

Cicero and the Socratic Dialogue:

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Between Frankness and Friendship (*Off.* I, 132–137)

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Introduction

At the end of his life Cicero sketched a theory of conversation (*sermo*). I propose an analysis of it as expounded in the first book of the *De officiis* (I.132–137), his last philosophical work (44 BCE). The oft-cited passage has seldom been commented upon by scholars.¹ Despite its relative brevity (two pages in Winterbottom’s edition), it offers, as Carlos Lévy (1993, 399) suggests, “a very advanced reflection on the ethics of conversation.” While the Latin term *sermo* covers a variety of types of conversations, Cicero appears to have in mind philosophical dialogue broadly understood in the light of the practical ethics of the Stoic Panaetius. There are good reasons to believe that Cicero more particularly had the Socratic dialogue in view.

Cicero begins his analysis by referring to the Socratics (*Socratici*) as supreme masters in the art of conversation.² While he does not name them, he seems to have Xenophon and especially Plato in mind. *Sermo* is the term Cicero uses for both the conversations of Socrates (*Off.* I.108) and the Platonic dialogue as literary genre (*De or.* III. 60: *sermones immortalitati scriptis suis Plato*). One might object that Plato cannot be properly be considered a “Socratic.” In Antiquity, however, in contrast to conventional modern classifications, Plato was ranked, according to Diogenes Laertius, among the principal “Socratics” (τῶν λεγομέ-

* This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the joint seminar on “Philosophie hellénistique et romaine,” directed by Professors Bernard Besnier, Alain Gigandet, and Carlos Lévy, at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. I wish to thank them warmly, as well as the other participants, for their insightful questions and remarks, which proved extremely helpful in the revision of the text. Special thanks go to Jeremy Hayhoe for kindly proofreading the English text.

- 1 There are, however, Andrew R. Dyck’s commentary (1996, 309–315), and the studies by Gary Remer (1999, 43–49), and Carlos Lévy (1993, especially 401–411).
- 2 *Off.* I.134; *maxime excellunt*. In *De or.* II.270 Socrates is recommended as the best model for witty and refined conversation (*longe lepore et humanitate omnibus praestitisse*); cf. Griffin and Atkins 1991, p. 41, n. 1; p. 52, n. 2.

νων Σωκρατικῶν οἱ κορυφαίότατοι, 2.47). The author of the *Thirteenth Letter*,³ which might date from as late as the first century BCE, refers to the *Phaedo* under the title *On the Soul* (περὶ ψυχῆς) as one of the Socratic dialogues (Σωκρατεῖοι λόγοι).⁴ Moreover, the context of the passage, namely Panaetius' doctrine on duties (καθήκοντα), does not rule out the possibility of a reference to Plato. To Panaetius himself, again according to Diogenes Laertius,⁵ Plato was one of the authors of the "true" (ἀληθεῖς) Socratic dialogues (Σωκρατικῶν διαλόγων) together with Xenophon, Antisthenes, and Aeschinus. Finally, Cicero himself speaks in the *Tusculanes* of "Plato and the other Socratics (*ut Platonem reliquosque Socraticos*)."⁶

I defend in this paper the following thesis. A comparison of the rules of conversation (*sermo*) in the *De officiis* with those of the Socratic διαλέγεσθαι in Plato, in particular in the *Gorgias*,⁷ reveals, beyond the obvious differences, one decisive agreement: the requirement of frankness for both truth and friendship. The role of reproof and correction (*obiurgatio, castigatio*) in Ciceronian conversation goes back, directly or indirectly, to the Socratic dialogue, more specifically to refutation conceived as correction (κολάζειν) and the counterpart of medical treatment. Cicero's position on this crucial issue is, however, in tension with the kindness or civility demanded by the *humanitas* but also more specifically by a "middle" ethics, the prime object in the *De officiis*.

3 *Letter XIII*, 363a6–7. The references to Plato's texts are to the Burnet edition (1901–1907). The English translations of Plato, which I have sometimes modified, are those of the *Complete Works* edited by Cooper (1997). With regard to Cicero's and Plutarch's texts, I refer to the Loeb Classical Library for the translation. The name of the translator is in all cases given.

4 I owe this observation to my colleague Harold Tarrant.

5 Diog. Laert. 2.64 (= fr. 126 ed. Van Straaten = test. 145 ed. Alesse). See Alesse's commentary on the term ἀληθεῖς (1997, 280–287), which refers according to her to the reliability or credibility of those dialogues as testimonies on Socrates.

6 *Tusc.* 11.8. Sedley 2014 quotes this passage but remains nevertheless hesitant about regarding Plato as being called a "Socratic" at Cicero's time; his detailed analysis of Horace's verses in the *Ars poetica* referring to "Socratic writings" (*Socraticae chartae*; 295–322) explores parallels with Xenophon, a largely justified move with regard to the relevant verses (in particular 312–316; cf. Xen. *Mem.* 2).

7 In the *De oratore*, for example, Crassus, in many respects Cicero's spokesman, says he read that dialogue under Charmadas the Academician: "I read [the *Gorgias*] with close attention (*diligentius*)" (*De or.* 1.47; tr. Sutton). In the preface to Book II of *De finibus*, Cicero writes in his own name: Socrates makes fun of Gorgias "as we can learn from Plato" (*ut e Platone intelligi potest*) (*Fin.* 11.2; trans. Rackham). In the *Tusculans* (v.36) he freely translates into Latin a whole passage from the *Gorgias* (470d).

