Davidson: Dialog, dialectic, interpretation

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RESUMO

Neste ensaio discuto alguns aspectos da interpretação davidsoniana do *elenchus* socrático. Desenvolvo também três postulados: a) a verdade é importante e ela se manifesta no jogo público da linguagem e da comunicação; b) o instrumento do filósofo é a interpretação dialógica que presume racionalidade no agir dos interlocutores e c) o método tipicamente socrático, o *elenchus*, é um modelo de comunicação bem sucedida e compreende os principais elementos da "interpretação radical".
Palavras-chave: Davidson, *erlenchus; interpretação radical, Sócrates.*

ABSTRACT

In this essay I discuss some aspects of the Davidsonian interpretation of the Socratic's *elenchus*. I develop three postulates: a) truth is important and it appears in the public exchange language and communication; b) the philosopher's tool is the dialogical interpretation that presuppose rationality in the action of the interlocutors, and c) the Socratic's method is a model of the successful communication and it involves the elements of the "radical interpretation".
Key-words: Davidson, Dialectic, *Elenchus*, Radical Interpretation, Socrate.

1. Upon receiving the Hegel Prize from Stuttgart City, Donald Davidson, the first laureate non-European, suggested that there is a horizon in which the barriers between the American (analytical) and the Continental philosophies dissolve when these traditions acknowledge that they share a *common heritage*. According to his understanding, this common heritage is associated with the joining of interests and interpretations around Plato, from the dialectic method and from issues of interpretation[1]. For a familiar reader of analytical philosophy and with the accomplishments of the philosophy in terms of logic, epistemology and philosophy of the mind, this statement may seem strange and anachronic. In Davidson's eyes –who was always in tune with Plato's work, since its beginning up to recent works[2]– platonic efforts bring to close a decisive reference to (his) philosophy.

My aim in this essay will be to see how Davidson resumes and reuses this *common heritage*. Three postulates will be fundamental for the general argument of this essay: a) *"Truth" is important and it manifests itself in the public game of language and communication*; b) *the dialogical interpretation that presumes rationality in the way speakers act is the philosopher's instrument*; c) *the well-known Socratic method, the* elenchus, *is a successful communication model and is consistent with the main elements of the "radical interpretation."*

2. Gregory Vlastos and Hans-Georg Gadamer[3], authors admired by Davidson, had pointed out the relevance, in Plato's work and Socrates' philosophical practice, of the *elenchus* or *disavowal*, especially in the mediation of moral questions[4]. In its most elementary form, *elenchus* involves two speakers: Socrates throws in a question –such as "What is virtue?"– the speaker gives his answer and then Socrates follows asking new questions to show inconsistencies of the first answer with other ideas that the other person believed to have credited. That ends up obligating the answering person to try to repair his affirmations, seeking coherency. But this dispute, in a game of affirmations and disavows, can prolong itself without arriving at a satisfactory conclusion[5]. In spite of its adversary characteristic, Vlastos[6] maintains that the *elenchus* is not a simple cynical exercise to bring understanding

1   Davidson, "Dialectic and Dialogue," in Gehard Preyer *et al.*, eds., *Languague, Mind, and Epistemology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 429-30.

2   See *Plato's Philebus* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990); "The socratic concept of truth," in K. J. Boudouris, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates: Elenchus, Ethics and Truth* (Atenas: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, 1992); "Plato's philosopher," in. T. Irwin e M. Nussbaum, eds., *Virtue, Love & Form: Essays in Memory of Gregory Vlastos* (Edmonton : Academic Printing & Publishing, 1993); "Dialectic and Dialogue" (*op. cit.*); and "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*," in Lewis Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Chicago/La Salle: Open Court, 1997).

