The Paradox of Learning and the Elenchos: Plato's *Meno*, Augustine's *De Magistro*, 
and Gongsunlong's *Jianpailun (On Hardness and Whiteness)*

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The early dialogues by Plato, which are also called Socratic dialogues, are noted 
for Socrates' use of the discursive strategy of elenchos to refute the initial assertion of 
his interlocutor. Quite a few scholars agree that this strategy gradually disappears in 
the later dialogues of Plato; others suggest that the device continue to be used. 
Under the assumption that the elenchos is a universal strategy of argumentation, this 
paper proposes to study three ancient dialogues, two in Western classical antiquity, 
one in Pre-Qin China. Of the three texts, Plato's *Meno* and Augustine's *De Magistro* 
are already separated by a temporal gap of almost eight hundred years, but they can be 
united by the common theme of paradox of teaching/learning and the dialogic 
structure in which disputation is performed. As to Gongsunlong's *Dialogue on 
Hardness and Whiteness* (hereinafter referred to as *Jianbai*), it can be linked 
mysteriously to the two Western texts from both an epistemological and a pragmatic 
point of view.

The paper is the product of an on-going project on the philosophical dialogue as 
genre, in collaboration with the International Association of the Studies of 
Controversy based at Tel Aviv University. It bears witness, among other things, to
the revival of rhetoric in recent decades, the blurring of textual boundaries by speech acts, and the reinstatement of philosophy, even philosophy, or particularly philosophy, as a discursive practice like literature. The paper is presented here initially as a response to the Conference's general theme. However, it is presented, ironically, with the author's strong belief that the future of East-West comparative literature does not lie so much in our vision of the apocalypse now or never, as in our critical revision of cultural legacy in those vanishing millennia.

Like all ancient texts, all the three dialogues I propose to study are textualised and the discursive situations therein are reconstructed as if they were actual conversations. The paper will not address the thorny issues of orality versus literacy, speech versus writing, primacy granted to speech or writing, relative opacity or transparency attributed to one or the other. Discussions of such matters, though fundamental and otherwise important, will be bracketed here. Nor is the paper concerned with the argument whether or not the interlocutors engaged in conversations are historical personages, or dramatis personae created by Plato and Augustine or, via minimalism, by Gongsunlong. In this paper they are treated as interlocutors rather than philosophers or dramatic characters.

I

Let me begin with Plato and Augustine, and move to Gongsunlong towards the end of the paper. Although differently expressed, the paradox of learning in both the *Meno* and *De Magistro* is quite similar. In the Platonic dialogue, the paradox is posed in Meno's question to the effect that one cannot search for what one does not know and does not need to search for what one already knows. The debate on this paradox between Socrates and Meno occasions as well as constitutes the text. Similarly, *De Magistro* states the paradox that one can learn only through signs and then one cannot learn through signs (Thonnard: "Rien ne s'enseigne sans les signes")
and "Rien ne s'enseigne par les signes". Qtd in Crosson, 1989, 121.) The link of these two paradoxes and the two classical texts is undoubtedly what concerns us all, namely, education, which can be enacted only through the dialogic interaction of interlocutors. It is through dialogic interaction that Socrates and Augustine argue for or against the possibility or impossibility of learning. The strategy of argumentation Socrates uses is his well-known elenchos, which consists of cross-examination, questioning, and refutation (Robinson 1996, Vlastos 1994, Benson 1990, 1995, 1996, Brickhouse and Smith 1996). How this strategy is used to resolve logical paradox will be demonstrated in the pages that follow. Let me begin with the Meno which can be attributed to an early to middle dialogue of Plato's.

In the Meno the paradox is succinctly expressed in the following exchange between Meno and Socrates:

MENO: How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

SOCRATES: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument [eristikon logon] you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—not for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (80d-e)

The paradox, known since the 1940s often as "the paradox of inquiry" (White, 1976, Matthews, 1999), "the paradox of learning" (Moravcsik, 1978 [1971]), or simply "Meno's paradox" (Moline 1969, Benson 1990), is a popular one not short of scepticism and agnosticism.¹
Socrates describes Meno's question as εριστικὸν λόγον (eristikon logon) ("debater's argument" [Grube], "disputatious argument" [Day], "captious argument" [Lamb], "contentious’ or ‘obstructionist’ argument" [White]), obviously suggesting that his own method of argument, the dialectic elenchos, is a different, more serious and effective one. Through a series of exchange with Meno who claimed to know what arête is in the first place, Socrates, in his characteristic disavowal of knowledge and persistent Q&A, forces Meno to admit that he is equally at a loss. And only on the basis of this admitted ignorance can they embark on a joint inquiry, an elenchos. Socrates says, "So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be." (80d)

In the above quotation, traditionally identified as 80d, Socrates seems to be suggesting a structural division on the basis of methodical change. This has led to a consensus among commentators that the elenchic method is launched at 80d and used thereafter. But this depends on the answer to the question "What is elenchos?" If only the method of inquiry used after 80d is elenchic, what method is used in the text before 80d? Or, can there be two kinds of elenchos, one used before 80d and throughout the dialogue and some if not all of the other dialogues; the other used after 80d and maybe used elsewhere. The second point is the relationship between paradox and elenchos. Can the latter be used to resolve a paradox? Let me dwell on the paradox before returning to elenchos.

Several attempts have been made to resolve Meno's paradox. First, Socrates never takes Meno's question to be a paradox; otherwise, he could not go on discussing it. Jon Moline (1969) simply dismisses the question as a paradox, or not even an argument (154). He attributes Meno's perplexity (aporima) to his response to the Socratic irony, as indicated by the latter's sarcasm towards the second person.
Another interpretation regards Meno's question to be begging the question and is therefore a pseudo-question. The paradox can be dismissed as verbal trickery based on the equivocation of the two senses of *manthanein* (to learn) (Nehamas, 1985). Once the word is disambiguated, the argument is proved equivocal and invalid (Walton 251). A third resolution of the paradox, also related to disambiguation, is to establish the broader semantic context of knowledge according to Plato, and to differentiate therein the concept of knowledge from that of belief, learning from understanding, understanding from recollection, understanding underestimate\(^*\) verification, *a priori* inquiry from empirical inquiry, practical skills from systematic knowledge. In this regard, modern semantics has made considerable contribution. (cf. Day, ed. 1994.)

