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Abstract: The paper discusses theoretical and practical relations between dialectic and eristic. It begins with the origin of the notion of eristic in Greece. Next, it considers eristic from three points of view. First, it is seen as an aggressive attitude in the context of an argument. Then, it discusses the philosophical motivations of some eristic practices in Greece. Finally, the contemporary notions of eristic dialogue and eristic discussion are considered.

Keywords: Aggressiveness, antilogic, Aristotle, dialectic, dialogue, eristic discussion, eristic, Plato, Schopenhauer, sophist.

In his monumental Greek Thinkers: History of Ancient Philosophy the Austrian philosopher and historian Theodor Gomperz (1920) discusses the sentence ascribed by Diogenes Laertius (1925) to the Greek sophist Protagoras: “On every question there are two speeches, which stand in opposition to one another”. This statement would have been the core of Protagoras Antilogies, his legendary but missing book. According to Diogenes, Protagoras also wrote an Art of eristic which actually was only a part of the Antilogies if we follow Untersteiner (1949). In a footnote, Gomperz (1920, p 590) had already expressed a doubt about the very existence of a separate book on eristic: “Nobody ever called himself an Eristic; the term remained at all times one of disparagement … so that the above mentioned title of his book cannot have been of Protagoras’ own choosing”.

The main point for us is the claim that “nobody ever called himself an Eristic”. If this is true, it should also be true of sophists although they were said ready to challenge any point of view. If Gomperz is right, eristic is a pejorative label that you do not apply to yourself but only to others. This is not the case with “sophist” and “dialectician”, two names germane to eristic, for Protagoras called himself a sophist and Socrates saw himself as a dialectician.

In his biography of Euclid of Megara, Diogenes Laertius (1925, Book II) reports that the members of the Megarian school of philosophy were first called the Megarian, then the Eristics and later the Dialecticians because of their use of questions, their love of arguments and their interest in paradoxes. Thus, if

Gomperz is right, Eristics was certainly a nickname. This makes an important distinction of status between eristic and dialectic.

In 1990, on the basis of a systematic study of the electronic *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, Edward Schiappa reported that the Greek words for *eristic, dialectic, rhetoric* and *antilogic* all originate in Plato's writings (Schiappa, 1990; see also Schiappa, 1992, 1999). As far as eristic is concerned, this seems to be a linguistic innovation but based on a root, *eris,* which means dispute or quarrel. Kerferd (1981, chap. 5) stresses that, for Plato, *eristic* did not only mean an attitude – to look for victory in a discussion – but also the art that provides and develops the means to do it. However, it would be wrong to consider this art as a specific *techne* since the eristic speaker is ready to use any means to triumph or to give an impression of triumph. So, although Plato often applies eristic and *antilogic* to the same characters, Kerferd suggests that a distinction should be maintained between these two words which involve an agonistic attitude. A verbal exchange is antilogic when two opposite or contradictory discourses (*logoi*) are applied to the same thing, event or situation. But, in an antilogic dialogue, the refutation of an opponent can be systematic without pertaining to a strategy ready to use any means. This point is essential to understand Socrates' position against the sophists: even when he contradicts his interlocutor, a dialectician does not aim at something like winning but looks for a truth which may not depend on the result of the dialogue. Although he often refutes his interlocutors, this makes a major difference between the dialectical inquiry fostered by Socrates and the love of dispute typical of eristic arguers ready to use any trick to succeed.

There are about a dozen occurrences of words germane to eristic in Plato (Brandwood, 1976). In the *Theatetus* (164c), Socrates does not use this word but makes a distinction between genuine philosophers and agonistic speakers who are only interested in words. A bit further (167e) he imagines how his fellow sophist, Protagoras, could complain about Socrates' unfair attitude in a previous conversation they had together. Socrates makes the sophist draw a sharp line between the agonistic strategy of eristic and the cooperative attitude of dialectic even when it uses refutation (Benson, 1989):

But I must beg you to put fair questions: for there is great inconsistency in saying that you have a zeal for virtue, and then always behaving unfairly in argument. The unfairness of which I complain is that you do not distinguish between mere disputation and dialectic: the disputer may trip up his opponent as often as he

likes, and make fun; but the dialectician will be in earnest, and only correct his adversary when necessary, telling him the errors into which he has fallen through his own fault, or that of the company which he has previously kept.

