

Maxwell Kennel

Plato, Adorno, and the Dialectic

Bionote: Maxwell Kennel is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto, where he is currently working on a project called “Critique of Conspiracism” under the supervision of Pamela Klassen. He completed his PHD in Religious Studies in May 2021 at McMaster University with a dissertation on “Ontologies of Violence” in the works of Jacques Derrida, Mennonite pacifists, and feminist philosopher of religion Grace M. Jantzen. He is the author of *Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) and the editor of a special issue of *Political Theology* on interdisciplinary approaches to Mennonite Political Theology (May 2021).

University of Toronto
max.kennel@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay shows substantial connections between Plato’s dialectical approach in *The Republic* and Adorno’s 1958 lectures in *An Introduction to Dialectics*. Although the relationship between Adorno and Aristotle has received some attention, little work has been done either demonstrating or making connections between Plato and Adorno, especially on the topic of the dialectic. This is likely because Adorno himself has little to say about Plato’s dialectic, although he does refer often to Plato’s ideas and forms, and sometimes to his aesthetics. This essay reads against the grain to show how Plato and Adorno conceive of dialectical thinking in strikingly similar ways that run parallel with their discontinuities, and concludes with the suggestion that the figure of chiasmus is well-positioned to push the limits of dialectical thinking.

Keywords: Plato, Adorno, Dialectic

Plato’s dialogues have long been considered to be the origin of the variegated history of the dialectic – a term that suffers from a broad semantic range in both its historical and contemporary uses, and a term that has been variously reduced to the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula, to an architectonic system, and to a method ready for application.¹ Hegel famously made the ancient form of the dialectic central to his project from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the *Science of Logic*, and in his lectures on the history of philosophy in which he describes and appropriates the dialectic of Plato and others.² Much more recent than Hegel’s development of the term is Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics” project. The 1966 preface to Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* begins with the claim that “Negative Dialectics is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a ‘negation of negation’ later became the succinct term.”³ In these opening lines to his great work Adorno not only signals the importance of the Hegelian “negation of negation” for dialectical thinking, but cursorily locates the origin of the dialectic in the works of Plato before advancing his negative critique of positive dialectics that side with concepts rather than the objects they conceptualize.⁴ However, throughout the rest of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno only makes oblique references to Plato, sometimes noting the “aporetic form” of the Socratic dialogues while also accusing Plato of prioritizing synthesis and being a “partisan of unity [*parteilich für die Einheit*].” like Hegel.⁵

Although the relationship between Adorno and Aristotle has received some recent attention,⁶ little work has been done either

¹ Consider the problems of using the definite article before “dialectic” highlighted in: Fredric Jameson, “Three Names of the Dialectic,” in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 3-70. See also the reductive treatment of dialectic in Karl Popper, “What is Dialectic?” [1940] in *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 419-451.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Volume 2: Plato and the Platonists*. Trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Hegel writes that “the aim of the Platonic dialectic is to confuse and to resolve [*verwirren und auflösen*] the finite ideas of men, in order to bring about in their consciousness what science demands, the consideration of that which is.” (51).

³ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik: Gesammelte Schriften Band 6*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 7. See also the existing English edition, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), xix. On the place of the negative dialectics project in the Frankfurt School see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), Ch. 4.

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 158/158.

⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 26/35, 158/158.

⁶ For recent work that examines connections between Adorno and Aristotle see: Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge

demonstrating or making connections between Plato and Adorno, especially on the topic of the dialectic. This is likely because Adorno himself has little to say about Plato's dialectic, although he does refer often to Plato's ideas and forms, and sometimes to his aesthetics.⁷ In his lectures on metaphysics, Adorno seems to suggest that Aristotle, rather than Plato, marks the true beginning of dialectical thinking because Aristotle addresses mediation while Plato is constrained to static forms.⁸ However, Adorno's reading of Plato as a thinker of pure concepts, in contrast to Aristotle as an innovator of mediation, misses the complex mediations of Plato's dialectical approach, especially in *The Republic*.⁹

The aim of this study is to read against the grain and show substantial connections between Plato's dialectical approach in *The Republic* and Adorno's dialectical approach in his preparatory lectures for *Negative Dialectics*. In his reading of Adorno's fourth lecture in *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Tom Whyman concludes that "The Platonic doctrine of forms is held by Adorno to be, effectively, coercive in nature."¹⁰ Although this essay will only perform a close reading of two primary sources, at least one implication of this comparison will be to challenge the notion that Plato's dialectical approach is fundamentally coercive. While Whyman's evaluation of Adorno's view of Plato is focused on the forms in his lectures of 1965, below I will question whether Plato's general dialectical approach is coercive in such a way that would fall into the problem of positive dialectics that Adorno identifies. While not necessarily accepting or rejecting Whyman's interpretation of Adorno – given the complexity added by Adorno's more generous treatment of Plato in

1958 at the beginning of *An Introduction to Dialectics* – below I will show how Plato's approach in *The Republic* and Adorno's approach in his *An Introduction to Dialectics* similarly challenge rhetorical coercion toward predetermined ends, and accord in their dialectical focus on the problem of mediation rather than the maintenance of stable identities.¹¹

In recent years, Adorno's preliminary materials for his negative dialectics project have been published as English translations. Filling in the background of Adorno's magnum opus, in 2008 the fragments of his 1965-1966 course were published as *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, which were translated into English from the 2003 German edition.¹² These twenty-five lectures – the first ten of which were transcribed from his oral presentations, and the latter fifteen from his notes – give a piecemeal account of the preparation of what would later become the book, *Negative Dialectics*. In 2017, the materials from yet another lecture course were published in English translation as *An Introduction to Dialectics*.¹³ In this 1958 course, taught at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Adorno gave twenty lectures that have also been transcribed from original oral presentations in much fuller form than the later *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*. By reading *An Introduction to Dialectics* the reader of Adorno can, in some small way, become a student of Adorno, and bear witness to a clear and meticulous account of dialectical thinking that begins with Plato and proceeds in an oral style that shows Adorno to be a clear and compelling educator in the classroom.

Although he originally presented his research on dialectics in the 1965-1966 lecture course, in the summer semester of 1969 Adorno planned to give a course entitled: "An Introduction to Dialectical Thinking," and an advanced seminar on the same topic.¹⁴ However-

University Press, 2013) and Tom Whyman, "Adorno's Aristotle Critique and Ethical Naturalism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 25:4 (2017).

⁷ See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics* (1958/1959). Ed. Eberhard Ortland. Trans. Wieland Hoban (London: Polity, 2018), 86-95, 107. In his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that "Precisely Plato's ontology, more congenial to positivism than dialectic is, took offense at art's semblance character, as if the promise made by art awakened doubt in the positive omnipresence of being and idea, for which Plato hoped to find surety in the concept." Distinguishing between dialectic as he conceives of it, and Plato's work, Adorno resists the notion that "hypostatized universal concept" of ontology is adequate to the attention to form and beauty in aesthetics. See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 110. Adorno also writes briefly of *The Republic* in "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 31.

⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (1965). Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 29-32, 33, 41

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43, 46, 55, 74, 129-130.

¹⁰ Whyman, "Adorno's Aristotle Critique and Ethical Naturalism," 1214.

¹¹ Adorno writes that "non-positivist thinking is precisely that which is not content with the rigid logic of exclusivity – the logic of either-or: either mediated or immediate, either concept or pure non-conceptuality – but analyses phenomena in such a way that seemingly self-evident statements like the one I just mentioned grow more and more shaky." Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 68. My argument below suggests that both Adorno's dialectic and Plato's dialectic challenge this kind of positivist either-or thinking by means of similarly open-ended mediations.

¹² Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Polity, 2008).

¹³ Theodor Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* (1958). Ed. Christoph Ziermann. Trans. Nicholas Walker (London: Polity, 2017). All in-text citations appear in brackets as follows: (ID, page number).

¹⁴ Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Polity, 2005), 475.

er, as is well known, the intervention of student activists caused Adorno to discontinue the lectures. The protesting students, who insisted that Adorno's work no longer held potential resources for emancipatory political action, prevented Adorno from moving forward with the course – a course that included a plan “to alter the traditional shape of the academic lecture [by inviting] his students to put questions to him at any time so as to create a forum for open discussion.”¹⁵ Although Adorno's desire to create an open forum in his lectures of 1969 was not realized at that time, a close look at the 1965-1966 lecture course reveals hints about the discursive environment that he may have had in mind.

Adorno's declining popularity during the rise of the student protest movements in the late 1960s seems to have had something to do with his dialectical refusal of partisan thinking (partisanship being one of his accusations against Plato and Hegel in *Negative Dialectics*). Although we might be inclined to look to Plato and Adorno for dialectical tools for resisting polarization and advancing emancipatory politics – political goals that I am deeply sympathetic with – I will demonstrate below that in neither thinker do we find the kind of approach that could be easily put to use for emancipatory purposes without also transforming those who attempt to use it. Dialectical thinking, as it is described below, cannot be used with integrity as an external means to a political end without transforming the soul of the speaker (Plato) and educating the student against simplistic thinking (Adorno). This is not to say that dialectic in Plato and Adorno prohibits activism, decision, and emancipatory action, but it is to say that both figures are very concerned with the ways that dialectic can become instrumentalized and essentialized in the rush toward political action.

Counter to the two-option structure that is staged by polarized politics, below I show how both Plato and Adorno use a dialectical form of inquiry that is more concerned with the complexities of mediation (the ‘how’) than the contradiction of stable identities (the ‘what’). In this study I make hitherto undeveloped connections between Plato's Socratic dialectic in *The Republic* and Adorno's concept of dialectic in his *An Introduction to Dialectics* – a course that he presumably intended to repeat and develop in the final years of

his life. I begin by giving a literary reading of Plato's use of dialectic in the Socratic dialogues of *The Republic* that challenges Adorno's focus on Plato's forms and ideas. In doing so, I provide a reading of the text that attempts to meet it on its own terms, clear of as much contemporary accretion as possible. Although I do not make a case for the linear or causal influence of Plato's *Republic* upon Adorno's preparatory lectures or *Negative Dialectics*, I do suggest that Adorno's vision of dialectical thinking, especially in his lectures, accords in surprising ways with how dialectic is figured in Plato's *Republic*. I then provide an account of Adorno's *An Introduction to Dialectics*, before drawing parallels between the two, and before, finally, concluding the study with an attempt to point beyond some of the limitations of dialectical thinking by turning to the figure of chiasmus to constructively thematize identity and mediation.

Overall, my focus will be on providing a close textual analysis of two key sources that exemplify dialectical thinking, favoring text over context in ways that are suggestive rather than exhaustive. In accordance with this approach, I argue that the dialectical refusal to proceed from authoritative grounding concepts is a major way that the two works accord in both their form and content. At the same time I also challenge this division in a way that aligns with Adorno's contention in *An Introduction to Negative Dialectics* that “the problem of dialectic would be not simply to insist upon the moment of discontinuity but, rather, to connect the moments of continuity and discontinuity with one another, namely to grasp continuity and discontinuity themselves as reciprocally mediated” (ID, 148). Correlatively, both the defining features of dialectic that I identify in Plato and Adorno, and the way I draw connections between them, will refuse reduction to straightforward continuity or simple discontinuity, but instead appear in a reciprocally mediated space.

Plato¹⁶

Plato's *Republic* begins with those iconic and much interpreted words of Socrates, “I went down [*katebēn*] to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, son of Ariston, to pray to the goddess and to observe the festival (327a).” Voegelin identifies in these first words, and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In-text citations are from *The Republic of Plato*. Trans. Allan Bloom. (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

“great theme,” a resonance with the descent of Homer’s Odysseus to Hades, and a recollection of “the Heraclitean depth of the soul that cannot be measured by any wandering.”¹⁷ For Voegelin this descent poses the question of whether humanity can ascend from the depths, and death, upward to the height of life and justice. Soon we will see how Socrates is not “held by the depth,” but instead ascends from the “spiritual death and disorder of Athens” toward new life.¹⁸ This new life prefigures later literary-philosophical ascents and descents, from Nietzsche’s down-going (*untergehen*) in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, to Augustine’s gesture heavenward in the opening lines of the *Confessions*.¹⁹ But it also differs from them in important ways because it prepares for a dialectical inquiry that proceeds by stages through the clarification of hypotheses toward a different height than Zarathustra’s mountaintop and Augustine’s heaven. The narrative that frames Plato’s dialectical approach is one of wandering and toil, and – with mediation in mind, rather than singular identity – it holds interesting figural relationships of both continuity and discontinuity with Zarathustra’s *Wandern* and Augustine’s *peregrinatio*.

Following this descent to the cosmopolitan Piraeus, and after the festival, on their way home, Socrates and Glaucon are confronted by a servant of Polemarchus. When he and his entourage arrive, they give Socrates and Glaucon a choice between staying with them or proving to be stronger than they actually are. Voegelin writes: “He had gone down, and now the depth held him as one of them, friendly, to be sure, but with a playful threat of force [...]”²⁰ True to form, Socrates suggests a way apart from the threatening opposition of these two given options, namely: “our persuading you that you must let us go” (327c). Although Polemarchus vows not to listen, he agrees anyway, and they proceed, under mild duress, to talk (328a). A concern for mediation, rather than opposed identities between which one must decide, seems to guide both Socrates’ refusal and his positing of a third way.