1 Ethics of Conversation (*Off. I, 132–137*)

1.1 Stoic Context

In the preface of his treatise on “duties” (more exactly “appropriate actions”, *καθήκοντα*), Cicero informs the reader that he will chiefly (*potissimum*, *Off.* 1.6) follow the ethics of the Stoics, in particular Panaetius. The complex question about the degree of Panaetian influence on *De officiis* exceeds the limits of this short study.⁸ It must be emphasized, however, that Cicero claims to follow the Stoics “not as translator” (*non ut interpretes*) but as drawing on their teachings at his own discretion (*iudicio arbitrioque nostro*) as it suits his purpose.⁹ In the case of the art of conversation, he points out that no one has yet formulated rules for it (*praecepta ... nulla sermonis*, *Off.* 1.132), and to that extent he appears to expound his own conception of it.¹⁰ Panaetius’ teaching about middle (*medium*) duty, by comparison with the complete duty (*perfectum*) of the wise, constitutes the context and scope of his treatise (of Book I and II at least)¹¹ and of the passage on conversation. This ethics is that of the appropriate (*decorum*, *πρέπον*, *Off.* 1.94), that is, of what is fitting given the circumstances and the persons involved, according to the values specific to the Roman social élite as well as the natural bounds uniting all humans.¹²

8 On the problem of the sources, see Testard 1965, 25–49, who concludes by insisting on Cicero’s relatively free use of his sources, including Panaetius.

9 Ibid. The translation of Miller 1913 has been here partially followed.

10 The examples referred to in this passage (1.132–137) are all Romans, and the passages on conversation in others writings by Cicero confirm the *De officiis*, including that on diction (*De or.* 111.41–42, cf. Dyck 1996, 311), which clearly indicate according to Lefèvre 2001, 68, n. 378, “dass es sich um eine durch und durch ciceronische Materie handelt.”

11 *Off.* 1.8; 1.46: “we do not live with men who are perfect and clearly wise (*non cum perfectis hominibus planeque sapientibus*), but with those who are doing splendidly if they have in them mere images of virtue” (*simulacra virtutis*) (tr. Griffin and Atkins). For the *De officiis* I follow Griffin and Atkins 1991, with occasional modifications as indicated; I have also consulted those of Miller 1913 and Walsh 2000 and refer to them when necessary.

12 *Off.* 1.50: reason (*ratio*) and speech (*oratio*) associate human being and “unite them in a kind of fellowship” (*conciat inter se homines coniungitque naturali quadam societate*)’ (trans. Griffin and Atkins). More generally on the limits of the early Stoa’s (esp. Zeno’s) reception of Socrates, see Robert Bee’s chapter in this volume.

1.2 *Preliminary Remarks (I, 132–133)*

Cicero divides speech (*oratio*) into two categories, *contentio*, “oratory,”¹³ and *sermo*, “conversation.” While *contentio* has been given rules (*praecepta*) by rhetoricians, including Cicero himself (in the *De oratore*, *Brutus*, and *Orator*), there still exists, he says, none (*nulla*) for *sermo*. Cicero thus decides at the end of his life, in a treatise on moral and political philosophy, to fill out, at least in part, this important lacuna. Evidently it is not easy to “codify” this private and informal activity. It is nevertheless possible to propose some rules, claims Cicero, insofar as words and ideas (*verborum sententiarumque*), which are constitutive of oratory, are also constitutive of conversation.

Contentio and *sermo* are first to be distinguished with regard to place. *Contentio* is appropriate for speeches in law courts, assemblies, and other public places; *sermo* should be employed in the private sphere, in social groups, discussions (*disputationibus*), and gatherings of friends (*familiarium*, *Off.* I.132). Cicero refers to the voice, which should be clear and attractive, but he does not mention clarity of thought (*cogitationis*). The latter is implied, however, as the rules common to both *contentio* and *sermo* concern words and ideas (*Off.* I.133). His analysis deals with ideas (*sententiae*), rather than with words (*verba*).¹⁴

1.3 *Rules of Conversation (I, 134–137)*

I will number the rules in the same order as they appear in the text. (1) Conversation should be gentle, undogmatic (*lenis minimeque pertinax*), and witty (*lepos*), characteristics Cicero attributes elsewhere to Plato’s Socratic dialogues.¹⁵ (2) No one should monopolize the conversation and all should allow others to have their turns. (3) We should especially give thought to the subject of discussion; if it is serious we should treat it with gravity; if humorous, with wit. (4) We should be particularly careful that our conversation does not reveal some fault in our behaviour (*vitium*), especially by speaking in a malicious or abusive manner about people who are absent. (5) Conversations are for the most part about private or public business, or about some literary or scholarly subject (*de artium studiis atque doctrina*); we must therefore always try when the discussion begins to drift off to bring it back to those subjects, but with consideration of the company present; for we do not at all time enjoy discussing the same subjects in the same way. (6) Since conversation is something to be

13 Translation by Miller as well Griffin and Atkins, to which I will return. Walsh translates *contentio* by “argument,” a translation more problematic than “oratory” as we will see.

14 Cicero has already dealt with the *verba* in Book III of *De oratore*.

15 Cf., e.g., *De rep.* I.16: *leporem Socraticum subtilitatemque sermonis*.

enjoyed, we must know when it is best to end it. (7) As in the rest of life, we must control excessive passions (*perturbationes*) that are opposed to reason, including anger (*ira*). (8) We must take particular care to be seen to respect and have affection (*veriri et diligere videatur*) for those with whom we converse.¹⁶ (9) Cicero finally comes to a delicate subject: the reproofs (*obiurgationes*) that sometimes need to be addressed to the interlocutor. On those occasions we must use a more rhetorical tone of voice (*vocis contentio maiore*) and harsher language, even appearing (*videamur*) to be angry (*irati*).¹⁷ Cicero elaborates on this a little. Like medical treatment by surgery and cauterization (*ut ad urendum et secandum*), we must have recourse to this kind of rebuke (*genus castigandi*) rarely and reluctantly and when no other remedy (*medecina*) can be found. In most cases we ought to resort only to mild criticism (*clemente castigatione*) reinforced with earnestness (*gravitas*) so as to show severity (*severitas*). Insults must be avoided. We must show that even the very harshness of the rebuke (*obiurgatio*) has been adopted for the good of the person rebuked, and this is why anger (*iracundiam*) is to be shunned. (10) Boasting is unattractive, especially when the claims are false.