In the *Euthydemus*, the young Clinias is going to listen to Euthydemus and Dyonisodorus, two brothers who have just been introduced as sophists. Socrates accompanies him because he claims that despite his venerable age he wants to learn their art that he calls eristic (272c). The two brothers are introduced as fighters. They were experts at wrestling, then at dispute before a court, and finally:

The one feat of fighting yet unperformed by them they have now accomplished, so that nobody dares stand up to them for a moment; such a faculty they have acquired for wielding words as their weapons and confuting any argument as readily if it be true as if it be false. (272a)

The fact that an arguer is ready to confute any statement, true or false (successfully or not) may confirm indifference to truth. This kind of attitude is also often associated with the art of the sophists and Plato's use of eristic tends to confirm a proximity between eristic and sophistic (Nehamas, 1990). However, in the *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle makes a set of distinctions between dialectic, eristic and sophistic. First:

The man who views general principles in the light of the particular case is a dialectician, while he who only apparently does this is a sophist. (171 b5) *… The eristic arguer … reasons falsely on the same basis as the dialectician*. (171b37)

Thus, for Aristotle (at least in this passage), the difference between the dialectician and the sophist is a matter of "vision of the principles", while between the dialectician and the eristic it depends on the quality of their reasonings. There is also an important difference of goals between the sophist and the eristic arguer who, here again, is introduced as a fighter, but an unfair one:

… just as unfairness in an athletic contest takes a definite form and is an unfair kind of fighting, so eristic reasoning is an unfair kind of fighting in arguments; for in the former case those who are bent on victory at all costs stick at nothing, so too in the latter case do eristic arguers. Those, then, who behave like this merely to win a victory, are generally regarded as contentious and eristic, while those who do so to win a reputation which will help them to make money are regarded

as sophists … Eristic people and sophists use the same discourse, but not for the same reasons…. If the semblance of victory is the motive, it is eristic; if the semblance of wisdom it is sophistical… (171 b24-31)

This distinction does not preclude that you are both a sophist and an eristic; but if you are one of them you are not a dialectician, at least in the Aristotelian sense of this term. It is also noteworthy that Aristotle is talking of the way people are "generally regarded". Thus, his comments could be taken as a testimony of the way the words *dialectician, sophist* and *eristic* were used around the middle of the fourth century. Further, as stressed by Dorion (1995, p 51) about the status of the Megarian school, it is likely that these terms were sometimes taken as synonyms at this time.

Taking now for granted that eristic arguing is characterized by the idea that a discussion is a challenge that you can win, that an eristic arguer systematically tries to refute his interlocutors by any means and, then, does not care about the truth of the views they express, I will examine three aspects of this phenomenon. First, it can be seen as an attitude independent of philosophical, religious or, broadly speaking, ideological orientations. Second, as suggested by the case of the Megarian school or the views of some sophists, it can be motivated by elaborated intellectual positions. Finally, I will consider eristic behavior in the context of a controversial discussion as is the case with Protagoras' antilogies, Plato's *Euthydeme* or the verbal confrontations discussed by Aristotle in the *Topics* or the *Sophistical Refutations.*

Eristic attitudes

It is common lore that some people love to argue and have a strong tendency to contradict their interlocutor in almost any verbal exchange. This suggests that eristic behavior could be a psychological individual feature, independent of the topic of the conversation. When it is related to only one kind of topic, for instance religious or political, it is sometimes seen as indicative of a dogmatic attitude.

Another typical case has been registered in classical texts: young people would be more prone to an eristic behavior than their elders. This is already reported in Isocrates' *Panathenaicus* (1929, 26) where Plato's rival notes that the new type of education has the merit "to keep the young out of many other things which are harmful" and:

Now in fact, so far from scorning the education which was handed down by our ancestors, I even commend that which has been set up in our own day — I mean geometry, astronomy, and the so-called eristic dialogues, which our young men delight in more than they should, although among the older men not one would not declare them insufferable.

