

GARETH B. MATTHEWS

PERPLEXITY IN PLATO, ARISTOTLE, AND TARSKI

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According to both Plato (*Theaetetus* 155d) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* A2 982b14ff), philosophy begins in wonder. But both Plato and Aristotle, in the passages cited, link philosophical wonder with perplexity, or puzzlement. I should myself prefer to say, more simply, that philosophy begins in perplexity.

If Plato and Aristotle are right, philosophical wonder and perplexity moved Thales to philosophize. But neither Thales nor any other pre-Socratic philosopher seems to have written anything *about* perplexity, or about its role in the genesis of philosophy. Plato was the first to do that. In Plato's early dialogues especially, perplexity is described, discussed, and linked directly to the pursuit of philosophical inquiry.

What happens to perplexity in Plato after those early dialogues, so aptly called "aporetic" because they begin and end in perplexity (*aporía*), is not so obvious. In this paper I want to say a little about the "career" of perplexity in Plato and Aristotle and then make a comparison between perplexity in Aristotle and perplexity in a leading twentieth-century philosopher, Alfred Tarski. My aim is to encourage more general reflection on the relationship between philosophy and perplexity, both in ancient times and today.

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No doubt it is the picture Plato gives us of *aporía* in those early dialogues, where Socrates reduces his otherwise perfectly articulate conversation partners to little more than a stammer, that we first think of when we think of Plato and perplexity. In those aporetic dialogues Socrates is made to question an otherwise articulate interlocutor in a way that leaves him bewildered and disoriented. Meno, in the dialogue named after him, describes the phenomenon this way:

Socrates, before I even met you I used to hear that you are always in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed . . . like the broad torpedo fish . . . [who] makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, you seem to have had that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. Yet I have made many speeches about virtue [the subject Socrates was questioning him about] before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot say what [virtue] is. (*Meno* 80ab, Plato, 1981)

In response to Meno, Socrates says he is willing to accept the torpedo-fish simile so long as it is true that the torpedo fish numbs not only other fish but also itself. “I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others,” he insists; “but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others” (80c).

Since the ability to benumb and perplex others is so often correlated with Socrates’s own perplexity about the matter he brings up for discussion, the phenomenon of Socratic perplexity is easily linked to Socrates’s legendary effort, described in the *Apology*, to determine how the oracle could be right in saying that no one was wiser than he. Socrates, as we know, decides that he is wise only in realizing his own ignorance – in not thinking he knows what, in fact, he does not know (*Apology* 21d).

Perplexity in the early, aporetic dialogues of Plato is thus the result of relentless questioning by Socrates, questioning aimed at coming to be able to say what virtue or courage or friendship or piety is, when Socrates, the questioner, is himself perplexed about how to answer the questions he puts to his conversation partner.

There is, I think, every reason to suppose that the historical Socrates actually did question his fellow Athenians in the marketplace about ethical concepts and that he did, on many occasions, reduce even the most prominent and articulate among them to a surprisingly benumbed perplexity. There is also good reason, I think, to suppose that the historical Socrates was himself puzzled and perplexed concerning the very same things he questioned others about. No doubt Socrates’s own perplexity was at a higher level of sophistication than that of his interlocutors; but it was serious perplexity nonetheless. Impressed with Socrates’s ability to ask educated adults questions about central ethical notions they naturally think they understand, Plato wrote dialogues that have made this Socratic talent as memorable for us as it first was for Plato.

If one thinks of, say, the *Euthyphro* as a paradigmatically aporetic dialogue, one can say that such dialogues end in apparent failure: the ‘What is F?’ question has not been answered satisfactorily, even at the end of the dialogue, and Socrates’s interlocutor desperately wants to escape further Socratic questioning. Thus when, at the end of the dialogue, *Euthyphro*, Socrates tells Euthyphro that they must begin their investigation of what piety is all over again, Euthyphro replies, “Some other time, Socrates, . . . I am in a hurry now . . .” (15e).