Can Meno's questioning constitute a paradox of sorites? For instance, when asked to define *arête*, instead of supplying one, Meno gives one manifestation of *arête* after another, including good management of public and domestic affairs, justice, moderation, courage, wisdom, munificence. No wonder Socrates teases him: "I seem to be in great luck, Meno; while I am looking for one virtue, I have found you to have a whole swarm of them" (72a), alluding to the metaphor of bees, and hence suggesting sorites. Meno's examples lead to Socrates' question on form: "Even if they are many and various, all of them have one and the same form (*eidos*) which makes them virtues, and it is right to look to this when one is asked to make clear what virtue is (72c). Thus Meno's argumentation anticipates Plato's method of divisions and collections in his later dialogues, such as the *Sophist* (Moravcsik, 1973, Cohen 1973), in which, even though Socrates is not represented, makes considerable use of elenchos.

The object of knowledge in this dialogue is the well-known but controversial concept of *arête*, which has been variously translated as "virtue" or "excellence." The
dialogue opens with Meno’s question:

(1) Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue [arête] be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?

Meno’s question, however, is complicated by two other immediately following questions; in fact, Meno has asked four questions instead of one. Although there is a syntactic difference between the Greek text and the English translation by Grube, which is used here, the original can be similarly broken into four questions.³

(1a) Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue [arête] be taught?

(1b) Or is virtue not teachable but the result of practice[?]

(1c) [O]r is virtue neither of these, but men possess it by nature[?]

(1d) [Or do men possess virtue] in some other way?⁴ (70a)

After posing the first yes/no question (example 1a), he does not wait for Socrates to answer, but poses a second question (example 1b) which, in a way, serves to answer 3a in the negative. Before Socrates is able to say a word, Meno poses the third question, i.e., example 1c, which dismisses both 1a and 1b. Likewise, he poses 1d to annul the previous three, 1a, 1b, and 1c. With reference to Paul Grice (1989), what rules of cooperative principle have Meno violated by posing one question after another whilst denying his interlocutor an opportunity to answer? Quantity, quality, relation, manner—any of these Kantian-Grician categories? Or put in another way, is Socrates, even though a textual construct of Plato rather than a real person, not justifiable to read Meno’s conversational implicature— as he actually does later in avoiding answering the questioner? Finally—and this is more important for the study of pragmatics of ancient texts, is our posing of the Grician question, given its context of ordinary language philosophy, appropriate when the concepts under discussion, such as arête, eidos, meros, and genos, are embedded in the context of Platonic
philosophy? I hope to be able to address these issues by cross-examining a small portion of the text before 80d.

Let us look closely at the initial dialogue between Socrates and Meno. Question 1a, "Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught?" can be regarded as a loaded question because it presupposes and begs another question, "What is virtue?" Not aware of this fallacy, Meno poses question 1b, which beguiles Socrates into first agreeing with him on the fact that virtue is not teachable and then agreeing with him that it's the result of practice. The same begged question of what virtue is remains unanswered. With 1c, Meno invites Socrates to comment on another possibility that virtue is given by nature, and through 1d still another possibility that men possess virtue in some other way. This series of questions suggests that the list can be long and indeed endless. This questioning, if not properly handled, may lead to an argument of part/whole relationship in mereology, or worse still, a paradox of sorites, i.e., How many qualities of excellence should one possess in order to have the quality of excellence?

Sensing the rhetorical trap, which Meno has set for him, Socrates does not give a straightforward answer to the question or any of the constituent questions. Instead he exposes the begged question of "What is arête?" In his response Socrates has recourse to rhetoric and the dramatic strategy of "scene-setting" by fabricating and assuming the point of view of another Athenian who, when approached by the same question, may answer as follows.

If then you want to ask one of us that sort of question, everyone will laugh and say: 'Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is.
I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that is possible? (71a-b)

I have quoted only part of Socrates' answer, already in some length, to see how the philosopher refutes his questioner. It is possible that Meno fails to see, as Bluck observes, the difference between "asking whether \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \) is \( \delta \epsilon \delta \alpha \kappa \tau \tau \sigma \) \( \delta \epsilon \delta \alpha \kappa \tau \tau \sigma \) \] and asking whether it is \( \mu \alpha \theta \eta \tau \omicron \nu \)" (Bluck 1961, 94). It is also possible that he is fully aware of the difference, but deliberately challenges Socrates by blurring the distinction. His question is complicated by the nature of the knowledge into which the inquiry is made. Virtue or \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \) is an ill-defined abstraction and the quantity of \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \) can be a vague concept that leads to the paradox of sorites. Surely Socrates may know what ordinary people and the sophists, such as Gorgias and Protagoras, mean by virtue, but this common sense is exactly what perplexes him and this perplexity serves as the point of departure of his inquiry (Matthews 1999). Therefore Socrates' disavowal of its knowledge may not be a pretension.

Be that as it may, Socrates disavowal of knowledge does carry an irony. The irony, so characteristic of Socratic rhetoric, does not lie in the discrepancy between his ignorance and knowledge, but in his conflation of cognitive and conceptual categories, the same error of which Meno is accused. Knowing what \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \) is does not amount to recognising who a man is or who Meno is, nor do the two kinds of knowledge amount to the ability of telling how that man looks like, whether or not he is rich or well-born. There is no need to rehearse the literature on naming and
qualities in the wake of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell (Kripke 1972), though the topic is as old as *Cratylus*.

