What is the Process of Division for?

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This paper examines the introductory section of the dialogue (216a–219a) to consider the purpose of the method of division. Most scholars have assumed that division plays a substantial role in discovering the essential properties of a target object. Against this, the paper argues that at least in the *Sophist*, it *is not* introduced for discovering the definition of a target object, but rather for demonstrating the pre-determined definition to those interlocutors who do not grasp or believe it yet.
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1. Introduction

Collection and division appear as a principal dialectical method in Plato's later dialogues, but it is not easy to understand exactly how the method is supposed to work. Traditionally, scholars have taken it to be a series of processes for discovering definitions: collection is for identifying the genus of a target object, and division is then for discovering its definition by dividing that genus into species, those species into sub-species, and so on. According to this traditional interpretation, therefore, the process of collection is the first step towards discovering a definition, and subsequent division produces the definition.

Some scholars have recently argued against the traditional interpretation, suggesting that collection does not necessarily precede division, and that the two processes operate in conjunction with one another at every point along the way.[1] Their point is that, when one divides a genus into species, one needs to define each of those species by collecting its various instances into one form. It is true that collection can be used to define other species and sub-species. Still, they seem to agree with the traditional interpretation that the definition of a target object is discovered as a result of the process of division.

This paper argues that the method of division, at least in the *Sophist*, *is not* introduced for discovering the definition of a target object, but rather

1 Hackforth 1945, 142–3; Henry 2012, 229–55.

for demonstrating the pre-determined definition to those interlocutors who do not grasp or believe it yet. To defend this view, I shall focus on the introductory section of the dialogue (216a–219a), which is important for understanding for what purpose the Visitor employs the method. Although I do not have enough space to discuss the subsequent passages in which division is actually employed, the analysis here will give us good reason for reconsidering the objective of division not only in the *Sophist* but also in its successor, the *Statesman*.

2. The Visitor's Task

The *Sophist* starts with the scene in which, on the day after the discussion in the *Theaetetus*, Theodorus introduces to Socrates a visitor from Elea who is a friend of the followers of Parmenides and Zeno. Wondering about the fact that different people have different views of philosophers—some treat them as statesmen, and others as sophists—Socrates asks the Visitor whether people in Elea think of sophists, statesmen, and philosophers as different kinds. The Visitor answers that they think of them as different, but that it is difficult to distinguish clearly what each of them is. Then, Theodorus reports that the Visitor himself says he has heard the issues discussed well enough and still remembers the discussion, which leads to the following exchange:

> Socrates: Well, stranger, this is the first request we've made of you, so please don't turn us down. Just tell us this: when you want to demonstrate (ἐνδείξασθαι) something to someone, are you usually happier going through it just by yourself, with a long speech, or by means of questions? I was there once, in my youth, when Parmenides himself used the latter method, and to quite splendid effect; he was by then very old indeed.
> Visitor: Doing it through conversation with someone else is the easier, Socrates, provided the person one's talking to causes no trouble and is easily led; if not, it's easier the other way.
> Socrates: Well, you may choose whichever of those here you want, because they will all go along with you quietly; but if you take my advice, you'll choose one of the younger ones: Theaetetus here, or one of the others if you prefer. (217c1–d7, trans. Rowe[2])

2 All translations of this paper are from Rowe 2015, but are modified when necessary for clarification of my argument.

Having thus selected Theaetetus, the Visitor tells him to begin by discussing the sophist. But they have only the name in common and, so, need to agree on the definition of what the sophist is as well. However, since this is a very difficult task, they should practice the method necessary for it, namely, the method of division, with a less important and more familiar object. They choose to discuss the activity of angling first, and it serves as a model for discussing the sophist by means of division.

This opening scene (216a1–219a3) provides important information about what task the Visitor is expected to undertake. Let us begin with the exchange at 216d3–217a9, where Socrates expresses his wishes to learn from the Visitor about the sophist as well as the statesman and the philosopher. It is clear that his request is not for the Visitor to search for what each of the objects is, but to explain what his countrymen think about that question. So Theodoros reports to Socrates at 217b5–9 the Visitor's admission that he has heard about it well enough and still remembers. This is why in the following exchange, cited above, Socrates asks the Visitor which way he generally prefers when "demonstrating" (ἐνδείξασθαι) something, by means of a long speech just by himself or of questions and answers with someone else. This makes it clear, although the precise meaning of ἐνδείξασθαι is not definite, that Socrates does *not* expect the Visitor to search for and discover the answer to the question, but rather to show either way what he has already in mind.