If, however, the *Euthyphro* is a paradigmatically, aporetic dialogue, then the *Meno* is already a departure from the paradigm, and that for several reasons. The eloquent description of *aporía* I quoted earlier occurs in the middle of the dialogue. It is followed by the Paradox of Inquiry (80de) and then by a statement of the Doctrine of Recollection (81b–82a), which in turn is backed up by the interrogation of the slave-boy (82a–86c). In the midst of the interrogation of the slave-boy Socrates asks Meno, “Have we done him any harm by making him perplexed and numb as the torpedo fish does?” (84b) Meno says he doesn’t think so. Socrates continues:

Indeed, we have probably achieved something relevant to finding out how matters stand, for now, as he does not know, he would be glad to find out, whereas before he thought he could easily make many fine speeches to large audiences about the square of double size and said that it must have a base twice as long. (84bc, Plato, 1981)

Socrates then clinches his point: “Do you think,” he asks, “that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know?” Meno replies: “I do not think so, Socrates” (84c).

The irony in this passage marks an important shift in Plato’s attitude toward *aporía*. Thus Socrates’s comment that the slave-boy “thought he could easily make many fine speeches to large audiences about the square of double size” is an irreverent, if not downright malicious, parody of Meno’s speech, quoted above, about perplexity over virtue.

There are several other respects in which this part of the *Meno* moves away from the *Euthyphro* paradigm. For one thing, the *aporía* Socrates induces in the slave-boy concerns a question to which, we must assume, Socrates, the interrogator, already knows the answer.

So this is Socratic questioning in the degenerate sense in which, in our own day, law-school professors use the so-called “Socratic method” to bring their students, thorough questioning, to find for themselves the answer that the professor has had in mind from the beginning of the class.

In Part II of the *Meno*, therefore, Socrates is willing to consider the benefits of becoming perplexed about something even when there is a clear-cut answer to the question the questioner has posed and the questioner even knows what that clear-cut answer is. By contrast, there may be no entirely satisfactory answer to the question that Socrates asks his interlocutor in the *Euthyphro*, namely, ‘What is piety?’. At least the dialogue itself gives us no confidence that there is a satisfactory answer beyond making it clear that Socrates wants to continue the questioning.

Moreover, in the slave-boy passage Socrates does not himself share in the perplexity he induces in his interlocutor. Though, only a few lines before, he had insisted that he would accept the torpedo-fish analogy only on condition that the fish numbed itself, there is no reason whatsoever to think that Socrates was himself puzzled about how to answer the geometrical question he put to the slave-boy; in fact, there is every reason to think otherwise.

Let me linger on this last point a bit to draw out its significance. The *Euthyphro* invites us, though it does not force us, to draw the conclusion that perhaps piety is an essentially problematic or contestable concept. If that were so, there would be no entirely satisfying answer to the question, ‘Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?’ (10a). If one accepted the first horn of that dilemma, then one would have to agree that piety is not something that is determined by the gods’ approval, otherwise to say that they loved something because it is pious would be only to say the nonsensical thing that they love it because they love it. If, on the other hand, one accepted the second horn of the dilemma, then one would need to agree that the pious is not anything independent of the, perhaps for all we know, quite capricious attitudes of the gods. And that is a conclusion few religious believers can readily accept.

To gain a better sense of what it might mean for piety to be philosophically problematic, we might consider a parallel application of the “Euthyphro Problem” to something more familiar to those of us

with sympathy for the Judeo-Christian tradition in ethics. Suppose 'x is morally right' were defined as 'x is commanded by God' (in analogy to Euthyphro's suggestion that 'x is pious' be defined as 'x is god-loved'). Now the Judeo-Christian version of Socrates's question becomes 'Is what is morally right commanded by God because it is morally right, or is it morally right because God commands it?' Grasping the first horn may be less than fully satisfactory to the Jewish or Christian believer because it makes the standard of moral rightness independent of God. Grasping the second horn, however, may be equally unsatisfactory, because it makes moral rightness primarily a function of God's attitude, rather than a direct indicator of the nature of the thing God's attitude is directed toward.

The early Platonic dialogues, like the *Euthyphro*, leave open the possibility that the notion being examined (piety, virtue, courage, friendship) is problematic, not just in some accidental or superficial way, but essentially so. Some accounts of the problematic notion may be demonstrably superior to others, but none can be demonstrated to be free from all possible objections. To be sure, we are not forced to draw that conclusion. But the long history of inconclusive attempts to analyze and define interestingly philosophical concepts, including the very concepts the early Platonic dialogues focus on, gives it plausibility. By contrast, the purely geometrical idea of constructing a square with an area twice that of a given square put for analysis to the slave-boy is not philosophically problematic at all.

