Collecting the Letters

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I reexamine Plato’s method of collection and division, and specifically of collection. If collection and division are simply methods for mapping out genus-species trees, then it is hard to understand why Plato is so excited about them. But a close study of Plato’s examples shows that these methods are something broader, and shows why Plato would regard collection as an important tool for coming to know “elements” in any domain of inquiry. In the first section I focus on a notoriously problematic example of collection from the Philebus, Theuth’s discovery of the letters of the alphabet; I show how Plato interprets this discovery as a process of collection, and draw conclusions about what Plato takes collection to be. In the process, I try to bring out Plato’s analysis of what is involved in learning to read and write a language, which he takes as paradigmatic for other knowledge. In the second section, stepping back from the Philebus passage and applying its lessons, I describe the function of collection and division, for the late Plato, in coming to know “elements,” including the Forms, or the most basic Forms. Reflection on Plato’s use of collection suggests a (relatively non-mystical) account of what it is to know non-complex intelligible entities, and of how we can come to know them. I also use Plato’s descriptions of collection and division to suggest a Platonic context for the notion of the separation of the Forms, to which the late Plato remains firmly committed.

I
At Philebus 16b5-18d2 Socrates describes the way or method (ὁδὸς) through which all the discoveries of the arts have been made. At 18b6-d2, in particular, he illustrates this method in the work of Theuth, the legendary Egyptian inventor of writing and the alphabet. But it has been notoriously difficult to explain how the story of Theuth illustrates what it is supposed to illustrate.

The problem is that Socrates’ method is twofold: he describes first a path “from the one to the many,” and then a reverse path “from the many to the one.” It is customary to call these respectively the methods of division (διαίρεσις) and collection (συναγωγή), names Plato uses together in a parallel passage of the Phaedrus.1 The story of Theuth is introduced expressly

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1 The terms συναγωγή and διαίρεσις are used together at Phaedrus 266b4. For argu-

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to illustrate the method of collection, the "contrary" of what was discussed before (18a9-b4), but commentators have generally been puzzled about why it should illustrate collection rather than division. Indeed, they have been puzzled about collection as such; and it has been suggested that Plato is really describing only a single method, the method of division.

Collection is supposed to take place when "someone is compelled to grasp the infinite [ἀπειρον] first": to collect well, he "must not look immediately to the one, but must recognize that each multiplicity is delimited by some number, and from all these finally reach a one" (18b1-4); just as, conversely, if we begin by dividing some one, we should make finite divisions and subdivisions to establish precisely how many it is, before admitting that it is also infinitely many. The account of collection is, as stated, obscure, but the story of Theuth is supposed to clarify it. Theuth begins by recognizing that φωνή (I will provisionally translate this as "vocal sound") is infinite (as it was already said to be in the discussion of division, 17b3-4). He does not then immediately proceed to recognize some one thing present in all vocal sound, but rather "he recognized that the vowels [φωνηέντες] in this infinite are not one but many, and then again that there are others [liquids and nasals and sibilants] which share not in φωνή but in some kind of sound [φθόγγος], and that these too have some number; and he set apart what we now call ῥηφάνα [stops] as a third kind of letter; then after this he divided those which are ῥηθόγγα and ῥηφάνα down to each individual [letter-type], and he divided the vowels and the intermediates in the same way, until, having grasped their [total] number, he gave the name 'letter' to each and all of them" (18b8-c6); then, having collected the letters, Theuth reflects on the single knowledge that grasps the whole system of letters, and calls it the art of letters or of writing [γραμματική].

A "letter" here [στοιχεῖον or γράμμα] is not necessarily a mark on paper, but, in the first instance, a phoneme, an indivisible unit of vocal sound (thus Aristotle defines στοιχείον as φωνή ἀδιαίρετος, Poetics c20 1456b22): it is clear that Theuth, having begun with a bare sensory perception of vocal sound in its infinite multiplicity, ended by collecting the genus "letter" or "phoneme," and that discovering this genus was a necessary pre-
condition for inventing a conventional system of marks on paper, with a type of mark corresponding to each type of phoneme. But it is not clear how Theuth was able to make this discovery. As Hackforth complains, "what Theuth has done is merely to give a name to a generic notion [i.e. 'στοιχεῖον'] which must have been present to his mind from the outset." Although Plato claims that we can either begin with a known genus and divide until we reach its infimae species, or begin with infimae species (or their individuals) and collect them until we apprehend the genus they belong to, Hackforth thinks that Plato’s second alternative is chimerical. If I take the species of a genus (say the different kinds of animal or of letter), and ask for the genus, then in order to select these examples for inquiry, I must from the beginning have selected them as species of that genus, and so I must already have the generic concept, even if I have not yet given it a name. So there are not two methods but only one: “you must start with the conjoint apprehension of a Genus and an indefinite Many, and proceed by division until you reach infimae species, where your task ends.” It is this method, Hackforth adds, that Plato unwittingly winds up illustrating in the Theuth example: to know what to collect, Theuth must always have had the concept of letter, and Plato shows him dividing it (note “διήρει” at 18c3) into its three main subclasses and then into their infimae species.