And so, we begin with dialogue, because Plato begins with dialogue in *The Republic* – dialogue that refuses to maintain stable identities in hard contradiction and instead mediates between opposing po-

sitions, but without the conciliatory apoliticism of a mediation between two stable identities that would merely “agree to disagree” or assume underlying shared values. Instead of a mediation that maintains an “either-or” disjunction, the dialectical mediations of Socrates are closer to Derrida’s later development of a “neither-nor” refusal that seeks the transformation of opposed categories.²¹ When Polemarchus says to Socrates and Glaucon, in no uncertain terms, that they will stay with him for the festival and “talk,” the term used is *dialegein*, which means to separate or glean or pick something out. This kind of parsing is the basis of dialectic. A few lines later, Socrates gently mocks the aging Cephalus, stating that he is “delighted to discuss [*dialegomenos*] with the very old” (328d). The conversation that follows, on aging and *eros*, then leads into the question of justice that remains the key concern throughout the rest of the text. Distinguishing between friend and enemy, and addressing justice as a human virtue (335c), Socrates begins to separate cool from heat, wet from dry, injury from good, and so on – until Polemarchus is persuaded that it is not just to harm anyone (335d).²²

Pausing here, the dialogue appears to be defined by a coercive and linear form of persuasion, with Socrates leading Polemarchus down a straight path through his questioning toward a predetermined conclusion. But if we continue to read, we will find a complication, as we frequently do in the ongoing and unfinished dialectical work of *The Republic*. Having thus far held back, Thrasymachus now interjects, hurling himself at them “as if to tear us to pieces,” says the narrative voice (335b). Thrasymachus had previously tried to take the discussion by force but was prevented from doing so. But now he shouts at Socrates and Polemarchus, accusing Socrates of merely leading Polemarchus down a pre-marked path. He says: “you know that it is easier to ask than to answer – but answer yourself and

²¹ See Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 90, and Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41. I analyze these mediations in detail in my dissertation “Ontologies of Violence: Jacques Derrida, Mennonite Pacifist Epistemology, and Grace M. Jantzen’s *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*.” (McMaster University, Department of Religious Studies, 2021).

²² The distinction between friend and enemy, and the notion that it is not just to harm and injure, have a long political history of opposition. Consider the distorted political theology and the founding of politics on relations of enmity in Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. 17–18, and Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*. Trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. 18, 26–27.

¹⁷ Eric Voegelin, *Plato* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 52–54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁹ See my “Periodization and Providence: Time and Eternity between Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Telos* 188 (Fall 2019), 103–126., now Chapter 5 of my *Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

²⁰ Voegelin, *Plato*, 53.

say what you assert the just to be" (336c). Insisting that Socrates give up his supposed sophism, Thrasymachus questions the question-answer format of the dialogue and demands a clear and precise assertion about the nature of justice. But Socrates's dialogue continues to follow a question-answer pattern. Socrates responds to Thrasymachus's exasperation, rebuking him and reaffirming the seriousness and flexibility of their dialogical endeavor (336e). But Thrasymachus continues, upset that Socrates will not answer his question dogmatically, by demanding that Socrates satisfy his desire and answer him (337e-338a). At this point in the dialogue a major ingredient in the pattern that Socrates establishes is the refusal to conclude or offer a final judgment. This refusal to construct an argument on a fundament, or base his conclusions on unchangeable definitions, is not only evident in spatial terms (like "fundament") but involves a temporal element as well. Taking hold of their time, Socrates' dialectical approach refuses to stop the conversation with a concluding statement, continuing on even when his interlocutors are exhausted. This is indeed what many of his interlocutors have trouble with, and what Socrates refuses to change as he continues the dialogue throughout *The Republic*. In some ways, we can already see that dialogue is a journey of the unfulfilled desire to find satisfaction in certain kinds of dogmatic conclusions (350d).

When Thrasymachus attacks Socrates and accuses him of directing the argument to work harm, following the assumption that justice is power (the "advantage of the stronger"), he forgets that his own attacking and demanding could reflect the same problem (338d). But the dialogue continues, and, true to *dialegein*, Socrates persists in making further distinctions. This is followed by an accusation from Polemarchus that Socrates is a "sycophant" who distorts the meaning of his words and intends to harm others through his argument (340d, 341a). More demands for precision come from Polemarchus, but the dialogue continues as they move deeper into the distinction between the ruler and the ruled. While making the weaker argument the stronger (340c), and setting speech against speech (348a), Socrates borrows from the Athenian legal paradigm of opposing court speeches, but points beyond this opposition by suggesting that instead of one external judge, they appoint themselves as "both judges and pleaders at once" (348b).

The inconclusive end of the first book-break is then followed by further dialectics and discussion. Initially coerced into the conversation by the threatening demand to choose between staying with his newfound "friends" and proving stronger than them (perhaps an invitation to use force and coercion), Socrates now suggests that he may be free from the need to argue (357a), but Glaucon is not yet satisfied with Thrasymachus's resignation, and pushes Socrates onward. Socrates continues to examine justice and its desires, telling a story in which the protagonist also goes down to a place he is curious about (359d). Beginning his discussion of the city (362b), and trying to address opposed arguments (362e), the dialogue continues into the second book of *The Republic*. Socrates identifies the limitations of language, understanding that the same word can have different meanings, but proceeding within these limits to discuss the city (368d-369a). The discussion then turns to the nature of the soul, the pursuit of philosophy, and the rearing of guardians, and Socrates argues that men [sic] must be educated in speech and its double form of truth and falsity (376e). The talk of dialectic is doubtless an essential part of Plato's concern for education (*paideia*), especially his desire to educate against other figures and schools who seek to form the soul: the misologist, the erist, and the sophist.

Towards the end of the third book of *The Republic*, Socrates revisits the nature of dialogue in his explanation of music, describing the unmusical "misologist" as one who hates the *logos* of reasoned discourse and "no longer makes any use of persuasion by means of speech but goes about everything with force and savageness, like a wild beast" (411e). We can assume in some way that the *misologist* is the enemy of Socrates's dialogue, as he sounds a lot like Thrasymachus, whose outburst first opposed the unfolding of the dialogue. The fifth book of *The Republic* also sees Socrates make another distinction important to dialectic. Speaking to Glaucon, Socrates states that "the power of the contradicting art is grand," clarifying that this is because "many fall into it even unwillingly and suppose they are not quarreling but discussing, because they are unable to consider what's said by separating it out into its forms." (454a). These confused people "pursue contradiction in the mere name of what's spoken about" through an "eristic" and not a "dialectic" approach (454a). Sensitive to making this mistake himself, Socrates calls eris-

tic that which has the appearance of dialectics, but which proceeds by using conversation instrumentally, as a means to the end of winning an argument, and not for the sake of truth. Unlike the dialectical approach, the eristic approach looks for victory and manipulates the difference between words and things to its advantage, destroying hypotheses rather than working with them. Although dialectic and eristic approaches may look similar in some circumstances, it is the soul of the speaker that truly decides the difference, for it contains the truth of speech within itself.

