Dialectical Know-How: A Deflationary Approach to *Sophist* 253b-254a

Verity Harte,
Yale University

The paper offers a deflationary approach to the description of dialectical knowledge at *Sophist* 253b-254a, arguing that its focus is dialectical knowing, the condition of a dialectical knower, and that this condition is best understood as a form of know-how, constituted by the ability to individuate kinds and a grasp of the permissible ways kinds combine, the permissible relations between them. It is a mistake to expect to be able to identify specific kinds as referents for designations such as "a single character". Instead, what we find here are placeholders for any kind standing in the relevant relation. The paper concludes with a speculative suggestion that in two of the four distinguished relations we find two different part-whole relations.
Plato, *Sophist*, dialectic, know-how, part-whole

1.

Plato has a habit of lauding dialectic with vague praise. "Descriptions" of dialectic show it to be important and valuable but are notably vague as to what dialectic is.[1] This is certainly true of *Sophist* 253b-254a, where ES and Theaetetus stumble upon the philosopher while looking for the sophist. It is not only true there, but a pattern.

The pattern is seen outside of dialogues with developed interest in either collection and division or the communion of kinds. Consider Socrates' cryptic account of "the power of dialectic" in the line analogy (*R*6, 511b2-c2). While Socrates returns to dialectic in discussing the guardians' higher education, one can only sympathize with Glaucon's questions (*R*7, 532d8-e1) as to the "manner" (*tropos*) of this power, the "forms" (*eidē*) into which it may be distinguished, and the "paths" (*hodoi*) it involves. Socrates says more about what he calls "the dialectical pursuit (*methodos*)" (*R*7, 533c8), but explicitly denies answering Glaucon's questions.

Among dialogues with developed interest in collection and division or communion of kinds, the pattern continues. The *Phaedrus* singles out and

1 On dialectic in the corpus, see Larsen, Haraldsen and Vlasits edd. 2022.

opaquely "describes" two activities whose one-sentence "descriptions" are usually taken to characterize "collecting" (*Phdr.* 265d3-5) and "dividing" (*Phdr.* 265e1-3), using Socrates' own shorthand (*Phdr.* 266b3-5). Those with the relevant insight he calls "dialecticians" (*Phdr.* 266b5-c1).[2]

The *Philebus* describes and illustrates the "Promethean Method" at elaborate length (16c-18d). Notably, this passage is said only to portray a "dialectical" as opposed to "eristical" way of proceeding in the give and take of discussion (*Phlb.* 17a3-5). Context suggests this could encompass discussion about the subject matter of many *technai*, including those used to illustrate the method: *grammatikē* and *mousikē*. Here, "dialectical" denotes an adverbial manner that can attach itself to other branches of knowledge. In this adverbial mode, dialectic compares to mathematics, an independent discipline whose manner can inform other disciplines.

Later in the *Philebus*, Socrates mentions "the power of dialectic" (*Phlb.* 57e6-7) defending its claim to maximal purity in its orientation towards truth. Here, dialectic seems a discrete form of knowledge, not an adverbial manner.[3] But Socrates says little about what it involves beyond a familiar, but unelaborated focus on permanent, stable beings (*Phlb.* 58a1-5 and 59a7-c7).

That such studied vagueness is true of the *Sophist* passage, especially the cryptic portion most explicit in offering a "description" of dialectical knowledge (253d1-e2), scarcely needs argument.[4] The sheer volume of creative and ingenious commentary testifies to its opacity.

Why so coy, Plato?[5] Plato seems likely to think dialectic more a matter of showing than telling. This is not a novel point. It is a *general* point, without commitment as to what we are shown, or how and where we are shown it. At the same time, the opacity of any given passage is a function of what we expect of it. This is the angle I explore regarding *Sophist* 253b-254a. Far from

2 "Insight": "*horan*" at 266b6. This need not be inarticulate.

3 It is unclear in context whether dialectic is a *technē*, an *epistēmē*, or both.

4 "Most explicit" in view of "dialectical *epistēmē*" at 253d2-3 and "the dialectical element" at 253e4. The demonstrative tasks outlined at 253b10-c3 *may* be components of dialectical knowledge, but they may equally be things a dialectical knower can correctly demonstrate "as they journey through the arguments" (253b11) without being part of their dialectical knowledge.

5 Some (e.g., Szlezák 2004) think Plato generally coy, drawing on the *Phaedrus* and the (dubiously Platonic) *Seventh Letter*. Even if Plato deliberately withheld certain matters, one might wish to understand what he *does* say, on the evidence of the dialogues.

proposing some novel key to its meaning, I will explore the shape of the lock from some less well-trodden directions.