Isocrates' testimony suggests that even if young men have a natural slant to eristic, it has been made more salient by the new education set up by senior citizens. Isocrates does not deny that arguing is enjoyable but stresses that it is the abuse of eristic that is objectionable. A similar observation can be found in Plato's *Republic* (VII, 539 b27) where eristic is not introduced as a kind of dialogue but as a perversion of it:

Socrates: *There is a danger lest they should taste the dear delight too early; for youngsters, as you may have observed, when they first get the taste in their mouths, argue for amusement, and are always contradicting and refuting others in imitation of those who refute them; like puppy dogs, they rejoice in pulling and tearing at all who come near them.*
Glaucon: *Yes, there is nothing which they like better.*

Young people would have fun to imitate "those who refute them", probably their masters. Like Isocrates, Plato suggests that this juvenile behavior is a consequence of the emergence of the new education, a feature of a new social life. But the analogy made by Socrates with an animal non-verbal attitude also suggests that it could be generic and natural. Even if Socrates' dialectical refutations or Protagoras' antilogic games are possible models for this juvenile eristic, both passages suggests that young people are excessive in this practice. A few lines latter, like Isocrates, Socrates stresses the difference with elder people and then with a more serious practice of dialectic:

Socrates: *But when a man begins to get older, he will no longer be guilty of such insanity; he will imitate the dialectician who is seeking for truth, and not the eristic, who is contradicting for the sake of amusement; and the greater moderation of his character will increase instead of diminishing the honour of the pursuit*.

According to Plato, the fact that eristic arguers do not pay much attention to truth can have sad ethical and epistemic consequences. This kind of game would

quickly pave the way to skepticism because, with the habit to confute and to be confuted, “they violently and speedily get into a way of not believing anything which they believed before”. And this would be the ruin of the whole educational program of the *Republic* since “philosophy and all that relates to it is apt to have a bad name with the rest of the world”. This threat from eristic to philosophy is also at the very heart of the *Euthydemus* where the two eristic sophists are said to be old men. Even if young men – what about young women? – are especially gifted for this art, this dialogue shows that it is not their prerogative or that their presumed masters can be worse than them.

Schopenhauer’s thesis

Schopenhauer wrote his *Eristiche Dialektik* (Eristical dialectic) in 1831. It is usually translated into English as *The Art of Controversy* (Schopenhauer, 1921), a choice which is unfortunate because *eristic* and *dialectic* disappear from the title and, accordingly, their semantic proximity too. Schopenhauer was clear about it: eristic is a kind of dialectic. Further, even if you know the original German title, you cannot make a decision about the main point, namely whether “controversy” translates “eristic” or “dialectic” or both, more or less identified.

The German version begins with a definition of eristical dialectic, immediately followed by long footnotes about the differences between logic, dialectic, eristic and sophistic. These notes have become the first pages of the English translation. When you replace controversial by eristic, the English translation of Schopenhauer’s definition (1921, p 4) comes close to Plato and Aristotle’s ones:

Eristical Dialectic is the art of disputing, and of disputing in such a way as to hold one’s own, whether one is in the right or the wrong – per fas et nefas… (*whether right or wrong*).

According to Schopenhauer, logic is “the science of thought, or the science of the process of pure reason”, then “it should be capable to be constructed a priori” (p 3). On the other hand, dialectic “can be constructed only *a posteriori*” because it is the “manifestation of the intercourse between two rational beings”. Therefore a possible disagreement between interlocutors is the consequence of the “disturbance which pure thought suffers through the difference of individuality”.

Schopenhauer is pessimistic about the way conflicts of opinion can be solved. The Socratic ideal of a common pursuit of truth by means of a friendly conversation is

hardly possible in practice. On the one hand, “regarded as purely rational beings, the individuals would necessarily be in agreement” (p 3), but, on the other, this possibility is unlikely in practice because “man is naturally obstinate”. According to Schopenhauer, the origin of this stubbornness is simply “the natural baseness of human nature” (p 5). When two interlocutors, A and B, perceive that they disagree, A “does not begin by revising his own process of thinking, so as to discover any mistake which he may have made, but he assumes that the mistake has occurred in B’s”. Therefore, every man “will insist on maintaining whatever he has said, even though for the moment he may consider it false or doubtful” (p 6). But he is not ready for a revision of what he has just said because he is “armed against such a procedure by his own cunning and villainy” (p 7).