Hackforth’s objection has been a notorious difficulty for the last fifty years; and I think it can be solved only if we reexamine, both what collection and division mean, and what it was that Theuth was trying to collect or to divide.

To begin with the second question: Plato says that Theuth began by "recognizing φωνή as infinite" (18b6), so it would seem that it is φωνή that he ends by collecting as a unitary genus. Indeed, we have been told earlier, in the discussion of division, that spoken φωνή is both one and infinitely many (17b3-4), and that division begins with φωνή as a unity and ends by dividing it into its infimae species; so that Theuth’s treatment of φωνή would be simply the reverse of this division. However, the generic concept that Theuth ends by discovering is not φωνή but στοιχεῖον (18c6); these terms are definitely not equivalent, and, while Hackforth is certainly right that Theuth must have had a concept of φωνή as a unity from the beginning, he need not have had the concept of στοιχεῖον. Hackforth, in

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3 Hackforth, ibid.
treating the Theuth story as a reverse of the division of φωνή, is compelled to assume that φωνή is the genus whose infimae species are the different letters or phonemes, so that every φωνή would be either a vowel or a continuant or a stop. But, for several reasons, this must be wrong. Theuth originally recognizes φωνή simply by hearing spoken language: since no written language yet exists, and since Theuth has not performed the analysis of language that will lead him to the concept of στοιχείον, what he initially recognizes is not a set of units of sound, but simply continuous speech. He recognizes φωνή as ἀπειρον, not because there are several kinds of indivisible φωναί, but because there are an unlimited variety of φωναί of all lengths. In fact Plato avoids the plural φωναί, preferring to speak of φωνή in the singular as something that is both one and infinitely many; so perhaps it would be better to speak of many sections of φωνή or many modifications of φωνή rather than of many φωναί; but if we are to speak of φωναί, then syllables and words have at least as good a right to be called φωναί as individual letters do. I do not know of a single Greek text where φωνή has the restricted meaning "phoneme": if letters are treated as φωναί, they are only one particular kind of φωναί, as in Aristotle’s definition of στοιχείον as φωνή ἀδιάκριτος (Poetics c20 1456b22, cited above). But in fact it is doubtful whether letters, and particularly consonants, are φωναί at all: the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems describe letters instead as πάθη τῆς φωνῆς, and say that consonants combine with vowels to produce the plurality of utterances (διάλεκτοι), which are nonetheless expressions of one and the same φωνή (Problems X,38-9 895a4-14). And Plato, here in the story of Theuth, expressly denies that consonants μετέχειν τῆς φωνῆς (Philebus 18c1), so he can hardly be regarding them as species of the genus φωνή: the point is that these letters by themselves either produce no sound at all, or, like liquids and nasals and sibilants, produce a sound (φθόγγος) which is not properly φωνή, because it is not a modulation of a

4 For a similar conclusion that φωνή here can refer to speech longer than a single phoneme, see Gisela Striker, Peras und Apeiron: das Problem der Formen in Platons Philebos (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1970), pp. 24-30, where her “Sprache” corresponds to my “continuous speech” and her “Laut” to my “phoneme.” But Striker’s overall interpretation of the passage is quite different from mine. On the point immediately at hand, Striker says that Theuth’s recognition of φωνή as ἀπειρον was a recognition “daß die gesprochene Sprache sich in unendlich viele Lauteinheiten einteilen läßt, die in einer begrenzten Anzahl von Arten zusammengefaßt werden können” (p. 25). I think that Theuth in recognizing φωνή as ἀπειρον was just noting the obvious fact that there is an unlimited variety of types of φωναί of all lengths. What was new was Theuth’s discovery that φωνή could be reduced to a finite multiplicity, and this (rather than a recognition of the ἀπειρον) is what the cited passage of Striker really describes.
continuous stream of air forced out through the larynx; they produce full-fledged φωνή only in combination with vowels.5 So φωνή in the Theuth story is continuous speech, and Theuth discovers the letters as things “in” speech (ἐν τῷ ἀπειρῷ, 18b8-9), which are not necessarily instances of speech. The στοιχεῖα τῆς φωνῆς are, here as so often, a paradigm for ἀρχαὶ in any realm of objects, and Theuth is depicted, not as dividing speech into its kinds, but as discovering the ἀρχαὶ out of which speech is constituted.