2.

A translation of my focal passage, divided into sections to aid discussion:

i. 253b9-c5: a knowledge requirement on demonstrating the answer to certain questions

> ES: What about this? Since we have agreed that the kinds too take part in mixing along such lines,[6] won't it be necessary for the one who is going to correctly display/demonstrate (δείξειν) which sort harmonize with which and which sort are not receptive to one another to proceed through the arguments with the aid of some sort of knowledge (μετ᾽ ἐπιστήμης τινὸς)? And, moreover, [who is going to make known] whether extending through them all (διὰ πάντων) there are certain ones holding them together so that they are able to intermingle, and in turn in cases of division/distinction (ἐν ταῖς διαιρέσεσιν) whether there are others extending through wholes (δι᾽ ὅλων) that are causes of division/distinction (τῆς διαιρέσεως αἴτια).
> T: Yes of course, it requires knowledge, and presumably the sort that is pretty much most important!

ii. 253c6-10: what to call the knowledge required

> ES: Then, in turn, what shall we now call this knowledge, Theaetetus? Or, by Zeus, did it escape our notice that we have stumbled upon the knowledge that is characteristic of free men and may we, perchance, while seeking the sophist, have first discovered the philosopher?
> T: What do you mean?

iii. 253d1-4: what is characteristic of dialectical knowledge

> ES: To divide/distinguish according to/into kinds (τὸ κατὰ γένη διαιρεῖσθαι) and/i.e. (καὶ) neither to think the same form (εἶδος) different nor one that is in fact different the same, surely we will say that this is characteristic of dialectical knowledge (τῆς διαλεκτικῆς … ἐπιστήμης)?
> T: Yes, we shall say so.

iv. 253d5-e3: what dialectical knowledge enables

> ES: Surely, then, the person capable of doing this (ὅ… τοῦτο δυνατὸς δρᾶν) adequately discerns (ἱκανῶς διαισθάνεται) a single character (μίαν

6 Reading κατὰ τὰ τοιαῦτα (βW) in place of κατὰ ταὐτὰ (T, followed by Duke et al.).

ἰδέαν) stretched out on every side throughout many (διὰ πολλῶν) each one lying apart (κειμένου χωρίς); and many (πολλὰς) [sc. characters] different from each other being encompassed from without (ἔξωθεν περιεχομένας) by one (ὑπὸ μιᾶς) [sc. character]; and, again (αὖ), a single (μίαν) [sc. character] having been joined together into one (ἐν ἑνὶ συνημμένην) through/by means of many wholes (δι᾽ ὅλων πολλῶν); and many (πολλὰς) [sc. characters] having been thoroughly marked off in every way as separate (χωρὶς πάντῃ διωρισμένας). But this is to know how to discriminate kind by kind (διακρίνειν κατὰ γένος ἐπίστασθαι) in what way (ᾗ) each of them is able to combine (κοινωνεῖν ἕκαστα δύναται) and in whatever way (ὅπῃ) not [capable].
T: Absolutely.

v. 253e4-6: assigning the "dialectical element"

ES: And yet, I suppose, you will not grant the dialectical element (τό διαλεκτικὸν) to anyone except the one who engages in philosophy (τῷ… φιλοσοφοῦντι) purely (καθαρῶς) and with rectitude (δικαίως)?
T: How could one give it to anyone else?

3.

A comment on my title "dialectical know-how".[7] I take dialectic, in the *Sophist* and possibly elsewhere, to be a "know-how". This is not a novel point.[8] I mean to be minimal in making it. I presuppose no specific theory of know-how, either as a philosophical matter of its relation to other types of knowledge or as an exegetical matter regarding the specific understanding one should have here. Instead, I use the term in what I trust is a familiar way. I use it broadly enough to encompass, for example, knowing-which.

A know-how is an expertise relating to some, potentially broad domain of objects and/or activities. It grounds capacities for practical engagement therein, where practical engagement is understood broadly enough to include acts of cognition, as in mathematical forms of know-how such as

7 For the general idea of dialectic as a know-how, I am indebted to conversation at NYCAP, especially with Mary Louise Gill and Tim Clarke. Gill 2012 defends a *Theaetetus*-based theory of dialectic as an expertise, but this is not what I have in mind.

