Introduction: dialogue and Enlightenment

This book presents a history of philosophical dialogue in the British Enlightenment and an account of the British Enlightenment by means of a history of philosophical dialogue. As such, two questions arise at the outset: first, why is philosophical dialogue relevant to an understanding of the Enlightenment; second, why does genre provide a basis for historiography? Although the methodological question would seem to take precedent, I shall not begin with a theoretical defense of a genre-based literary history. The issues involved are too complex to be treated in the abstract and will therefore be addressed at points throughout this book, especially in chapter 1, where I discuss the way genre distinctions functioned during the early eighteenth century as a means of classifying readers, stipulating preferred values, and instituting normative modes of interpretation; in chapter 8, where I describe attempts to restrict the composition of philosophical dialogue through a “poetics” of the genre; and in the epilogue, where I explain why I have written a generic history of dialogue and dialectic rather than a dialectical history of genre and Enlightenment.

An answer to the second question, why philosophical dialogue is relevant to the British Enlightenment, must also be the work of the following chapters. Nevertheless, because I shall be referring to the “failure” of philosophical dialogue and the project it represented during the Enlightenment, it is necessary to preface a few remarks about the history of the form prior to this period.

The problem dialogue poses for Enlightenment philosophy and theology is implicit in a profound ambivalence situated at the origin of dialogue in Greek philosophy, an ambivalence that becomes untenable once Christian Neoplatonism encounters the secularizing tendencies of Modernity. Origins are usually located in etymologies or in myths; therefore, I shall offer two genetic accounts, in order to argue that both present the same dilemma, a problem Enlightenment philosophers feel they must solve, and cannot.

Dialogue’s etymological ambivalence derives more from confusion about its prefix than its root. The prefix διά, understandably but erroneously
extracted from *dia*, implied for some the division of the *logos* into two. "The tendency is to confine it [dialogue] to two persons, perhaps through associating *dia* with *di*," remarks *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The important point about this reduction of many to two is not that the number of speakers is restricted, but that the division of the *logos* is always in principle reversible, from many to two, from two to one. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say that the *logos*, conceived as absolute unity, permits itself to be divided for the sake of human comprehension, with the proviso that division remain all the time a proptaeic to the recovery of a coherent whole. Thus, one definition of dialogue became a discourse between two speakers leading to a synthesis of viewpoints – not mere eristic, but the purposeful discovery of truth. With this reduction of *dia* to *di*, dialogue became synonymous with a remarkably useful concept called dialectic. Richard McKeon, summarizing the equation, writes, "The method of dialogue is dialectic in the sense that two or more speakers or two or more positions are brought into relations in which it becomes apparent that each position is incomplete and inconclusive unless assimilated to a higher truth."  

If not fanciful, this definition at least involved a selective blindness to the actual prefix, which is *dia*. *Dia* means passage, transition, movement, with no limitation upon the number of voices sharing in the *logos*. The important point here is that emphasis shifts from the *logos* to the activity it enjoins among thinking subjects, finally irreducible one to the other. Thus, another definition of dialogue simply referred to any verbal interaction among two or more voices, leading to no necessary resolution. Again, Richard McKeon captures this other conception of the genre: "Dialogue is statement and counterstatement, based on ordinary ways of life and ordinary uses of language, with no possible appeal to a reality beyond opposed opinions except through opinions about reality. Truth is perceived in perspective, and perspectives can be compared, but there is no overarching inclusive perspective."  

Maurice Blanchot describes the same split conception of dialogue through the recitation of an originary myth. For him dialogue’s ambivalence derives from an essential opposition between human being and being God. Blanchot writes, "I think of what Apollo affirms when, through the mouth of the poet,  

---

2 See Plato, *Republic*, bk. 5, 454a. Socrates (to Glaucon): "Many appear to me to fall into it [the art of contradiction] even against their wills...They pursue purely verbal opposition, practicing eristic, not dialectic on one another." The one who engages in dialectic thus "attempts through discourse of reason and apart from all perceptions of sense to find his way to the very essence of each thing and does not desert till he apprehends by thought itself the nature of the good in itself" (*Republic*, bk. 7, 539a-b). *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). All subsequent references to modern translations of Plato refer to this edition.  