The irony is further developed by the subsequent comments of Socrates in relation to his earlier reference to Gorgias.

**SOCRATES:** Not only that [not knowing what virtue is], my friend, but also that, as I believe, I have never yet met anyone else who did know.

**MENO:** How so? Did you not meet Gorgias when he was here?

**SOCRATES:** I did.

**MENO:** Did you then not think that he knows?

**SOCRATES:** I do not altogether remember, Meno, so that I cannot tell you now what I thought then. Perhaps he does know; you know what he used to say, so you remind me of what he said. You tell me yourself, if you are willing, for surely you share his views.

**MENO:** I do. (71c-d)

Why does Socrates deny "knowing" Gorgias whom he has met, whose meeting is alluded to, and whose knowledge of virtue is also known? As he has said in 70b:

"The responsibility for this reputation of yours [the Thessalians] lies with Gorgias, for when he came to your city he found that the leading Aleuadae . . . loved him for his wisdom. . . ." (70b). Apparently, Socrates here is making fine nuances between recognising one's appearance, knowing his reputation, and so on. Perhaps what's important for Plato scholars is his introduction into the dialogue the topic of recollection (*anamnesis*), which Socrates will develop later in an argument that teaching/learning is recollection (Vlastos 1994). For our purpose here, Socrates's denial of knowing Gorgias whom he has actually met, his ironical acknowledgment of knowing Gorgias's reputation for something (i.e., *arête*) which he himself does not
know, his stated inability to remember and tell what he saw and said—all these mirror, and reciprocate through dramatisation, the fallacy of loaded term implied in Meno's question. By so doing, Socrates is able to get himself off the hook and make his interlocutor a fool out of himself. The method the trickster Socrates uses is dialectic, that is, elenchic, smacking nevertheless the sophistry of Gorgias and Euthydemus.

What, then, is the elenchos? And what kind of inquiry qualifies as an elenchos? Here we are confronted with another instance of semantic dissemination and pragmatic *aporia*. Like *arête*, the word can have a large spectrum of semantics, from the Socratic dialectic with a more or less rigid formula, such as suggested by Vlastos (1994), to any kind of inquiry, including its modern corruption for the Immigration Officers at Athens airport. Incidentally, this semantic controversy applies to different readings of the Meno, which I have mentioned earlier.

Supposing we accept Vlastos' definition of standard elenchos, we could recapitulate the debate like this.

1. Meno asserts a thesis of *arête*, *p*, which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
2. Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say *q* and *r*. The agreement is *ad hoc*: Socrates argues from {*q, r*}, not to them.
3. Socrates then argues, and Meno agrees, that *q* & *r* entail *not-p*.
4. Socrates then claims that he has shown that *not-p* is true, *p* false.

Their conversation continues:

*SOCRATES:* . . . But Meno, by the gods, what do you yourself say that virtue is?

*MENO:* It is not hard to tell you, Socrates. First, if you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue consists of being able to manage public affairs . . . if you want the virtue of a woman . . . And
there are many other virtues, so that one is not at a loss to say what virtue is . . .

SOCRATES: I seem to be in great luck, Meno; while I am looking for one virtue, I have found you have a whole swarm of them. (71d-72b)

It is here that Socrates surreptitiously draws the analogy between virtue and bee to beguile Meno:

But, Meno, to follow up the image of swarms, if I were asking you what is the nature of bees, and you said that they are many and of all kinds, what would you answer if I asked you: 'Do you mean that they are many and varied and different from one another in so far as they are bees? Or are they no different in that regard, but in some other respect, in their beauty, for example, or their size or in some other such way?' Tell me, what would you answer if thus questioned? (72b)

Clearly Socrates is arguing from two other propositions $q$ and $r$, but has managed to make Meno to accept them to be true, and to accept his conclusion:

The same is true in the case of the virtues. Even if they are many and various, all of them have one and the same form which makes them virtues, and it is right to look to this when one is asked to make clear what virtue is. Or do you not understand what I mean? (72c)

Needless to say, the analogy between the nature of virtue and the kinds of bee does not hold; nor can the *eidos* of virtue be equated with the form of bees. Fooled by Socrates, the poor Meno could have simply argued against the analogy (Walton, 261). It can be said that Socrates has violated the rule of relation or relevancy and that of manner (e.g. prolixity) in cooperative principle. The other statements, $q$, $r$, etc. are made by Socrates rather than elicited from Meno's $p$, and the burden of proof should be shifted to Socrates rather than Meno. Therefore, the fact that one interlocutor's $p$
is inconsistent with the other interlocutor's $q$ and $r$ does not prove that $p$ is false (Vlastos, 1994, Benson 1995.). One perceives here that Socrates' search for truth is both realised and undermined by the dialogic form.

Cast in terms of modern theory of argumentation, the elenchos has nothing extraordinary and has little contribution to make to pragmatics. What is relevant to pragmatics is perhaps the dialogic form in which this method of cross-examination is embedded. The elenchic method would not be possible without dialogic interaction. As Socrates' argument shows here and there, it is a method incorporating the operational procedure of logic and the moral persuasion of rhetoric, manipulated to refute and convert his interlocutor, first Meno and then the slave boy.

II

The method cannot be monopolised by Socrates, or for that matter the early Socrates. Some eight hundred years later, Augustine used the same method of inquiry in his dialogue with his son Adeodatus. As the title De Magistro shows, the topic is again teaching, and the argument of the dialogue is also noted for the paradox of teaching. Rather than addressing the topic of impossibility of teaching/learning moral knowledge, Augustine is concerned with the impossibility of using signs, including the linguistic sign, as a means of teaching and learning. Since this topic is central to the dialogue, let me take an excursion to it before returning to the elenchos.