Even if we do not suppose that the notions that Socrates undertakes to analyze in those dialogues that end in *aporía* are essentially problematic in the strong sense I have been discussing, Socrates's insistence that he is just as puzzled and perplexed about the notion under discussion as his interlocutor gives the Socratic investigation a kind of excitement and authenticity that inducing perplexity in a question to which the questioner already knows the answer cannot match.

The switch, then, from a torpedo-fish that numbs itself as well as others to one that can numb others without any danger of becoming itself numbed, is a change of monumental proportions. Using the second simile, philosophy, like geometry, would be a discipline with answers at the back of the book. On this model the philosophy teacher might still induce perplexity, but only as a pedagogical device, a way

to convince a pupil of his ignorance and motivate him to learn the answers and how to get them.

On the other model, the philosopher who presses the questions may have as much hope of profiting from the philosophical inquiry as the student he interrogates. The inquiry is genuine for the teacher, as well as for the student. Indeed, on this model one can't really teach philosophy unless one can get oneself into a state of genuine perplexity.

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Does the *Meno* mark a shift in Plato's conception of philosophical inquiry? I think so. Aporetic dialogues disappear in the middle period of Plato's creative activity. The style of questioning Plato gives to his figure, Socrates, changes and Socrates is allowed to develop theories and support positive conclusions. To be sure, the positive conclusion of Part II of the *Meno* is modest and tentative. But Plato goes on in the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* to argue for and develop the grandest metaphysical doctrine in Western philosophy, the Theory of Forms.

One might have expected that, among the dialogues of Plato's middle period, at least Book I of the *Republic* would make a central place for *aporia*, since that book is often taken to be an early dialogue, recycled for a larger, middle-dialogue purpose. And it is true that the questioning in Book I is much more nearly elenctic in style than anything to be found in Books II–X. But Socrates in Book I gives only lip-service to his fabled ignorance and, in fact, argues, albeit only sketchily, for many of the substantive theses of the later books.

In fact, the expected profession of Socratic ignorance at the end of Book I of the *Republic* rings rather hollow. Having just presented an argument for saying that justice is doing your own thing (*ergon idion* – the very definition of 'justice' in Book IV) and proving that the just person is happy, and the unjust wretched, and concluding that "injustice is never more profitable than justice" (354a), Socrates says this:

I seem to have behaved like a glutton, snatching at every dish that passes and tasting it before properly savoring its predecessor. Before finding the answer to our first inquiry about what justice is, I let that go and turned to investigate whether it is a kind of vice and ignorance or a kind of wisdom and virtue. Then an argument came up about injustice being more profitable than justice, and I couldn't refrain

from abandoning the previous one and following up on that. Hence the result of the discussion, as far as I'm concerned, is that I know nothing, for when I don't know what justice is, I'll hardly know whether it is a kind of virtue or not, or whether a person who has it is happy or unhappy. (354b, Plato, 1992a)

We can, of course, admit, as Socrates wants us to, that the arguments have come too thick and fast for proper evaluation. And we can agree that neither he nor we have a right to rest confidence in Socrates's conclusions until the arguments have been laid out more carefully and the opposing views have been considered more thoroughly. But there is here none of the numbing perplexity of blind alleys and undermined assumptions, no trace at all. Socrates's self-professed ignorance here is only the uncertainty of a brilliantly sketched proof that awaits having each step carefully checked once the ardor of discovery, or at least apparent discovery, has faded.

Not only is the enveloping perplexity of the aporetic dialogues missing entirely from Plato's *Republic*, there is a chilling passage at the end of Book VII in which the dialogue's fictional Socrates seems to be condemning the historical Socrates for inducing a destructive perplexity in the Athenian young that leads them to nihilism and leaves them open to corruption.

In this passage Socrates talks about how children, who have been brought up with traditional family values, who obey and honor their parents, may be thrown for a loop when someone asks them "What is the good [*to kalon* – the good, fine, or beautiful]?" (538d). Here is the moral the Socrates of the *Republic* draws:

And isn't it one lasting precaution not to let them taste arguments while they're young? I don't suppose that it has escaped your notice that, when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who've refuted them by refuting others themselves, and, like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing those around them with their arguments. (539ab, Plato, 1992a)

It is hard not to see in this passage a criticism of Socratic practice, even something of a vindication of the court's judgment in condemning Socrates to death for corrupting the youth of Athens.