© Cambridge University Press
Bacchylides, he says to Admetus: ‘You are a mere mortal; therefore your mind must harbor two thoughts at once.’ In other words a multiplicity of speech in a simultaneity of language.” For Blanchot, being’s division from absolute unity produces two divergent interpretations of dialogue. The first acknowledges duplicity as the fallen state of mere mortals, while aspiring, through dialogue, to regain the unitary condition of Godhead; the second revels in the liberating difference between the divine monologue and a human polyphony, emphasizing, exaggerating an irreducible plurality of voices. In the first case, Admetus remains enclosed in the circle of the God, fascinated with unity; in the second, Admetus leaves that circle to seek out what Blanchot calls a truly plural speech, “to receive the other as other, and the foreign as foreign.”

Whether one locates dialogue’s ambivalence in its etymology or in an imaginary scene of genesis, the split conception has influenced the entire history of the genre. Plato seems to have understood dialogue in both senses. As Gadamer and Bakhtin both observe, the early (aporetic) Platonic dialogues and the Seventh Letter differ from later Platonic texts setting forth the theory of knowledge or ideal form.7 We have, in the first case, dialogue as a basis for potentially interminable inquiry, search, and questioning, and, in the second, dialogue as a means of ascending from error (appearance, division) to truth (reality, synthesis). This latter sense of dialogue is, according to Gadamer, hardened into the dialectical method codified by Aristotle and subsumed within Christian Neoplatonism.

Plato’s divided response to dialogue corresponds with the plurality of meanings he assigned to dialectic. Charles Griswold describes “three senses of ‘dialectic’ in Plato. The first can be traced to ‘dialogesthai,’ i.e. to dialogue, the asking and answering of questions ... The second sense of dialectic ... is not critical, skeptical, or zetetic, but is rather the exposition of the dialectic of thought purified of its human and rhetorical context. [It] allows us to speak of ‘Plato’s system’ – a positive but incompletely developed teaching essentially independent of the cumbersome dialogue form ... [And] the third sense of dialectic ... is the ‘method of division and collection’ of classes evidently described in the Phaedrus on analogy with the butcher’s art.”8 In other words, the concept of dialectic repeats the etymological and existential ambivalence

6 Ibid., p. 82.
associated with the word dialogue, especially if one allows that Griswold’s third definition (division and classification) might be considered a subset of the second (synthesis) within a dialectical theory of knowledge.

The same division occurs throughout the long history of critical commentary on dialogue. In the *Poetics* Aristotle cannot decide what to do with philosophical dialogue, so he places Socratic Conversations in a nameless class of texts with the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus, thus lumping together the Socratic Conversations he would have known from his teacher’s polished performances and the parodic, extemporaneous invectives of the mimic performers. Köjève will find in Platonic dialogue a rudimentary expression of Hegel’s stronger dialectical thought: “the dialectical method was consciously and systematically used first by Socrates-Plato. But in fact it is as old as philosophy itself. For the dialectical method is nothing but the way of dialogue—that is, of discussion.” Yet Bakhtin, anxious to free dialogue from any totalizing system, arrives at just the opposite conclusion, celebrating the antic Socrates and disparaging the equation between dialogue and transcendental dialectic: “Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices . . . remove the intonations . . . carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness— and that’s how you get dialectics.”


11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. xxxii. The passage is taken from the editor’s introduction.

12 Although over-simplified, the distinction between the synthetic potential of comedy and the divisive threat of tragedy is commonplace in the history of criticism, just as it is in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*.
defines philosophical dialogue as wholly comedic. In this genre “poetry played the same subordinate role with regard to dialectic philosophy as that same philosophy was to play for many centuries with regard to theology.”

In other words, dialogue provides a thin representational veneer for transcendental dialectic; and since, for Nietzsche, Socratic dialogue transforms the titanic oppositions at war in tragedy into a domesticated intellectual drama, philosophical dialogue infects and destroys classical tragedy:

Socrates, the dialectical hero of the Platonic drama, shows a close affinity to the Euripidean hero, who is compelled to justify his actions by proof, and for that reason is often in danger of forfeiting our tragic compassion. For who among us can close his eyes to the optimistic element in the nature of dialectics, which sees a triumph in every syllogism and can breathe only in an atmosphere of cool, conscious clarity? Once that optimistic element had entered tragedy, it overgrew its Dionysiac regions and brought about their annihilation and, finally, the leap into genteel domestic drama.

