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ON THE LAW OF CONTRADICTION IN REPUBLIC 436b-437a*

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether in Republic 436b-436a Plato formulates, in some way, the Law of Contradiction. In order to do that, firstly, I shall explain what this law consists in, distinguishing it from the notion of opposition or contrariety. Secondly, I shall quote the passage this paper deals with. Finally, I shall consider whether it is right to state that in any sense Plato enunciates the Law of Contradiction.

It is usually thought that in *Euthydemus* 293c 12-d1; 283d 4-6, Plato enunciates the Law of Contradiction:

"[...] Are you any the less not knowing? But just now you said you were knowing, and so you are really this very same you, and again not the same, in relation to the same things at the same time!" "[...] It is impossible for the same thing both to be and not to be [...], for I could not to be knowing and not knowing at the same time".

It is right to state that this is an antecedent on *Republic* 436b-437a in favour of Plato's enunciating the Law of Contradiction. As a matter of fact, one could argue that if Plato enunciates this law in *Ethydemus*, he could well enunciate it in *Republic*, since, as it is well known, the latter was written afterwards. Nevertheless, I shall not be concerned with *Euthydemus*; in this paper I shall be centered on Republic 436b-437a where I could find Plato's enunciation of the Law of Contradiction.

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The notion of contradiction is traditionally studied in the way of a law: "The Law of Contradiction". It is frequently considered as an ontological principle: "It is impossible that the same can and cannot belong to the same in the same reference". It can also be understood as a logical Law (principle): "It is impossible for some proposition p that p and not-p are both true".

The discussions on this law are about whether "the ontological" or "the logical" is to prevail.

When the ontological formulation predominates, that law is either affirmed as an expression of the constituent structure of reality, or denied, supposing that reality is self-contradictory. On the other hand, when the logical formulation predominates, it is discussed whether the law must be considered as an evident axiom or as a language convention that allows us to speak about reality.

In any way we consider contradiction, it has to be distinguished from the notion of opposition. According to Aristotle¹ there are many senses for the opposition of terms. I shall only consider the ones I think are the most relevant for my purposes.

a) Opposition of contrary terms, or of the contrary, as from evil to goodness. According to Scholastics, it is given between things of the same gender, but they cannot be predicated simultaneously of the same subject.

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- b) Opposition from the affirmation to the negation, or of the contradictory. This opposition is given between one thing and its negative, for example, man and no-man.

With reference to the opposition of propositions, I am also distinguishing the contradictory and contrary opposition.

Besides, opposition is usually considered in metaphysics. It is understood as the relationship between realities. Those realities are usually conceived as interdependent. To sum up, the metaphysical opposition implies the meeting of contraries.

What I want to remark is that, for example, white and non-white are contradictory, but black and white are opposites.

Moreover, the law of contradiction is usually used for propositions, while the notion of opposition is usually related to things.

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At this point we consider convenient to quote the passage we deal with, i.e., Republic 436b-437a.

"[...] or whether it is with the entire soul that we function in each case when we once begin. That is what is really hard to determine properly.

- I think so too, he said.
- Let us then attempt to define the boundary and decide whether they are identical with one another in this way.
- How?
- It is obvious that the same thing will never do or suffer opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing at the same time. So that if ever we find these contradictions in the functions of the mind we shall know that it was not the same thing functioning but plurality.
- Very well.
- Consider, then, what I am saying.
- Say on, he replied.
- It is possible for the same thing at the same time in the same respect to be at rest and in motion?
- By no means.
- Let us have our understanding still more precise, lest as we proceed we become involved in dispute. If anyone should say of a man standing still but moving his hands and head that the same man is at the same time at rest and in motion we should not, I take it, regard that as the right way of expressing it, but rather that a part of him is at rest and a part in motion. Is not that so?
- It is.
- Then if the disputant should carry the jest still further with the subtlety that tops at any rate stand still as whole at the same time that they are in motion when with the peg fixed in one point they revolve, and that the same is true of any other case of circular motion about the same spot—we should reject the statement on the ground that the repose and the movement in such cases were not in relation to the same parts of the objects. But we would say that there was a straight line and a circumference in them and that in respect of the straight line they are standing still since they do not incline to either side, but in respect of the circumference they move in a circle, but that when as they revolve they incline the perpendicular to right or left or forward or back, then they are in no wise at rest.
- And that would be right, he said.

- No such remarks then will disconcert us or any with the more make us believe that it is ever possible for the same thing at the same time in the same respect and the same relation to suffer, be, or do opposites².

The problem is: does Plato, in the quoted passage, enunciate the Law of Contradiction? Let's see in what sense I can answer this question affirmatively.