But how does he discover them? Ackrill’s answer, in “In Defense of Platonic Division,” was “by dividing.”6 Against Ryle (who had assumed that διαίρεσις was always the division of a genus into its species, and had inferred that it could not have been of any philosophical interest), Ackrill argued that διαίρεσις for Plato covered a whole family of methods of analysis that could lead to defining a specific term or to clarifying a general concept: the analysis might be the division of a genus into its species, or the division of a word into its different senses, or, as here, “the division of language into its elements” or minimal constituents.7 Now Ackrill is surely right, both that the procedures Plato describes in Philebus 16b5-18d2 are meant to be collection and division, and that what Theuth does is not simply to move up or down a genus-species tree; and so he must be right that collection and division should be understood more broadly than this. But Theuth’s procedure cannot be division, since it is the “contrary” (18a9) of the procedure of division described in 16b5-17e6. It must be a passage from the infinitely many through the finitely many to the one, and thus a “collection” in some sense broader than moving up a genus-species tree; and this despite the fact that Theuth “divides” or distinguishes the different stops, and the different continuants and vowels, at 18c3-5. How are we to understand this kind of collection?

Other texts of Plato help to show that συναγωγή is not always a matter of collecting genera from their species or individuals; or, at any rate, that

5 Similarly at Theaetetus 203b2-8, σ is ἄφωνον, merely a ψόφος and not a φωνή, while β is neither a φωνή nor even a ψόφος; among the στοιχεία, only the seven vowels are φωναί. Aristotle in Poetics c20 gives essentially the same classification, dividing στοιχεία into φωνήνεντα and ἡμίφωνα and ἄφωνα. Similarly Dionysius Thrax (Ars Grammatica c6) divides στοιχεία into φωνήνεντα and σύμφωνα, and the latter again into ἡμίφωνα and ἄφωνα: the φωνήνεντα are so called because they “produce a φωνή of themselves,” the σύμφωνα because “they do not have a φωνή by themselves, but produce a φωνή when they are combined with the φωνήνεντα”.


it is not always perspicuously so described. This is clearest from an example of collection that Plato gives in the Statesman, in explaining how children learn to read and to spell, that is, to decipher the individual letters in written combinations so they can pronounce what they see, and conversely to detect the individual phonemes in audible speech so they can write down what they hear.\(^8\) Plato supposes that the children can already recognize the letters when they see them or hear them in certain simple and familiar syllabic combinations, but that they become confused and cannot discern the same letters when they see them or hear them in unfamiliar or more complicated syllables (277e2-278a3). In such a case, Plato says, the right method for teaching the children to discern the letters even in the initially confusing syllables is to present the confusing syllable side-by-side with a familiar syllable containing an identical letter, and then “to show that the same likeness and nature is present in both combinations, until the ones that were gotten right [τὰ δοξαζόμενα ἀληθῶς] have been displayed next to all the unknown ones; and when these have been displayed as models, they will bring [the children], among all the letters in all the syllables, to name the one that is different as different from the others, and the one that is the same as the same and always alike to itself” (278b1-c1). Plato describes this method of displaying the same letter in