So, according to Schopenhauer, eristic is not an isolated individual behavior or an attitude typical of specific human groups, for instance young men: it is a natural and almost universal aspect of human conversations. Schopenhauer may be right that eristic behaviors or tendencies are quite frequent, but they may be less frequent than he says. You can also doubt his pessimistic explanation and opt for a more optimistic version saying that there may be a global epistemic or cognitive benefit for mankind to behave eristically or, at least, to support a claim when there is strong evidence to the contrary. Schopenhauer already stresses that an agonistic attitude can prove beneficial during the conversation:

…we make it a rule to attack a counter-argument, even though to all appearances it is true and forcible, in the belief that in the course of the dispute another argument will occur to us by which we may upset it, or succeed in confirming the truth of our statement. (p 6)

Let us add that it could be beneficial also after the dispute, in the long run, as shown by the example of cold cases reopened because some defenders resisted the evidence of the guilt of a sentenced person and finally found new evidence to the contrary, that they suppose decisive.

Schopenhauer points to the agonistic and sometimes aggressive aspect of eristic attitudes but does not pay much attention to the playful (Plato) or athletic (Aristotle) aspect, already stressed by the Ancient and still clear nowadays, for instance in the behavior of the so-called “trolls” that you can meet on the social networks of internet. This suggests a distinction between different kinds of eristic attitudes, depending on whether they are playful or not, aggressive or not.

Schopenhauer supports the strong anthropological claim that eristic arguing is a global, if not universal, phenomenon, but this deserves a more systematic empirical study. Hample and his colleagues have begun a worldwide investigation of it (Hample, 2010; Xie & al., 2013). In their 2010 paper which reports the results of a research involving about two hundred American students (mostly women from various ethnic origins) Hample et al. draw a roughly "schopenhauerian" conclusion: "We believe that the natural strip of arguing behavior is eristic, that at its core arguing is verbal force aimed at defeat of the other person". One variety of eristic arguing is arguing for fun, but Hample et al. emphasize an idea already found in Plato and Aristotle's metaphors about the kind of game played by eristic arguers: it lies on a scale ranging from peaceful sports with clearly stated rules to a war fearing neither god nor man. In the *Euthydemus,* Plato says that, before turning to eristic, the two brothers used to practice *pankration*, the Greek martial art almost free or rules and are experts in the use of weapons. Hample et al. (p. 418) only talk of boxing, a more civilized sport:

Entertainment is not normally supposed to be eristic or potentially unpleasant, but our results show that in the case of arguing, it certainly is. Aggressiveness asserts itself forcefully in the experience of and awareness of arguing for play. The entertainment character of interpersonal arguing is more comparable to boxing than to passing the time pleasantly or working on a garden together. In fact, we are somewhat disinclined to say that playful arguing is playful at all, since it shows such a combative nature in our analyses.

Eristic philosophy

Even if eristic arguing sometimes appears to bloom haphazardly in a conversation, it can also be motivated by theoretical reasons. If its goal were really to win by any means, i.e. to silence an opponent, a gun could be the most efficient one. But this seems too radical. So, an implicit presumption is that not any means make the deal but only any verbal ones. But, to shout or utter an endless stream of words are also verbal means to try to silence someone. Thus, a more restrictive presumption is that eristic arguing has something to do with reasons giving and so, at least broadly speaking, with argumentation. The problem then becomes the scope of the expression "any means" in the context of an argument.

As many contemporary scholars I do not agree with the traditional view

considering the so-called “great sophists” (De Romilly, 1988), namely those who lived at Socrates and Plato’s time, as hurried professors ready to support any idea by any means to make fast money. Even the two sophists of the *Euthydemus* who seem to belong to a second generation – if they did exist – claimed that their eristic attitude was bound to philosophical positions: they would not be playing just for the pleasure. If Dorion (1995) is right that Aristotle’s *Sophistical Refutations* is especially directed against the Megarian, this would confirm that the dispute between the Philosophers, represented by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the Eristics and/or the Sophists is not merely a fight of good against bad or pseudo philosophy, as the tradition claims. It is a moment of an enduring debate between philosophical schools.