8 At 253e1-2, Cornford translates "*diakrinein… epistasthai*" by "*knowing how* to distinguish" (my emphasis, Cornford 1935 *ad loc.*) He is followed in this by Gill 2012, 212, who writes of dialectic as both a "skill" and an "expertise".

calculus. In Platonic contexts and in view of the close association between know-how and the Greek term "*technē*", being in possession of a know-how implies a certain standing, both epistemically (being expert) and potentially socially (as a recognized teacher, for example).[9]

Here are some reasons to think that dialectical knowledge (*epistēmē*) as characterized at *Sophist* 253e-254a is a know-how.

Though the term "*technē*" is not used directly of dialectical knowledge in this passage, dialectical knowledge is compared to the *technai*, *grammatikē* and *mousikē*. These *technai* are evidently know-hows.

Like these *technai*, dialectical knowledge enables its possessor to do certain things, centrally including the cognitive act(s) described at 253d1-3 (§iii): "dividing/distinguishing (*diairein*) according to/into kinds (*kata genē*)",[10] "not thinking the same form different nor one that is in fact different the same".[11] These cognitive acts are deeds, as shown by the verb "*dran*" at 253d5 (§iv).

The person capable of these cognitive deeds "discerns *adequately*" (*hikanōs diaisthanetai*, 253d7, §iv, my emphasis). Dialectical knowledge is thus a threshold notion. A threshold notion seems appropriate for a know-how. Elsewhere, regarding the comparands, *grammatikē* and *mousikē*, it is explicitly allowed that someone might fall short of adequacy without lacking all knowledge in the relevant domain. At *Phlb*. 17c, for example, it is allowed that a person could *know* (*eidōs*) the basic threefold division of musical pitches without being *wise* in relation to *mousikē*, without having the know-how.

Finally, it is assumed that dialectical knowledge goes along not only with recognizing certain things for oneself, but with the ability to display or demonstrate them—to another, I assume. The use of "*deixein*" at 253b12 (§i)

9 I remain neutral on whether dialectical knowledge (*epistēmē*) is (also) a *technē*. That it *is* an *epistēmē* is explicit, though I do not here ask what makes it so. Though the term "*technē*" is used with broad scope in the *Sophist*, at 253b-254a Socrates could be read as reticent about *calling* dialect a *technē* as opposed to an *epistēmē*. On the relation between *epistēmē* and *technē* in Plato, see Parry 2021. My claims are limited to my focal passage.

10 I am not persuaded by Dixsaut 2001: 157 that "*kata genē*", at 253d1, should be rendered "kind-by-kind". However, "*kata genos*" (with singular noun) at 253e2 is plausibly read so. This encourages keeping the two points distinct (as Dixsaut herself urges regarding "*diaireisthai*" and "*diakrinein*"). For the option "*into* kinds", on which I remain neutral, see Brown 2010.

11 One act or two? The "*kai*" at d1 could be epexegetic. The singular "*touto*" at d5 does not require, but would support this.

suggests this view. The ability correctly to display which sort of kinds harmonize with which is listed as something made possible for someone whose progress through the arguments (or discussion, the *logoi*) is accompanied by dialectical knowledge.[12]

4.

A description of dialectical know-how might focus on various things. I mention three central possible foci, without claim to be exhaustive. A description might focus on the subject-matter of the know-how. A description might focus on how the know-how is exercised, some method or technique it involves. A description might focus on the epistemic condition of an individual with the know-how.

From what vantage point does ES "describe" dialectical knowledge? His focus is the epistemic condition of the individual with such know-how (the philosopher, as it turns out).[13] Indeed, I suspect this is generally true of "descriptions" of "the power of dialectic".

For example, while the *Philebus*' "Promethean method" is labelled a "method", and Socrates himself describes it as a "path" ("*hodos*", 16b5), one would be hard pressed to *follow* it based on Socrates' description.

> <The ancients said that> given that these things [sc. whatever are said to be, 16c9] are organized in this way [sc. according to the ancients' saying of 16c9-10] we must investigate by on each occasion positing one character (*mian idean*) in connection with everything, since we will find it if/because it is present; if we got hold of it, after one we must examine two, if there are so many, but, if not, three or some other number, and <we must> in turn <examine> each of these ones likewise until one should see with respect to the one at the start not only that it is one and many and

12 As Tim Clarke suggests to me, this fits well with the context, in which ES and Theaetetus are "demonstrating" (*apodeiknumi*) something to Parmenides (258c11), as part of the ES' overall "demonstration" (*endeiknumi*) by means of "holding conversation with" another (*prosdialegomai*) (217c1-d3).