\(^8\) What Plato says is that the children are coming to be γραμμάτων ἔμπειροι (277c3-4), and that they learn to discern the στοιχεῖα within the συλλαβαῖ. The large majority of scholars – at least Cousin, Campbell, A.E. Taylor, Skemp, Guthrie, Crombie, and Benardete – have taken this as referring only to deciphering written letters (learning to read), and not also to distinguishing spoken phonemes (learning to spell). But there is no justification for this in Plato’s words (perhaps some scholars have thought, wrongly, that γράμματα are necessarily written), and Christopher Rowe, in his recent translation (Aris and Phillips, 1995), glosses “becoming γραμμάτων ἐμπειρο” as “acquiring skill in reading and writing,” which is what the phrase would normally imply. Everything that Plato goes on to say applies to both cases, though some remarks would go more smoothly with one case, and some with the other. The inclusive interpretation is supported by a parallel text in the Theaetetus: when you learned γράμματα as a child, what you were learning was “to discern each of the letters by itself both in sight and in hearing, so that their [different] positions might not confuse you, when they are spoken or when they are written” (Theaetetus 206a5-8). The two cases are closely analogous, and even if Plato has one case chiefly in mind in the Statesman passage, the procedure of learning that he wants to illustrate would work the same way in both. Plato talks about learning to spell or to discern the phonemes within audible speech in the Theuth passage of the Philebus and at Theaetetus 207d8-208b6; he talks about learning to read or decipher the letters in written texts at Republic II 368d1-7 and III 402a7-b7.
two syllables as collection, συνάγειν: “the same thing, being present in something else at a distance, is gotten right and collected [δοξαζόμενον ορθῶς καὶ συναχθέν], and produces a single true opinion about both together” (278c4-6). In this example, as in more straightforward examples of collecting a generic nature from its species or individual instances, I bring two or more objects together for comparison, and by doing so I notice some aspect in which they are alike, so that I am brought to awareness of a nature identically present in the different objects – the generic nature “animal” present in a dog and a horse, or the letter α present in the syllables βα and γα. Collecting α could in fact be described as an instance of collecting a genus: if, instead of saying that βα and γα are similar in respect of α, I say that the α in βα is similar to the α in γα, then in recognizing the common nature I am collecting the genus α from its individuals, or from its species α-preceded-by-β and α-preceded-by-γ. Nonetheless, this is not a perspicuous way to describe what I am doing in collecting α and the other letters, which is to learn to recognize the letters within a syllable βα or γα, and thus to understand the syllable as resulting from the letters (so that I can pronounce it, or spell it, correctly). Plato speaks of the children as “discerning” the letters (διαισθάνεσθαι, 277e7), and the point must be that they are initially presented with the syllable as an undifferentiated whole, and must learn to distinguish the β-component from the α-component within it (whether by sight or by hearing). I learn to distinguish βα into its components just by comparing the syllable, both to other syllables containing β and to other syllables containing α. So, although I can say that I collect the genus a from individual α’s, those individuals were not given to me prior to the act of collecting: I come to recognize both the genus α and the individual α’s by comparing the different syllables that contain α.

It is clear that this text from the Statesman helps to show in what sense Theuth was “collecting” when he collected the many particular letters, before collecting the single genus “letter.” As we have seen, Theuth was initially confronted, not with many neatly separated phonemes waiting to be clas-

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9 I take συναχθέν in 278c6 as supplementing ἐν ἐτέρῳ διεσπασμένῳ δοξαζόμενον ὀρθῶς, not as going with the following περὶ ἑκάτερον. But however we construe the sentence (it has several difficulties including a textual question), there is a συναγωγή, a “collection” or “bringing together” of the same letter in the two syllables, and this act of collecting is, or is intimately connected with, the act of recognizing it as the same in both. For why Plato insists on speaking here of “true opinion” rather than of knowledge, see Section II below.
sified, but with the infinite variety of continuous speech (φωνή). The only way he could discern the letters within all this sound was to compare different segments of speech, presumably syllables, and to notice what elements of sound they had in common. Theuth was thus doing for the first time what the children learning their letters repeat under the guidance of their tutors, in discerning the different phonemes in spoken language. A πρώτος εἰρηνής like Theuth was needed to compare the different syllables of spoken language, and to collect the particular letters or phonemes within them, in order to establish the writing-system that the children are now learning. For Theuth to do this, without a guide, would of course be much more difficult than for a child to do it now, and Plato has chosen in Theuth an excellent example of the difficulty and importance of collection.

