Lessons in Agreement and Disagreement from Plato’s Dialogues

The following paper draws specific lessons from the use of agreement and disagreement in Plato’s dialogues. In order to demonstrate this, I turn to specific cases from Plato’s corpus: (1) the use of *aporia* in certain early and middle dialogues, (2) Glaucon’s ever-accepting stance in *The Republic*, (3) the missed encounter or false dialogue between philosopher and sophist, and (4) finally the encounter between artist and philosopher. I highlight each case by referring to a specific dialogue.

To introduce these lessons, I turn first to the aporia concluding *Euthryphro*. A standard conclusion to the early and middle dialogues, the *aporia* or impasse illustrates the first lesson in agreement and disagreement: the no-person’s or every-person’s land. The purpose of such an aporia, extending beyond the impasse regarding the question of piety, is the possibility that the unacknowledged ignorance at the start of the dialogue is corrected by acknowledged non-knowledge at the end. It is precisely with such dialogic practices that one can start philosophical inquiry. The heuristic method and aporetic practice, in other words, is to empty the self of dubitable claims to knowledge while also creating space (literal or figurative) to facilitate learning.

For the second case I highlight the bizarre personage of Glaucon, the person who perpetually agrees (almost to his own detriment). I argue that Glaucon practices a form of hospitality unlike, and in contrast to, the hostility shown by Polemarchus toward Socrates. Agreement, I argue in this case, is not simply to indicate acquiescence or consent, but to allow the other to think aloud. This thought-aloud is provided only by an other, whether that other is actual or virtual, present or absent.

In the third case I turn to the character of Callicles, the cantankerous and sophistic interlocutor. I read Plato’s *Gorgias* as an instance of what happens when the space for conversation impedes further conversation. Rather than focusing on the impossibility of agreement (the exhaustion of Callicles), I address a different instance of a person communicating with an absent other (Socrates’s dialogue with himself). In this case, the lesson in the possibility is not so much agreement with another, but rather disagreement with oneself.

The last example comes from the encounter between the arts and philosophy. Stemming from the inability of the arts to provide a worthy account of their practices or creations (*Ion*), we have Socrates exile artists from the state (*Republic*). The noteworthy aspect of this exile, however, is that Socrates allows the prospect of artists to come back and *plead* their case, in other words give an account or a different account. That which is particularly striking of this case is Socrates’s leaving open the possibility for a future dialogue, regardless of present (or future) disagreements. The claim is not that they must agree in the future, but that a future conversation can resolve itself differently. Put differently, the lesson is: the future is a space for perpetual non-agreement. This prefix (“non-“) becomes the condition for the possibility for agreement and disagreement.