3   Vlatos, "Elenchus et Mathématique: un Tournant dans le Développement Philosophique de Platon," Monique Canto-Sperber, trans, in Monique Canto- Sperber, ed., *Les Paradoxes de la Connaissance: Essais sur le Ménon de Platon* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1991) pp. 51-88; e *Socrate: Ironie et Philosophie Morale*, Catherine Dalimer, trans. (Paris: Aubier, 1993); Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, Ch. Smith, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986); *Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the* Philebus, Robert M. Wallace, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

4   Vlastos, *Socrate*, p. 28.

5   Davidson, "Dialectic and Dialogue," p. 430.

6   Vlastos, *Socrate*, p. 28.

to the confusion in the speakers' thoughts (as it is normally stated), but it is *a legitimate method of philosophical investigation.*

For Gadamer[7], the philosopher, the elentic dialects is at least the mediator of a founding dialogic opening. The Socratic question is necessarily registered in the language, in the exchange of knowledge and non-knowledge it is not a rhetorical piece: it exposes uncertainties and questions originated upon dramatic themes about existence, in a sincere search of understanding, introducing the dialogue as a place where the *logos* takes place.

Socrates, at the beginning of *elenchus,* does not have an answer to the question that is the subject of the dispute; rather he makes use of the words, sentences and arguments of his speaker. In the meantime, his desire is to not only to listen to his speaker and, afterwards, to put an end to the wisdom in which the speaker's beliefs revolve. He is also not sure of the fallacy of the beliefs of his speakers. Ideas of these speakers are not confronted with some ready-made *fact* in the world, discarding those that go against the reality state and sealing those that reflect the beliefs' external truth. There is an inherent lack of this epistemic certainty in the Elentic method, and its strategy cannot offer support for any additional beliefs that are true.

3. In the essay from 1985 titled "Plato's philosopher," Davidson resumes the study that resulted in his doctoral thesis, *Plato's Philebus. Philebus* is a dialogue that occupies a special position in the works of Plato. It was in it that Plato, in one of his last dialogues, after having abandoned the first method used by Socrates, finds the best way to philosophy in *elenchus*[8].

In the beginning of *Sophistes*[9], Socrates emphasizes three characters in the life of the city: The Sophist, the politician and the philosopher. The first character was the object of *Sophistes,* the second was obviously named *Politicus.* Would there not be a dialogue titled *philosopher?* Chronologically and logically, according to Davidson, *Philebus* is the text known by Plato that follows *Politicus*: it is the dialogue in which Plato, upon examining the meaning of the "pleasant life," deals with the philosopher and the nature of his work[10]. It is precisely here that Plato resumes his trust in the *elenchus* and concludes that the Socrates from the juvenile dialogues was right in adopting this method[11].

Philebus starts from two premises (either pleasure or wisdom lead to a "pleasant life") and will run into a double meaning *elenchus*[12]. The structure of this dispute follows the model described by Vlastos: Socrates insists that the speakers be rigorously honest in expressing their opinions, and he begins to question, and to bring new supplemental propositions to show, that the initial premises were in contradiction with the new ones. This will allow him to say that the first two initial terms of the argument are false –neither pleasure

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7   *Wahrheit und Methode,* see especially "Das Vorbild der platonischen Dialektik."

8   *Ibid.,* p. 182.

9   Plato, 416d.

10   Some commentators do not accept this solution, for example: Giovanni Reale in *Para uma nova interpretação de Platão,* Marcelo Perine, trans. (São Paulo-Brazil: Loyola, 1997), pp. 315-27.

11   Davidson, "Plato's Philosopher," p. 193.

12   Plato, 11c.

nor wisdom assure a "pleasant life"[13]– therefore the dispute is not complete by a special definition or proposition...