To underline Plato's point about the difficulty and importance of Theuth's task, it is worth noting that, in modern scholarly opinion, the invention of alphabetic writing was roughly as Plato describes it, except that, by omitting any pre-alphabetic writing, Plato telescopes the process so much that he makes it hard to imagine how anyone could have performed the required collection. Plato speaks as if Theuth had simply discerned the repeating phoneme-types within the continuous stream of φωνή, and realized that all φωνή could be reduced to them. But it is intellectually more plausible, and historically truer to the Egyptian writing-system and to other early writing-systems that we know of, for there to be several stages of analysis: first speech is analyzed into words, then words into syllables, and then syllables into phonemes, and different writing-systems record different levels of analysis. At the first stage, each word might be represented by a single sign. At a later stage, when a single syllabic constituent is recognized within many different spoken words, a single sign (perhaps a sign used to stand for this syllable when it forms a whole word by itself) can be used to represent the same syllable in any word that it occurs in: this might first arise as an ad hoc device for representing hard-to-symbolize abstract words and inflectional morphemes by rebus-writing, but once sufficiently many syllable-types have been collected, in principle every word could be reduced to them. Only by a further analysis are individual phonemes discerned within the syllables. Sometimes a given syllable is or becomes monophonemic, and the monophonemic "syllable" can then be recognized within other syllables; or the sound recognized as the first phoneme of one syllable (and represented by the sign for this syllable) is also recognized within others. If sufficiently many phoneme-types are collected in this way, all syllables can be reduced to them, and a purely alphabetic system of writing becomes possible. What actually happens in Egyptian is an
unsystematic compromise: while there is an “alphabet,” it is always supplemented by other types of sign. Only after a long process of collecting first syllables and then letters could a single ενεργείας collect enough letters, until, as Plato says of Theuth, “having grasped their [total] number, he gave the name ‘letter’ [στοιχεῖον] to each and all of them; then seeing that none of us would learn any one of them αὐτό καθ' αὐτό without the others, and reasoning that this bond is one and makes all these [letters] somehow one, he proclaimed a single art of writing [γραμματική τέχνη] over them” (Philebus 18c5-d2). This final step was never taken in Egyptian, or in Sumerian or Akkadian, but first in Phoenician. Of course, once an alphabet has been invented in one language, it is a smaller step for someone to reduce a second language to alphabetic writing; but it still requires processes of collection even to reduce the words of the second language to the phonemes discovered in the first language, and much more so if the representation of the second language requires collecting additional phonemes, or distinguishing between phonemes not distinguished in the first language. But however this happens, what is logically required at each stage in the development of a writing-system is something much like the process of collection that Plato ascribes to Theuth.

Plato stresses that Theuth was able to establish his writing-system only because, when “compelled to grasp the infinite first” and to seek a one within the infinity of φωνῇ, he did not “look immediately to the one, but recognized that each multiplicity is delimited by some number, and from all these finally reached a one” (Philebus 18b1-4): this was the point Plato had set out to illustrate in the Theuth story. If Theuth had simply declared

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10 I have oversimplified in one respect: Egyptian phonetic representations rely only on consonants and sequences of consonants, and do not “collect” and symbolize the vowels. But any writing-system, including the Phoenician or Greek, “collects” only some features of φωνῇ, enough to represent most meaningful utterances without practical ambiguity, and “lets go into the infinite” (Philebus 16c2) the more subtle variations, especially in vowel quality. On the Egyptian writing-system and other writing-systems in the ancient Near East, see G.R. Driver, Semitic Writing: from Pictograph to Alphabet (revised edition, ed. S.A. Hopkins, 1976, published by Oxford University Press for the British Academy), especially his discussion of “the Egyptian pseudo-alphabet,” pp. 132-6. For a practical account of the Egyptian writing-system see Alan Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar (Clarendon Press, 1927), especially pp. 6-9 and pp. 25-8. Egyptian writing is made very complex by the combination of different systems of representation; Barry Powell works through two examples in detail in Homer and the Origins of the Greek Alphabet (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 79-85. I.J. Gelb’s A Study of Writing (University of Chicago Press, second edition, 1963) is a stimulating overview but contains some very idiosyncratic judgments (fortunately taken over by Powell).
"the nature of στοιχεῖον is present in all φωνή" or even "all φωνή consists of vowels, stops, and intermediate consonants," he would have no way to represent the different spoken syllables in writing. Plato stresses that Theuth "recognized that the vowels in this infinite are not one but many . . . then after this he divided [the stops] down to each individual [letter-type], and he divided the vowels and the intermediates in the same way, until, having grasped their [total] number, he gave the name 'letter' to each and all of them" (18b8-c6). If Theuth had collected the letters too hastily — say, if he had failed to distinguish aspirated from unaspirated stops and so counted ι and φ or τ and θ or κ and χ as the same letter — and so had fallen short of the full number of phonemes in the language, and if he had then assigned a conventional written mark to each phoneme he had recognized, then his writing-system would be defective, in that it would not be able to represent the spoken syllables unambiguously. This is why, in an illustration of the right method of collection, Plato stresses that Theuth divided (διηρεύει) the stops: Plato’s lesson is not that it is important to collect, but that it is important to collect critically and unhastily, and this can be done only by dividing or distinguishing the different things you are collecting. A more careful comparison of syllables will bring out, not only that some of them share "unvoiced dental stop" in common, but that some of them share "unvoiced unaspirated dental stop" and others share "unvoiced aspirated dental stop." When Theuth has collected all the phonemically distinct primitive sounds of his language, then he can make the final collection of the genus "letter," and assign written marks; the collection is really sufficient if he can then reconstruct the syllables from which he began, by spelling them out unambiguously in terms of the letters they contain.