13 I do not say this epistemic aspect of the philosopher exhaustively captures the philosophical disposition. (Thanks to Ronna Burger for inviting this clarification.) Following my focal passage, ES proposes only that this is the "sort of region" (*toioutos tis topos*, *Sph.* 253e7) in which they may hope to discover the philosopher. Given the motivational aspects one may expect of the philosophical disposition, the reference to someone engaging in philosophy "purely and with rectitude" (253e5, §v) is striking, but undeveloped.

> without limit but also how many <it is>; that <we should> not apply the character of what is without limit to the plurality until one should discern the entire number of it [the plurality] between both what is without limit and the one, at that point leaving be each one of them all, having released them into what is without limit. (*Phlb.* 16c10-e2)

This is not so much a map as an aerial view of what is true of someone in possession of the relevant know-how and thereby enabled to follow the path that such possession enables. The passage may in some sense relay a method, but it does not offer a step-by-step technique that someone could implement based on its description. Instead, the focus is the epistemic accomplishments of an expert in possession of the know-how.

Something similar is true of ES's "description" in the *Sophist*. This "description", though methodical, is less overtly methodological than the *Philebus* passage. ES articulates various cognitive deeds that dialectical knowledge either consists in or enables in its possessor.[14] Here too these are characterized through the lens of the epistemic achievement of the dialectical knower. The extent to which the description gives us information about *what* the dialectical knower knows and about *what* their knowledge enables is limited.

In the immediate context of the passage, the Stranger's focus is not on *what* the dialectical knower knows at all. It is, in the first instance, on the *fact* of their knowing. This, at least, is the central argumentative point of the comparison with *grammatikē* and *mousikē* (252e9-253b8).

The comparison has two dimensions, one metaphysical, the other epistemological. The metaphysical dimension is the point that just as only some phonetic or musical elements combine, and others do not, so only some kinds combine, and others do not.[15] However, this metaphysical point is not the comparison's argumentative focus. It cannot be, because the comparison is itself based on prior agreement that some kinds combine, and others do not.[16] The argumentative focus is epistemological, using the metaphysical

14 I return to this distinction below.

15 "*The* point" as the only affirmed point of comparison between *all three* comparanda: the scope of intermingling of phonemes, pitches, or kinds.

16 The possibility of vowel-like kinds picks up the mention of the special combinatorial role of vowels, but the comparison is not used to establish this possibility (let alone the *actuality* of any such kinds). The possibility of kinds that are causes of division (253c3, §i) is raised without any explicit analogue in the comparands. Both possibilities are trailers for what is to come in the discussion of five greatest kinds, but they are not the metaphysical basis for the comparison between *grammatikē, mousikē* and dialectical knowledge, nor do they ground the inference to knowledge being required to answer questions regarding the combination of kinds.

point of comparison already established as leverage. Competence in relation to the permissible combinations between kinds and in determining roles for certain kinds in bringing about or undoing them will require know-how, just as it does in relation to the permissible combinations of phonemes and pitches.

That knowledge is required: this is what carries the weight of the argument at 253b10-11 (§i) when ES suggests that a journey through the arguments to demonstrate the permissible combinations *will require some specific knowledge*. That this knowledge requirement carries the weight is confirmed by Theaetetus' reply, at 253c4-5 (§i), *yes*, knowledge will be needed.

Further, in saying that knowledge is required, the point is that the person must journey through the arguments *as a knower*. Attention is focused on their epistemic condition, not on *what* they must know. While considering what to call the knowledge this knower must possess, ES does go on to talk about what this knower must know and what their knowledge enables. But he continues to do so from the perspective of their *knowing* it, their epistemic condition.

So, what is "characteristic of dialectical knowledge", at 253d1-3 (§iii), is certain intellectual insights/acts (including acts of omission): "distinguishing", "thinking", "not thinking…" when thinking so would be mistaken. Similarly, at the centre of the fourfold list at 253d5-e1 (§iv), the list that has commanded so much scholarly attention, is a cognitive verb: "*diaisthanetai*".

However we should understand the list of things this individual "adequately discerns", what we are told explicitly is that each is a matter of *adequate discernment*, a characterization of the epistemic condition of this dialectical knower. Likewise, the summary, at 253e1-2 (§iv), focuses explicitly on the knower knowing: "knowing how to discriminate…".

In summary, everything said about *what* the dialectical knower knows or *what* their dialectical knowledge enables is said through a characterization of them as *knowing* it.

In the remainder, I comment on three aspects of how ES articulates this dialectical knower's knowledgeable condition: its structure, scope, and subject-matter. I conclude with a speculative suggestion.

5.