There are some good reasons to say that the Eleatic philosophy associated with the names of Parmenides, Melissos and Zeno has had a major influence on the eristic/sophistic thought. I will only recall a few arguments that support the existence of a filiation between some ideas, gathered under the name of Eleatic philosophy, and the dialectical practice of some eristic sophists.

Gorgias is the author of a lost work called *On Nature or the Non-Existent*. There remain two partial paraphrases of this text: one can be found in Sextus Empiricus’ Against the Professors, the other is an anonymous text called On *Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*. In this last work, Gorgias puts forward three paradoxical theses about being, knowing and communicability: in short, nothing exists, if something existed we could not know it, and even if we could know it, we could not communicate it to other people. The proofs of these astounding claims explicitly refer to the views of Eleatic thinkers like Melissus and Zeno whom Aristotle held to be the father of dialectic if we believe Diogene Laertius (IX, 25). According to B. Cassin (1980; 1995), Gorgias’ theses would be a “logical” but paradoxical consequence of some ideas of Parmenides and his followers.

According to Gomperz (1920), the founder of the Megarian school, Euclide, “merely ethicized, if the term is permissible, the metaphysics of Elea…” (p174) and “the Megarians, as a school, may be described by the term Neo-Eleatics” (p 175). The reason for this philosophical proximity being the Eristics and Eleatic philosophy is their shared position about what Gomperz calls the problem of predication, namely the possibility of a plurality of attributes applying to one single being and a plurality of individuals sharing the same predicate. Like the Eleatic thinkers, the Megarians denied the possibility of “a relation of unity to

plurality". In spite of their common tendency to despise empirical knowledge and their interest for paradoxical arguments, propitious to eristic games (Wheeler, 1983), the strength of this connection between Eleatic and Megarian thinkers has been challenged by Muller (1988, p 39).

Last but not least, in Plato's *Sophist* (1921) the stranger who leads the discussion with Theodorus to try to define what a sophist is, comes from Elea and is a disciple of Parmenides and Zeno. Socrates ironically wonders if this man is not a god and, more precisely, a god of refutation. No, this man "is more reasonable than those who devote themselves to disputation" (216 b-c). The Sophist and the *Theatetus* are also the two main dialogues where Plato sketches a theory of error, a major subject of disagreement with some sophists who were said to deny the possibility to be wrong. Here again Parmenides' ghost is lurking around because, according to Socrates, the possibility of a mistake "in opinions and in words" (241a) amounts to the ascription of some being to non-being. To ascribe some being to non-being is impossible according to Parmenides, for non-being is not (= has no being). This is a central tenet of his *Poem* where the Goddess condemns the path of non-being and leaves opened the only path of being. Therefore, a thought or a saying is always about something, namely some-thing, i.e. some being. Hence, the two correlated theses that it is impossible to say a falsity, i. e. to say nothing, namely no-thing, and then to conclusively confute an opponent. A consequence is that a decisive arbitration of a controversy is not possible: an opponent is fully entitled to claim that he is right to the detriment of the other. This is why, from the Eristic point of view, victory in a discussion is not the victory of truth over falsity but the victory of the stronger arguer. All this would come from the Eleatic thought. This seems to be acknowledged by Socrates when he says that to take a step in the direction of an ascription of being to non-being is an offense and even a crime against the old Parmenides (237a; 241a).

Another wind, coming from Heraclitus, seems to have blown on eristic philosophies. The Heraclitean idea of an always changing world can bring another kind of support to eristic arguers. A thing that is green today may be red tomorrow, so it can rightly be said red and non-red. This reasoning has a similarity with the kind of faillibilism which appears in Schopenhauer. The eristic arguer whom everybody, including himself, believes to be wrong today (although a Parmenidian eristic arguer should not care about being wrong since it is impossible) could be right tomorrow (but a genuine Heraclitean view forbids the

possibility of any definitive success). We know that Aristotle denounces this kind of move in his discussion of the principle of contradiction in *On Sophistical Refutations* (167a) or in *Metaphysics* (1005 b 15-30) where he condemns the sophistic maneuverings based on the unconditional use of contradictory predicates.