Following this, Socrates then asks what a philosopher is (472d), and what the nature of rule is (474c), carrying the discussion further and returning to the question yet again at the beginning of the sixth book (484b). As the dialogue proceeds and Socrates's relentless discussion begins to tire Glaucon and Adeimantus, the latter party levels a further accusation:

Socrates, no one could contradict you in this. But here is how those who hear what you now say are affected on each occasion. They believe that because of inexperience at questioning and answering, they are at each question misled a little by the argument; and when the littles are collected at the end of the arguments, the slip turns out to be great and contrary to the first assertions. (487b)

Here, again, we find the accusation that Socrates has already decided how their conversation will end, while deceiving and coercing his interlocutors by leading them on under the guise of free inquiry. Here it may be helpful to step back from the narrative movements of the dialogue and examine Adeimantus' criticism from our vantage point as readers of Plato's *Republic*. From our position, we can treat *The Republic* as a book that contains Plato's coded doctrine from which we must derive a singular theory of dialogue and dialectic by matching parts of his narrative with corresponding parts of his philosophy. This abstraction of the philosophical out of the literary is often done by isolating Plato's doctrine of the forms from the narrative movement of *The Republic*. Adorno makes this move when he focuses on Plato's ideas rather than his narrative,²³ and so does Hegel, when he attempts to look beyond Plato's dialogue to discover

his true position.²⁴ A better option, however, is to read the dialogue as a narrative report of a conversation in which dramatic movements are meant to communicate something that is not communicable in abstract formulations. Where we stand as readers on this question will determine how we understand Plato's dialectic, the dialogues of Socrates, and the criticism presented by Adeimantus.

If we take a philosophical approach that understands the narrative form of the dialogue to be a veil that hides an architectonic philosophy of ideas and forms, then the dialectical approach must bear the weight of Adeimantus' critique, most notably, the suggestion that the conversation was being led all along by Socrates (and for us, by Plato) toward a predetermined and systematic end. However, if we take a literary reading of the text that does not look for a dogmatic and abstract definition of *the* dialectic, but instead considers dramatic narrative and philosophical concepts to be intertwined, then we must consider the possibility that *The Republic* is reflective of a free discussion, and perhaps even side with Socrates and say that dialectic does not necessarily entail coercion toward a foregone conclusion. Indeed, if we read the dialogue closely, we find that those who are being led into corners – being “checked” (487c) – are not falling prey to a sophistic trick of Socrates, but falling prey to the limitations of their own thinking by refusing to allow their definitions and assumptions to be transformed. If we accept this interpretation then we may find that in Socrates' dialogue there is no secret answer that his interlocutors must find, but rather an open ended and ongoing process of critically clarifying hypotheses by means of ascent and descent.

Adeimantus's accusation that Socrates is slowly edging his interlocutors away from their initial premises in a kind of deceptive ruse stands in contrast with Socrates' later definition of true philosophy as involving the same sort of *eros* as dialectic (458a-458d and 499b). Socrates does not really answer the charges laid against him by Adeimantus, but instead he proceeds under the assumption made by Adeimantus that the city must be ruled by philosophers (486e). According to his later account, philosophy is not “a taste for quarreling” or confusing persons for arguments (500b), but something oriented toward the divine (500d, 501b). For the philosophers, es-

²³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 26-27.

²⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Vol. II, 9-21.

tablished as guardians of the city in speech (503b), justice must be pursued as a good both itself and for its consequences, and it seems that dialectic too must be pursued both in itself and for its consequences, lest it lapse into eristic or misology.

The dialogue continues into Book VI, and the participants forget that the idea of the good is greater than justice, and so they return to the subject again (504d-505a). With the “good” defined as pleasure for the many, and as prudence for the few, Socrates criticizes both definitions and further distinguishes between good and bad pleasures (505b-505c). This distinction is followed by the exhaustion of Glaucon and Adeimantus. Like Thrasymachus at the beginning, Adeimantus now demands that Socrates assert his fixed opinion (506c), but Socrates will still not do it. Tired of the back-and-forth movement of the dialogue (just as readers may tire of the present exposition), here Glaucon and Adeimantus are unsatisfied, for satisfaction always exists in relation to desire, and their desires have been left unfulfilled in interesting and instructive ways throughout *The Republic*.

Even when Socrates steps back from the idea of the good (506e), the framing language is still focused on desire, satisfaction, and attention. Here, and throughout the text, we see that Socrates almost always engages in talk and dialogue, even when dogma is demanded of him, and his relentless plodding dialectic takes a longer path (504b) that taxes the patience of everyone involved, pushing them to the breaking point of their attention spans. Agreement, disagreement, assertion, distinction, are each part of the movement of Plato’s dialectic, as it strains and sustains inquiry for both the characters in the dialogue and the readers and critics of the dialogue throughout the history of its reception. Throughout, Plato shows a preference not for settled identities that could be opposed in contradictory stasis, but for a restless and relentless back-and-forth that exhausts attentions, disappoints expectations, and transforms desires.

The sun, the line, and the cave form the basis of the following dialogue, and in the seventh book of *The Republic* Socrates speaks again of dialectic (531d). Here the dialectician is not one who is merely clever, but one who pursues discussion and argument, apart

from the senses. The dialectician “attain[s] to each thing that is and does not give up before he grasps by intellection itself that which is good itself,” eventually finding the end of the “intelligible realm” (532a-532b). Like the illuminations of the cave, the journey of dialectic is a pining after that which is, and an ascent to the light (515e). After hearing the song of dialectic and its grasping toward the good by means of intellection, Glaucon is torn, finding Socrates’ statements about the sun and the cave difficult not to accept (532d). The dialectic ascent out of the cave toward the sun “leads the soul up to the contemplation of what is best in the things that are” (532c). At his limit, Glaucon demands that Socrates teach him dialectic like one would teach another art, desiring conclusion again, or desiring a kind of homecoming (532e). But Socrates tells Glaucon that he can follow no further, for then he would be learning dialectic on Socrates’ terms like one would learn a technique, and not on his own on the terms of the dialectic itself (533a).

Socrates distinguishes dialectic from the other arts that are concerned with opinions and human desires, stating that dialectic “proceeds in this direction, destroying the hypotheses, to the beginning itself in order to make it secure; and when the eye of the soul is really buried in a barbaric bog, dialectic gently draws it forth and leads it up above” (533d). In the eyes of Plato, dialectic is a kind of ascent from original but damaged hypotheses that attempts to pick out the good in the context of an argument, distinguishing it, and “going through every test, as it were in battle – eager to meet the test of being rather than that of opinion – he comes through all this with the argument [*logos*] still on its feet” (534c). In the transformations and mediations that Socrates both endures and causes, the identities of each *logos* are not destroyed. Instead they are transformed. This enduring, fighting, and distinguishing dialectic is atop the other topics of study for Socrates (534e). While studying, training, and educating, dialectic is paramount, for it concerns itself not only what that which is, but it tests the souls of those who study it, and those who succeed are capable of what Socrates calls the ascended perspective of “overview” (537c). This overview takes many dissonant things into its view, but this view is not defined by the eyes but by the intellect, for in order to see dialectically one must “release himself from the eyes and the rest of sense and go to that which is in itself and accompanies truth” (537d).