First, structure. I have talked, without distinction, of "*what*" the dialectical knower knows and of what their knowledge "*enables*". In principle, these may differ. What possessing a given know-how enables may extend beyond

the reach of direct exercises of that know-how. *Grammatikē*, the know-how that enables literacy, offers a ready example: reading or writing are *direct* exercises of the know-how, but reading and writing are a gateway to many other intellectual (and other) acts.

It is not clear that dialectical knowledge has this "gateway" structure, so I do not insist on this. There is, however, *some* structure indicated by the ES' "description", even beyond the list of four discrete things the dialectical knower "adequately discerns" at 253d5-e1. This structure merits attention. Where two passages seem to describe what possession of the knowledge enables, a third seems to capture the knowledge that does the enabling.

I start with the latter (§iii). 253d1-3 identifies certain intellectual activities as "characteristic of" dialectical knowledge: "dividing/distinguishing according to/into kinds" and "not thinking the same form different nor one that is in fact different the same". One could take the second to specify the first (taking "*kai*" at 253d1 as epexegetic), but one need not do so.[17] These activities are said to be "characteristic of" dialectical knowledge. I understand this to mean they are characteristic of the dialectical knower's knowing.

These activities may be characteristic of that knowing without exhausting it. They may also be characteristic of dialectical knowing without requiring that, whenever someone avoids thinking the same form different, they do so in virtue of dialectical know-how. Not thinking the same form different sounds easier than it is, in a shorthand like this. How could the *same* form be *different*? But the requirements on not thinking the same form different in the manner of a dialectical knower are demanding and take work to achieve. It takes both the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (at least) to address this task for sophist, statesman, and philosopher (*Sph.* 217a6-b4).

The fourfold list of what the dialectical knower "adequately discerns" at 253d5-e1 (§iv) is introduced as true of one "capable of doing this", where "this" looks back to the characterizing knowledge of 253d1-3. One might understand the various acts of adequate discernment as further elaboration of what is involved in being capable of doing "this", so that these various acts unpack the characterizing knowledge of 253d5-e1.[18] But I think it more natural to understand this second passage as pointing to intellectual activi-

17 Not doing so is consistent with thinking them closely related, e.g., of the second as necessary for the first.

18 So McCabe 2000: 212-13 with n50.

ties *enabled* by possessing the characterizing knowledge and not as further articulations of that knowledge.[19]

This is consistent with these various acts of adequate discernment being direct exercises of dialectical know-how, as acts made possible in virtue of those that characterize such knowledge. There may be structure *within* a single know-how. It would also allow for the gateway structure mentioned earlier, dialectical know-how being a gateway for these acts.

253e1-2 (§iv) resumptively summarizes the various acts of adequate discernment as a group. Separating these enabled acts from the enabling acts said to be characteristic of dialectical knowledge encourages following scholars who distinguish the talk of "dividing/distinguishing according to/into kinds (*to kata genē diaireisthai*)" at 253d1 from the talk of "know[ing] how to discriminate (*diakrinein*) kind by kind (*kata genos*) …" at 253e2.

The third passage to situate regarding the structure of dialectical knowing is first to appear (§ii): the demonstrandum of 253b12-c3 the correct display or demonstration of which is said to require (what turns out to be) dialectical knowledge. Monique Dixsaut has rightly emphasized that this is organized into questions: which sorts of kinds harmonize with which, which do not admit one another, and so on.[20] The first two questions relate to the resumptive summary of the enabled act of discernment at 253e1-2 (§iii) in their shared interest in where there is combining of the relevant sort and where there is not.

That summary explicitly picks up *only* these first two questions (§ii). This is reason to be cautious in taking the various acts of adequate discernment to tie directly to the identification of candidate vowel-like kinds or of kinds that are causes of division/distinction, notwithstanding that this second pair of questions will be a focus of their subsequent exploration of five of the greatest kinds.

There is another, more subtle distinction between the list of questions and the acts of adequate discernment. The answers to the questions posed will be given in terms of *kinds*: which sorts harmonize, and which sorts do not;

19 What difference does this (admittedly subtle) distinction make? On the unpacking view, every activity in §iv must be understood as, and so constrains the understanding of the activities, "dividing/distinguishing according to/into kinds" and "not thinking the same form different nor one that is in fact different the same". On the enabling view, there is no such constraint.

20 Dixsaut 2001: 157-8. This allows that the exercise of dialectical knowledge *can* be regarded as operating within a question-and-answer framework, appropriate to the conversational aspect of "*dialegesthai*" and to Platonic interest in philosophical question-and-answer.

which kind(s), if any, enable mingling; which kind(s), if any, are cause of division. The list of acts of discernment is focused on *relations* between kinds as opposed to the kinds that may stand in one or another relation. I will return to this point.