Augustine's conclusion is that one cannot teach through signs, but the reason he gives is reminiscent of Meno's paradox. "When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is the sign; but if I'm not ignorant, what do I learn through the sign?" (10.33). The conclusion that denounces the use of sign, however, is arrived at through an argument which is based on the premise of positive function of sign. This is discussed in the famous chapter
two on the nature of signs. Towards the end of the previous chapter, Augustine has gotten Adeodatus to the point of agreeing with him that words are signs of things (1.2.75). In chapter 2 he pursues further by asking his son, "Well, can a sign be a sign if it doesn't signify anything?" To which Adeodatus answers, "It can't." (2.3.5). Then Augustine quotes a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* 2.659: "Si nihil ex tanta superis placet urbe relinqui . . ." (If nothing from so great a city it pleases the gods be left . . .), and asks his son to identify word by word which thing each of the nine words as signs signifies. Adeodatus finds it difficult to name the things that the first three words, *si*, *nihil*, *ex*, signify. He is especially puzzled by the reference of *nihil*: "What else does 'nothing' signify except that which doesn't exist." (2.3.22), echoing, strangely, Plato's *Sophist* (237-8). Surely Augustine already predicted this, and it's time the father tightened up the trap.

AUGUSTINE: Perhaps you're right, but I'm hesitant to agree with you, because you granted above that there is no sign unless it signifies something (2.3.4-5). Yet what does not exist can't in any way be something. Accordingly, the second word in this line of verse isn't a sign, because it doesn't signify anything. So we were wrong to agree either that all words are signs or that every sign signifies something.

ADEODATUS: You're really pushing too hard. It's stupid to utter a word when we don't have anything to signify. Yet in speaking with me now I believe you yourself aren't making a sound pointlessly. Instead, you're giving a sign to me with everything that comes out of your mouth, so that I may understand something. Thus you shouldn't enunciate those two syllables ['no-thing'] when you speak if you don't signify anything with them! If you see that they are necessary for producing an enunciation, and we are taught or reminded when they
strike the ears, then surely you also see what I want to say but can't explain. (2.3.23-41)

Judging from modern language theories, the confusion of word/reference, signifier/signified, enunciation/enunciated can be easily clarified. For example, *nihil* (nothing) can be legitimately taken as a linguistic sign that does not have to close on a real thing; indeed a sign never closes on a thing. One has to make allowance for the fact that Augustine, though in many ways a forerunner of modern semiotic thinking, wrote with reference to late classical lexical grammar rather than modern semantics. His argument has to be understood within the context of Latin grammar on words (*verba*), in particular the grammar of Aelius Donatus of the fourth century. Had he speculated about anything like the arbitrariness of the sign, he might not have made statements like: "[A] sign is learned when the thing is known, rather than the thing being learned when the sign is given." (10.33.132-4), and "[I]f we signify in order to teach, and we don't teach in order to signify, teaching is one thing and signifying another." (10.30.32).

Fortunately, neither Donatian grammar nor Saussurian semiology is our concern here. What does concern us is the way in which Augustine manipulates the dialogue in the name of teaching, in a unique discursive situation involving an asymmetrical father/son relationship, where the elderly not only takes full advantage of his filial interlocutor, but also lays injunctions on the latter.⁹ Such injunctions, linguistic in appearance, if contradictory to each other, may constitute a special type of paradox, indeed a psychological double bind, which will have a negative impact on the junior interlocutor, both in his immediate discursive performance and, as Gregory Bateson would say, in his later personality development (Basic 1998, Bateson 2000 [1972]). In terms of the asymmetry in magister/disciple communication, it would not be too far-fetched to establish the homology consisting of four terms: Father : Son :: father
Throughout the dialogue, Augustine is often found teasing his son. The following excerpt is just one of the many instances. The whole debate is quite sophisticated, but time and space allow me only to quote part of it.

AUGUSTINE: Then come now, let's consider the division [of signs] where signs do not signify other signs but instead things, which we call 'signifiabls' [significabilia]. First tell me whether man is man [utrum homo homo sit].

ADEODATUS: Now I don't know whether you're playing around with me.

AUGUSTINE: Why so?

ADEODATUS: Because you think it necessary to ask me whether man is anything but man!

AUGUSTINE: Then I believe you'd also think I was merely playing around with you if I were to ask you whether the first syllable of this name ['man'] (homo) is anything but 'ho-' and the second syllable anything but '-mo.'

ADEODATUS: Yes! I would!

AUGUSTINE: Yet those two syllables ['ho-' and '-mo'] conjoined are man (homo). Will you deny it?

ADEODATUS: Who could deny it?

AUGUSTINE: Then I ask the question: are you those two conjoined syllables?

ADEODATUS: Not at all, but I see where you're headed.

AUGUSTINE: Then you shall tell me, so you don't think I'm being offensive?
ADEODATUS: You think it follows that I'm not a man.

AUGUSTINE: Well, don't you think the same thing? You grant that all those claims above, from which this conclusion has been deduced, are true.

ADEODATUS: I won't tell you what I think until I have first heard from you whether in your question about man being man you were asking me about those two syllables [(ho-mo')] or about the very thing they signify.

AUGUSTINE: Reply to this instead: from what standpoint have you taken my question? If it's ambiguous, you ought to have guarded against this first, and not answered me before you made certain precisely how I put the question.