These rules call at once for a correction about the relation between *sermo* and *contentio*. In the light of the rule about rebuke and criticism (*obiurgatio, castigatio*), the initial translation of *contentio* as “oratory” has to be qualified. Even if conversation ought to be free of intransigence and anger, it is not necessarily free from *contentio*.¹⁸ Therefore *contentio* is not the exact equivalent of *eloquentia*. The difference between *contentio* and *sermo* lies above all in the voice: in the *contentio* there is “tension” in the voice, while in the case of *sermo* it is, at least in principle, devoid of “tension.”¹⁹ As Carlos Lévy points out, “there

16 *Videamur* indicates the ambiguity involved in this rule as in others (there are three occurrences of *videamur* in our passage: in 131 and 136 *bis*); the subject is a propriety located often halfway between image and reality, as is the middle ethics of the *Officiis* as a whole (cf. 1.50: *simulacra virtutis*, quoted above).

17 According to Cicero (*Tusc.* IV.55) the orator too sometimes had better pretend (*simulare*) to be angry.

18 *Tusc.* II.5: “We, however, whose guide is probability (*probabilia*) and who are unable to advance further than the point at which the likelihood of truth (*quod veri simili*) has presented itself, are prepared both to refute without obstinacy and be refuted without anger” (*refellere sine pertinacia et refelli sine iracundia parati sumus*) (tr. King). Cf. *Pl. Grg.* 458a2–4.

19 See the first two definitions of *contentio* given in the *Latin Oxford Dictionary* (Glare 1982): “1. A stretching, tension; 2. The strenuous exercise of any of the physical or mental faculties, exertion, effort.” Lévy 1993, 400. Cf. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* III.23: “The Tone of Conversation (*sermo*) is relaxed (*remissa*), and is closest to daily speech (*cotidianae*)

can be *sermo* in oratory and *contentio* in conversation” (1993, 402). Cicero refers in the passage to Caesar, the brother of the elder Catulus, as someone who so greatly surpassed everyone else in witticism and humor that even in forensic speeches (*forensi genere dicendi*) he defeated the oratory (*contentiones*) of others with his conversational style (*sermone*, *Off.* I.133). Plato’s Socratic dialogues, which Cicero calls *sermones*, are not free from “tension,” as is obviously the case of the *Gorgias*. Socrates’ speech is full of “tension” insofar as he is always striving for refutation or demonstration, and his tone of voice sometimes becomes more emphatic toward his adversaries, here Polus and Callicles.²⁰ It is true that the rebuke (*obiurgatio*) to which Cicero refers does not correspond in every respect with the Socratic *elenchus*, but the practice of dialogue (*διαλέγεσθαι*) is not reducible to (logical) refutation either. I will return to this question toward the end of this study.

2 Dialectical Rules and Ethical Implications

2.1 *Dialectical Rules in Plato’s Socratic Dialogues*

Plato presents Socratic dialogue as *practiced* without ever giving a systematic account of its *theory*; that is the **reason** for holding those conversations in the particular way that he has Socrates hold them. He does, however, make scattered remarks, through his Socrates, about the rules that should regulate the dialogue, especially in the *Gorgias* (though to some extent also the *Protagoras*), which has sometimes been called a dialogue on dialogue. In the course of his successive exchanges with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, Socrates points to the principal rules of dialogue as he practices it or, more accurately, as he would like to practice it. As will quickly become apparent, several of the rules of the following (non-exhaustive) list are absent from Cicero’s brief sketch.

Let us begin with the main *general* rules. (1) We must be prepared to give an account of our own claims and convictions (*Prt.* 336c1: λόγον τε δοῦναι καὶ δέξασθαι; cf. *Plt.* 286a5); (2) dialogue is a common search for truth rather than a fight for victory; (3) its principal aim is the liberation from false beliefs (and possibly the discovery of truth);²¹ (4) the interlocutor must possess three qual-

locutioni). The Tone of Debate (*contentio*) is energetic (*acris*), and is suited to both proof and refutation” (*et ad confirmandum et ad confutandum*) (tr. Caplan).

20 On the struggle (*ἀγωνίζεσθαι*) in dialogue (*διαλέγεσθαι*) as well as the gap between theory and practice in Plato’s dialogues, see Renaud 2009, col. 181–182.

21 I need not take a position on the very controversial question whether the Socratic *elenchus*’ aim is exclusively refuting or also defending theses.

ities without which authentic dialogue is impossible: friendship or goodwill (εὐνοία), knowledge or competence (ἐπιστήμη), and frankness or freedom of speech (παρρησία) (*Grg.* 487a–d); (5) we ought to remain calm and not get angry if our opinion is refuted (*Grg.* 457d–e); (6) we must seek logical coherence, that is, agreement (ὁμολογία) with the reason in us (*Grg.* 481d–482c). As for the main *particular* rules: (7) there must be two interlocutors and no more, the questioner and the respondent, since the interlocutor’s agreement is the only one that counts (*Grg.* 474a–b); (8) the questioner must obtain the interlocutor’s agreement at each step of the discussion, which rules out long speeches; (9) the roles of questioner and respondent are interchangeable; each one may in turn question and respond (*Grg.* 462a3–5); (10) logical *elenchus* (ἔλεγχος), or refutation, typically proceeds in two steps: (a) the questioner, usually Socrates, asks a question (often of definition: “What is x?”; also “Is x y”), to which the respondent must answer, thus becoming the defender of a thesis; (b) a series of questions follows leading to reformulations of the initial thesis on the part of the respondent and usually to the refutation; (11) the questioner tests the consistency between the various claims of the respondent (logical consistency), but he can also test the consistency between his claims and his way of life (moral consistency).²² Hence the necessity of frankness or sincerity: the respondent must stand behind what he says, which implies both *παρρησία* and *ἐπιστήμη*, as he must know what he himself thinks and express it according to the rules.²³

2.2 *Plato and Cicero: Disagreements and Agreements*

The present study is not concerned so much with Plato’s and Cicero’s *practice* of dialogue as with their respective *conceptions* of it.²⁴ It is nevertheless important to point out at the outset two differences pertaining to their practice of the written dialogue, which will then be qualified. First, Plato often opposes the Socratic dialogue (διαλέγεσθαι), proceeding by questions and answers, to long speech, which he identifies negatively with rhetoric (ῥητορικὴ) (*Grg.* 471d–

22 Cf. *Grg.* 482b4–6: “or else, if you leave this unrefuted, then by the Dog, the god of the Egyptians, Callicles will not agree with you, Callicles, but will be dissonant with you all your life” (ἐν ἅπαντι τῷ βίῳ) (tr. Zeyl); *La.* 188d3–6: the most beautiful harmony (ἁρμονία καλλίστη) is not the one on the lyre or some other pleasurable instrument, but actually on his own life “rendering [it] harmonious by fitting his deeds to his words” (αὐτοῦ βίον σύμφωνον τοῖς λόγοις πρὸς τὰ ἔργα) (tr. Sprague).