In any case, Plato in his *Republic* has moved far enough away from needing or wanting to pay homage to Socratic *aporia* that he includes in that dialogue no examples of questioning that lead to perplexity. Moreover, he proposes (540a) postponing the introduction of real philosophy in an ideal curriculum until age 50, more than twice the

age of the Athenian youth the historical Socrates was alleged to have corrupted.

Then an odd thing happens in the further development of Plato's thought. Having, in the *Republic*, turned his back on Socratic perplexity and, among a great many other things, presented the Theory of Forms, Plato in the *Parmenides* makes a young Socrates try to defend Plato's own Theory of Forms in the face of relentless criticism from an older Parmenides. In a way Parmenides, in that dialogue, plays the part of Socrates from an early dialogue. He questions his earnest interlocutor in the most searching ways – his most famous line of questioning being what has come to be called the “Third Man Argument.” And he secures an admission of being perplexed from Socrates with the following words:

“And yet, Socrates,” said Parmenides, “the forms inevitably involve these objections and a host of others besides – if there are those characters for things, and a person is to mark off each form as ‘something itself.’ As a result, whoever hears about them is [perplexed, *aporein*] and objects that they do not exist, and that, even if they *do*, they must by strict necessity be unknowable to human nature . . .”

“I agree with you, Parmenides,” Socrates said. “That's very much what I think too.”

“Yet on the other hand, Socrates,” said Parmenides, “if someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of the same sort, won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way he will destroy the power of dialectic [or: discourse] entirely . . .”

“What you say is true,” Socrates said. (135ac, Plato, 1996)

Is this a return to the perplexity of the early dialogues? Well, there are several ways in which this passage does not portray paradigmatically Socratic perplexity. First, Parmenides doesn't exactly say that he is himself perplexed. He says that whoever hears about the forms is perplexed. Second, the subject of investigation is not what piety or justice or friendship or virtue is, or anything of the sort. The subject of inquiry is a philosophical theory, namely, Plato's Theory of Forms. So this investigation belongs to the Academy and not to the Athenian marketplace. Third, Parmenides proposes a method for resolving the perplexity; it is Zenonian dialectic. We are clearly meant to conclude that the *aporíai* the Theory of Forms generates have a solution, and that the best way to arrive at the solution is to use an appropriate philosophical method. A better trained Socrates,

in fact, one trained in the appropriate philosophical method, will be able to deal with the problems.

In *Parmenides*, Part I, we can say, I think, Socratic perplexity is doubly professionalized. It is professionalized, first, in that it is allowed to arise from the examination of a professional theory, a philosophical theory, rather than from reflection on a central notion like virtue or justice that is fully at home in the marketplace, that is, in non-professional, or non-philosophical discourse. Second, it is professionalized in that a professional remedy is proposed to deal with it, namely training in dialectic.

In a way, Plato's dialogue, *Theaetetus*, marks an even clearer return to the early aporetic dialogue. This is another 'What is F?' dialogue, the "F" this time being knowledge. And the dialogue ends without the 'What is F?' question having been answered satisfactorily. The three "definitions" or analyses of knowledge that had been considered and rejected in the dialogue Socrates calls "mere wind eggs and not worth the rearing" (210b). It is worth noting that the third of these analyses, according to which knowledge is true belief with an account, or justification, had seemed perfectly acceptable in the *Meno* and the *Symposium*; but here it is criticized and rejected.

Socratic ignorance is again prominent in the *Theaetetus*, as, for example, in this part of the dialogue's final speech, in which Socrates explains what he takes to be the value of their apparently fruitless inquiry:

Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh, Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today's scrutiny, and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy to know what you do not know. For that, and no more, is all that my art can effect; nor have I any of that knowledge possessed by all the great and admirable men of our own day or of the past. (210bc, Plato, 1992b)

There are, however, important respects in which the *Theaetetus* is quite different from all the early aporetic dialogues. First, although Socrates's chief interlocutor, like so many of his conversation partners in the early dialogues, is very young, he is described as being a brilliant mathematician (143d–44a). He is certainly not someone Socrates simply bumps into on the street corner. Indeed, he comes with the enthusiastic recommendation of his teacher, Theodorus.