In the *Theatetus* when Socrates discusses Protagoras' maxim that "man is the measure of all things", first interpreted as meaning that each man is the measure of all things, he explicitly establishes a relation between this view, which opens the path to eristic conflict, and the philosophy of Heraclitus, Empedocle and many philosophers, but Parmenides (152e). It is noteworthy that the discussion is limited here to the case of perceptions. According to Protagoras, the one who says that the wind is cold when the other says that it is not cold are both right. Socrates does not deny it and Protagoras is right to say that these two discourses are a case of antilogy. But it may seem difficult to grant, at the same time, that both speakers are right and that a contradiction is not possible. A way to avoid this paradox is to claim that both speakers actually say "some-thing", hence that their utterances are neither false nor void, but that they are not talking of the same thing. After stressing that a verbal opposition is not the same as a mental opposition, that "our tongue will be unconvinced, but not our mind" (154d), Socrates stresses a pragmatic contradiction between Protagoras behavior and his philosophical theses for he should grant that, under his own maxim, people who disagree with him are right.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to dive further into this topic and the disputed influences of Parmenides and Heraclitus on Greek eristic thinkers. The main point is that, in Greece, eristic arguing was not always a silly game. Even if it is rooted in human nature and sometimes appears spontaneously, at least in Greece, it was also motivated by philosophical concerns about language, thought and communication.

Eristic discussion

In *Commitment in Dialogue*, Walton and Krabbe claim that eristic dialogue is a specific kind of dialogue (1995, p. 76):

Under this title we have assembled all types of dialogue, such as acrimonious verbal exchanges and private quarrels, that serve primarily as a substitute for fighting (tournaments or duels) as a means to reach, provisionally, an

accommodation in a relationship. As in a fight, the participants are foremost trying to win. What constitutes winning may differ but is often defined in terms of effects on onlookers or referees.

This kind of dialogue which is supposed to follow some rules, like tournaments and duels, would have subtypes. Quarrel is one of them, eristic discussion is another (p. 78):

The eristic discussion is a type of dialogue where two participants engage in verbal sparring to see who is the most clever in constructing persuasive and often tricky arguments that devastate the opposition, or at least appear to.

A slightly different approach, without explicit acrimony and onlookers, is also introduced in Walton (98, p. 181) who, further, uses the expression "sophistical dialogue":

Eristic dialogue is a combative kind of verbal exchange in which two parties are allowed to bring out their strongest arguments to attack the opponent by any means, and have a kind of protracted verbal battle to see which side can triumph and defeat or even humiliate the other.

More recently, Van Laar gave his own version (2010, p. 390):

Eristic discussion is the kind of game that aims to determine who is the most capable, smart and artful when it comes to devising and presenting arguments and criticisms.

There are similarities between these contemporary approaches, and also between them and the various ancient concepts of eristic. But there are also important differences between the new and the old ones. Let us begin by the similarities.

In these contemporary definitions we find again three features of previous definitions. First, a common goal: to win. Second, "any means" with the restriction that they are, more or less, connected with the practice of argument. Finally, we meet again sport or military comparisons or metaphors (fighting, tournaments, duels, devastate, combative, attack, battle, triumph, defeat, humiliate…). Van Laar seems to escape this paradigm but not the idea of a competition to select the best arguer according to criteria to define.

Now, a characteristic feature of all these contemporary approaches is the parity

or symmetry between the main goal of the interlocutors and between the means they use or are "allowed" (Walton) to use. Their common main goal is to win and they are supposed to use means which are different but framed and, perhaps, evaluated according to the same criteria or rules. The status of these criteria or rules is a problem. Are they the same as in a critical discussion as suggested by pragma-dialecticians? Are they specific to each kind of dialogue? Are they mixed? See Krabbe (2009) for a discussion. But, my main point remains that in these contemporary views they are the same for both sides.