23 See Nancy’s pioneering study (1996) as well as, on the moral dimension of the dialectical virtues, Geiger 2006.

24 On Cicero’s practice of dialogue see Schofield 2008.

472c; cf. Quint. *Inst.* v, 14.27–29). Cicero does often praise the Socratic method, including as we have seen in the passage on the art of conversation, but in his philosophical dialogues (*sermones*) he most often opts for the antilogic debate, the *disputatio in utramque partem*, opposing uninterrupted speeches (*oratio perpetua*). Such is the case, for example, in the *Academica*, *De finibus*, and *De natura deorum*.²⁵ This difference in practice is no doubt due to Cicero's bent for oratory, but also to his conviction that *disputatio* allows for a more complete presentation of a doctrine.²⁶ Second, despite the rule of reciprocity, the Socratic dialogue in Plato is most often a dialogue between unequal interlocutors, as the questioner-protagonist (Socrates) is the leader of the discussion. Cicero's dialogues present conversations between equal interlocutors who belong to the Roman elite and show mutual esteem. These two fundamental differences must at once be qualified. In Plato's early dialogues Socrates sometimes uses uninterrupted speech. Such is the case in his fictive questions, which introduce a monologue within a brief dialogue, and above all in speeches such as the personification of the Laws in the *Crito* (50a–54c), the commentary on Simonides' poem in the *Protagoras* (342–347a), the stories about the leaking jars in the *Gorgias* (492d–494a), and the same dialogue's final myth (523a–527e). In addition, the equality prevailing in the Ciceronian dialogues implies the exclusion of interlocutors not belonging to the Roman elite or expected to accede to it.

Let us now consider the principal agreements. *Disputatio* as well as *sermo* are characterized by freedom, as opposed to the intransigence (*pertinacia*) of a dogmatic attitude (cf. *Tusc.* 11.5). This freedom in Cicero's dialogues is manifested in various ways: witticism, irony (*De or.* 11.269–270), and the seemingly improvised character of the dramatic action (*De or.* 1.207). This freedom of scepticism does not, however, exclude the defence of some beliefs like the existence of the divine in and around us (cf. *Tusc.* 1.30). With regard to the passions, anger is banished as it is in Plato. Finally, there is the decisive importance of goodwill, since conversation flourishes best among friends (*in amicitia*).²⁷

25 Cicero calls the conversations in his own dialogues *sermones*, and the written dialogues themselves he (often) calls *disputationes*, which are by nature mimetic and include a significant rhetorical dimension: *Fin.* 11.17; *Tusc.* 1, 112. For an analysis and defense of the rhetorical strategy in *Fin.* 11, see Inwood 1990.

26 Cf. *Fin.* 11.3: *Nos commodius agimus. Non enim solum Torquatus dixit quid sentiret sed etiam cur.* See however, in the same passage, Cicero's stated preference in principle for the Socratic method (*cum in rebus singulis insistas et intelligas quid quisque concedat*), which Cicero at first adopts but quickly gives up in favour of uninterrupted speeches.

27 *Off.* 1.58. Cf. *Fam.* 1X. 24.3; Lévy 1993, 404–405; Remer 1999, 48.

In short, the moral virtues of conversation in Cicero are essentially those of the *humanitas* ideal: courtesy, self-restraint, mildness (*comitas, clementia*), and goodwill (*benevolentia*).²⁸ Cicero's conception agrees with Plato's, with the difference that the practice of dialogue that the Roman thinker privileges above all is the peaceful dialogue among friends characterized by a conciliatory spirit. Still, in Cicero too, goodwill and the care for truth-telling occasionally require reproof and correction (*obiurgationes*), as will be discussed in § 3.

2.3 *Other Ethical Assumptions and Implications*

Let us now explore the more general implications of the art of conversation (I.132–137). According to Cicero the power of speech (*oratio*), and especially that of dialogue (*sermo, colloquium*, etc.), being that which distinguishes us from animals (*De or.* 1.32–33; cf. *Inv.* 1.5; Quint. *Inst.* 11.16, 16), allows us to seek the truth by relying on commonly shared values. An important question arises: does conversation as Cicero understands it ultimately rest on common values or does it rather constitute the condition of knowledge and ethics?

Claude Roubinet puts forth the general thesis (with no direct link to Cicero) that sociability exists before the exchange (1981, 205). From this point of view, goodwill constitutes one of the preconditions of dialogue, since the willingness to listen and respond implies the recognition of the human community, including local traditions such as the *mos maiorum*. This would explain why in his dialogues Cicero features the great Roman political orators; in addition to suiting the subject of discussion, the characters chosen also embody the *humanitas* ideal, which thus contributes to the legitimation of philosophy at Rome (*Cato M.* 3; *Amic.* 4. Cf. Ruch 1958, 403–404). According to Lévy, however, this foundational sociability in Cicero is largely idealized or dreamed, and it is not applicable to Cicero's purely theoretical works such as the *Academica*. In the second version of the *Academica*, in which the main speaker is the scholar Varro, the question of truth predominates and therewith the ideal of the contemplative life in comparison to the active life. This predominance is well illustrated in the correspondence at the time between Cicero and Varro, who in Cicero's eyes admirably embodies the contemplative life (βίος θεωρητικός).²⁹ In the *De officiis*, however, Cicero claims the primacy of moral action over the search for truth: "all the praise that belongs to virtue lies in action" (*virtutis enim laus omnis in actione consistit*; *Off.* 1.19, tr. Griffin and Atkins). This is all the

28 *De or.* 1.35, 106. Cf. Becker 1938, 19–20; Leeman and Pinkster 1981, 82; Renaud 1998, col. 81–84; Zoll 1962, 105–133, in particular 129–133.