Second, the concept to be analyzed in this dialogue, knowledge, is not, as are all the concepts in the early aporetic dialogues, an ethical one. Third, in discussing and assessing the three proposed analyses of knowledge, Socrates is quick to fill out the possible import of each suggestion with quite fully developed philosophical theories, even with theories of famous philosophers. Thus immediately after Theaetetus makes the suggestion that knowledge is perception, Socrates fills out that suggestion by reference to ideas from Protagoras, Heraclitus, and Empedocles. As anyone who has ever studied this dialogue can testify, the discussion is abstruse and technical, perhaps as technical as anything in the Platonic corpus. So, again, though the *Theaetetus* is a definitional dialogue and Socrates's discussion partner is a young person, the discussion that makes up the dialogue belongs more to the academy than to the marketplace.

Also noteworthy in the *Theaetetus* is Plato's attempt to deal with the charge he himself had made at the end of Book VII of the *Republic*, namely, that Socratic inquiry leads to nihilism among the youth, who then, as a result of their cynicism and unbelief come to a bad end. Here is part of that effort:

It is the height of unreasonableness that a person who professes to care for moral goodness should be consistently unjust in discussion. I mean by injustice, in this connection, the behavior of a man who does not take care to keep controversy distinct from discussion; a man who forgets that in controversy he may play about and trip up his opponent as often as he can, but that in discussion he must be serious, he must keep on helping his opponent to his feet again, and point out to him only those of his slips which are due to himself or to the intellectual society which he has previously frequented. If you observe this distinction, those who associate with you will blame themselves for their confusion and their perplexity [*aporía*], not you. . . . But if you follow the common practice and do the opposite, you will get the opposite results. Instead of Philosophers, you will make your companions grow up to be the enemies of philosophy. (167e–168b, Plato, 1992b)

There is another development here that is of the greatest importance. Plato makes clear and explicit by his use of the word, 'perplexity' [*aporía*], that the domain of philosophical perplexity extends beyond the attempt to answer definitional or 'What is F?' questions to include questions of the form, 'How can it be the case that p?'. Here is the passage:

Socrates: I have something on my mind which has often bothered me before, and got me into great perplexity [*aporía*], both in my own thought and in discussion with other people – I mean, I can't say what it is, this experience we have, and how it arises in us.

Theaetetus: What experience?

Socrates: Believing what is false. (187d, Plato, 1992b)

Superficially, this might just seem to be another definitional question. Instead of asking, “What is knowledge?” or “How is ‘knowledge’ to be defined?” Socrates asks, “What is false belief?” or “How is ‘false belief’ to be defined?” But, in fact, the focus is somewhat different. In asking, “What is knowledge?” or “What is virtue?” – even in a philosophical way – we need not be puzzled that there can be any such thing as knowledge, or virtue. Our puzzlement arises when, through Socratic questioning, we confront the fact that we cannot give a satisfactory definition or analysis of knowledge, or virtue.

With false belief, as Socrates goes on to demonstrate, it is different. There may well be trouble in trying to say what falsity is, or what belief is, but if we are clear about what falsity and belief are, there should be no big puzzle about what false belief is. But there can still be a puzzle about how anyone can ever make a false judgment, or believe something that is false. Suppose I mistake Barbara for Susan. Can I *believe* that Barbara is Susan? It might well seem that, to satisfy the conditions for having a belief that is genuinely about Barbara and also a belief that is genuinely about Susan I would be precluded from believing that Barbara is Susan.

Of course, this is hardly the first time Plato had introduced a puzzle about how it can be the case that *p*. Thus, just after the passage from the *Meno* I began with, Plato has Meno introduce the puzzle about how there can be such a thing as inquiry, for example, trying to find out what virtue is. Either one knows already, and there can, for that reason, be no real inquiry. Or one doesn’t know, and so won’t even know what to look for (80de). This “Paradox of Inquiry,” interesting and important as it is, however, is not identified *in the dialogue* anyway as a genuine source of perplexity. Socrates refers to it as a “debater’s argument” (*eristikon logon*) and, though he does respond to it, he doesn’t treat it with the respect he treats the perplexity-inducing question, “What is virtue?”