In general, one reason not to bring these two passages too closely together is their perspectives on dialectical knowing. The summary at 253e1-2 (§iii) encapsulates the dialectical knower's *own* enabled acts of adequate discernment. But the question-passage (§ii) focuses on the questions, answers to which the dialectical knower is enabled by their knowledge to display *to another*.[21] Being in possession of dialectical knowledge is required of anyone in a position to offer an answer to these four questions correctly. But that does not mean that answering these four questions is all that dialectical knowledge enables.

Contextually, our interest in dialectical knowledge may arise because dialectical knowledge is needed to answer these questions. That is different from thinking our interest in these questions arises because they are illustrative of dialectical knowledge.

All told, we can view ES' articulation of *what* the dialectical knower knows as having a threefold structure. Certain intellectual acts are characteristic of dialectical knowledge. This characterizing knowledge enables various acts of discernment by the dialectical knower, acts that may themselves be (further) part of dialectical knowing. Together, this characterizing knowledge and the sorts of acts of discernment it enables are prerequisites for correctly displaying to another the answer to the four questions listed at 253b12-c3.

My second comment concerns scope. As is well known, the passage has provoked two main lines of interpretation. According to one, the description of dialectical knowledge outlines the method of division illustrated in the example of angling and their hunt for the sophist.[22] According to the second, the description anticipates the subsequent, more detailed discussion of the communion of five most important kinds and is focused on their interrelations, especially the roles attributed to the kinds, being and other.[23] Aptly enough, there are also those who, in the spirit of the "children's prayer" (*Sph.* 249d3), ask for both.[24]

21 Oddly, in what a reader could be misled into thinking is a complete *translation* of this third passage, Gill 2012: 211-12 mentions only the second pair of questions and ignores the focus on *display* or *demonstration* ("*deixein*").

22 Stenzel 1940 is representative of this family of views.

23 Gómez-Lobo 1977 is representative of this family of views.

24 Ionescu 2013 is a recent example.

I am sympathetic to the latter, more generous view. But it may still be under-ambitious. The structure of the description of dialectical knowledge gives us latitude to pick apart elements of what dialectical know-how involves and enables without requiring that every example of its exercise involve each act of adequate discernment its possession enables, let alone answers to each question such a knower is equipped to demonstrate. This opens the way to finding examples of dialectical know-how throughout the *Sophist* even in passages not specifically engaged in the method of division exemplified by identifying the angler or in the systematic kind combinatorics exemplified by their consideration of five greatest kinds.[25]

The flip side of this point about under-ambition is a point about overambition. It seems overambitious to eke out from ES' "description" anything as concrete or specific as all and only the precise moves involved in the complex activity exemplified by the search for the angler or to zero in on which specific kind is the single character identified by the various acts of discernment dialectical know-how enables.

Consider the act of intellectually "dividing/distinguishing according to/into kinds", part of what characterizes dialectical knowledge (§iii). It is natural to connect this to the methodical procedure of progressively dividing up kinds exemplified in the search for the angler. But to draw this connection does not require *identifying* that methodical procedure with the intellectual act of dividing/distinguishing according to/into kinds. It requires only that that intellectual act, however understood, should be used as an element of that methodical procedure, as it evidently is (in fact, repeatedly).[26]

Drawing this connection is consistent with that same intellectual act being used in other contexts, including their investigation of the five kinds. ES draws attention to one example of this, observing that the nature of the kind other has been "chopped up" in the same fashion as knowledge (257c7-8). Each admits of parts that may be marked off and given their own designation.[27] To see the same intellectual activity at work in both contexts is not to identify the larger intellectual contexts it contributes to, nor to insist on any

25 Though sympathetic to the maximally generous view of the scope of dialectic of Dixsaut 2001, who understands it as the form of philosophical thought, I do not follow her on specifics.

26 *Sph.* 235b8-c7, reflecting on how they will proceed, underscores this point, indicating *both* that what they are doing involves "dividing/distinguishing" (forms of "*diairein*" at 235b8 and 235c3) *and* that this is a *repeated* act ("*diairountas aei*", 235c3).

27 For "marked off" ("*aphoristhen*" at 257c11), compare, e.g., "*aphorisasthai*" at 227c5, the active verb, used for what ES and Theaetetus are trying to do as they divide off some kind (and cf. "*aphorisantes*" at 240c8).

specific relation between those contexts. Nor need these be the only contexts to which this intellectual activity may contribute.