29 *Fam.* IX.1–8. See Lévy's (1992, 132–137) analysis of that correspondence.

more true in the context of an intermediary ethics, which explains why frankness is nowhere cited explicitly as one of the virtues of conversation. Lévy goes further, however. According to him, the old political concept of frankness or freedom of speech (παρρησία) seems to play “no important role in philosophical texts prior to Philodemus” (1993, 411). He refers to the fact that the philosophical conversation in the Academy, as Cicero writes in the *Academia*, consists in seeking truth without any contention (*sine ulla contentione*), intransigence or stubbornness—in other words, without dogmatism (*Acad.* II (*Luc.*), 7). With regard to Plato, Lévy claims that “Callicles, a character full of violence and intolerance, represents an intrusion of *contentio* into the Platonic *sermo* that bears the title *Gorgias*” (403). In what follows I will try to show in what sense frankness (παρρησία) does in fact constitute an important dialectical virtue in the *Gorgias* as well as a significant component of the art of conversation in the *De officiis*, albeit in a more limited sense than in Plato.

3 Friendship and Truth

3.1 Criticism and Frankness

In the *Gorgias* Socrates claims that his interlocutor Callicles possesses the three dialectical virtues: goodwill (εὐνοία), knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), and frankness (παρρησία, 487a–e). Whether this praise is ironic or not, it implies a general hypothetical statement: the dialogue between them, as any dialogue worthy of the name, is not possible unless the interlocutor truly possesses these three virtues. As the discussion and the dramatic action quickly show, this is not all the case. Callicles **embodies** both his thesis that might is right and the unrestrained hedonism he defends (482c–486d, 488b–499b). He identifies with his impulses (491e–492c), reason being for him merely an instrument for their satisfaction. Socrates seeks to demonstrate that Callicles has a false conception of himself and that in rejecting justice and self-control he makes himself unfit for partnership and therefore for dialogue (*Grg.* 507e5: κοινωνεῖν γὰρ ἀδύνατος). More than once, Callicles gives up the principle of frankness (παρρησία) in order to avoid self-contradiction and refutation (*Grg.* 495a5–9, 499b4–c2; cf. 505d4–7). Refutation thus reveals the contradiction in his words (λόγοι) and more fundamentally between his words and his actions (ἔργα).

There are good reasons to believe that (a) Cicero’s final remarks on the art of conversation regarding the necessity of rebuke and criticism (*Off.* I, 136–137) refer directly or indirectly to the *Gorgias* and (b) that this reference sheds light on the relation between *contentio* and *sermo*. Let us cite this time at length the relevant section paraphrased earlier:

A further point: sometimes it happens that it is necessary (*necessariae*) to reprove (*obiurgationes*) someone. In that case we may perhaps need to use a more emphatic tone of voice (*vocis contentione maiore*), or sharper and more serious language, and even to behave so that we seem to be acting in anger. However, we should have recourse to this sort of criticism (*hoc genus castigandi*) in the way that we do to surgery and cauterization (*ad urendum et secandum*), rarely and unwillingly; never unless it is necessary, if no other medicine (*medicina*) can be found.³⁰ However, anger itself should be far from us ... [137]. One ought for the most part to resort only to mild criticism (*clementi castigatione*), though combined with a certain seriousness (*gravitate*) so as to show severity (*severitas*) while avoiding abusiveness. We must furthermore make it clear that any sharpness there may be in the reproof (*obiurgatio*) has been adopted for the sake of the person who is being reproved.

CIC. *Off.* 1, 136–137 (tr. GRIFFIN and ATKINS, modified)

The expression “surgery and cauterization” (*ad urendum et secandum*)³¹ as well as the language of rebuke and criticism (*obiurgatio, castigatio*)³² clearly recall the *Gorgias*. At the end of his exchange with Polus, Socrates defends a good use of rhetoric, which consists in chastising and revealing false pretence to knowledge:

[He] must compel himself and the others not to play the coward, but to grit his teeth and present himself with grace and courage as to a doctor for cauterization and surgery (ὥσπερ τέμνειν καὶ κάειν ἰατρῶ).

PL. *Grg.* 480c5–7 (tr. ZEYL)

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- 30 The medical analogy is employed earlier in the treatise (*Off.* 1.83): “When confronting danger, therefore, we should copy the doctor (*imitanda medicorum*), whose custom it is to treat mild illnesses mildly, though he is forced (*coguntur*) to apply riskier, double-edged, remedies to more serious illnesses” (tr. Griffin and Atkins).
- 31 Cicero uses the same expression, at the time of the *De officiis*, towards his enemy Mark Anthony (*Philippics* VIII.15), this time as an analogy of the “body of the State”: “If there be in the body anything such as to injure the rest of the body we suffer it to be cauterized and cut out (*uri secarique*), that some member, rather than the whole body, should perish; so in the body of the State (*sic in rei publicae corpore*)” (tr. Ker). Cf. Dyck 1996, 314.
- 32 Other than those in the *De off.* already referred to, here follow the occurrences of these two terms and their cognates in Cicero’s philosophical writings; for *obiurgatio*: *Off.* 111.83; *Nat. D.* 1.5; *Tusc.* 11.50; *Amic.* 88; 89; 90; for *castigatio*: *De leg.* 11.62; *Tusc.* 11.50; 111.64; IV.66; V.4.

With regard to “true politics” (ἀληθῶς πολιτικὴ τέχνη, *Grg.* 521d7; cf. 464b), towards the end of his exchange with Callicles Socrates prophesies his trial by comparing himself to a doctor accused by a pastry chef and judged by a jury of children. The pastry chef will accuse him as follows:

Children, this man has worked many great evils on you, yes on you. He destroyed (διαφθείρει) the youngest among you by cutting and burning them (τέμνων τε καὶ κάων).