In many ways, the dialogue, *Sophist*, picks up where the *Theaetetus* left off. Of all the Platonic dialogues, the *Sophist* is perhaps the one most explicitly concerned with perplexity. Its ostensible project, defining ‘the Sophist,’ leads into an extremely

complex and difficult discussion of appearance and reality, being and not being, truth and falsehood. The Eleatic Stranger, who, in this dialogue, has replaced Socrates, doesn't exactly claim ignorance on these matters, in the fashion of Socrates in the early dialogues; but he does make clear that he finds these topics deeply perplexing:

This appearing, and this seeming but not being, and this saying things but not true things – all these issues are full of confusion [or: deeply involved in perplexity, *aporías*], just as they always have been. It's extremely hard, Theaetetus, to say what form of speech we should use to say that there really is such a thing as false saying or believing, and moreover to utter this without being caught in a verbal conflict [or antinomy, *enantiología*]. (236e–37a, Plato, 1993)

A first thing to note about this passage is that what induces perplexity in the Eleatic Stranger here is a first cousin of what Socrates expressed perplexity about in the *Theaetetus*, namely, how it is possible to believe something false. Here the puzzle is how there can be such a thing as false statement. Since in both dialogues thinking is taken to be inner talking, inner speech, the difference between the two puzzles is a difference between saying to oneself something false and saying it aloud, to another person.

A second thing to note is that perplexity is here linked with a specific *enantiología*, or antinomy, that produces the perplexity. The antinomy can be stated this way:

1. The Sophist says what is false.

Therefore,

2. The Sophist says something.
3. What is false is what is not.
4. What is not, is nothing.

Therefore,

5. The Sophist says nothing.

Therefore,

6. The Sophist says something and he says nothing.

Stated in this bald way, the antinomy may be less than gripping. But I hope you can appreciate the fact that there are ways of filling the question out in terms of nonexistent states of affairs distinct from other equally nonexistent states of affairs that have a good chance of inducing perplexity even today.

It is but a short step from this development in Plato's thought to what one might call the full "normalization of perplexity" in Plato's pupil, Aristotle. Often Aristotle, when he begins the discussion of a new subject matter, first identifies the *aporíai* (perplexities, difficulties, antinomies or just problems) that belong to that subject and the sets as a constraint on his own inquiry the resolution (*euporía*) of each of the perplexing problems he has identified.

At least once in his writing Aristotle in fact links his own understanding of the importance of identifying *aporíai* to his solution to the Paradox of Inquiry. Perhaps this is his best solution to the Paradox of Inquiry. This is the passage I have in mind:

We must, with a view to the science which we are seeking, first recount the subjects that should be discussed. These include both the other opinions that some have held on certain points . . . For those who wish to get clear of the difficulties it is advantageous to state the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot which one does not know. But the difficulty [perplexity, *aporía*] in our thinking points to a knot in the thing [*peri tou pragmatou*]; for in so far as our thought is in perplexity [*aporía*], it is like those who are tied up; in both cases it is impossible to go forward. Therefore one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand, both for the reasons we have stated and because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go; besides, we do not otherwise know even whether we have found what we are looking for; the end is not clear to such a person, while to one who has first discussed the difficulties it is clear . . .

The first problem [perplexity, *aporía prôtê*] concerns . . . (995a24–b4, Aristotle, 1984)

The philosophical methodology this passage suggests goes something like this. Suppose one wants to know what it is for something to be a place, or a location (*topos*). One begins by collecting some of the relevant things people say about places, things that might help us determine what a place is. One of the things people say, it seems, is that the place of a thing contains it, but is not part of it, since the thing can leave its place without growing smaller.

Then we collect the puzzles (*aporíai*) about place. For example, there is a puzzle about whether a place is itself *in* a place. If everything in the physical world had a place, then, it seems, a place must have one, too. But then there would be an infinite regress of places, which is absurd.

Now the point of the inquiry is to see if we can somehow respect most of what people are preanalytically inclined to say about places

and, at the same time, resolve the relevant *aporíai*. Suppose someone then says, how can you inquire into what a place is? Either you know already, and so the inquiry is phony, or else you don't know, and so you won't be able to recognize a satisfactory answer. Aristotle replies, first, that what people are inclined to say about places provides some general parameters for a satisfactory account. As for being able to recognize what we are looking for, should we find it, that consists mainly in being able to tell whether the puzzles that our object of inquiry gives rise to have been solved in a way that respects what people are inclined to say.