4. What is the end result of *Elenchus?*

Davidson supports a *coherentist perspective* in the theory of truth in the end of "Plato's philosopher": the *elenchus*, as far as the possibility of the philosophical method goes, does not establish philosophical thesis, but the *coherence* and the assumption of truth as a part of public discourse[14]: the exercise of philosophy without the task of founding the episteme and building a discourse in which things and the state of things leads to *coherentism of the idea of truth.* This way, the philosophical method would focus not on formulating truthful propositions about the world, but on suppressing the contradiction in its corollaries –the meaningless, the absurd inferences, and the invalid understanding. He also remits, in a final note, the argument shown in his 1986 "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge."[15]

This essay is a defense of the theory of justification that does not explain what a true belief is, but when the reason as to all true beliefs are justified –which is strongly anti-skeptical and anti-relativistic without giving in to the foundationistic temptation. *"All beliefs are justified in this sense: they are supported by numerous other beliefs (otherwise they wouldn't be the beliefs they are)."*[16] Someone who has a group of coherent beliefs has the right to assume that his/her beliefs are not wrong, or at least that not all of them are completely wrong.

5. *Would we then, find truth by proving the inconsistency of the belief through the* elenchus? In "The Socratic Concept of Truth" and "Dialectic and Dialogue," Davidson notes that things are not that simple. If every problem summarized the proposition that generates the identified and exterminated inconsistency, we would restitute the logical certainty. If Socrates truly knew the way to the truth, why is it that he did not follow it and then announce his results to his audience? Why is it that the dialogue preserves this inconclusive character and the *elenchus* follows as a way to the truth without being able to establish what truth and real beliefs are?

As important as in the text titled "A Coherence Theory," Davidson made corrections as to the thesis and terminologies found and used in it – he afterwards affirmed that it was not coherent according to the epistemic coherence. In "The Structure and Content of Truth" published in 1990, he points out that the major mistake of the coherent theories of truth, as in the realistic and corresponding theories, is that they are commonly driven by an epistemic engine. They depend on certain specific cognitive capacities and on experience. That is how pragmatic theories and deflationist affirm, instead, that there would be nothing interesting to say about the truth. *All these theories of truth deal with the same issue: when we take the*

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13   *Ibid.*, 67b

14   Davidson, "Plato's Philosopher," pp. 188 e 194.

15   "A coherence theory of truth and knowledge" and "Afterthoughts, 1987," in *Subjective, intersubjective, objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 137-57.

16   "A coherence theory of truth and knowledge," p. 153.

truth as epistemic, or on the other hand, as something we need to be quiet about, we open a door to skepticism.[17]

In the linguistic turn horizon, the way to answer the skeptic is to show that the propositional thought, be it positive or skeptical, whose object be interior or exterior, requires embracing the concept of *objective truth*, and *this concept is not accessible other than to people who are in straight communication with one another.* Contrary to Cartesian epistemology (solipsist and introspective), theoretically speaking, the most fundamental gathering to be considered is the interpersonal one. It is impossible for this to happen without a world that shares objects that can be found in the same shared time and space[18]. *This gathering model is the Dialectic,* and its linguistic interpretation is the way philosophy investigates beliefs, clears doubts, elucidates meanings and gives life to dialogue.

6. Independent of "Plato's Philosopher" coherentist vote, Davidson recognizes that the Socratic's dialectic transcends the mere attempt to concede consistency and coherence to knowledge: the elentic discussion involves moral improvement and the clarification of meaning and belief[19].

It is important to resume the Platonic argument on the difference in the priority of the spoken word in relation to the written word, and to reflect why Socrates maintains all of this philosophical work *in speech.* As found in *Phaedrus*[20], on one side, speech is superior to written form. In the verbal exchange in the *elenchus,* it is a privileged way to moral wisdom. According to Plato, the written word makes readers believe they are knowledgeable of many things, when in reality it is based on mere opinion without one's truly knowing[21]. Written words serve only as a remedy for our memory. According to Plato's metaphor, written words are like a painting. Their image appears to be alive, but it is completely lacking vitality, continuing to be kept in total silence, incapable of interacting and answering any questions that might be asked of it, thus, limiting itself to an endless monotonous repetition about themselves. Without discerning those with whom it is convenient and possible to communicate, the written word goes vaguely from hand-to-hand, ending up at times with people competent enough to understand its message, as well as those who are not prepared to understand it and do not have the capacity and interest in it[22].

