One of the central points of discussion at this Conference yesterday was ‘dialectics’. As usual, its meaning — as well as the meaning of ‘negation’ — was taken for granted.

Still, the history of the term ‘dialectics’ is a history of twenty-five centuries. If we follow this history, i.e., if we trace the changes of meaning that this term has undergone from Plato to — let us say — Sartre or Gurvitch, and try to bring to the light and compare the various concepts of dialectics which we come across in this history, and which are not infrequently confused with another, what do we learn?

Let us first take a look at the main meanings ascribed to the term ‘dialectics’.

The first philosopher to introduce the term is Plato. By dialectics he understands a “method”, but ‘method’ in two different but interrelated senses: (a) the method of philosophical training, which considered from the viewpoint (from the “side”) of the person who undergoes this training, is a “march” (πορεία), leading to “science,” i.e., to the knowledge of ideas, those who with the help of a philosopher or dialectician have successfully completed it. From the viewpoint (from the “side”) of the educator he understands dialectics as a “skill” (τέχνη), a training technique, synonymous with the socratic μανυτική, the skill of mid-wifery: the skill of asking questions which awaken the consciousness of ignorance on the issue in question, and by using what the disciple already knows, to make him, step by step, answer by himself the initial question. He who has successfully completed this march becomes able to grasp in individual things their essence, or the idea, i.e., to see for example what justice, courage, temperence or virtue, in general, are; as well as to account for — to give the reason for — his claims etc.; in other words, he becomes a dialectician or a philosopher. This ability is ‘dialectics’ in the second main sense that we find in Plato, viz., (b) the method of science. Thus Platonic dialectics, in all its meanings, appears to be synonymous with philosophy as the activity of knowing ‘what is’, ‘is’ understood here both as a main verb and as a copula, by means of

which knowledge (or science), justification of true opinions, becomes possible.

According to Aristotle also, ‘dialectics’ is a “method,” but this time a method of reasoning or a march of thinking itself. In accordance with the aim of this reasoning, it appears as a method of justification of a “thesis” — a definition or a hypothesis, to use the Aristotelian terms; or as a method of testing (of ἐλεγχος) — a method of verification or refutation of — contradictory claims, i.e., a method of evaluating already existing knowledge or propositions expressing general opinions (what Aristotle calls the ἐνδοξον). ‘Dialectics’ in this sense, is a kind of syllogism, which Aristotle distinguishes from demonstrative syllogism with regard to the epistemic specificity of their premises. In relation to those who carry out this reasoning successfully dialectics is a skill; and the knowledge (or theory) of the conditions of carrying out this kind of reasoning successfully constitutes part of the Aristotelian methodology as we find it in the Topics.

Thus from a method of philosophical education “the method of dialectics” now becomes the name of a method of reasoning and one of the paths that thinking follows, consequently a different skill (a different ρητολογία); and being in Plato the “method of science”, it now becomes in Aristotle part of the science of method.

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According to Plotinus, ‘dialectics’ is an ἐξικτική, a habit or an acquired ability; the ability “to tell through reason what each thing is, how it differs from other things and what it has in common with them; to what kind of things it belongs and where each of these things stands; and whether it is what it is and how many beings there are and how many there are not and are different from beings.”

Here we observe that though this definition of dialectics bears obvious affinities to Plato’s dialectics as a “science”, new elements are added to it: it becomes also the name of the ability to tell through reason whether a thing exists or not, and where. This attempt “to tell through reason” or to demonstrate the real existence (of concepts), i.e., the debate concerning the “universalia,” is one of the tasks the medieval philosophers set themselves.

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