PL. *Grg.* 521e6–8 (tr. ZEYL)

The expression employed in 480c and 521e, τέμνειν καὶ κάειν, is nearly identical to that in Cicero (*ad urendum et secandum*), the order of words being simply reversed. Moreover, in the *Gorgias* the medical and juridical analogies are combined to underscore the parallel between argument and dramatic action. As Callicles refuses to recognize the refutation or even to respond, Socrates exhorts him, comparing refutation to punishment (κόλασις, κολάζειν) as the theme of the discussion being enacted by them:

This fellow won't put up with being benefited and with his undergoing the very thing the discussion's about, with being disciplined (περὶ οὗ ὁ λόγος ἐστὶ, κολαζόμενος).

PL. *Grg.* 505c3–4 (tr. ZEYL)

Socrates thus compares dialectic to medical treatment and judicial discipline, and this in the heat of the action, when examining and refuting his interlocutor. These three passages from the *Gorgias* reveal a double parallelism: on the one hand, between punishment (and medicine) and dialectic; on the other, between argument and dramatic action.³³ Frankness (παρρησία) is thus required for both the questioner (Socrates) and the respondent.

Plato seems to achieve a double transfer in the *Gorgias*: that of the political παρρησία of the democratic debate to παρρησία of a philosophical conversation; and that of a conventional rhetoric that hides and flatters to one that accuses and chastises (κατηγορεῖν, κολάζειν).³⁴ This double transfer, taking place for the

33 Likewise when Socrates exhorts Polus to recognize the refutation: “Don't shrink back from answering, Polus. You won't get hurt in any way. Submit yourself nobly to the argument as you would to a doctor” (ἀλλὰ γενναίως τῷ λόγῳ ὡσπερ ἰατρῷ) (475d4–6; tr. Zeyl).

34 *Grg.* 480b–d. In the *Gorgias* a dozen of each of those two terms and their cognates are found. In the *Lysis* the verb κολάζειν is also used by the young Lysis when referring to Socrates' way of arguing (211c3); Socrates himself is of the opinion that “this is how

most part tacitly through the dramatic action (ἔργω), is embodied in Socratic “true politics,” the function of which is the care of the soul, namely the liberation from the greatest evil, ignorance, and hence from injustice (cf. Erler 2010, 286–287). Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* also uses the language of chastisement or discipline (κολαστηρίου ἔνεκα) to characterize the refutation Socrates inflicted on those who think they know everything.³⁵

The understanding of refutation as a disciplinary measure is well illustrated in Socrates’ treatment of Alcibiades in Plato as well as in Aeschines of Sphettus. In Plato’s *Symposium* Socrates is said to have destroyed the pride of princelike Alcibiades. The latter confesses that when Socrates begins to speak, “the tears come streaming down my face” (δάκρυα ἐκχεῖται ὑπὸ τῶν λόγων τῶν τοῦτου, 215e2–3). According to Plutarch’s testimony, in his treatise *How to tell a flatterer from a friend*, Plato once praised Aeschines for understanding Socrates’ capacity to correct and amend (ἐπανορθοῦν)³⁶ by his speech those with whom he associated (67c–e). A little later, Plutarch reports the episode of the *Symposium* cited above and underscores the importance of frankness in what is an indirect reference to Aeschines’ *Alcibiades* (68f–69a). I reproduce in what follows the second passage in Plutarch, a passage considered a fragment of Aeschines by Dittmar and Giannantoni:

In what circumstances, then, should a friend be severe (σφοδρόν), and when should he be emphatic (τῷ τόνῳ) in using frank speech (παρρησίας)? It is when occasions demand of him that he check (κολοῦσαι) the headlong course of pleasure or of anger or of arrogance, or that he abate avarice or curb inconsiderate heedlessness. ... In such manner Socrates tried to keep Alcibiades in check (ἐκόλουε), and drew an honest tear from his eyes (δάκρυον ἐξῆγεν ἀληθινόν) by exposing his faults (ἐξελεγχόμενου), and so turned his heart (τὴν καρδίαν ἔστρεψε).

AECHINES *Alcibiades* 69e–f = SSR 51 = fr. 10 ed. Dittmar (tr. COLE BABBIT)

you should talk with your boyfriends (τοῖς παιδικοῖς διαλέγεσθαι), Hippothales, cutting them down to size and putting them in their place (κατιδῶν οὖν αὐτὸν ἀγωνιώντα καὶ τεθορυβημένον ὑπὸ τῶν λεγομένων), instead of swelling them up and spoiling them, as you do” (210e3–6; trans. Lombardo). See Renaud 2002, 188–194.

35 *Mem.* 1.4.1. On παρρησία in Xenophon and other Socratics see Palumbo 2013.

36 In the Platonic corpus we find 33 occurrences of the verb ἐπανορθοῦν and its cognates, two of which are in the *Gorgias*: 461c6–8: πρεσβύτεροι γινόμενοι σφαλλώμεθα, παρόντες ὑμεῖς οἱ νεώτεροι ἐπανορθώτε ἡμῶν τὸν βίον καὶ ἐν ἔργοις καὶ ἐν λόγοις, and 462a2.

It is possible that Aeschines' *Alcibiades* is the source of Cynic-Stoic maxims (ἀποφθέγματα) on the harshness of reproof as a salutary means of correction.³⁷ As is well known, παρρησία will be an important element of the Epicurean conception of philosophy as medicine of the soul, notably in Philodemus (c. 110–140 BCE).³⁸ The medical analogy is part of the ideas that were being discussed in the intellectual circles to which Cicero belonged. He refers in the *De oratore* (III.117) to the opposition between friend and flatterer as a rhetorical *topos*. Cicero's criticism of the Cynics (cf. *Off.* 1.128, 148) might conceivably be part of a polemical strategy against Philodemus or some other contemporary. Cicero does not, however, reject all forms of frankness: rebuke and criticism (*obiurgatio, castigatio*), which are sometimes necessary as we have seen, depend on its use. Furthermore, the *De amicitia* (esp. 91–92) constitutes nothing less than a praise of frankness, as will be briefly discussed in § 3.3.