The written word presumes a *fixed meaning* and the only interpretation from its reader, thus eliminating dispute and putting itself in a place that sets aside the inter-subjective changes, that is, the ones in which meaning is effectively created and established. On the

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17　For Davidson, skepticism –while an intellectual attitude which states that we have no reason to believe that our beliefs are real and thinks that the majority of them are indeed false– is an artificial attitude, contrary to the ordinary lives of rational beings. See "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" p. 137.

18　Davidson, "Reality without reference," in *Inquiries into truth and interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 199.

19　"Dialectic and Dialogue," p. 432.

20　Plato 275c-e

21　*Ibid.,* 275c.

22　*Ibid.,* 275d.

other hand, the written word seems to be dependent upon speech; that is, in order to defend itself from criticism and offending statements, it needs help (from speech) from its writer. Speech is indeed the philosopher's central component in dialectic exchange, and its task is characterized by a certain way of participating and conducting dialogue. *Socrates was right: it is not enough to just write. If we want to draw the most solid truth near, we should speak and, of course, listen*[23].

7. The dialectic scenario offers a process that engenders change and the means by which this change takes place is through interpretation –in the *radical interpretation* sense –of the sentences uttered by speakers, exploring, bringing and developing meaning to concepts and words dealt by those speakers. Socrates, in a humble resolute approach, and with an irony that cannot be disguised, puts himself in the place of the interpreter: He carefully scrutinizes all of the speaker's thesis one by one without excluding any beforehand[24].

Each thesis, even the most absurd and intricate, assumes its foundation in a belief seen as real by the speaker, and because of that, it must be submitted to the sieve of a cautious inquiry. In Socratic speech, meaning, truth and belief are intimately joined. The only beginning demand is for the thesis to be presented as a loyal mirrored image of the speaker's with respect to belief[25]. If a participant of the dialectic game does not sponsor truth his words, we will not have resources to understand the meaning of what is said; if freeing truth and falsity, nothing will be added to his statement or denial in the soul of the people and the town's inhabitants.

Sincerity is not an arbitrary imposition by Socrates and the legitimacy of speech is related to the *speaker's intention to be correctly interpreted*. In the dialogue conducted by Socrates, to speak (a necessary public and social phenomenon) does not depend on the fact that two or more speakers speak in the same manner (rigorously sharing grammatical rules); it is required, nevertheless, that the speaker believes and express through his words an intentional attitude; he requests to be interpreted by his listener. In the same way, a request that the listener assumes is that the speaker has this real belief and is waiting to be interpreted in such a way (there is no Dialectic without this "structure"). Something trivial in a conversation between men and women should become a central issue in philosophy: *The mutual desire for understanding and clarification of the language.*

8. It may seem excessive to relate "dialectic" with "radical interpretation," and as Vlastos points out, Socrates was not Davidsonian[26]. The language interpretation method is not a philosophical doctrine, but an adopted attitude by philosophers in different times and situations; it reflects attempts to find reasons for the thesis being disputed about a crucial question or moral disagreement and epistemological grounds. That is why the critique of the language is able to engage ideas with various disciplines and philosophical traditions: "*It provokes argument, and when practiced with an open mind, it engenders dialogue. At its*

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23 Davidson, "Dialectic and Dialogue," p. 432.
24 Vlastos, "Elenchus et mathématique," p. 55 e 57; Vid., Plato, 364b.
25 Plato, 365d.
26 Vlastos, *Socrate*, p. 29.

best, dialogue creates mutual understanding, fresh insights, sympathy with past thinkers, and, occasionally, genuinely."[27]

9. We are persuaded to abandon the commonly accepted idea that the language is a rule or an agreement shared between speakers and listeners both, in the Socratic work as in the *radical interpretation*. For Davidson, there *"...is no such thing as a language."*[28] Socrates himself, as remembered by Davidson, is concerned in undoing the idea that words and their significance go according to the rules completely established and shared. In *Euthyphro, e.g.,* Socrates' speaker tells what he does, as Daedalus, so that his words move without a permanent place.