ADEODATUS: Why should this ambiguity be any obstacle, since I have replied to each? Man is certainly man: those two syllables ['ho-mo'] are nothing other than those two syllables, and what they signify is nothing other than what it is. (8.22.25-55)

According to Grice, one rule of the cooperative principle is manner, which requires that the questioner make his statement as unequivocal as possible. When Augustine asks, "whether man is man" (utrum homo homo sit), he does not make it clear whether he is asking about the signifier man or the signified man, and the word "signifiable" which he uses suggests the thing signified rather than the signifying sound. Adeodatus notices the ambiguity, but is unable to read his father's implicature--not until the end of the dialogue, so he refuses to give in. When pushed by Adeodatus, Augustine does not bother to clarify; instead, he complicates the matter by posing another loaded question to undermine the position of his son. The son is a man (homo) as well as two syllables. Augustine's subsequent explanation, not
quoted here, is that Adeodatus has earlier mistakenly differentiated "man" (*homo*) from "whether" (*utrum*) and "is" (*sit*), presumably believing *homo* can close on a referent whilst *utrum* and *sit* can be only non-referential, empty or "pure" signs. Not until nearly the end of the dialogue--the last chapter being Augustine's monologue--do we realise Augustine's design. Adeodatus' taking offence of his father's insinuation that the son is not a man is because of the son's misguided preference for the knowledge of the name (e.g., the signifier *ho-mo*) to the knowledge of the thing (e.g., the signified *homo*). Christian doctrine aside, Augustine's defense of the *a-priori*ness of things is no doubt consistent with his belief in the immanence of knowledge and his concept that learning is recollection. Here he is consonant with Socrates' position in the *Meno*.

Finally, we have returned to the Socratic problem of elenchos? Indeed, it is a method used by Augustine to get the better of his son, but his son may turn the table around by using the same strategy. We may look at the beginning of the dialogue, where Augustine starts by questioning his son.

Q1: AUGUSTINE: When we speak, what does it seem to you we want to accomplish?

A1: ADEODATUS: So far as it now strikes me, either to teach or to learn.

Q2: AUGUSTINE: I see one of these points and I agree with it, for it's clear that by speaking we want to teach. But to learn? How? [1.1.1-7]

[Aug(ustinus:) Quid tibi videmur efficere velle, cum loquimur?
Ad(eodatus:) Quantum quidem mihi nunc occurrit, aut docere aut discere.
Aug. Unum horum video et adsentior; nam loquendo nos docere velle manifestum est, discere autem quomodo?]
Augustine's first WH-question, reminiscent of Socrates' question put to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in another dialogue on the sophists (*Euthydemus* 274), is given Adeodatus' equivocal answer. From the perspective of pragmatics, it is a perfectly acceptable answer in view of the asymmetry of communication in educational discourse. What is to teach to the teacher-interlocutor is to learn to the student-interlocutor. Augustine cannot accept both to be true because he would be implicated by this double answer. In other words, his asking the first WH-question can be read as he wished to learn from his son. This leads to Augustine's second WH-question on "to learn". By asking this WH-question for clarification, Augustine is unwittingly caught in an irony, i.e., he now seeks to learn from Adeodatus. The first three verses, seven lines in the original Latin, already establish a dramatic setting for verbal fencing between the father/son interlocutors.

The continuity of Q&A is interrupted here by Adeodatus because instead of answering Q2, Adeodatus himself poses a WH-question for clarification.

Q3: ADEODATUS: How do you suppose we learn, after all, if not when we ask questions? (1.1.8-9)

One could say Adeodatus is asking for clarification, but one can also safely say that he is alluding to his father's first WH-question, that is, "If you did not wish to learn, why did you ask me in the first place?" Adeodatus is certainly not the slave boy in the *Meno*. No wonder he is dear to God, as his name suggests.

A4=Q4: AUGUSTINE: Even then I think that we want only to teach. I ask you: do you question someone for any reason other than to teach him what you want [to hear]? (1.1.10-12)

A5: ADEODATUS: You're right. (1.1.13)

AUGUSTINE: So now you see that we seek nothing by speaking except to teach.
ADEODATUS: I don't see it clearly . . . Given that we often sing [to him, a form of speaking] while we're alone, without anyone present who might learn, I don't think we want to teach anything. (1.1.14-19)

Apparently, Adeodatus is not convinced, despite his answer A5 in the affirmative. To refute Augustine, he refers to the phenomenon of self-communication in singing without an audience (Lotman 2001 [1990], 20-35). The example may not be well taken because from the point of view of semiotics words used in songs are differently encoded; nonetheless, this does not weaken his argument against Augustine's insistence on teaching. But Augustine is quick to catch Adeodatus' erroneous analogy to music and rebukes him (1.1.30-34). It is here that Augustine introduces his Platonic doctrine of reminding; he observes there are only two reasons for speaking: "to teach or to remind either others or ourselves." (1.1.24). Adeodatus cannot agree to this and gives the counter-example of praying. In praying, we neither wish to teach God nor do we wish to remind Him of anything. Augustine refuses to take the challenge but suddenly changes his position to agree with his son that we don't teach or remind God, "There is accordingly no need for speaking when we pray" (1.1.57) because God can always hear us. At the end of this long digression, which is in effect a sermon, Augustine asks Adeodatus a Yes/No question, "Do you hold otherwise?" (1.1.61). To this Adeodatus has no other option but says, "I agree completely." (1.1.62).

In this opening chapter Adeodatus firmly adheres to his p, refuses to give in to Augustine's q and r, but he finally accepts not-p because he cannot argue with Christian belief. Does Augustine win? Yes, he does, in so far as his argument is a priori. Does Adeodatus lose? The answer cannot be given because of the double-bind injunctions: you should follow the rules of argument, but you can never argue with faith. Unlike Socrates' argument with Meno and his teaching or
reminding the slave boy in the *Meno*, which eventually prove useful, Augustine fails to reason with Adeodatus, but he succeeds through appealing to belief. This kind of paradox is, alas! beyond the solution of argumentation in dialogic interaction.

The initial exchange between Augustine and Adeodatus and the father's subsequent argumentation by authority have far-reaching implications. Among other things, it shows the social functions of language. To speak is to make a speech act, and is to exercise illocutionary and/or perlocutionary forces in relation to the interlocutor. Furthermore, the effect of that speech act is more than *delectare* and *movere*, but amounts to the higher order of *docere*. Whilst the effects of moving and delighting are based on the performative use of language, teaching comprises of both the performance of speech act and the making of constative statements. This enables the dialogue to inquire into both the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language.