It is also noteworthy that in Van Laar's paper and Krabbe and Walton's definition, the eristic discussion occurs in front of an audience or in front of "onlookers and referees" who serve as a jury. Thus, it is supposed to follow a common procedural frame: the goal is collectively fixed like in a tournament or a contest and the parties are "allowed" to bring out their strongest arguments. Hence, the interaction can not only be seen as a (collective) game, it is a game: the participants know they are playing and what game they are playing. In such a case, it seems easy to identify a discussion as an eristic one.

This scheme fits common situations. For instance, it seems close to the way Protagoras is supposed to have trained his disciples or similar to the didactical exercises sometimes played in contemporary argumentation classes, with one player or a team trying to support a view "by any means" against an opposing team. You can also find examples in context which are less obviously playful. Most contemporary democracies have preserved two Greek institutions, the Assembly and the Court, two places of collective or public talk which are major symbols of democratic life. In both of these arenas opposition is essential and its truthfulness counts as a warrant of a regular working. This is why lawyers are appointed to support a defendant even when "everybody" claims that he is guilty. This is a political opposition is essential to democratic life as it is summarized by the French political saying to the effect that "L'opposition s'oppose" (The political opposition *has* to oppose the government's policy) which seems massively followed by politicians and political parties, even if citizens interpret this systematic opposition as a sign of bad faith or unfairness that may lead to a public disaffection toward politics.

Krabbe (2009) distinguishes two typical attitudes in dialogue: collaboration and competitiveness. He stresses that even in competitive situations "a certain minimal cooperativeness is needed – since otherwise there can be no exchange at

all" (p. 121). He adds that "arguments are called in as a means to change a situation into a better situation" (p. 122). Who decides that a situation is better, and according to which criterion? "By common standard … in an optimal situation the parties would be in agreement". But this fails to capture the idea that although eristic arguers may be ready to cooperate as long as common standards serve their personal goals, they are also ready to drop them when they become hindrances. I think that Van Laar rightly points that if eristic is a specific kind of dialogue it is not like the others. There is something puzzling, properly paradoxical, i.e. beyond common expectations, at least in some forms of eristic arguing. Van Laar (2010) writes: "…a crucial characteristic of an eristic discussion is that there is *less* cooperation than prescribed by the norms of critical discussion**[i]** and the contestants are typically unwilling to bind themselves to propositions or more detailed procedures" (p. 388).

The problem with Krabbe's notion of competitiveness introduced to account for the fact that each party wants to win, is that it can shelter very different attitudes. Even if you grant the debatable point that in any argument the different parties want to win, the most classical feature of eristic is the will to win "by any means". It is the scope of "any means" which is the key, I think, to understand and evaluate eristic arguing even if the working of this key is not very clear and deserves a closer investigation.

We have seen that the use of sport and military metaphors is as old as the word "eristic". The former ones suggest the idea of a whole range of practices spanning from athletics to boxing and other martial arts. Sport competitions have frames and rules which are usually clearly identified and apply symmetrically. But if we shift to the military paradigm the question of rules become more uncertain. In some sense, you can say that there is a minimal cooperation in war for the reasons given by Krabbe and war can also be seen as a kind of competition, especially when it is seen as "the continuation of politics by other means" as Clausewitz said. By other means does not mean by any means. Sometimes there are codified practices between enemies and attempts to regulate the use of weapons. But we know that in some wars, the enemies are ready to win by any means: the end justifies the means and there is no need of a jury to decide who won. Collaboration or competition is not the only choice for eristic arguing: there is a third option, more hostile, beyond them. Sometimes, eristic appears beyond collaboration and competition.

I think Kerferd (1980, p. 113) is right when he suggests that the distinction between antilogic and eristic should be maintained on the ground that antilogic is not ready to use any means while eristic is. Antilogic is closer to sports while eristic is closer to war, with difficult but interesting limit cases, like duels, gladiators fights and, perhaps, *pankration*.

It is difficult to say if the definitions of eristic dialogue introduced by Krabbe and Walton cover the whole field of *martial dialogues,* namely antilogic and (warlike) eristic exchanges, two notions which are not always clearly distinguished even in classical authors. But, if we grant that they are two different kinds of the genus that I have just called martial (which could still be called *eristic* if the context prevents any confusion**[ii]**), it seems clear that the eristic discussion considered by Krabbe (2009) and Van Laar (2010) and more generally the "regular" political and judicial opposition of our democracies is a matter of antilogic rather than (warlike) eristic: it is soft, open and manifest competition whereas eristic can be hard, stubborn and concealed. Of course, eristic can bloom in an antilogic dialogue: a manifest antilogic discussion is sometimes a good prelude to a hostile eristic overflow.