And so, to both recapitulate and advance, we can identify that *The Republic* begins with a descent to the Piraeus that confronts Socrates with the opportunity to respond with force, after which Socrates suggests another way apart from two given options, hinting at the way in which he will proceed in the ensuing dialogues. The critique of dialectic begins with the question asked by Thrasymachus regarding whether dialectic is merely a coercive tool that Socrates is using to direct conversation toward his own ends (336c), and this critique continues with the similar question from Adeimantus in the sixth book (487b). Keeping with the question-answer format of the dialogues, these critiques of dialectic reject the instrumental arrangement of answers as pre-decided solutions to the problems posed in the questions. Instead of following a *telos* that Socrates has pre-decided, the critique initiated by Thrasymachus and Adeimantus proceeds from their valuing of an open-ended conversation that the participants are free to steer in different directions in the interest of following their subject matter. The approach of dialectic in Socrates' dialogues *The Republic* is certainly not free of force and coercion, but it is also not defined by fixed definitions of abstract "ideas" or "forms" that cannot be moved. Quite the opposite. Rather than stable identities, it is mediation and the transformation and education of the soul that define dialectic in *The Republic* in ways that resonate far more deeply with Adorno's work than he admits.

Adorno

In the lectures that make up *An Introduction to Dialectics* Adorno not only attempts to describe what dialectical thinking is, but he also attempts to perform and demonstrate dialectical method in the process of teaching it to his students. Pedagogical and educational, Adorno's lectures are certainly of a different genre than *The Republic*. However, the fact that Plato's work is an authored literary work with dramatic personae who narrate philosophical ideas, and Adorno's lectures are transcribed records of university seminars, should not obscure their similar educational goals. Attention to and mediation of both continuity and discontinuity should permit such a comparison between two very different texts that embody similar desires to educate.

Unlike Plato's *Republic*, in which dialectic is the manner of proceeding rather than the matter at hand, Adorno's lectures explicitly at-

tempt to introduce dialectics as a concept and a method at the same time. But it is not so simple to separate form and content in either case. For Adorno, as for Plato, there is something about dialectical thinking that prohibits easy divisions. Indeed, Adorno's first lecture begins by emphasizing the immanent character of the dialectic. He writes that "at the point in philosophy where the dialectic first emerges, in the thought of Plato, it already implies the opposite, namely a disciplined form of thought which is meant to protect us from all sophistic manipulation" (ID, 1). For Adorno, the dialectic is a way to think rigorously and conceptually. It is both a "method of thought," and a "specific structure that belongs to things themselves" (ID, 1). Method and structure, the dialectic serves as a measure of itself, holding itself accountable to the way things are, and to the way that it represents how things are.

For Adorno, at the beginning of *An Introduction to Dialectics*, Plato's dialectic is "a doctrine which enables us to order our concepts correctly, to ascend from the concrete to the level of the highest and most universal" (ID, 1-2). For Adorno, Plato's "ideas" and doctrine are the focus of his thought rather than the dramatic unfolding and literary form of the dialogues or the narrative movement of dialectic talk (ID, 2). Our reading above shows that Adorno misses something important in Plato's dialectic: the entanglement of its dramatic form with its content and character. However, Adorno's preoccupation with Plato's ideas and his lack of attention to the narrative form of his dialogues does not prevent him from seeing the open-ended character of dialectic in Plato. Although Whyman states of Adorno's 1965 lectures on metaphysics that "The Platonic doctrine of forms is held by Adorno to be, effectively, coercive in nature,"²⁵ here, in 1958, Adorno does not accuse Plato of coercion, but instead suggests that "Plato was already well aware that we do not simply know, without more ado, whether the conceptual order we bestow on things is also the order which the objects themselves possess" (ID, 2). This deferral to Plato is followed by some further critiques of how Plato and Aristotle do not think the non-conceptual being beyond these concepts, but Adorno's comments here do reflect more openness toward Plato's work than his reduction of Plato's ideas to metaphysics and secularized theology in his lectures on metaphysics.²⁶

²⁵ Whyman, "Adorno's Aristotle Critique and Ethical Naturalism," 1214.

²⁶ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 16-18.

Adorno contends that the dialectic is experienced in “the way our concepts are driven on in the encounter with what they express” (ID, 2). Both expressing something about the world and seeking to grasp something in the world, the dialectic moves beyond manipulative conceptual ordering and seeks to correct itself in light of opposition, not as an “elaborate conceptual technique,” but through thinking (ID, 2). In his first lecture Adorno begins, as readers of the present study may have begun, by considering the many prejudices that are held against the dialectic, the most notable of which is its reduction to a set of ritualized techniques bound to closure. Adorno quotes Hegel’s claim that the dialectic is “the organized spirit of contradiction” (ID, 3), but, for Adorno, this organization need not be a codification that would attempt to arrive at stable and conclusive identities pitted against each other in eternal opposition or synthesized by a grand system. Instead, Adorno’s dialectic performs a restless movement of mediation and transformation that is not exhaustive, but may be exhausting. Later, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno will argue that dialectics attests to “the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived,” positing that there is always a remainder in the movement by which thinking tries to make concepts adequate to objects.²⁷

In the lectures that follow, Adorno describes this difficult movement of the dialectic as it tries to do justice to the concepts it both describes and prescribes. Adorno contends that the dialectic is both a procedure of thought that is enacted by the dialectician, but also something discoverable within things, making its double nature contingent upon some relation of identity between thought and being (ID, 4-5). Striving for clarity and seriousness in his treatment of the dialectic, Adorno leads his students toward a concept of the dialectic by refusing to “collapse” the matter of thought and the process of thought (ID, 6) – a refusal that may be reminiscent of Plato’s refusal to collapse questions into answers, and problems into solutions, by providing definitive and conclusive statements to satisfy his interlocutors.

While the Hegelian dialectic attempts to unify thought and being in a way that at least in some way resolves their opposition (recalling that Adorno accuses both Hegel and Plato of being “partisans

²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5/17.

of unity”), for Adorno the materialist varieties of the dialectic have a more agonistic structure that attempt to maintain both the stability of the opposed identities and their contradictory nature (ID, 9). Hegel’s totality in absolute spirit has both an encompassing and dissolving effect upon the constituent identities and contradictions that make up the whole, but Adorno’s dialectic does not see a version of itself, present or future, in which contradiction is solved, resolved, or dissolved. Just as he expressed in an aphorism in his *Minima Moralia*, in *An Introduction to Dialectics* Adorno repeatedly contests Hegel’s statement that “the whole is the true” (ID, 7, 17, 20).²⁸ Although he will later argue more definitively that “the whole is the false,” here, Adorno more subtly distinguishes between the prejudiced resistance to the dialectic that accuses it of arbitrariness, and the resistance found within the dialectic that prevents clean and stable definitions (ID, 7).