Even if this is not a voluntary attitude, in the situation in which the open discussion by which the speakers try to mutually understand each other, *the assumption that they are using words with the same meaning requires inquiry and clarification.* More often than not, it is known that words do not maintain their meaning value between the speakers. That will require the word meaning be revealed through the question and answer process[29]. The object of a conversation is precisely the semantic disagreement that reveals a metaphysical and moral disagreement. In the Elentic dispute, the speakers are able to start with a statement, and through the dialogue, one of the speakers can be persuaded to use the word virtue in an interpretation that was not present in the beginning of the dialogue.

On these terms, the *elenchus* adds important aspects of the *radical interpretation.* We only understand the meanings and beliefs when we are the interpreters of the sounds and points of others (such as issues that maintain intentions, desires, beliefs, etc.). A pleasant interpretation takes place when the semantic theories that are elaborated by the speaker and the interpreter cross and converge. But the fact that speakers end up sharing a common theory *does not necessarily mean that their knowledge and interpretative ability is a totally shared convention.* What Davidson calls "prior theory" (the first hypothesis about the other's language) is not that which is shared by the speaker and the interpreter so that the communication can take place. While the speaker and the interpreter converse, their prior theories start to resemble themselves more: *the asymptote of agreement and understanding is reached when passing theories coincide*[30]. This *passing theory* is the theory efficiently used by the interpreter to interpret a sentence and it is also the theory understood by the speaker; it is only by this coinciding *passing theory* that we come to a complete understanding. The speakers need the ability to converge their transitory theories from one statement to the next in order to mutually understand each other through a dialogue.

The assumption that the sentences used by the speaker are true is what is used by the interpreter in order to understand the speaker —especially those maintained with more obstinacy, the belief system most central ones— are true, *at least in the opinion of the*

27　Davidson, "Foreword," in Bo Mou, ed., *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2001), p. v.

28　"A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in: Ernest LePore, ed., *Truth and interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 446.

29　"Dialectic and Dialogue," p. 432.

30　"A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 442.

interpreter[31]. A dialogue is the context of an active communication by which thoughts and concepts emerge, receive a meaning, and inscribe themselves in the rational environment: thoughts have no clear form without language and dialogue. We can only attribute rationality to prepositional attitudes of speakers[32] (rationality is a social feature belonging only to speakers) beyond the *foundationalistic image* of reason and the *essentialism* of language.

For the dialectic to be possible, we must, on the one hand, start with the conception that the speakers are rational animals like ourselves, and that they act according to specific reasons, and on the other, to imagine a conceivable inter-subjective world (this concept is the concept of an objective world, a world in which each communicator is allowed his own beliefs). We need to be capable of understanding or thinking that which is thought or understood by the speaker to understand his language – that allows us to understand his world. Even though we are not required to agree with all of his views, *we are required to think the same proposition is we are to be in disagreement and,* this way, the same thing to conceive the same criteria of truth[33].

10. Elentic dialogues are apparently structured in a better definition-seeking manner. Unfortunately, this better definition, followed by counter-examples, of new definitions and new counter-examples, ends up in the recurring complaints of failure from beginning to end in the Socratic dialogues: virtue, beauty, life, joy, courage, friendship, love, self-control, are dissected, but no better and convincing definitions arise[34].

Dialogue makes it possible for sentences and beliefs to be assumed as basic (which encompasses a world image that should be real and cannot be freely abandoned), other than just defining and specifying concepts. It is also so that they can be in relation to other words and beliefs, amplifying and remodeling semantic and metaphysical edges. Socrates seems to assume that people possess certain *basic truths* that are motives to the possibility of elentic dispute. That's why elentic dialectic goes directly against the skeptical and the relativistic argument: there are good reasons to assume that it is possible for our basic beliefs to be false. We just cannot be wrong when we think there is a world outside our own minds, like other people, plants and animals, pastures, mountains, buildings and stars[35].