This seems to be the case in Plato's *Euthydemus*. Walton and Krabbe (1995), Krabbe (2009), Walton (1998) turn to this dialogue to illustrate their views about eristic discussion. They mostly focus on its antilogic (and fallacious) aspects whereas I think the key of this dialogue is rather the warlike eristic behavior of the sophists.

The collective goal of the dialogue seems to be clear: the two sophists claim that an eristic training could teach virtue to the young Clinias and persuade him to love knowledge and to practice virtue. Like in a game or a sport, a rule is fixed before the beginning of the play. It is quite simple: the young boy has just to answer yes or no (276d). But this is a trick since he knows nothing else about the alleged game. Walton and Krabbe write that in an eristic dialogue, "the initial situation …is an unsettled intellectual hierarchy, prompting a need to test our verbal skills of argumentation to see who is the more masterful. The goal is to settle the intellectual hierarchy…" (p. 79). Does this apply to the *Euthydemus?* I doubt it because the status of the intellectual superiority is more intricate. The apparently shared goal is the education of the young Clinias. To reach it, the lad accepts an eristic dialogue with the two teachers who are supposed to be intellectually superior if Socrates is not ironical or does not play on words when

he says that he wants to study eristic. The sophists win, but their brilliant victory is so cheap that, from the point of Plato and probably most readers, they did lose. Plato's conclusion seems to be that eristic arguing is certainly not the right path to knowledge and wisdom, let alone to the education of beginners. The first intellectual hierarchy is upset.

A major difference between Krabbe and Walton's models of eristic dialogues and the *Euthydemus* (at least in the first part) is that this dialogue lacks the parity, the formal equality that is typical of their models and of antilogic games. A first anomaly, allowed by the alleged intellectual authority of the sophists, is that they fix the rule of the game. Later, Socrates will try to break it by asking questions, but the sophists will refuse it because they stick to their own rule: their opponents are not allowed to ask questions (287 c-d). The lesson of boxing quickly ends for Clinias who has accepted the rule: knocked out in the first round. The expected lesson shifted to an unfair competition which is over when it has hardly begun, much to the delight of the two sophists. The match is a triumph for them, but the lesson is a failure. The two sophists made a decisive step towards eristic when they decided not to play with Clinias but at his expense. They were already beyond collaboration and competition.

Conclusion

Since the Antiquity, eristic practices have been associated with the use of strength in a dialectical argumentation. A first necessary condition of eristic is to see a dialectical exchange as something that you win. But its most typical feature is the readiness to win by any means that appear relevant to the practice of argument.

Eristic can show two faces depending on whether the arguer uses means which pertain to the frame of the exchange or not. These two faces appeared in Greece where theory and practice of eristic arguing was part of philosophical reflections and arguments about the nature of thought, language and the practice of argument. An antilogic game was an agonistic verbal game where the participants were supposed to abide by rules. But it already seemed clear that this did not account for all the agonistic verbal exchanges. Sometimes arguers did not compete with their interlocutors but play at their expense.

This supports the suggestion that an eristic behavior can be the manifestation of a primary natural aggressiveness which could abide by rules as long as they serve

the desire to win. But this desire can also be ready to use fallacious strategies. We should, however, resist a quick association of fallacies with eristic since eristic can do without them. Systematic refutation too is not a reliable criterion since an eristic behavior can be limited or occasional, like aggressiveness.

Some contemporary authors claim that eristic dialogues or eristic discussions can be seen or are a specific kind of dialectical interaction. I have suggested that their views focus only on one face of eristic, the antilogic one. The distinction between this pacific version of agonistic verbal exchanges similar to the practice of games or sports, and the more warlike one, ready to win even by irregular means, could help to clarify the analysis and evaluation of agonistic arguments.

NOTES

i. In the pragma-dialectical sense of the term.

ii. Just like man can be a generic term including woman and man.

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