

Socratic Method: Aporeia, Elenchus and Dialectics

1. Aporia

The verb *ἀπορέω* (aporeô) means to be perplexed, at a loss, without further resources, or in (perhaps embarrassing) doubt. Hence, *ἀπορία* (aporia) is probably best translated as puzzlement or impasse. Since many of Plato's works end in aporia, they are called 'aporetic'. The following passage brings this out nicely:

MENO: Before I had even met you, Socrates, I have heard that all you do is infect other people with the bewilderment you suffer from yourself. And that seems to me to be what you are doing now too: you are using magic and witchcraft on me. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that you are casting a spell on me, to make me utterly stuck. If you will allow me a little joke, I think I know the perfect image for you: in appearance and all other respects you are just like one of those flat sea-fish, torpedoes.^[1] I mean, the torpedo numbs anyone who comes near enough to touch it, and I think you have done the same kind of thing to me. My mind and my mouth are literally torpid, and I have no answer for you, despite the fact that I have spoken at length about excellence on countless occasions, to a great many people, and, though I say so myself, have done so rather fluently and well. But at the moment I cannot even begin to say what it is. I think it was a sensible decision of yours to stay here and not to travel abroad, because if you were to behave like this elsewhere, as a foreigner, you would probably be arrested as a magician.

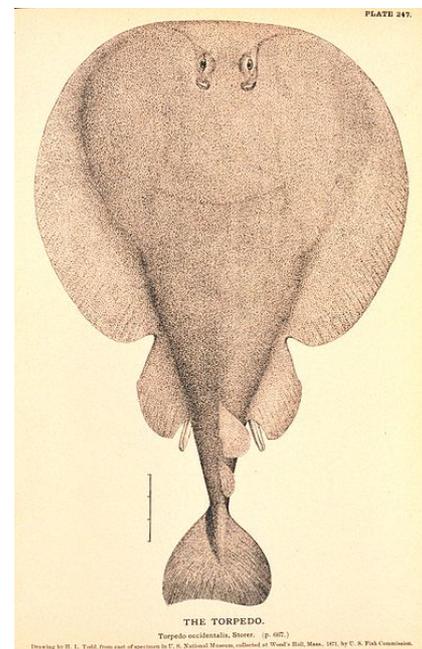
SOCRATES: You are full of mischief, Meno: I nearly fell into your trap.

MENO: What did you mean, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I know why you came up with an image for me.

MENO: Why, do you think?

SOCRATES: To make me come up with one for you in return. I am well aware that all good-looking people enjoy being compared to something: it works in their favour, because, I suppose, attractive people are bound to be compared to something attractive. but I am not going to come up with an image for you in return. As for me, if the torpedo numbs other people by virtue of the fact that it is numb itself, I am indeed like it, but otherwise I am not. It is not that I make other people stuck while being cleared myself; no, I make other people stuck in virtue of the fact that I am stuck myself. In the present instance, I do not know what excellence is, and although you probably did know before you came into contact with me, you seem not to know now. But I would be happy if the two of us together could investigate the issue and try to find out what it is.”
(*Meno* 79e–80d)



1 Picture from <http://www.photolib.noaa.gov/htmls/figb0518.htm>

2. Elenchus

Yet, *aporia* is the hallmark of the Socratic ‘elenchus’ (ἔλεγχος, proof, refutation or cross-examination).² The technique: (a) claim *P*; (b) explore what *P* entails, e.g., *Q*; (c) but if *Q*, then *P* is false; (d) so the initial claim needs correction or replacement.

The elenchus is *destructive*: prove ignorance, expose false beliefs, mere opinions, incoherent contradictions, or just bullshit (cf. *Apology* 21d ff.); the price seems to be indecision and scepticism.

Yet, it is also *constructive*: the elenchus may lead to further inquiry and hence conceptual clarification or refinement. Moreover, there is a meta-philosophical point: the result is less important than the enquiry itself. Philosophy is an active open-ended search with an uncertain outcome.

The Paradox of Inquiry. The *Meno* passage (80d–e) goes on to raise the following puzzle. When we ask what *F* is, then either we know *F* or not. If we know *F*, then we would not enquire into *F*, and if we do not know *F*, we cannot enquire into *F* either, for we do not know what we are looking for. Put differently, if we know the answer to the question we are asking, then nothing can be learned by asking. If we do not know the answer, then we cannot recognize a correct answer even if it is under our nose. So, enquiry is futile.³

3. Dialectic

The word λέγω (*lego*) means saying, speaking or talking, but also gathering or collecting. (The German verb *lesen* is similarly ambiguous between reading and collecting.) With the prefix *dia-*, which means ‘through’ in a temporal, spatial, and also means-end way, *διαλεκτική* (*dialektikê*) simply means ‘discussion’. So, dialectics can be understood as the art or skill of rational and logical discussion that aims at true and indubitable first principles. (Does this cohere with the scepticism produced by the elenchus?) In contrast, for Plato a *sophistic* discussion aims just to shine and score points.

Goal. Refute uncritically held beliefs. As destructive activity, dialectic relates to *elenchus*. But dialectic is positive too: seek to establish propositions of high generality, i.e. not what this *x* is, but what *x* is as such, or in itself. Hence the ultimate goal of Plato’s dialectic is the discovery of *Forms* or *Ideas* (universals).

elenchus, a cross-examination or refutation. Typically in Plato’s early dialogues, Socrates has a conversation with someone who claims to have some sort of knowledge, and Socrates refutes this claim by showing the interlocutor that what he thinks he knows is inconsistent with his other opinions. This refutation is called an elenchus. It is not entirely negative, for awareness of his own ignorance is supposed to spur the interlocutor to further inquiry, and the concepts and assumptions employed in the refutations serve as the basis for positive Platonic treatments of the same topic. In contrast, sophistic elenchi are merely eristic: they aim simply at the refutation of an opponent by any means. Thus, Aristotle calls fallacies that only appear to be refutations “sophistical elenchi.” **See also SOCRATES.**

E.C.H.

2 Right: Halper, E. C. (1995). Elenchus. In R. Audi, (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (p. 220). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 See Sorensen, R. (2011). Epistemic Paradoxes. In E. N. Zalta (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (esp. §6.1). URL <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemic-paradoxes/>>.