II

Plato describes Theuth’s procedure in collecting the letters because it is supposed to give us a model for how to discover ἀφαξί in general, the letters of "the long and difficult syllables of reality" (Statesman 278d4-5): these ἀφαξί are, especially, the Forms, and especially the most basic of the Forms. Plato wants both to recommend collection as a method for coming to knowledge of the Forms, and to warn against the dangers of over-hasty collection in this context.

It is not immediately obvious why collection and division are needed in coming to know the Forms. The Republic, which lays great stress on the importance and difficulty of knowing the Forms, and on dialectic as
the means for coming to know them, says nothing about collection and division; and we may wonder why the Phaedrus and Philebus insist that only these are the proper methods of dialectic, and indeed of all scientific discovery. Republic VII suggests that dialecticians come to know the Forms through definition: the dialectician is the person who can give and receive a λόγος saying what each thing is (531d9-e5, 534b3-6), or who can διορίσασθαι τῷ λόγῳ each Form (534b8-c1); apparently we will discover the Form or οὐσία of each thing simply by trying different possible definitions for the thing, and seeing whether they survive all honest attempts at refutation by question and answer (534c1-3). But there is obviously something wrong with this proposal. If a λόγος is a verbal formula saying what each thing is, then “since it is composed out of nouns and verbs, it is not stable, not stably enough” (Seventh Letter 343b4-6): we cannot overcome the unfixity of all names simply by fixing them to each other. Clearly we cannot define all the Forms without circularity; at least the most basic Forms must be immune to definition, and must be known in some other way. Plato seems to be making this point in the Theaetetus, in criticizing the thesis of the Republic that “he who cannot give and receive a λόγος does not have knowledge about the thing” (Theaetetus 202c2-3, cp. Republic VII 531d9-e5, 534b3-6): as Plato now says, this would imply that the primitive στοιχεῖα in terms of which λόγοι are given would themselves be unknowable, whereas in fact, as our childhood experience of μανθάνειν τὰ γράμματα shows (203a1-2, 206a1-3), letters are both more knowable and more crucial to know than the syllables are (206b5-11).

The example of μανθάνειν τὰ γράμματα, as the Theaetetus explains it, gives an alternative model of how we know simple ἀρχαί. What we did in learning our letters was to try “to discern [διαγιγνώσκειν] each of the letters by itself [ἀντί καθ’ ὀνόμα τῷ] both in sight and in hearing, so that their [different] positions might not confuse you, when they are spoken or when they are written” (206a5-8): thus the knowledge of simples which (Plato says) is crucial for mastering the whole art, is an ability to recognize the simples as they occur in complexes, without mistaking any one of the simples for any other. In this passage, and in the Statesman passage on μανθάνειν τὰ γράμματα, what distinguishes knowledge of the simples from true opinion about the simples is that it involves consistently recognizing them in complexes. Thus the children in the Statesman who can correctly identify the letters in a short and familiar syllable, but misidentify the same letters when they occur in an unfamiliar syllable, are carefully credited only with right opinion (278a9, 278c5, and – when the letters are metaphorical for
principles of reality – 278d4). If at first they misidentify the letter $\zeta$ in “$\kappa\nu\alpha\zeta\zeta\beta\iota\chi$”, they can learn to correct their false opinion about $\zeta$ as it occurs in this syllable by comparing it with their true opinion about $\zeta$ as it occurs in “$\zeta\nu\varsigma$”, as Meno’s slave learns to correct his false mathematical opinions by his true mathematical opinions; but this merely replaces the false opinions by true opinions, and does not yet turn them into knowledge (Statesman 278c6, Meno 85b8-d1). The true opinions about $\zeta$ in different combinations become knowledge of $\zeta$ only when they are “tied down,” so that we consistently recognize $\zeta$ in whatever combination it occurs in, and never falsely identify it when it is not in fact present. So the Theaetetus argues that a child who “in writing ‘Theaetetus’ [presumably from dictation] thinks he ought to write theta and epsilon, and does in fact write them, but in trying to write ‘Theodorus’ thinks he should write tau and epsilon and does in fact write those letters” does not know the syllable $\theta\epsilon$, although he has a true opinion about it on the first occasion (Theaetetus 207c7-208a3); nor does the child know $\theta$ or $\tau$, since he has a true opinion about $\theta$ on one occasion but mistakes $\theta$ for $\tau$ on another. Both the Theaetetus and the Statesman intend to draw a lesson about “the long and difficult syllables of reality” (Statesman 278d4-5): I do not yet know the (let us say) indefinable Form Animal until I can recognize it wherever I encounter it in things, nor do I know the definable Form Man, even if I have memorized the formula “man is a mortal rational animal”, unless I can recognize Man, and his animality and rationality and mortality, wherever he may be encountered.