My caution against overambition is not readily disentangled from the question of the subject matter of dialectical knowledge as the Stranger "describes" it. This is my third topic for comment. I focus on the four acts of adequate discernment mentioned at 253d5-e1 (§iv).

Evidently, the subject-matter of dialectical know-how involves kinds. But what, more specifically does the dialectical knower know? Certain specific items—those that would be candidates for being the various "single characters" mentioned? That these items *play* these roles? Or is what the knower knows the various *roles* or *relationships* possible for kinds, so that, for any given set of kinds, the dialectical knower can explore the ways in which they do or do not relate to one another?[28] I have already telegraphed my preference for the final option.

Consider the comparison with *grammatikē*, the know-how enabling literacy. The literate person knows how phonemes do and do not combine to make syllables and syllables words. What does such know-how involve? Does the literate person keep some mental record of *all* permissible combinations between phonemes into larger units of speech? That seems to me doubtful.[29] Anyhow, such a list would not, on its own, give all the information needed to use the available combinations in permissible ways to make up units of speech.

Certainly, the literate person will need to know the phonetic alphabet for the language involved, and the organization of these alphabetic types into groups, such as the vowel. But knowing that a vowel is needed for any combination in speech is not yet to know *which* vowel is needed in this combination, nor *how* to combine it. The literate person will need to know the *ways* alphabetic types combine, where such "ways" will not reduce to a list of examples of things so combined.

The best evidence that this is a helpful way to interpret what we are offered at 253d5-e1 (§iv) is ES' resumptive summary of the four acts, at 251e1-2,

28 Ionescu 2013 suggests the focus is "the kinds of relations among forms that division can disclose when carried far enough" (58). I agree that the focus is on *relations*. However, Ionescu muddies the waters by going on to talk, as if equivalently, of "*rules* governing the combination of kinds" (61, my emphasis). Gill 2012: 212-13 says this passage "describes four relations between forms" (212). But the focus of her explication is on the *forms* thus related and not the *relations* as such.

29 This is no strawman: Gómez-Lobo 1977: 37-8 is explicit in adopting such a view. Of course, the range is *types* rather than *tokens*. Even so the view seems implausible.

as knowing how to discriminate kind by kind *in what way* each is able to combine and *in whatever way* not. We have been given an account of certain *ways*, some constituting ways of combining and at least one constituting a way of *non*-combining. That is, we have been given schemas for certain possible *relations* between kinds, not an account of *kinds* standing in certain relations.[30]

More tentatively, I understand "*hekasta*" (*Sph.* 253e1) to range across all kinds (or, better, all *groupings* of kinds), without requiring that every (relevant) kind be inside the scope of the knowing (at least, not actively so).[31] Dialectical know-how enables one to know what are the available relations in which any given kind may stand to other kinds, without this requiring that one know *for every kind* which relations it does in fact stand in to *which other kinds*. Equipped with dialectical know-how, this is something one could *investigate*, but need not know in advance. Further, such investigation need not range over *every* kind on any given occasion. Context may determine *which* are the *kinds* relevant to the investigative project undertaken. Context may also limit *which* of the various *relations* outlined prove to be applicable.

If ES' list of things the dialectical knower adequately discerns is focused on *relations* between kinds, it becomes more explicable that he talks in such opaque terms of some "single character", "many characters", "many wholes", "many things", since these are placeholders for the relata. It also becomes less incumbent upon us to think that examples we may find of some specific kind standing in one of these relations give exclusive insight into how, when and by what the relation is satisfied.[32]

A point of objection might be raised here. One might be skeptical that one could have, or that Plato would be likely to have, a conception of relations that is *independent* of the items that stand in them (or vice versa).[33] I am sympathetic to this objection and do not mean to suggest these relations are *primitives*, independent of their relata. But it is consistent with this that dialectical know-how consist in and enable a relatum-independent grasp of

30 Buchheim 2013 rightly emphasizes that we are given "Weisen" here.

31 Dixsaut 2001: 201-2 observes the significance of the plural.

32 As Tim Clarke suggests to me, the studied vagueness may serve another contextual objective. Theaetetus easily arrived at the conclusion that kinds, like phonemes, are selective in their combination. The comparison with *grammatikē* and *mousikē* shows the task arising, understanding the combination of (selected) kinds, requires know-how. Socrates' studied vagueness shows the know-how needed for *this* task is demanding, appropriate to its dialectical character.