Nietzsche’s strength as a writer is such that the question, “is this an accurate statement about the history of dialogue?” seems beside the point. Yet the view of dialogue as inherently optimistic fails to account for the ambivalence situated at its etymological heart; nor does it explain why anti-metaphysical skeptics like Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, and Allan Ramsay will attack Christian Neoplatonism by writing philosophical dialogues. While it is entirely true that within the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, “poetry played the same subordinate role with regard to dialectic philosophy as that same philosophy was to play for many centuries with regard to theology,” a tragic shadow, the other interpretation of dialogue, accompanies this tradition, never entirely repressed.

From the beginning of the Christian era until the middle of the eighteenth century, dialectic became one of the dominant methods of argument for Christian theology. Opposition to dialectic (for example, as a mere tool of the sophists, or as a banal school exercise) no doubt arose, but there was little doubt that dialectic, correctly conceived and executed, provided a method for bridging reason and revelation. Thomas Stanley, summarizing the

14 Ibid., p. 88.
15 Comment Richard McKeon, “Dialectic became the method of Christian theology and philosophy until the translation of Aristotle in the thirteenth century suggested the possibility of the two methods and two ways; dialectic was also opposed during the Middle Ages because it is a purely verbal art and because it applies reason to matters that transcend reason” (“Dialogue and Controversy in Philosophy,” pp. 29–30). I would argue that dialectic remains central to Christian theology through the middle of the eighteenth century: it is a necessary operation for any rational Christianism based upon analogy or induction from known sensory phenomena to an unknown supersensible domain. It therefore underlies the conceptual movement of physico-theology, the dominant theological position attempting to reconcile science and faith after the development of the Royal Society (1660) and before Hume’s critique of analogy.
tradition of Platonic dialectic in his *History of Philosophy* (1st edn., 1655–1662), calls dialectic “a Science, but, neither Mathematick, nor Opinion, because it is more perspicuous than sensible things; nor a Science, because ’tis more obscure than first Intelligibles.” Situated between opinion and certainty, sense data and first intelligibles, ethics and geometry, dialectic was thought to provide the means of ascent from the human to divine realm. Such was its comedic potential. Dialogue added to the logic of ascent the fiction of bodies assenting.

In metaphysical dialogues of the Christian Neoplatonic tradition—works such as Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Petrarch’s *Secretum*, Firenzuola’s *Dialogue on the Beauty of Women*, and Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*—the skeptical interpretation of dialogue is both incorporated and overcome: the teleological plot driven by transcendental dialectic carries us from thought’s potentially tragic division from the good, its immersion in an endless and aimless dialogue, to its final marriage with divine wisdom. But how did this overcoming of skepticism take place? The more probing the dialogue, the more fundamental its encounter with a skeptical “other,” the less implicit the *modus* of transition (the plot, dialectic) could remain. I shall discuss two moments in this complex history as a way of leading into the problem dialogue poses for philosophy and theology during the Enlightenment.

Augustine’s *Soliloquies* begins in the following way:

While I was turning over in my mind [volo mel ihibi] many and various matters, and searching zealously through many days for my very own self and my good, and what evil should be avoided; suddenly something spoke to me, whether it was I myself, or something external, or something internal, I do not know; for that is what I am struggling most to understand.  

Suddenly, private meditation gives way to dialogue, and even though Augustine cannot be sure about the origin of the second voice, he appears confident that it will lead him beyond *volo mel ihibi to scire*. Yet this visitor, which Augustine calls Ratio, begins to pose difficult questions. It first asks how Augustine intends to proceed from one matter to another (*hic te inimisse aliquid; cui commendabis, ut pergas ad alia*?). Augustine responds that he will secure his dialogue against slips of memory by writing it down. But his response only shows that Augustine has failed to grasp the more vital methodological question bound up in the phrase *cui commendabis, ut pergas ad alia?* Ratio restates the question:

---


Dialogue and Enlightenment

A: I desire to know God and the soul.
R: Nothing more?
A: Absolutely nothing.
R: Begin therefore to search. But first explain how, if God is demonstrated to you, you will be able to say that it is sufficient [si demonstretur Deus, possis dicere, Sat est].
A: I do not know how He would have to be demonstrated to me so that I could say it is sufficient [si dicam, Sat est], for I do not think I know anything as I want to know God.

Here is an extreme self-consciousness about the problem of method, threatening to transform the condescending progress of dialogue, pegas ad alia, back into a tragic volentii mihi. The tension resides in the ambivalent sense of the word “how” (quemodo). It doubles as a reference to method (nescio quemodo mihi demonstrari . . .) and as a statement of comparison (non scire aequum sit, quemodo scire Deum desideri). What troubles Augustine is the dependence of the first sense of quemodo upon the second; for if method relies on comparison, always relating a deduction to known premises, then God, arrived at in this way, must be colored by and reduced to the familiar—must, in other words, be fundamentally intrinsic rather than extrinsic. If God, conversely, is entirely other, then Augustine can have no idea when or how to say Sat est.