Given this Theaetetus-Statesman understanding of what it is to know the letters and syllables of reality, the method of collection (by which the children in the Statesman learn their letters) is a natural way to pursue knowledge, and especially knowledge of simples. The reason why it is difficult to recognize the letters of reality, and in particular the Forms, is that they appear in many guises, and this is because they appear in many combinations. Already in the Republic, in trying to explain why most people do not know the one beautiful-itself (and likewise for the other Forms) but only have opinions about the many beautiful things, Plato says that “although each [of the Forms] is one, yet because they appear everywhere in combination with actions and with bodies and with each other, each appears to be many” (Republic V 476a5-7). So a plausible way to come to know the one Form X is to collect different combinations in which $X$ occurs, especially combinations $XY$ and $XZ$ with other Forms $Y$ and $Z$, and try to discern what these different combinations have in common; this should help us to recognize $X$ wherever we see it, and to spell out the
more complex Forms in terms of X and their other constituents, as well as to spell out the internal structure of X itself if it has one.

When I compare the syllables βα and γα, I am led not only to recognize the common constituent α, but also to separate α from β and from γ. As the Theaetetus puts it, I come to discern each letter αὐτό καθ’ αὐτό (206a6-7): this enables me, when I hear “βα” spoken, to separate it into its components, so that I can repeat back separately “βῆτα, ἄλφα”, instead of merely repeating back “βα”. In the example that Aristotle credits to Young Socrates, if we had never seen circles separate (χωριζόμενα) from bronze, it might be difficult for us to make the separation in thought (ἀφαίρειν τῇ δινόι(γ) and to recognize that bronze does not belong to the essence of circle; as it is, by comparing circles in bronze with circles in wood or stone, we can separate the essence of circle from each of these materials (Metaphysics Z 1036a31-b3). It is genuinely Platonic to speak in this way of a human act of separating things that are presented to us inseparably: the senses perceive heavy and light or great and small “not κεχωρισμένον but as something συγκεχωρισμένον”, but thought has the task of seeing them διωρισμένα or κεχωρισμένα, since if it perceived them ἀχώριστα it would perceive greatness and smallness not as two things but as one (Republic VII 524a6-c8). Collection can help me separate out the letters, but if this is to give me knowledge of the original syllables, I must not only separate the letters but also know how they can recombine; in Socrates’ programmatic words in the Parmenides, I must be able “first to divide [διωρισθῆναι] the Forms separately themselves by themselves . . . and then to show that they can be combined and uncombined [συγκεχωρισθῶσιν, διωρισθῶσιν] among themselves” (Parmenides 129d6-e3). Plato does not suggest in the Parmenides or elsewhere that the separation of the Forms is a mistake: Parmenides praises Socrates for taking the first step by separating the Forms (130b1ff), and if Socrates then gets into difficulties it is because he has tried to separate them too hastily, πρὶν γνωμασθῆναι, and cannot give an adequate account of how they are related to each other and to participants andknowers.¹²

¹¹ The comparison with the letters is made explicit in the Sophist, where γραμματική knows what letters will combine and what letters will not (252e9-253a12), and dialectic knows the analogous things about the Forms.