3.2 *Two Kinds of Criticism in Plato: Moral and Dialectical*

An objection might be raised at this point. Since the reproof or correction referred to in *De officiis* appears to be moral or psychological in nature, in what sense can it possibly correspond to Socratic refutation, which is primarily logical in character? Cicero remains admittedly vague and says nothing explicit in this passage about the argumentative dimension of rebuke and criticism.

It might be helpful to recall here Plato's general distinction between two kinds of chastising or reproof: (a) juridical or conventional punishment (e.g., flogging, imprisonment, exile, execution; *Grg.* 480c8–d3); (b) dialectical or philosophical punishment, namely refutation (ἐλεγχος). In the *Gorgias* Socrates often uses the same term for *both* kinds, namely κολλάζειν (as well as κατηγορεῖν, "to accuse"). In the *Apology* (25e6–26a7) Socrates rejects conventional punishment (κολλάζειν) as ineffective in the case of unwilling wrongdoings (which all wrongdoings are, according to Socrates), as opposed to the private instruction (νουθετεῖν) that teaches (διδάσκειν). In the *Sophist*, the same distinction is drawn, albeit in different and even contrary terms. The Stranger distinguishes between two kinds of ignorance corresponding to two types of

37 Cf. *SVF* I.384, 387, both of which concern Aristo of Chios. See Alesse 2000, 162–164, according to whom these anecdotes concerning Alcibiades go back to Aeschines of Sphettus. On reception of the Platonic *Alcibiades* in Cicero see Renaud and Tarrant 2015, 110–125.

38 On Philodemus see Erler 2010, 284–285. On his treatise on frankness (περὶ παρρησίας), cf. Gigante 1972 and its English translation in Konstan 1998; more generally on the possible relations between Cicero and Philodemus, cf. Auvray and Delattre 2001. On the reception of the Socrates figure in Epicurus and in Plutarch see Hessler and Roskam (in this volume).

teaching (διδασκαλία), the first being old fashioned and rough, the second newer and softer: (1) admonition (νουθετητική), again considered ineffective (insofar as virtue is knowledge), and (2) refutation (ἔλεγχος), superior by far, as it purges the individual from the learning-impeding false pretence to know.³⁹ As we see, the vocabulary changes and is sometimes contradictory, but the basic distinction between conventional punishment (dealing above all with the non-rational in us) and Socratic punishment (primarily if not exclusively logical or argumentative in nature) is maintained. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates frequently uses the term *κολάζειν* and other cognates (as well as *κατηγορεῖν*) as though he accepted the conventional conception of **punishment**. This can be explained (although I cannot argue for this interpretation in detail here) by the fact that he adapts to his interlocutors' prejudices in order to lead them gradually to the dialectic conception, and this at the conceptual level as well as in deed, in the very action of the dialogue.⁴⁰

In the case of Cicero, determining exactly the kind or kinds of correction he has in mind is not an easy task. Cicero might have had both sorts of correction in mind, or some intermediary definition somewhere between the conventional and the dialectical. It would be unduly restrictive to suppose that Cicero is referring purely and simply to the moral *elenchus* (reproof) as opposed to the logical *elenchus* (refutation), and this for at least two reasons: Cicero's characterization of it is deliberately vague or generic;⁴¹ and the Socratic logical *elenchus* itself often includes a moral or existential dimension, as visible already in its (etymological) connection with the notion of shame.⁴² At any

39 *Soph.* 229b7–230e3. The same basic distinction is found in the *Eudemian Ethics* 1 (1214b–1215a) where Aristotle assimilates conventional political correction (κόλασις), such as whipping (πληγῶν; cf. *Gr.* 480c8, 485c2, 485d2, 524c5), to medical treatment, both of which he calls correction (κολάσεως ἰατρικῆς ἢ πολιτικῆς) as forms of compulsion, which suits the child (παιδαρίοις) or the insane (παραφρονοῦσι), for such are unable to profit from the other, superior, treatment by refutative argument (ἔλεγχος).

40 Cf. the enlightening analysis of Rowe 2007, 144–152.

41 The Greek terms for reproof (μέμφεσθαι, ψέγειν) used in the *Gorgias* have in general a conventional, not a dialectical meaning. On the use and defense of the strict distinction between moral *elenchus* as reproof blame and logical *elenchus* as refutation, see Dorion 2000, cxlvii.

42 As Vlastos 1994, 9, point this out, despite his primary interest in the logical dimension of the *elenchus*. (See above, section 2.1, dialectical rule 11.) Let us recall that the Greek term ἔλεγχος and its cognates originally meant “reproach,” then later also the “examination” or “test” of opinions and of the persons holding them, and later still “refutation” (or “proof”). Cf. LSJ s.v. The older meanings of ἔλεγχος and their connotations (reproach and especially examination, as synonymous with ἐξέτασις) are still present in Plato's dialogues,

rate, in both kinds of *elenchus*, for Cicero as well as Plato, punishment depends on frankness (παρρησία).

3.3 *Contentio and sermo as Complementary*

What is the relation between *sermo* and *contentio* in Cicero, and more generally between Socratic dialogue and Ciceronian conversation? The *Gorgias* admittedly constitutes an extreme case insofar as it is a dialogue that transforms into a polemic. However, the practice of polemic and the language of punishment are not unique to this dialogue.⁴³ At the very end the *Apology*, for instance, Socrates makes the following request to those of the audience who accused (κατηγόροις) and convicted him (καταψηφισαμένοις):

When my sons grow up, punish them (τιμωρήσασθε)⁴⁴ by causing them the same kind of grief (λυπούντες) that I caused you (ἐλύπουν), if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue If you do this, I shall have been justly treated (δίκαια) by you, and my sons also.