Without trying to possess or exchange concepts like neutral counters, Adorno contends that “dialectical thought refuses to provide a definition,” precisely because of the non-equivalence of concept and thing (ID, 8). Again, it is not difficult to see strong parallels between the refusal of stable identities and definitions in Adorno and similar refusals in Plato’s dialogues. Further explicating and revising Hegel’s dialectic, Adorno affirms the presence of non-identity within identity – anticipating his later emphasis on the non-identity of the object with itself, and the non-identity of the object with the subject²⁹ – while rejecting the idea that the dialectic can proceed from or result in a *prima philosophia* (ID, 16).

Further resonant with the Socratic critique of the eristic, misologist, and sophistic instrumentalizations of argument, Adorno, in *An Introduction to Dialectics*, teaches his students that the dialectic “cannot be a way of securing one’s own position in a discussion with others, although of course this is just what it is suspected of being” (ID, 12). For Adorno, the dialectic is a method that aims to resist method, attempting to further dialogue simultaneously with self-critique, exploring contradictions without allowing the historical determination of those contradictions to determine future inquiry (ID, 12).

²⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*. Trans. E.F.N Jephcott (London & New York: Verso, 1974), 50.

²⁹ See: Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146/149-150.

Just as Plato's dialectic rejects the desire for stable definitions and seeks to "go to that which is in itself and accompanies truth" (537d), in Adorno's dialectic truth is not static, stable, or discoverable in origins. In the lectures, he challenges "the desire to trace things back historically as far as we can possibly go" (ID, 15) – something doubtless connected to his earlier critique of fascism in the introduction to the 1956 *Zur Metacritik der Erkenntnistheorie* on the grounds that it "sought to actualize a philosophy of origins."³⁰ Against the idea that the Absolute is self-identical – i.e. "the whole is the true" – Adorno argues that the qualification of the term "Absolute" constitutes a determination that cannot be external to the concept itself (ID, 17). The change that occurs in the concept when it is determined is a kind of mediation of the becoming of identities rather than their singular being (ID, 18). For Adorno, in his account of Hegel, it is always the case that "we fail to uphold our concepts unchanged," and in fact, "we must change them in order to grasp them" (ID, 18). At its best, what sets the dialectic apart from ordinary conceptual thinking about identities is that it does not seek to impose an order that tries to govern from without, but instead it is something immanently inner to concepts themselves, and therefore uniquely suited to both critique and appropriate its object. Where the sophist attempts to overdetermine the "inner life of concepts," for Adorno, the dialectician acknowledges that "it is not we who bring concepts into movement," for that movement is already underway (ID, 19).

Befitting a conversation that is always underway – a dialogue that is *in medias res* and not founded on an *arche* – in his lectures Adorno will occasionally break from his exposition on the topic at hand and make a case for the importance of the educational endeavor itself, both encouraging and challenging his students in such a way that blurs the distinction between the concept of the dialectic and the kind of education that Adorno seeks to provide.³¹ In his second lecture he advises his listeners that

if you really try and make the dialectic your own, as I strongly encourage you to do – that is, if you try to reproduce, and

³⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*. Trans. Willis Domingo (Boston: MIT Press, 1983), 20.

³¹ For Adorno's reflections on pedagogy and critiques of the teaching profession see his 1965 essay "Tabus über dem Lehrberuf" in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II*. Hsg. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003).

produce afresh, out of your own experience the motivations which ultimately give rise to dialectical thought – then it is precisely here, I believe, that you will discover what the law, what the objectivity we have been talking about, actually means, and how what actually determines our acting and thinking over and beyond our mere individuality, how what is historical is far more than what we merely are, more than what we conceive ourselves once and for all to be. (ID, 10)

The seriousness with which Adorno conducts himself is something he attributes to the pedagogical task of dialectic. In the third lecture he specifically argues that "the task of philosophical education today, it seems to me, is to serve those who seriously desire such an education specifically by immunizing them against the countless philosophical slogans and ready-made concepts which swirl around us everywhere" (ID, 20). The education of the soul in *The Republic* also combines *paideia* and *politeia* in ways that fundamentally challenge the ossification of thinking into abstract systems.³²

Adorno opposes the "closed dialectic" of German Idealism, with a more "open dialectic" that rejects the discontents of the systematic impulse (ID, 21, 26-27), whether mechanistic or organicist (ID, 21-22). The open and unfinished character of the dialectic – an interpretation defended by Fredric Jameson, among others³³ – is important to Adorno, not only for philosophical and interpretive reasons, but also for specific political and social reasons such as the plight of mine workers and the oppressive structures of industrial production (ID, 22-23). The alienation of the factory worker points back, for Adorno, to the context of the totality in which it is situated (ID, 126).³⁴

How one thinks about that totality and the contradictions that work within and against it matters deeply for any emancipatory project, as has been pointed out in recent work on the decolonizing potential that remains in dialectics.³⁵ Although Plato and Adorno remain vulnerable to political critiques, their representations of dialectical

³² Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. Vol. II. Trans. Gilbert Highet (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), Chapter 9, esp. 198-200.

³³ See Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations* (London: Verso, 2010), 18.

³⁴ Compare Adorno's comments on workers (ID, 23) with those of Simone Weil, "Factory Work," in *The Simone Weil Reader*. Ed. George A. Panichas (London: Moyer Bell, 1977), 53-72.

³⁵ George Cicciariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 3-5, 114-116.

thinking nonetheless have high political stakes. Much hinges on whether the dialectical relationship between identity and totality is grounded on force and coercion. Whether or not identities are subsumed into a totality by means of conceptual force, and whether or not dialogue is founded on a coercive pedagogy that leads to pre-determined ends, will depend on how one conceives of the relationship between identity and mediation. Whether identities are held in stasis, eternally opposed, dissolved by synthesis, or mediated by an open-ended dialogue, will determine how those identities conceive of their own freedom in relation to forces of power and coercion.

Dialectic

Considering the place of identity and mediation in Plato's *Republic* and Adorno's *Introduction to Dialectics*, we can observe that in each case the dialectic refuses to offer conclusions that cannot be revised by self-critique and the challenges posed by interlocutors. At each turn, dialectic disappoints the desire for dogmatic certainty and exhausts the patience of those who await a conclusion. However, this is not to say that dialectical thinking in either Plato or Adorno refuses to make clear and direct assertions, or disjunctive arguments that contradict others. Rather, it is to say, that dialectical thinking attempts to continually judge itself and the world from within the movements of its processes and not from an unquestionable measure that abstracts and transcends either the exchange of questions and answers in Plato (348a), or the immanent sphere of critique in Adorno (ID, 31). In both Socrates' conversations and Adorno's lectures it is evident that dialectic is found within (not founded upon) the mutual exchanges of discussion and talk, but also that dialectic exceeds casual talk and instead demands more, whether in Plato's taxing of the attention and endurance of his interlocutors, or in Adorno's encouragement to his students to take up dialectical inquiry as their own in a serious way.