III

In Plato's *Cratylus* Socrates defines the dialectician as he who knows how to ask and answer questions (390c). And he has Cratylus say that “the methods of inquiry and discovery are of the same nature as instruction” (436a). The importance of dialogue in philosophical inquiry cannot be over-emphasised. When Socrates uses the expression "joined inquiry" in the *Meno* and, through the mouth of the stranger in the *Sophist* (218b), he is actually referring to the method of Q&A in conversation or more precisely, dialogue. He deliberately plays on word by expanding the link of διάνοια and λόγος to that of διανοια and διαλογος (*Sophist* 263e), suggesting thereby that thought is "dialogue of the mind" (ψυχής διαλογος) (264a). If we follow Socrates' and Augustine's instructions, then we are legitimate to read the *Gongsun Longzi*, four out of whose extant six chapters are in explicit dialogic form, as dialogues on instruction. Since I have elsewhere discussed the semiotic functions of the White Horse (*Baima*) and Pointing at Things (*Zhiwu*), I will
focus here on the dialogue on hardness and whiteness, with implicit reference to Understanding Change (*Tongbian*). There are at least two reasons why, among all the Pre-Qin philosophers engaged in the Great Dabate on Name and Substance, I have singled out Gongsun Long, and from his surviving fragments, the dialogue on *Jianbai*.

Although the Great Debate involved almost all the philosophers of different persuasions for some two hundred years in the Pre-Qin period, two schools of logicians can be identified. One school belonged to the Mohists who advocated the theory of Blending of Sameness and Difference 合同異 (*Hetongyi*); the other by Gongsun Long whose philosophy is often labeled as Separating Hardness from Whiteness 離堅白 (*Lijianbai*). Gongsun Long's insistence on division, mostly based on paradoxes, was the subject of ridicule of the joined forces of Confucianists and strangely the Taoist Zhuangzi (Chang 1998). Incidentally, Gongsun's favourite discursive practice of dialogue serves as an ideal method to propound his philosophy. This is precisely the method used by Socrates, from his early dialogues like the *Gorgias* and the *Meno* to the later *Sophist*. The dialogic and dialectic method as a method of division is most succinctly expressed by the *Sophist* 253c-d.\(^{11}\) The etymological and semantic links between dialogue and dialectic are well established in the literature to need any rehearsal here.

Among the six extant chapters of the *Gongsun Longzi, Baima, Jianbai, and Tongbian* are concerned specifically with the philosophy of division. It comes quite natural that the categories discussed will find parallels in Socrates' discussions with his interlocutors. In the *Meno* Socrates differentiates shape from colour: "Let us say that shape is that which alone of existing things always follows colour." (75b). Compare this with Gongsun Long on the white horse: "Horse nominates shape; white nominates colour. Nominating colour is different from nominating shape. Therefore, white horse is not horse." The argument on differentiating hardness (*jian*)
from whiteness (*bāi*) should be a familiar one to Western scholars, because of a similar argument involving John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and most recently Umberto Eco (1999, 77-79).

Regarding dialogic structure, two features can be said about the *Gongsun Longzi* and the two Western texts we have discussed. Firstly, whilst the early Socratic dialogues are noted for the perplexity, sophistry and wittiness of Socrates the interlocutor, and *De Magistro* has reduced characterisation to the minimum, in none of the dialogues of *Gongsun Longzi* are the interlocutors named, and their virtual existence is suggested by the repeated use of *yue* 月, meaning “say” or “speak.” One can surmise that the dialogue be given by two interlocutors in alternation, and that, because of its highly abstract form, it be delivered between any pair of interlocutors at any time, irrespective of their identity, interests, and political orientation. In fact, the lack of semantic specificity and referentiality enables the interlocutors to engage in discussion of “purely” ontological and epistemological matters. Secondly, the syntactical flexibility and “telegraphic” style (Li and Thompson, 1982) of classical Chinese are capable of generating a large number of paradoxes and resulting in much semantic ambiguity. This is quite common in ancient philosophical writings, not restricted to the *Gongsun Longzi*.

The kind of dialogue used in *Gongsun Longzi* is often called *zhuke wennan* (Guest-Host Q&A), though the identification of one speaker as guest, the other host is already the result of unnecessary semantic investment. However, for the convenience of analysis, let us adopt the traditional usage in our rendering of the dialogue into English.

GUEST (Q1): Can we say, ‘jian bai shi are three’? (*Hardness, whiteness, and stone [stoneness] are three separate entities.*)

HOST (A1): No, we can’t.
GUEST (Q2): Can we say, ‘They are two?’

HOST (A2): Yes. We can.

GUEST (Q3): Why?

HOST (A3): With whiteness but without hardness, you get white stone and hence two; with hardness but without whiteness, you get hard stone, hence two.

GUEST (Q4): Given whiteness, you can’t say the stone is not white; given hardness, you can’t say the stone is not hard. That’s the nature of stone (stoneness), isn’t there then three (entities)?

HOST (A4): You see whiteness but not hardness, so hardness does not exist; you touch (to feel) hardness but not whiteness, so whiteness does not exist.

GUEST (Q5): If there were no whiteness in the world, you wouldn’t be able to see the stone; if there were no hardness, you wouldn’t be able to feel the hard stone. Hardness, whiteness, and stone(ness) are not mutually exclusive. How can we hide the third?

HOST (A5): One is hidden by itself, not hidden by manipulation.

GUEST (Q6): Whiteness and hardness are inherent in stoneness, and join to realise it in full. How could either one hide itself?

HOST (A6): Given whiteness or given hardness, visibility and invisibility are separated (Whiteness and hardness are differentiated by visibility). Invisibility means (is the ground for) separateness. One cannot join the other to realise full (stoneness). Separation is no other than hiddenness.