However, some scholars have suggested that the task the Visitor is about to undertake is basically such a co-operative search for truth as Plato's Socrates professes to conduct.[3] It is true that at 218b7–c1 the Visitor tells Theaetetus "to investigate the sophist together with him" (κοινῇ ... μετ' ἐμοῦ σοι συσκεπτέον), "searching for and revealing what he is" (ζητοῦντι καὶ ἐμφανίζοντι λόγῳ τί ποτ' ἔστι). But, strictly speaking, the subject of this investigation is grammatically Theaetetus alone, which may well imply that the Visitor himself does not search but intends only to guide him to search for the definition of the sophist. We need to notice the Visitor's suggestion made in the passage cited above, that, although he eventually chooses to discuss the matter with Theaetetus, he *could* also demonstrate it with a long speech by himself. His choice is based upon "a kind of shame" (αἰδώς τις, 217d8) at "giving a display speech" (ἐπίδειξιν ποιούμενον, 217e2–3) by prolonging his speech excessively and leaving behind the listeners. This does not mean, however, that he is unable to do so. It is therefore more natural to suppose that the Visitor possesses such a sufficient grasp of the nature of

3 Cornford 1957, 170; Bluck 1975, 33.

the sophist at this initial stage as to be able to deliver a demonstrative speech about it.

There is another element in the above passage that strongly indicates that we should not read into the dialogue a Socratic joint search for the definition of the sophist. For the Visitor comments there that he can accomplish his task more easily if his interlocutor "causes no trouble" (ἀλύπως) and "is easily led" (εὐηνίως). To him, then, Socrates responds that all those who are present will go along with him "quietly" (πράως) in discussion. We can thus see that the Visitor's attitude towards his interlocutor is rather different from Socrates', because Socrates typically welcomes the difficulties his interlocutors pose, to examine whether his opinion is correct (cf. *Grg.* 486d–488b).[4] In the middle dialogues, such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Socrates' main interlocutors—Simmias and Cebes and Glaucon and Adeimantus—are all those who challenge Socrates' positions with substantial counter arguments and ask him for thorough proofs of his views. In the *Sophist*, in contrast, Theaetetus simply follows the Visitor's lead in the whole process of division without raising serious objections.[5]

It is clear that the notion that the Visitor is seeking a definition of the sophist assumes that he resembles Socrates in engaging in dialectical inquiry. But we can account for Plato's changing the main speaker from Socrates in the *Theaetetus* to the Visitor in the *Sophist* by supposing that he is depicting the Visitor as possessing knowledge of the matter and explaining it to Theaetetus and the others.

3. The Role of Division

If, though, the Visitor already knows what the sophist, the statesman, and the philosopher are before starting the discussion, why does he not give their definitions to Theaetetus straightaway rather than undertaking to conduct a long discussion with him? The Visitor repeatedly notices at the beginning

4 Cornford 1957, 167, suggests that the Visitor chooses to have "a genuine conversation, to which the respondent makes a real contribution." But it seems clear that he does not expect such a contribution from Theaetetus.

5 There is one occasion (222b2–c2) on which the Visitor seems to entrust Theaetetus with the task of deciding how to divide a generic kind (hunting footed animals) into its species (hunting tame animals and wild animals). But this at most suggests that the Visitor has some flexibility about how to advance the process of division. In any case, Theaetetus ends up agreeing with the way in which the Visitor intends to divide that generic kind.

that clarifying the nature of those three objects is not a small task and requires a very long discussion (217b2–4, e3–5, 218a8–9, c5–7, d3–4). This claim, as we have seen above, does not mean that he has not yet grasped their essences and is therefore commencing a joint search for them. There must be some other reason why the ensuing discussion demands much more than simply offering the definitions in question.

The most probable explanation, I suggest, is that explaining what each object is involves not only giving its definition but also showing why or how that definition is satisfactory. Let us see here what the Visitor says when starting the discussion with the question what the sophist is:

> As things stand at present, the only thing you and I have in common between us on the subject is the name, and we may well each have our own private view of the thing (τὸ ἔργον) we call by that name. But the rule ought always to be, in relation to anything, to agree together (συνωμολογῆσθαι) about the thing itself (τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτό) through talking about it, rather than agreeing just about its name without any account to go with the name. (218c1–5)

What the Visitor is prepared to do is not merely to inform Theaetetus what he knows about the sophist but to reach an agreement about its essential nature. (Notice that τὸ ἔργον and τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτό are used here without distinction to mean the essence of the object.) Theaetetus already has some ideas about the sophist, which the Visitor assumes to be different from his own. Given the role he plays in leading the ensuing discussion, it is highly unlikely that the Visitor expects to change his mind as a result of it. It is more faithful to the text to suppose that, since the Visitor possesses knowledge of what the sophist is, he is attempting to persuade Theaetetus that his view is correct. This persuasion is evidently a more difficult task than merely giving the definition as information, which itself does not give any reason why Theaetetus needs to approve of it.

What, then, does the persuasion in question consist in? We should remember here the ultimate objective of the whole discussion, which is said to "distinguish" (διορίσασθαι, 217b2–3) clearly the philosopher, the sophist, and the statesman by showing what each of them is. For Socrates says that the philosopher takes on "all sorts of shapes" (παντοῖοι, 216c4), appearing sometimes as sophist and sometimes as statesman. The point is that the three professions in question are similar to each other and also to many others (223c2, 226a6–8, 231b9–c2). Sophistry itself is also said in the subsequent discussion to be quite complex expertise, resembling many sorts of expertise. This points to the idea that demonstrating a definition of sophistry

requires showing what kinds of expertise sophistry resembles but differs from, and in what respects it resembles and differs from them. This endeavour is substantially more involved than merely providing the definition. It is true that a proper definition should include all the necessary differentiae that distinguish the target object from all the rest. But each differentia by itself does not necessarily make clear what other objects it is intended to distinguish the target object from, and how it does so. For example, even if we are given the definition of the man as 'biped animal', we do not thereby know what feature the differentia 'biped' is contrasted with (having no legs, four legs, or more than two legs?) and what animals it distinguishes the man from (insects, reptiles, or other mammals?). But it is necessary to know these elements to understand that the given definition suffices to distinguish the target object from all the other similar objects properly.