Dialectic demands more than the desire for fixed and stable identities. Instead, in both Plato and Adorno, dialectic represents a movement from identity to mediation. Socrates contrasts his dialectic with the works of the philodoxers (480a), misologists (411d), sophists (413a), eristics (454a), and geometers (511d) – each of whom are undialectical in their desires to fix the *logos* in place or

use it as a means to an end. So too with Adorno, whose *Negative Dialectics* is premised upon the idea that fixing too determinately on the concept at the expense of the object is counter to the negative core of identities. Proceeding through moments of agreement and disagreement, confusion and understanding, patience and rushing, dialectics is an *eros* characterized by abrasive relations between its conversation partners and between subject and object, rather than conciliatory mediations that simply follow the flow of the conversation or attempt to force the object to conform to a pre-decided concept.

Reading the conversations in *The Republic* in light of their literary form (rather than in spite of it), we can identify that there is something inherently dramatic about dialectic in Plato (although not in the same sense in which the poets are dramatic). The drama of dialectic in these texts takes the form of a conversation that ebbs and flows, one that both continues and is interrupted, rather than a technique or dogma that can be taught or learned by the simple repetition of exercises. There is also a minimal drama in Adorno's lectures, noticeable in his candid engagements with major continental philosophers in *An Introduction to Dialectics*, and the brief commemoration of his friend Paul Tillich in the later *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*.³⁶ Even in the economy of a lecture course, small hints of his personal life and the periodization of the school term appear; one of his notes reads, "More on this after Easter" (ID, 312). Although it is not comparable to the sustained dialogue of Plato's *Republic*, even amidst Adorno's steady presentation of dialectical thinking, small moments break through the veneer of dissociation between ideas and life.

Furthermore, as we know from both Plato and Adorno, dialectic cannot be decontextualized or dissociated without defeating its immanent and contextual purpose, for in both *The Republic*, and Adorno's lectures, there is no systematic theory of dialectic (no static concept of "the dialectic" that would be safe from transformation), and certainly no attempted summary like the present study. This lack of a codified synthesis in both Plato and Adorno is significant, for surely both figures knew how to write a manual of dialectical strategies and doctrines, but they did not, presumably for the reasons

³⁶ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2-4.

described above. Instead, in *The Republic*, we find the narration of dialectic as a virtuous striving for the good beyond being (509b) – a striving that ascends from hypotheses that are always questionable and flexible, upward in the mode of conversation until it adequately clarifies these hypotheses (511b), and then descends back down to conclusions that are left open to future revision. Unlike geometry, which fixes its hypotheses as unquestionable axioms at the highest point and descends down while deriving conclusions from them, Socrates' dialectic ascends from the ever-changing bases of flexible hypotheses up toward a perfection that is never attained, in a conversation that does not fall silent in conclusion or closure.

Later, in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, Adorno lauds the “tentative, experimental, and inconclusive” quality of philosophy, against the rigidity of the sciences, and the distortion of the dialectic in the simplistic tripartite schema: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.³⁷ According to Adorno, positivity in dialectical thinking is too easy and must be disturbed by the labor of the negative in which the interior of identities reveals itself to be more than an essence, being instead something that contains the seeds of its own generative and creative undoing.³⁸ For Adorno, dialectics defeats its own purposes if it becomes a kind of first philosophy.³⁹ Similarly, in Plato, dialogue is defined by its open ended and intentional speech, and dialectic falls under the category of dialogue as a virtuous pursuit and not something that can be taught as a technical skill or explained as an abstract doctrine. Instead, dialectic is taught by doing, and it is cultivated against the sophistic tendency to assert dogmatically, and with final certainty, and thereby use knowledge as power. The modern sense of dialectic, on the other hand, often appears as the opposite of this movement, seeking self-consistent and self-confident conclusions that close down further dialogue by means of synthesis or a culmination in a final totality – a kind of thinking that harmonizes, neutralizes, and naturalizes the existing social order, as Adorno himself points out (ID, 181).

Both Plato's dialectic and Adorno's dialectic are movements without final resolution or conclusion. Although these movements reca-

pitulate at important moments, they do not gather all things into a completed object or dissolve all potential exceptions into a rule. Socrates engages in dialogue and pursues dialectic in a way that entertains his interlocutors, taxes both their attention thresholds and their patience with each other and exposes the ironies and contradictions of their expectations. In this unfolding of dialectic that both rhetorically divides and erotically merges things, Socrates is instructing his interlocutors not only by *what* he says, but *how* he says it, as well as the timing of his questioning. Adorno, too, refuses the temptation to present the dialectic in a succession of easy steps, instead insisting that “we do not simply have the whole at our disposal” (ID, 33).

Always starting over and returning, Socrates employs dialectic in the pursuit of education (*paideia*) and its “tuning” of “dissonance” within the human being.⁴⁰ Adorno, too, understands dialectical thinking to be a key component in his educative task (ID, 20), elsewhere considering philosophy to be an education in resistance.⁴¹ In Socrates' questions we can observe that dialectic involves the unceasing inquiry into whether the opposite of each statement might also be true, a working and unworking of terms, and the exposure of the limitations and aporias of his interlocutors' positions and uses of language. When the categories that Socrates encounters are pushed to their limit through dialectic, they generate contradictions that then generate further questions, and contribute to the formation of discourses. Socrates does not employ dialectic in an abstract way that can be easily slotted into any context, but instead allows the topic of conversation or the object of concern to be the real test of the method being applied to it, allowing the *what* to be the measure of the adequacy of the *how*. Adorno too understands the dialectic to be a measure to itself in between concept and object, rather than an externally imposed or externally evaluated thing (ID, 32).

Socrates' explorations of philosophy, justice, and political rule are not separate from the practice of dialectic, but instead, dialectic is vital to justice and the state because it is an expression of the soul and its formation. Adorno, too, contends that the stakes are high

³⁷ Ibid, 5-6.

³⁸ See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 158-161/160-163.

³⁹ Ibid, 154/157.

⁴⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets” in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*. Trans. P. Christopher Smith (London: Yale University Press, 1980), 54, 57.

⁴¹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 101-103.

in discussions about totality, not only among students and teachers, but also among laborers and workers (ID, 120-124). In Plato's account, dialectic is part of the cultivation of the soul, meaning that the dialectic is always personal, inhering in the soul of the speaker as it points out contradictions and shows the limits of language and perspective. Unlike Thrasymachus, who uses ambiguities to force contradiction and insists on consistency in a way that may well destroy the city in speech, dialectic does not insist on consistency in a way that binds to a rule, but instead it sets one on an ascending path toward the good beyond being (509b). Dialectic is not merely a kind of practice of knowledge, but a virtuous way toward the good itself, pursued with the intent of cultivating the soul in the way of the virtues by making distinctions and joining terms toward a better understanding.