Much as Augustine would like to align dialogue with the logical stages of transcendental dialectic, an element of doubt remains. Reason does not so much solve the problem as shift attention from epistemology to psychopathology: “How do you, who do not yet know God, know that you know nothing like God?” (Qui nondum Deam nosis, unde nosi nihil te nosse Deo simile?). Because Augustine begins, like most intellectual voyagers in this tradition, a sick and partially blinded pilgrim, he cannot really say that he knows nothing like God, only that he has forgotten or suffered separation from what he already knows. The rudimentary fiction—an embodiment of the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis (recollection)—saves dialogue from any excessive encounter with skepticism. The young man is sick with something, but if he attaches himself to the one true image and holds it in place, guiding his faltering steps, he will reach his end. His sickness is a form of forgetting; dialogue is his medicine; and the dialectical discovery of a truth already known confirms the cure, the ability to say Sat est.

Poetic elements play a subordinate role in metaphysical dialogue, as Nietzsche observed, because they are called upon mainly to supplement a comedic ascent always in danger of circling back on itself and becoming tragic. They draw our attention away from the question Augustine cannot answer, representing dialectical reason as a capacity the pilgrim shares with the being of God, if only he could free himself of his mortal disease. The fiction must be partial, however, because the more fully the pilgrim’s disease—his doubts, his fascination with the things of this world and alienation from
the beyond – gains representation, the more arduous and doubtful his recovery becomes.  

Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which one commentator describes as the dramatic completion of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, arrives at a similar point of crisis, and reaches again for fiction as a means of staving off impasse.  

Unlike Augustine, Boethius is more certain about the nature of the second voice. She is Philosophy, a remarkable woman. She has her feet on the ground but her head in the clouds. And so the remorseful, half-blind pilgrim will need to travel up her, allegorically speaking, from toe to crown, body to intellect.  

Although the student rarely objects to any of the cures Philosophy offers, he does interrupt on one notable occasion. In book iv, Philosophy attempts to prove that evil does not exist, first by having her disciple agree that nothing is impossible for the Almighty, and then by arguing that since God can do no evil, evil must be nothing, since God can do anything. Bothed by the syllogism, Boethius responds, “You are playing with me … by weaving a labyrinthine argument from which I cannot escape. You seem to begin where you ended and to end where you began. Are you perhaps making a marvelous circle of the divine simplicity? … You proved all this without outside assumptions and used only internal proofs which draw their force from one another.”  

Philosophy calls her answer “the most important point of all”:  

It is the nature of the divine essence, neither to pass to things outside itself nor to take any external thing to itself … You ought not to be surprised that I have sought no outside proofs, but have used only those within the scope of our subject, since you learned, on Plato’s authority, that the language we use ought to be related to the subject of discourse.  

Philosophy’s response begs the question as fully as Augustine’s “How do you, who do not know God, know that you know nothing like God?” Philosophy makes a virtue of necessity by claiming that a God whose essence is circular and autonomous must be grasped through a method also circular and self-contained.

---


19 On the relation between Boethius and Augustine, see Edmund T. Silk, “Boethius’s *Consolatio philosophiae* as a Sequel to Augustine’s *Dialogues* and *Soliloquy*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 92 (1999), 19-39. Silk’s summary of the *Consolation* demonstrates how completely the plot of dialogue could be equated with the stages of transcendental dialectic: “there is a gradual but steady movement and unwavering progress towards the goal. As the work begins, it is true, the *nubes initiales* hang just as low as often at Caesareum, but Philosophy emerges from the cloud, majestically performs her function as healer, exactly charts the course of the journey, and completes it. The promise held out to Lictorius and Romainianus is triumphantly fulfilled” (33).


Dialogue and Enlightenment

Whether the explanation satisfies the pilgrim we do not learn. No reply follows. Instead, the prose dialogue breaks off, giving way to a proem recounting the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus, in his grief over his wife’s death, threatens the very order of the universe. His music makes the Furies weep. “Tantalus, long maddened by his thirst, ignores the waters he might now drink.” By some miracle Orpheus has employed human instruments to touch the divine. Even mythic figures are subservient to his song. We know the rest. Orpheus descends to the underworld, where he is granted Eurydice again, on the sole condition that leaving her not look back. He does, she is snatched away, and Orpheus is left staring into the abyss. Boethius supplies the moral: “This fable applies to all of you who seek to raise your minds to sovereign day. For whoever is conquered and turns his eyes to the pit of hell, looking into the inferno, loses all the excellence he has gained.”