And as truth is seen as "an indefinable concept,"[36] other concepts also can be seen that way. The fact that truth is indefinable does not mean that we cannot state anything revealing about it: we can and we do it, relating it to other concepts such as belief, desire, cause and action[37]. This way, other words like "justice," "knowledge," "beauty," seem to constitute that which are philosophy's most basics, *by defining it.* These words are fundamental parts of our thinking, but they also confuse us. Perhaps there are no basic words and concepts, primitive

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31 "Radical Interpretation," *Inquiries into truth and interpretation,* p. 130.

32 "Rational Animals," in *Subjective, intersubjective, objective,* p. 105.

33 See "Rational Animals."

34 "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth," in: S. Blackburn e e K. Simmons, eds., *Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 308.

35 "Dialectic and Dialogue," p. 431.

36 See "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth" and "The Structure and Content of Truth."

37 "The Folly of Trying to Define Truth," p. 309.

and simple that can lastly define them: *many things cannot be defined unless we are going in circles.* It is a mistake to try to reach further[38]. The *elenchus* and the philosopher's work definitely cannot bring a clear and legitimate meaning of a problem (which finally is virtue, the knowledge and the justice). With a lot of luck and effort –and with a degree of freedom– they will be able to "disperse some clouds", that in and of itself does not mean that a metaphysical dilemma will be resolved –we only give better light to our concepts and differences[39].

Dialogue, conceived this way with the presence of the philosopher, will be entangling our words and remodeling our familiar concepts, mainly those that represent our most fundamental values and beliefs. Words such as "knowledge," "virtue," "sanctity," "honesty," "truth," and "person", would hardly have safely survived without being affected by the changes made in our language during argumentation. This change will make a big difference in the way we understand and live together. Finally, Davidson[40] remembers Vlastos: *someone that, like Socrates, practices the dialectic method accepts "the weight of freedom that is inherent in all significant communication.*

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38   "Dialectic and Dialogue", p. 434.

39   *Ibid.,* p. 433.

40   *Ibid.,* p. 436.

Este libro quiere presentar un panorama de la ética continental contemporánea. Es un libro histórico, pero no sin intención sistemática. El autor piensa que las investigaciones éticas actuales no pueden entenderse sin referencia al paradigma lingüístico, pragmático y hermenéutico de la filosofía contemporánea y de la racionalidad comunicativa. Después de introducir al lector en este contexto teórico, la exposición se concentra en el estudio de las transformaciones de la teoría ética producidas por un grupo de autores representativos: L. Wittgenstein, K. O. Apel, P. Ricoeur, J. Habermas y E. Tugendhat. Desde el punto de vista temático, del contenido de la ética, se comprueba sin embargo que vuelven a replantearse, con los nuevos instrumentos de la filosofía contemporánea, los mismos problemas clásicos de la praxis y de la vida moral, con lo cual se demuestra que en filosofía la teoría de los paradigmas funciona de manera muy diferente que en la historia de la ciencia. Este libro toma como hilo conductor un problema fundamen-

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Panorama de la ética continental contemporánea

tal como es el de la diferencia y las relaciones del *ethos* (o de la ética) y el discurso moral. Se persigue este hilo hasta una de sus puntas en la tradición de la filosofía continental, que es la confrontación de Hegel y Kant. El recorte temporal y temático ha dejado fuera autores y corrientes filosóficas importantes, pero la exposición presenta la visión que los autores tratados tienen de la situación general de la ética contemporánea, prestando especial atención a sus críticas y discusiones con las otras posiciones. De esta manera puede obtenerse un panorama menos escolar y más interesante de los debates actuales en el campo de la

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