¹² Parmenides’ terminology for separation varies (he says διωρισθῆναι χωρίς at 129d7 and 130b2, ὄριζονται at 135a2, b7, and c8-9), but the context shows that there is no difference in sense between these expressions. It is not as if he were (e.g.) in favor of ὄριζονται and against διωρισθῆναι χωρίς; he is in favor of ὄριζονται and
Many texts of the later dialogues seem intended, in different ways, to warn against the dangers of over-hasty collection; often, as in the Theuth story, the remedy suggested is to divide (διαρέειν) the things we are collecting, so as to avoid the analogue of taking γ and δ to be a single phoneme. To know the letter δ, it is not enough to be able to identify δ consistently wherever it is present: we must also consistently not identify something as δ when it is really γ, and this is just what it means to divide δ from γ. So the Sophist says that the task of dialectic is “to divide according to kinds [κατά γένη διαρείεοθα] and not to think that the same form is different or that a form which is different is the same,” and then to see how they can combine (253d1-3, cf. d9-e2). Διαρέεσίς here is simply the nonconfusion of the different Forms which the dialectician has identified and must reidentify, notably Being and Motion and Rest and Sameness and Difference: since both the Giants and the Friends of the Forms have collected Being too hastily, and have confused it either with Motion or with Rest, the dialectician must correct their confusions by “dividing” the letters of reality as Theuth divided the letters (Being and Motion and Rest are compared to letters at 253a1). But this kind of division cannot be reduced to the division of a genus into species, since I can “divide” a Form from another Form whose extension it contains (as Being from Motion), or even from a coextensive Form (as Being from Sameness, since they both apply to everything).

To separate something correctly is thus not just to collect it, but also to divide what we collect, to distinguish each thing from the other things it might be confused with. Plato had first introduced the pair collection and division, in the Phaedrus, as a guard against the over-hasty collection of ερως and of μανία in Socrates’ first speech, which had failed to distinguish the kinds, and had assumed that what was true of the kind of ερως the speaker had observed was true of ερως as such. Likewise in the Philebus, Plato brings up collection and division because Protarchus has been too hasty in collecting pleasure. Protarchus assumes that he has grasped the nature of pleasure in general, and that “although [pleasures] arise from contrary things, they are not themselves contrary to one another” (12d7-8), nor even unlike, “not insofar as they are pleasures” (13c5). For Protarchus, as for the Socrates of the Protagoras (351c-e), this is enough to infer that, since pleasure in the abstract is better than its contrary, all pleasure must be good, and that if anything pleasant is bad, this is not insofar as it is

thus of διαρείεοθα χωρίς, but against doing this incautiously, πρὶν γνωσθήναι. ('Ωρίζεσθαι here does not mean "to define" in the technical sense, but simply to separate or distinguish something from everything else.)
pleasant, but because of some other attribute it shares in (because it causes or presupposes a greater pain). Protarchus' problem is thus the opposite of Meno's. Meno had been unable to answer the question "what is virtue" except by describing separately the virtues of a man, of a woman, of a child, of a slave, because he was unable to collect what these virtues have in common. Socrates, in urging him to collect and to describe the single nature of virtue, argues that even if bees are of many kinds and differ from one another, they do not differ insofar as they are bees, but only in their size or their beauty or something else of this kind (Meno 72b1-7), so that it should be possible to describe the one thing in which bees, or virtues, do not differ. Now in the Philebus, while still insisting on the necessity of collecting one nature from its many manifestations, Plato is warning against a temptation to which the theory of Forms is peculiarly liable, to conceive all X's as being the same inasmuch as they are X, and to put down all their differences to imperfect participation in the X-itself, and to participation in other forms.13 (In the extreme case, this means saying that all stops are the same, inasmuch as they are stops, and that their differences are due to their being only imperfectly stops, or to their being combined with continuants or vowels; so that there is no need to distinguish more than three letters, "stop" and "continuant" and "vowel", in order to represent all syllables in writing.) Meno's problem and Protarchus' are each, at root, failures of intellectual perception, for which there is no guaranteed treatment. But no treatment can possibly succeed until we overcome the eristic arguments that serve to excuse these failures, Meno's argument that the single common nature cannot be known and Protarchus' argument that that nature, insofar as it is that one nature, cannot also be many, and cannot differ from itself or have contrary attributes. Meno cannot answer his question whether virtue is teachable until he knows what virtue is, and he cannot know this until he collects the single nature from its many manifestations. And Protarchus and Socrates cannot resolve their dispute about whether the best life is one of pleasure or of knowledge until they can collect pleasure and knowledge critically and without confusion, dividing and separating their kinds: they can then determine the value of each separated kind of pleasure and of knowledge, and see how to recombine them into the best human life.14

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13 This seems to be Socrates' temptation at Parmenides 128e4-130a2.
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