In Adorno, too, we find an ethics of sorts, albeit more implicitly presented in the rejection of domination and coercion. In these earlier lectures, as we have demonstrated above, Adorno seems to resist coercing his students down a preordained path. However, this is not to say that there are not markers on the path that Adorno has placed there in advance – for example, the notes and plans that accompany the transcribed lectures. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine in detail, I observe that the role of epistemic power in the practice of dialectic, although it is addressed in some ways by both Plato and Adorno (in the objections of Thrasymachus and Adeimantus in *The Republic*, and the rejection of transcendent critique in Adorno) is not yet clarified in either case, especially given that the dialectic tends to render both power and its measure immanent, and therefore risks obscuring or neutralizing the very real differences in power between teacher and student or speaker and listener.

In conclusion – lest this study appear to be the mere identification of a state of accord between Plato and Adorno on the question of the dialectic – it bears pointing out that by neither account of the dialectic outlined above would it be sufficient to simply point out continuities. Instead, both Plato and Adorno, despite the vast distance separating them in time and by translation, claim that even when things appear to be in agreement there is a kernel of agonism at the heart of identity that immanently gives rise to difference and

contradiction. So too with any comparison of their works that would show accord; discontinuity will always be present. But rather than turning toward the discontinuities between Adorno and Plato, below I conclude by pointing outside of their work to another figure for thinking that may exceed the dialectic in its ability to assist us in conceptualizing both continuity and discontinuity, and identity and mediation.

From Dialectics to Chiasmus

A long string of dualities, polarities, binaries, dichotomies, paradoxes, parallaxes, hybridities, and antinomies define the history of metaphysics. Dialectical thinking from Plato to Adorno and everywhere in between has attempted to work with, and against, distinctions and oppositions between at least two identities, and often more than two at once. However much the dialectic may remain an open-ended figure for thinking – as I have argued is the case for Plato and Adorno – it is nonetheless only one figure of many for thinking about how relations between identities are mediated. If it is to have a future, the future of metaphysics will require other figures to configure the relationship between-two that structures the concept of identity. In conclusion, I want to suggest a movement beyond mediating the relationship between two at the heart of identity by using figures like “binary” (disjunctive either/or arrangements), “dichotomy” (the splitting of a previous whole), “duality” (the possession of two separate parts), “polarity” (stark opposition), “paradox” (the joining of two things that appear to be contradictory but are really reconcilable), “parallax” (a spatial shift in the location of an object when observed from two different points), “hybridity” (mixing and intermingling), and “antinomy” (irreconcilable opposition between-two, under certain nomic standards of measure).

Dialectical thinking, as described above, will take us well beyond these much more limited thought-figures. But dialectical thinking itself anticipates the intrusion of other different, opposing, and contradictory identities upon its own process. To be truly dialectical requires a movement outside of the self, as Walter Kaufmann points out.⁴² While dialectical thinking in Adorno challenges any notion of

⁴² He writes that it was the Neo-platonism of Proclus (among others) that portrayed the dialectic as a movement from the unity of self (*moné*), to leaving oneself (*próhodos*), and then returning to oneself (*epistrophé*). Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Doubleday,

a forced closure in the domain of identities, it does not necessarily lend itself to nonlinear or non-teleological thinking about the movements of mediation. In conclusion, I want to suggest a dialectical movement outside of dialectical thinking and toward *chiasmus*: the figure that appears poetically in the form *xyyx*. Consider the words of John Keats in his Ode on a Grecian Urn, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”⁴³ Both poetic and metaphysical, and defined by mirroring, reversal, intertwining, and inter-contamination, *chiasmus* promises to take thinking further into the agonistic becoming of identities by representing their interiorly double or triple character.

Whereas dialectics tends to begin with a couplet within which the two parts have a linear relationship of negation, opposition, or contradiction, *chiasmus* begins by already doubling back on itself. The figural mediation between two in *chiasmus* is not a superseding or subsuming *Aufhebung* into a third thing that is both between and beyond the parts of the couplet, but instead it challenges movements of cancellation, overcoming, surpassing, and encompassing. Rather than suspension, tension, or synthesis, *chiasmus* is a mirror image turned towards itself and reflected back onto itself, a reversal that inverts hierarchies, an intertwining that mixes conjugated elements while both refusing and erasing distinctions, and an inter-contamination in which the discernible becomes indiscernible and identities are both maintained and compromised.

Indeed, both poets and metaphysicians have already begun to develop this notion of *chiastic* thinking. John Keats’ “negative capability” and Don Paterson’s “two-in-one” (or *twa-in-yin*) both come to mind.⁴⁴ Philosophers have also, albeit rarely, written of the metaphysical potential of the figure of *chiasmus*, two such examples include Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in his later work), and Patrick Lee Miller (in his interpretation of Heraclitus).⁴⁵ For Merleau-Ponty, in

particular, “we situate ourselves in ourselves *and* in the things, in ourselves *and* in the other, at the point where, by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others’ and we become world.”⁴⁶ Although Merleau-Ponty does not exhaustively develop the concept, there are scattered references to *chiasmus* as a metaphysical and phenomenological concept throughout the manuscript and notes for his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. For Merleau-Ponty, the *chiasm* is defined by reversibility (particularly between body and mind), by leaving oneself, by the projections of vision, by being without restriction, and by the co-functioning of a pair at the “advent of difference.”⁴⁷

Entwined with dialectics of the sort that we see in Plato and Adorno, perhaps the figure of *chiasmus* can push thinking further still into the ontological problems of identity, weaving and meshing its constituent reversibility without mystifying the matter of identity completely in an erasure of the boundary between distinction and indistinction. Beyond the dialectic – if such a thing is possible – *chiasmus* has the potential to free identity from the need for spatial fundamentals and temporal linearity without abolishing or fragmenting the real connections between origins and ends that do not endure. *Chiasmus* is not the one dividing into two, nor the two becoming one, but both at the same time. Beyond dialectics, this is the core of ontological identity, an intertwining and a contradiction, fixed upon and becoming as-one without the violence of being completely at-one.⁴⁸

1966), 153.

⁴³ John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton and Mifflin, 1899), 135.

⁴⁴ See Keats, *Complete Poetical Works and Letters*, 277–278, and Don Paterson, “The Dark Art of Poetry,” T.S. Eliot Lecture. October 30, 2004.

⁴⁵ Patrick Lee Miller, *Becoming God: Pure Reason in Early Greek Philosophy* (London & New York: Continuum, 2011). Miller suggests that “Chiasmus threatens to violate the principle of non-contradiction whenever its components are conjoined and opposed, whether as contraries or contradictories.” (8).

⁴⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. Claude Lefort. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 160.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 263, 199, 259, 263, 266, 270, 214–215, 217.

⁴⁸ This study, especially the conclusion, both extends and implicitly critiques some of my earlier work in the following three essays: *Dialectics Unbound* (Brooklyn: Punctum, 2013), “What is a Compendium?” *Continent* 3:1 (Spring 2013), 44–49., and “Identity, Ontology, and the Two / Идентитет, онтологија, и две,” *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender, and Culture* 13 (2016–2017), 101–136. Trans. Jordan Šišovski.