without realising it. His second and third accounts of logos are rival attempts to clarify the nature of some one thing vaguely felt; but his first account refers to another thing altogether. Therefore, in passing from his first to his second account he is passing from one to another sense of an ambiguous word; but in passing from the second to the third he is passing not to a third sense, but only to a second hypothesis about the thing meant by the second sense. If this is the right interpretation, the discussion of logos in the *Theætetus* is by no means a clear case of the detection of an ambiguity. It is an obscure detection of an ambiguity not distinguished from a perception of rival hypotheses.

The strongest of the arguments in favour of Plato's realising the ambiguity of language were the appeals to the *Sophist* and the *Statesman;* and to these let us now turn.

With regard to the *Sophist*, we note that at best Plato is here dealing only with one or two cases of ambiguity, namely " is not " and " is the same ". The *Sophist* cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered a discussion of ambiguity as such. It contains no word or phrase to which any dictionary would give the English equivalent " ambiguity ", nor any other of the related set of semantic terms, such as " univocity " and " meaning ". It does not even contain, in the passages to which the argument appeals, the word " word " or ὄνομα. Translators make Plato much more precise than he was, and much more of a semanticist, when they render ὁμοίως by " in the same sense ", or οὕτως by " in this sense ", or ἐκείνη by " the precise sense ". (The examples are from Cornford's translation of *Soph.* 256A, 256E, 259D.)

The fact is that, however the *Sophist* may seem to us, it did not seem to Plato to be a discussion of words or syntax or anything verbal at all. It seemed to him to be about the " ideas " or " forms ", which, far from being human words, are realities very remote from man and quite independent of him. What appears to us as the discovery of the copula, a piece of grammar or logic, appeared to Plato as the discovery of a certain " form ", namely the Other, which has the wonderful property of " communicating " with all other " forms " without exception. In our language, he thought of his discussion of not-being as pure ontology, and not at all as semantics or logic. He is talking about Being, not the word " being "; about the Other, not the word " other "; about Forms or kinds, εἴδη or γένη, not about words or ὀνόματα. Hence Shorey and Taylor are mistaken in ascribing to him the discovery of the copula; and Cornford, although he denies this,

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is equally mistaken in finding that Plato here distinguishes
meanings of " is " and " is not ".

Why is it, then, that so many interpreters find logical or
grammatical doctrines in this part of the *Sophist* ?   The answer
seems to be this.   Suppose that I give you an account of Hans
Pluke, describing at length his appearance, activities, relatives,
and so on ; suppose further that everything I say is true of one
and the same existent individual, except that this individual's
name is not Hans Pluke ; suppose lastly that there never has
been and never will be a man bearing the name of Hans Pluke.
The three things thus supposed could jointly occur ; they are
each possible and together compossible.   This is an analogy of
Plato's procedure in the *Sophist*.   He there gives us an account
of what he calls the " form " of the Other ; there is no such
" form " ; nevertheless, all that he says about it is true of some-
thing else, namely the word " other ".   Not provided with any
semantic concepts, and misconceiving the ontological status of
his subject-matter, Plato has yet contrived to get wonderfully
near to certain facts about language.   Using extremely in-
appropriate tools, he has yet produced such a recognisable result
that we all instinctively restate it for him in the more suitable
language now available.

If this is a true account, the *Sophist* is so to speak almost but
not quite at the top of the ridge that looks down into the valley
of ambiguity.   It is much higher than Plato ever climbed before,
for it leaves far below the discussion of λόγος in the *Theætetus*.

It is also higher than he ever reached again, with the possible
exception of the passage from the *Statesman* put forward above
as the fourth argument for the view that Plato saw the pervasive-
ness of ambiguity.   This passage in the *Statesman* (262-3) is
much less thorough and elaborate than that in the *Sophist*.
Nevertheless, it comes nearer to formulating the idea of am-
biguity as such.   If Plato had confined himself to saying that
a part is distinct from a " form ", the passage would have been
little to our purpose ; but, when he interprets this doctrine as
implying that the existence of the word W is not sufficient
evidence of the existence of a " form " common and peculiar to
all the things called W, we are strongly inclined to feel that, if
only he had had at that moment some such word as ἀμφιβολία
to provide a spark, a very bright flame would have been generated.
As it is, however, the remarkable hint thrown out in this passage
did not, so far as we know, lead to any revision of the theory of
" forms " ; and Plato appears to have remained till death at the
point of view stated in the *Euthydemus*, that ambiguity is of no
importance to the philosopher.