When the dialogue and proem are juxtaposed, it becomes clear what “hell” is. Hell, the inferno, is dialectic, the method that has brought one to a point of revelation. To question that method, as the student does in the prose section, is to risk losing everything the method has produced. Philosophy, when asked to provide a ground for her own method, produces myth. Naturally, we are not meant to take this recourse as a fault. On the contrary, myth establishes a marvelous isomorphism between human reason and divine revelation, while issuing a warning against any further doubts. Dialectic is not a self-driven, tautological engine; it is presided over by an absolute sanction, whose authority can only be represented figuratively. As in Augustine, fictional elements supplement dialectical reason where it is most threatened, but always remain subordinate.

As the preceding examples show, more was at stake in the viability of philosophical dialogue than the truth of any specific doctrine. By fusing dramatic encounter with the logic of transcendental dialectic, metaphysical dialogue made the transition from reason to revelation, tragic division to comedic unity, seem a realizable fact of human experience. Yet these examples also foretell the fate of dialogue and dialectic under the skeptical, secularizing conditions endemic to Modernity. When the student questions the tautological appeal of dialectical syllogism, Philosophy must produce the authority in light of which a natural give-and-take of opinions on both sides of the question transforms itself into a truth. Myth silences doubt; but its very appearance within philosophical dialogue also brings into question the value that a given writer, or age, or religion has chosen to place beyond doubt.

In other words, under the pressure of a secularizing reason, metaphysical dialogue begins to thematize its own juridical structure: two or more parties exchange ideas, but their dialogue is not aimless; it is presided over by a

---

22 Ibid., p. 74.
transcendental authority — here, myth, elsewhere logos, God, Reason itself — assuring the transition from division to synthesis, doubt to determination. This authority, the transcendent third or criterium artis, both permitted human agents to reason their way towards divinity and was in turn confirmed by the success of their deliberations. Once thematized in this way, however, the third term begins to lose its transcendent aura: myth appears less like an emblem of divine revelation and more like a crude warning to the fledgling philosopher not to trespass on sacred ground.\textsuperscript{23}

The problem philosophical dialogue poses for the Enlightenment follows directly from these observations. What happens during an increasingly skeptical age, an age of methodological self-consciousness, of hell-gazing, when dialogue and dialectic begin to lose the transcendental reference point whose stability had assured the transition from tragic division to comedic unity? In 1644 Hezekiah Woodward expressed the problem with particular poignancy. Having written “A Dialogue Arguing that Arch-Bishops, Bishops, Curates, Neuters, Are to be Cut Off by the Law of God” (1644), the polemicist paused in his Preface to the work, alert to the objection that his dialogue might be taken to be nothing more than another tolerant mihi, a form of intellectual onanism: It is a Dialogue: and therein I dispute and argue the case with myself; and so wise I am, I will put no other arguments to my selfe, but what I can tell myself how to answer: and so I must needs overcome, as the Boy must winne the game, that plays with himselfe. Changing garb from controversialist to judge, he responds, I say againe, and as in the ears of GOD; that I have, by His good hand on me, thoroughly considered the present Controversie, and have desired to take-in, as my understanding did supply, what I thought could be suggested for the maintaining of the fore-mentioned [contrary positions]; That I might cast-out all scruples, and clear the minds of the ignorant.\textsuperscript{24}

Here again the circle is closed, this time not with a myth but with a direct appeal to the authority whose violent antagonism towards the writer’s enemies the dialogue is about to prove. This was playing trump with a vengeance, but the extremity and tenuity of the appeal would not have

\textsuperscript{23} Stains within the history of Christian Neoplatonic dialogue are already evident in the Renaissance, as several historians have noted. Virginia Cox finds that “In contrast with the programmatically ‘disordered’ dialogue of Castiglione’s era, the dialogue of the late sixteenth century shows an increasing preoccupation with system, method, and order.” “The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Context,” Castiglione to Gallina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 99. And Walter Ong has described the decline of humanist dialogue under the weight of Ramus’ revision of scholastic dialectic. Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958). See also Snyder, Writing the Shape of Speaking.