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In order to follow with my analysis, I will sum up what has been said up to now, giving importance to what I consider more relevant.

The notion of contradiction is usually studied as a law. That law can be considered as ontological, that is to say, concerning to things, or as logical, that is to say concerning to propositions or terms.

Besides, according to Aristotle, the notion of opposition is divided in: opposition of contrary terms, opposition of contradictory terms, opposition of contrary propositions, opposition of contradictory propositions and what is called metaphysical opposition. The latter assumes the meeting of contraries (or opposites). It is generally associated with Plato's philosophy.

Although the distinctions given in this paper are correct, it is usually understood that the law of contradiction concerns to propositions (or terms) while the notion of opposition concerns to things. It is for this reason that in his article "Plato's Separation of Reason from Desire"³, Robinson affirms that in the passage of Republic I am considering, Plato is not stating the law of contradiction, but what he calls "Principle of the opposites".

According to Robinson, this is not the law of contradiction because it is not applied to propositions, only to things. More things can "enter" in Plato's "contradiction", which would really be an opposition, than in the contradiction of propositions. The author bases his argument in the following paragraph of Plato's quoted passage:

"It is obvious that the same *thing*⁴ will never do or suffer opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing and at the same time".

I believe that in this same text Plato is enunciating, or at least showing clearly, the law of contradiction.

Firstly, it is obvious that the notion of contradiction appears in the text. Secondly, Plato warns about the impossibility of coexistence of the contradictories. In third place, it is true that the notion is applied to things, not to propositions; however, the function it has, as a "law of the correct thinking", is the same as if it was referring to propositions. In fourth place, if what we want to highlight is that Plato says "things" and not "propositions", it can be said that this principle would be the ontological version of the law of contradiction, that is to say "It is impossible that the same can and cannot belong to the same in the same reference". In fifth place, although Plato speaks about "contrary effects", he states that those effects cannot be given in the same thing. That is to say that contradiction cannot be predicated of it. Finally we may wonder why Plato says "things" and not "propositions". I believe that Plato is not specifically interested in being careful with terminology here, because the function the quoted passage has is to warn us about a possible mistake, the one of thinking contradictorily. Taking this for granted, as an axiom, Socrates goes on "speaking" about soul and its faculties.

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But, that text is even richer. Let's see the context in which it is included and how the same conclusion about the law of contradiction is reached.

In accordance with A. Vargas, "Tres partes del alma en la *República*"⁵, I sustain

that in the quoted passage, Plato wants to describe certain psychical events, the pair of "action" and "passion". It is important to show that there is a principle that rules the use of this pair. This principle, even related to pairs of opposites, functions as the law of contradiction, and thus it can be understood in this way. According to Taylor⁶, Plato means by "polar pair" the contraries or opposites and defines "polar opposition" as the greatest distance that exists in the field of the differences belonging to the same gender. It is true that the psychical events are described as polar oppositions, and that Plato needs the notion of contrariety or opposition in order to do that. In fact, the psychical faculties are joined in pairs of contraries. This pair, "action/passion", is subsumed by the notion of faculty or power (*dynamis*). When Plato describes the psychical events as faculties, he emphasizes their correlative character. This relation is given between what is of the nature of a dynamis and the object in which it is realized. In order to find this relation Plato needs the notion of contrariety or opposition. But, on the other hand, Plato gives a rule (standard) for the correlative behaviour of these pairs of contraries. He says that these pairs must behave according to the law of contradiction. We accept that in the described context, Plato is concerned with pairs of contraries, but the notion of contradiction is clearly shown in the quoted passage from Republic.

NOTES

1. Cat. X 11b 15-13b 35; Top. II 109 b 18-25, 113b 1-15; Met. passim; De Int. IV 17 a 37-38 a 13; Pr. Anal. II 63b 21-64b 27 (Princeton 1984).
2. Plato, Republic 436b-437a, Princeton 1963.
3. Robinson R., "Plato's Separation of Reason from Desire", *Phronesis. A Journal for Ancient Philosophy*, vol. XVI, No. 1, 1971, pp. 38-40.
4. My italics.
5. Vargas A., "Tres partes del alma en la República", *Dianoia*, vol. XXXVII, 1991, pp. 41-42.
6. Taylor C. C. W., *Plato: Protagoras*, Oxford 1976.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΙΣ

Ἐνταῦθα ἐξετάζεται ὁ τρόπος καθ' ὃν ἀντιμετωπίζει ὁ Πλάτων τὸν νόμον τῆς ἀντιφάσεως ἢ τῆς ἀντιθέσεως εἰς τὸ χωρίον τῆς Πολιτείας 436b-437a.