My suggestion is thus that the process of division is introduced exactly for this instructive purpose, namely making the interlocutor(s) systematically understand that a given definition can certainly distinguish the target object from all the similar objects. This is corroborated by the following passage, where the Visitor is distinguishing the sorts of expertise in cleansing the soul from those in cleansing the body, the latter of which he is saying consist of both important and unimportant sorts of expertise.

> Visitor: Yes indeed, Theaetetus. And yet in our method of argument (τῇ τῶν λόγων μεθόδῳ), it matters not a bit less, or indeed any more, whether we're dealing with sponging people down or administering medicines, or whether the cleansing in question does us a little good or a lot. Our method aims at acquiring understanding, by attempting to grasp what is akin and what is not akin among all the various expertises (πασῶν τεχνῶν), and for this purpose it values all of them equally. (227a7–b2)

The "method" (μέθοδος) referred to here is no doubt the method of division. The passage indicates that its objective is for Theaetetus to have a better understanding of the similarities and dissimilarities in all sorts of expertise. This does not mean, however, that he is expected to learn all the essences so as to complete the classification of all sorts of expertise. Although the method could well be used for that purpose, the visitor's suggestion is rather that Theaetetus should understand in what respects a target object resembles, but is distinguished from, all the other objects. At the stage of division the above passage marks, he is shown that the sophist resembles, in the respect of cleansing something, the various sorts of experts in bodily cleansing, whatever that group may be called, but is distinguished from them because all of them are concerned with cleansing the body. This level

of understanding cannot be achieved merely by specifying the sophist as expert in psychic cleansing even though that differentia is appropriate. The process of division is thus also the instructive process of gradually revealing what the target object is *not* by confirming which features its differentiae are contrasted with. This exclusion is important for understanding that its completed definition certainly excludes all the similar objects one might mistake it for.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that the process of division in the *Sophist* is not introduced for discovering the definition of the sophist but for demonstrating it to the interlocutor(s). Still, one might wonder what kind of instructive process this demonstration by division is more precisely.[6] The process of division is clearly not concerned with such a deductive demonstration that yields scientific knowledge, as Aristotle supposes. He criticizes the method of division for being unable to deduce that a target object has an essential property and for begging such a conclusion. (*APr* I.31, *APo* II.5). According to Aristotle, for example, when a divider wants to establish that the man is mortal rather than immortal, he does not prove that the man is mortal, but merely asks and obtains his interlocutor's assent to that proposition. The fact that Aristotle assumes division to be a method of proof supports my view that Plato basically intended division to be a pedagogical method rather than a heuristic one. But I agree that division cannot prove any logical necessity for the target object to have a certain property. That is not its purpose.

However, this does not mean that the method of division is purely pedagogical, namely intended only to persuade the interlocutor(s) of whatever a divider might think about a target object, without any contribution to establishing what it really is. In this paper I argued that persuasion by means of division involves gradually revealing the essence of the target object by showing what objects differ from it and how they differ. The process starts by distinguishing a target object (e.g. the man) from the least similar group of objects (e.g. plants) by specifying its most generic essential property (e.g. 'animal') and continues until one completely distinguishes it from all similar objects by specifying all its differentiae. This gradual process, I suggest, helps one to examine rationally whether a given definition is satisfactory, as

6 I thank Pauline Sabrier and Verity Harte for putting to me this question in the Symposium.

Aristotle similarly points out (cf. *APo* II.13, 96b25–97a6). For example, if a divider proceeds from 'animal' to 'biped' to distinguish the man from all the other animals, one will find that this definition is not yet adequate because it does not distinguish the man from birds. But if he then moves from 'biped animal' to 'land' to distinguish it from birds, one will find that this is not adequate either because it will make the man closer or more similar to birds than to non-biped land animals such as chimpanzees. As a result, one can thereby understand that we have first to proceed from 'animal' to 'land' to distinguish the man from birds, fish and so on, and then to specify some differentia(e) of 'land animal' to reach a better definition. This should be one of the possible ways in which the method of division can demonstrate definitions without appealing to deductive inferences. Although Aristotle is largely critical of the method, he sees such a verifying process as useful for establishing definitions. Here I would like to add that the process will also help the divider himself in the sense that he can thereby confirm whether his pre-determined definition is adequate. But taking the role of division as consisting in verification and confirmation is different from the view I rejected in this paper, that it lies in discovering the definition of a target object by dividing its genus into species and identifying its differentiae.

However, making a fuller answer to this question requires discussing more instances of division in the subsequent passages of *Sophist* and clarifying its difference from the role of 'collection'. I need to keep this task for another occasion.[7]

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