As Q1 shows, the Guest-inquirer launches the discussion with a seeming paradox, indeed a confusion of stone as token and as type, being self-sufficient in its stoneness, but the latter in turn dependent on two (and no doubt more) intensional
qualities of hardness and whiteness. In Peircian parlance, Q1 shows two kinds of confusion: that between sinsign and legisign, and that between sinsign or legisign and qualisign. The semantic problem is very much like that raised by *arête* in the *Meno* and more fully developed in the *Sophist*. Obviously, the Guest’s assumption is a fallacious one because intension and extension, or legisign and qualisign, are not distributed on the same semantic level. But this is not *yet* what bothers the Host, so he does not hasten to clarify such confusion by separating the two kinds of sign. What initially perplexes him is the view that the two perceptible signs or Peircian indices, one visual, the other tactile, should be confused because of their mixed contribution to stoneness. In other words, the two intensional qualities or qualisigns ought to be differentiated in the first place. It is imperative that the Host shift from the Guest’s *p* to his *q*.

Our reading of Q1 has already partially but necessarily disambiguated the paradox inherent in the indifferentiability between stone and stoneness in the original wording. The Host’s response in A3 serves to clarify intension from extension, but it fails to convince the Guest who believes in the *a priori* nature of whiteness and hardness. With A4, the Host now moves the dialogue to a new dimension quite unexpected to the Guest, by focusing on the intension of stone in relation to empiricism. Neither whiteness nor hardness has existence beyond human experience; by virtue of its distinct experience, one quality is differentiated from the other.

The dialogue continues as follows.

**GUEST (Q7):** The whiteness of stone, the hardness of stone, visibility or invisibility—these have given rise to our argumentation on two or three. Let me give an example. A rectangular takes width and length to form and to enclose what’s inside. Can they (width and length) be separated?
HOST (A7): The whiteness of things is indefinite, so is their hardness. This indefinite nature applies to other things as well, not limited to stone alone. Isn’t it?

GUEST (Q8): [Following your argument of] touching stone, without touching, there is no stone. But without stone, there can’t be white stone to pick up. Therefore, these are inseparable. This is definitely and infinitely true.

HOST (A8): Stone is one. Hardness or whiteness is two, but only in relation to stone. Therefore, there is the distinction between tangibility and intangibility, visibility and invisibility. Much as tangibility is separated from intangibility, so is visibility and invisibility hidden from each other. If they are hidden from each other, they are also separated from each other.

GUEST (Q9): Even though eyes cannot feel hardness, and hands cannot see whiteness, one cannot say there is no hardness or whiteness. Eyes and hands have different functions to perform and cannot be exchanged. Hardness and whiteness are inherent in stone. How can we separate them?

HOST (A9): Hardness has to exist with stone or with other matters. Otherwise, hardness *per se* is hidden. If whiteness were not white, how could it whiten stone? If there were whiteness in itself, there would be no need to show its whiteness in stone. The same is true of yellowness and blackness. If there were no stone, where would one get hardness (hard stone) and whiteness (white stone)? Therefore, they (hardness and whiteness) can be separated. Separateness lies in this. Explorations of senses and the intellect both lie in this (principle of distinction) rather than elsewhere. Furthermore, whiteness is visible because of eyes and light. If
there were no light, no eyes could see it, and then we could only rely on spirit (imagination) to see it. If spirit cannot see whiteness, it then perceives separation. Hardness is felt by hands, and by hands’ caressing (stone). Perception or lack of perception of hardness is acquired through this sensation. Spirit cannot perceive it. O spirit! The nature of things is none other than distinction. Distinction pervades the universe. Therefore, separation is justifiable. (My translation.)

The Guest’s Q7 rebuts by drawing a geometrical analogy, like Socrates demonstration with Meno’s slave boy, to argue for the inseparability of constituents of form. The Host’s Q7 seems to ignore the analogy, but his argument for the indefiniteness of qualisign serves to dismiss it. It is interesting that the Guest’s analogy is to a geometrical form that supposedly contains matter. This is one of the two instances evoking political intertextuality, the other one being the Host’s conclusion in A9. Such a political interpretation is not relevant here though otherwise indispensable to our understanding of Gongsun Long’s hidden ideology.

Like the Meno and De Magistro, the last speaker is the winner of the debate, who wraps it up by giving a relatively lengthy monologue; here the winner seems to be the Host though his short speech is by no means comparable to the loquacity of Socrates and Augustine. Does the Host really win? Or is the Guest convinced? Apart from the Host’s concluding monologue, there is no textual evidence to support that the two interlocutors are reconciled. As Q1 to A2 show, the Guest’s proposition \( p \) is met with the Host’s \( q \). The curious thing is that \( p \) seems to be based on the position advocating division, and A3 seems to be suggesting the possibility of combination (stoneness + whiteness, stoneness + hardness). Because of the Host’s curious (curious to the Guest) turn in argumentation, which seems to be contradictory, the Guest poses Q5, which turns out to be against his initial position of divisibility. In other words,
the Guest is now arguing for \( r \) rather than \( p \). Thus there is a hidden elenchos in the Host’s strategic concession in Q2-A2 to lull the Guest away from division to combination, from disjunction to conjunction, from analysis to synthesis, and when the latter finally gives the false geometrical analogy in Q7, he is to witness his downfall. In a given planar space, even delimited like rectangular, neither width nor length can be regarded as intensional qualities in the same sense as hardness and whiteness. This would lead to another complex discussion of the semantics of space and the semantics of diagram as model of space.