33 Thanks to Pauline Sabrier for the objection. On relativity in Plato and others, see Duncombe 2020.

various relations at a level of some generality, while allowing that within a given domain exploring those relations in full specificity would go hand in hand with exploring relevant relata as well. Indeed, such *generality* might help to explain why such knowledge belongs to the *dialectical* knower.[34] It is also part of my point that such exploration can work piecemeal, without requiring a *full* list of all permissible relata for any relation in question. I also think we *do* have evidence, in the corpus, of Plato showing highly general interest in some, specific relations, as *relations*.[35]

6.

The points I have made so far are deflationary. As a "reading" of the passage, they are seriously incomplete. I have not attempted to identify the relations that the dialectical knower adequately discerns. In this, there is truth in advertising: I have, as promised, focused on the shape of the lock, not the key.

I close, however, with a speculative suggestion about *two* of the relations involved. These are the relations second and third on the list: the relation involved in "many characters different from each other being encompassed by a single character from without" and the relation involved in "a single character having been joined together into one through/by means of many wholes".[36]

The second relation—containment from without—seems to me (as it has to others) to be illustrated by the way in which "change" and "rest" are said to be encompassed by "being" (*Sph.* 250b8-10). I take this to be only one example of things standing in the relation. The passage offers as important corollary that "being" cannot be said to change or rest "according to its own nature" (*Sph.* 250c6-7). This is consistent with it being permissible to speak of "being" as changing and/or at rest but not according to its own nature. It

34 I owe the suggestion to David Charles and that talk of philosophizing "purely" at *Sph.* 253e5 may reflect this aspect of dialectical knowing.

35 The *Parmenides'* gymnastic exercise is good evidence of this. Harte 2002 explores that exercise's interest in the part-whole relation and comparable interest elsewhere in the corpus.

36 The "*au*" at 253d8 is often taken to link and contrast the first pair on the list of acts of adequate discernment from the second (e.g., Miller 2016). But it is sometimes taken to link and distinguish the second and third acts on the list, especially by Francophone writers. See, for example and other references, Dixsaut 2001: 192-3. This would be congenial to my suggestion.

is also consistent with it being permissible to speak of "change" or "rest" as being, each in accordance with its own nature.

The third relation—a joining into one through/by means of many wholes—seems to me (again, not uniquely) to be illustrated by the unification of "half-parts" to make up angling (*Sph.* 221b2-c3). Again, I take this to be only one example of things standing in the relation, though it may be that every example involves an item appropriately arrived at by act(s) of dividing. I take the reference to joining "through/by means of many wholes" to point not to the single character having *many wholes* as its constituents, but to *many wholes* being partitioned to arrive at the single form that is joined into one. Another example would be the relation between change and being or between rest and being, *if* each can be said to be according to its own nature.[37]

In each of these relations we have something we could, but ES does not, call a "whole of parts": the encompassing kind, on one hand, and, on the other, the single character joined together into one. In the *Parmenides*, the "encompassing" verb, "*periechein*", is used as a stand-in for the relation of a whole to its parts in posing various puzzles about that relation.[38]

It is well known (a point of agreement in seminal papers by Moravcsik 1973 and Cohen 1973) that in the divisions of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* we are faced with candidate "parthood" relations open to a potentially confusing mix of extensional and intensional treatments. My suggestion is that the second and third relations ES isolates here distinguish between an extensional relation of inclusion and an intensional relation of containment.[39]

Thinking about ES' fourfold list, I am reminded of a passage tucked inside the *Parmenides*' second deduction, whose generality is striking. At 146b2-5, Parmenides announces that "each thing is related to each thing whatsoever"

37 Gill 2012: 152-3, 206-11 argues against the antecedent. Such a relation between change or rest and being could be a limit case, with only two "wholes" in view: being and (for change) rest or (for rest) change. Or it could be that, if one's project were to come up with a suitably unified account of change, one would not immediately divide being into change and rest, so that there would be other steps *between* being and change. The fact that the pursuit of angling and sophistry are characterized as *pursuits* allows that the divisions that are apt are sensitive to the target. As is well-known, the hunt for the statesman in the *Statesman* begins with a different division of *technē* than did the hunt for the sophist.

38 E.g., *Prm.* 145b8-c1. Cf. Harte 2002: 90-100.

39 It is a separate question whether the language of "extensional" and "intensional" is apt to serve as more than shorthand for the distinction. I do not pursue this question here, nor how Plato might formulate the relevant distinctions needed.

in one of four ways: they are the same or they are different and, if they are neither the same nor different, then either they stand as whole to part or as part to whole. ES' list seems to me similarly general and similarly focused on relations (specifically, in the context, available relations between *kinds*). It differs, however, rather importantly, in allowing for two *distinct* ways in which something appropriately regarded as a whole might stand to its parts.[40]

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