PL. *Ap.* 41e2–42a2 (tr. GRUBE, modified)

From the lexical point of view the *Apology* is at variance with the *Gorgias*, but from the semantic point of view the idea is essentially the same: the care of the other, just like the care of oneself, must be friendly but rough, since what counts is the soul's good and truth rather than the pleasure derived from flattery (κολακεία).⁴⁵ In Cicero, the intimate link uniting friendship and *sermo* (transformed in part into *contentio*) is confirmed earlier in Book 1 of *De officiis*:

as indicated in the *Sophist* passage referred to above, which clearly brings out the link between the *elenchus* as refutation and *elenchus* as shaming: “The people who cleanse the soul, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it (πρὶν ἂν ἐλέγχων τις τὸν ἐλεγρόμενον εἰς αἰσχύνην καταστήσας)” (230d1–2; tr. White). Cf. *Symp.* 216b2–3: ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦτον μόνον αἰσχύνομαι. On the humbling effect of the Socratic *elenchus*, especially in the *Lysis*, see Renaud 2002.

43 In his study of the *Gorgias* that corroborates my interpretation in many ways, Sedley 2009, 60 n. 12, raises doubts on precisely this question.

44 This formulation is perhaps not without a tint of irony, despite the solemn context, as τιμωρήσασθε can also mean “avenge yourself” (as Grube translates).

45 464c7–d1: conventional, shameful rhetoric “takes no thought at all of whatever is best” and only of “what's most pleasant at the moment” (ὅπερ ὑπέδου, καὶ τοῦ μὲν βελτίστου οὐδὲν φροντίζει) (tr. Zeyl); 503a7–9: noble rhetoric on the contrary consists of “getting the souls of the citizens to be as good as possible and of striving valiantly to say what is best,

A shared life and a shared living, counsel and conversation (*sermones*), encouragement, comfort, and sometime even reproofs (*etiam obiurgationes*), flourish most of all in friendships (*in amicitis*); and friendship is most pleasing when it is cemented by similarity of conduct.

CIC. *Off.* I.58 (tr. GRIFFIN and ATKINS)

But it is above all in the *De amicitia* that Cicero deals fully with the connection between truth and friendship. There we read: “whatever there is [in it] is genuine and comes from its own accord” (*id est verum et voluntarium*; *Amic.* 26; tr. Armistead Falconer). A significant part of this treatise is devoted to the relation between frankness and friendship (89–100). Hence the reiterated denunciation of spurious friendships and of false friends. A friendship without frankness, without the willingness to say and hear the truth, is undeserving of the name;⁴⁶ as Cicero writes,

They are annoyed, not at the fault, but at the reproof (*obiurgari moleste*); whereas, on the contrary, they ought to grieve for the offense and rejoice at its correction (*correctione gaudere*).⁴⁷

Amic. 90 (tr. ARMISTEAD FALCONER)

Contentio in *sermo*, when judiciously used, is like a friendly and kindly battle against error (in judgment or behaviour). The harshness of the reproof (*obiurgatio*), just as that of punishment (*κολάζειν*) in Plato, implies frankness or freedom of speech (*παρρησία*) conceived as a salutary means of correction and education.⁴⁸

whether the audience will find it more pleasant or more unpleasant” (*διαμάχεσθαι λέγοντα τὰ βέλτιστα, εἴτε ἡδίω εἴτε ἀηδέστερα ἔσται τοῖς ἀκούουσιν*).

46 *Amic.* 88–98. There one also reads the following passages: “it deserves to be branded as a vice peculiar to fickle and false-hearted mean who say everything with a view to pleasure and nothing with a view to truth” (*ad voluptatem loquentium omnia, nihil ad veritatem*)” (91); “hypocrisy (*simulatio*) ... is especially inimical to friendship (*repugnat maxime*), since it utterly destroys sincerity (*veritatem*), without which the word friendship can have no meaning” (92); “friendship which is wholly weighed in the scales of truth (*quae tota veritate perpenditur*)” (97) (tr. Armistead Falconer).

47 This remark recalls Socrates’ declaration in the *Gorgias*: “And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted (εἰμί; τῶν ἡδέως μὲν ἄν ἐλεγχθέντων εἴ τι μὴ ἀληθὲς λέγω) if I say anything untrue” (458a3–4; tr. Zeyl). See also *Ap.* 23a1–2, c8.

48 On the diverging, Straussian reading of the *Gorgias* downplaying the importance of frankness as a dialectic virtue in the dialogue, as defended by Stauffer 2006, see Renaud 2008, 70–73.

Conclusion

Carlos Lévy recognizes that, according to Cicero, genuine conversation cannot be dissociated from genuine friendship, and he aptly underscores a tension in his thinking between theory and practice:

In absolute terms, there is no difference in Cicero between the conversation that produces pleasure and the conversation that produces truth. In practice, there is in his work at least a certain tension between these two models.

LÉVY 1993, 415

This tension is inseparable from the distinction between two kinds of friendship (corresponding to the two ethics, the intermediary and superior): the friendship discussed in the *De officiis* is not the perfect friendship of the wise but is instead the so-called common friendship (*de communibus amicitiiis*, III.45). In the *De amicitia*, the subject of which is true friendship, Cicero quotes a saying of Cato the elder:

Some men are better served by their bitter-tongued enemies than by their sweet-smiling friends because the former often tell the truth (*verum saepe dicere*), the latter, never.

Amic. 90 (tr. ARMISTEAD FALCONER)

The cause of the tension between friendship and frankness seems to lie ultimately in the insurmountable human imperfection—the imperfection that is unwilling to show itself and especially to be shown by others. It is this imperfection that Panaetius' middle ethics seeks to accommodate as expounded by Cicero in the Book I and II of the *De officiis*. Between the antagonistic *contentio* of the lawyer or politician and the free and gentle *sermo* of true—that is, wise—friends, there exists an intermediary kind of conversation in which frankness has to negotiate its rights with those of indulgence.⁴⁹

49 Cicero admits in the *De legibus* (III.1), through the mouth of Marcus, how difficult (*difficillam*) it is to combine seriousness (*gravitas*) with gentleness (*humanitas*).

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