One final word ought to be said about the discursive structure of Jianbai lun in relation to its two far-fetched Western “counterparts.” It seems that in the Chinese text dramatisation is almost non-existent, and this may have contributed to philosophers’ lack of interest in its textuality. The dialogue opens with a double-layered discursive structure. Q1 does not ask—in fact, it takes someone to ask—“Are jian, bai, shi three?” but “Can we say, ‘jian, bai, shi are three?’” What’s the difference between these two readings? The difference is enormous because the second reading involves meta-lingual reflection on the use of language to model the world, which, as I have argued elsewhere, lays the foundation of semiotics.\(^{12}\) It is this discursivity that helps to textualise the abstract and pedantic discussion of epistemology and ontology, and it is this textuality that interests a literature student like me. In this sense, Gongsun Long is seen joining Plato and Augustine in the writing of what Umberto Eco (1983) proposed a world history of semiotics.
NOTES

1 The paradox of learning is raised and discussed in other dialogues too, notably in Protagoras (236) and Euthydemus (274e). References to all the other dialogues but the Meno are to Hamilton and Cairns, eds. 1989, those to the latter to Grube, trans. 1981. The citation method follows the traditional practice based on H. Stephanus' edition, Paris 1578. The English translation of Meno belongs to G. M.A. Grube, but other translations, including W.R.M. Lamb's in the Loeb Classical Library, have also been consulted. In addition to the Loeb, Ioannes Burnet's Oxford edition (1900) is the main source.

2 According to Gareth B. Matthews, the paradox can be laid as follows: If you can search (successfully) for something, then either (a) what you (successfully) search for is something you don't (already) know; or else (b) what you (successfully) search for is something you do (already) know (1999, 57). The best way to respond to the paradox is to grasp the second horn of the dilemma and interpret 'you know what you are searching for' to mean 'you have an adequate description or specification of what you are searching for'. So understood, this horn leaves open the possibility that one hasn't yet found the object that fits the description under which one is searching; thus the search can be perfectly genuine. (Ibid., 59).

3 For linguistic analyses of this and the other passages I am indebted to Dr Vassilis Vagios of National Taiwan University, who is a classicist and linguist specializing, amongst other things, in Stoic grammar.

4 Compare the translations with two others of the same eristic question. (1) "Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught, or is acquired by practice, not teaching? Or if neither by practice nor by learning, whether it comes to mankind
by nature or in some other way?" (Lamb)

(2) "Can you tell me, Socrates - does virtue come from teaching? Or does it come not from teaching but from practice? Or does it come to people neither from practice nor from being learnt, but by nature or in some other way?" (Day)

5 Discussions of the elenchos have been well documented. Interested readers are referred to Prior, ed. 1996. 3 of 4. Vlastos defines the "standard elenchus" as follows.

(1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis, \( p \), which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.

(2) Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say \( q \) and \( r \) (each of which may stand for a conjunct of propositions). The agreement is \textit{ad hoc}: Socrates argues from \( \{q, r\} \), not to them.

(3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that \( q \& r \) entail \textit{not-}\( p \).

(4) Socrates then claims that he has shown that \textit{not-}\( p \) is true, \( p \) false.

(1994, 11)

My assumption is that the elenchic method persists until Plato's final dialogues, in particular, the Sophist. See the following description of the method of education:

"They cross-examine a man's words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions; these they then collect by the dialectic process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another about the same things, in relation to the same things, and in the same respect . . . [S]o the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty . . . " (230c). The Stranger uses several times \( \varepsilon\lambda\varepsilon\gamma\chi\omicron\omicron\omicron\varepsilon \) which in Jowett and Cornford's translation, is rendered either as "refutation"
or "examination" (Hamilton and Cairns, eds. 1989).

6 The translation I use is Peter King 1995, which is based on the Latin text from Corpus christianorum series latina, tom. 29: *Aurelii Augustini opera*, pars 4.1, edited by Klaus-Detlef Daur (Turnholti, 1970). As there is only one book of *De Magistro*, the numbers after each quotation refer to chapter, section, and verse in Latin.

7 Augustine's assumption that there is a kind of knowledge, which can be acquired through signs and there is another acquired without them can be accounted as a paradox of confirmation. That is, whether a few instances of learning through signs can be good evidence to confirm or falsify learning, and the other way around (Sainsbury, 1988). Based on the paradox, a single instance can contribute to its confirmation or falsification, let alone quite a few. Despite his distinction between natural and conventional signs in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine firmly believes that true knowledge is divinely inspired and does not require the mediation of signification.

8 *De Magistro* opens with the exchange between Augustine and his son Adeodatus on speech:

AUGUSTINE: When we speak, what does it seem to you we want to accomplish?

ADEODATUS: So far as it now strikes me, either to teach or to learn.

In addition to identifying the theme of teaching, which the dialogue sets to develop, the son's answer has no doubt two theoretical implications. First, it has confined the social use of language, i.e., discourse, to one function only, that is, purely demanding and supplying information, under the assumption that he who asks wishes to learn and he who answers necessarily teaches. Second, discourse bridges as well as blurring both thought and language, intention and speech, utterer's meaning and utterance's meaning.
For a similar discussion of this asymmetrical conversation between Socrates and the slave boy in the Meno, see Shanon, 1984, 144.

Lotman modifies Jakobson's symmetrical communication model and discusses the phenomenon of I-I communication, especially in lyrical poetry. Adeodatus' reference to singing without audience can be regarded as such though language in song is otherwise encoded.

STRANGER: Well, now that we have agreed that the kinds stand toward one another in the same way as regards blending, is not some science (ἐπιστημή) needed as a guide on the voyage of discourse (λόγον), if one is to succeed in pointing out which kinds are consonant, and which are incompatible with one another--also, whether there are certain kinds that pervade them all and connect them so that they can blend, and again, where they are divisions [separations], whether there are certain others that traverse wholes and are responsible for the division?

THEAETETUS: Surely some science (ἐπιστημή) is needed—perhaps the most important of all.

STRANGER: And what name shall we give to this science? Or—good gracious, Theaetetus, have we stumbled unawares upon the free man's knowledge and, in seeking for the Sophist, chanced to find the philosopher first?

THEAETETUS: How do you mean?

STRANGER: Dividing according to kinds, not taking the same form for a different one or a different one for the same--is not that the business of the science of dialectic (διαλεκτικής φήσομεν ἐπιστημή)?

THEAETETUS: Yes. (253c-d)

Similar discursive registers can be found in Zhiwu and Baima.
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