Although Aristotle could hardly be said to follow this methodology in *all* his philosophical inquiries (I'm not sure there is any single methodology he follows in all his inquiries¹), some of them, such as for example, this discussion of place in the first chapters of *Physics* IV I have been discussing, do seem to fit it. Others, perhaps, could be recast in this pattern. In any case, this methodology does seem to preserve an important place for *aporía* in philosophy without forcing us to be satisfied with Socratic ignorance; it also has the virtue of providing an interesting response to the Paradox of Inquiry.

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In conclusion I want to compare the role of perplexity in late Plato and in Aristotle with what is suggested by some remarks of Alfred Tarski in his article, "Truth and Proof."² Tarski writes:

Two diametrically opposed approaches to antinomies can be found in the literature of the subject. One approach is to disregard them, to treat them as sophistries, as jokes that are not serious but malicious, and that aim mainly at showing the cleverness of the man who formulates them. (Tarski, 1969, 110)

Incidentally, many of the contemporaries of Socrates seem to have had this attitude toward the conundra he plagued them with.

Tarski continues:

The opposite approach is characteristic of certain thinkers of the 19th century and is still represented, or was so a short while ago, in certain parts of our globe. According to this approach antinomies constitute a very essential element of human thought; they must appear again and again in intellectual activities, and their presence is the basic source of real progress. (*ibid.*)

I suggest that this approach is Socratic. It is followed by anyone who thinks there is something important in Gallie's idea of "essentially contested concepts,"³ and who thinks that it is an important task

of philosophy to bring out how deeply problematic philosophically interesting concepts are.

Tarski goes on:

As often happens, the truth is probably somewhere in between. Personally, as a logician, I could not reconcile myself with antinomies as a permanent element of our system of knowledge. However, I am not the least inclined to treat antinomies lightly. The appearance of an antinomy is for me a symptom of disease. Starting with premises that seem intuitively obvious, using forms of reasoning that seem intuitively certain, an antinomy leads us to nonsense, a contradiction. Whenever this happens, we have to submit our ways of thinking to a thorough revision, to reject some premises in which we believed or to improve some forms of argument which we used. We do this with the hope not only that the old antinomy will be disposed of but also that no new one will appear. To this end we test our reformed system of thinking by all available means, and, first of all, we try to reconstruct the old antinomy in the new setting; this testing is a very important activity in the realm of speculative thought, akin to carrying out crucial experiments in empirical science. (*ibid.*)

It would be simplistic to identify Tarski's attitude towards antinomy and perplexity with that of late Plato and the Aristotle of *Metaphysics B*. But there are certainly interesting and important similarities. In the article from which the above quotations were taken Tarski explains how puzzling over the liar paradox, or, as he calls it, "the antinomy of the liar," played a crucial role in the development of his own theory of truth. When Tarski expresses the resolve to "find a solution" to the liar antinomy "that will keep the classical concept of truth essentially intact" he follows a philosophical method that is quite close to the one I have highlighted in Aristotle.

* * *

Many of us were first attracted to philosophy by encountering a modern-day Socrates who induced philosophical perplexity in us. But most of us, like Plato, Aristotle, and Tarski, can't be content to live, like Socrates, with unresolved perplexity. We try to master philosophical perplexity by turning the source of perplexity into problem-sized perplexities (*aporíai*), or antinomies (*enantiológíai*), which we can hope to solve, or resolve, one at a time. That's what Plato does in his *Sophist*. That's what Aristotle does in many of his writings – indeed, for Aristotle the word '*aporía*' is best translated, not as 'perplexity,' but as 'problem' or even 'difficulty.' Dealing with perplexity by identifying tractable *sources* of that perplexity and

trying to solve or resolve them is part of what I call the “normalization of perplexity.” A good bit of what we do today as philosophy, I suggest, belongs to the normalization of perplexity. It is important for us, as it was for Plato, that the perplexity we induce in others, and feel in ourselves, be genuine. It is also our aim, as it was the aim of Plato in the later dialogues, and of Aristotle, and I think of Tarski, to turn philosophical perplexity into resolvable problems about truth, or falsity, or virtue, or piety, or whatever, that we have some hope of solving, if not for all time, at least for our own time.

NOTES

- ¹ On this matter I agree with McLeod (1995).
- ² George Boger suggested to me this comparison between Aristotle and Tarski.
- ³ See Gallie, 1955–56.

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Department of Philosophy
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003
USA