



## Vasilis Politis, Ph.D.

Professor of Philosophy

Trinity College Dublin

Born in 1963 in Athens

Studied Philosophy at Oxford University

---

### PROJECT

## Aporia and the Demand for Definitions in Plato's Early Dialogues

The aim of this project is to establish the function of aporia in a number of Platonic dialogues generally considered early and to show that this is of central significance for our understanding of, first, the method and structure of Plato's arguments and inquiries and, second, Plato's demand for definitions and the view that knowledge requires knowledge of definitions. It is of course generally recognized that many of these dialogues end in aporia, in the sense of the puzzlement distinctive of the failure of a search and typically the search for a definition. What has not been properly recognized, however, is that in these same dialogues Plato uses the term aporia and its cognates also for the puzzlement distinctive of the grasp of a particular problem and indeed for such problems themselves. According to this use, aporia is situated not at the end of a search, indicating its failure, but at the beginning of a search whose starting-point it serves to indicate. Such aporia is typically articulated in a question with two apparently conflicting sides (whether or not ..., whether ... or ...) with good or apparently good reasons on both sides. I shall argue that this use of aporia has two central functions in these dialogues: first, to motivate, direct and structure particular searches, searches whose aim is the resolution of particular aporiai; and, second, to defend and justify the raising of the *ti esti* question and the request for a definition. A central outcome of the project, therefore, is that there is an important sense in which the question *ti esti F* is not supposed to be primary in these dialogues; for there is supposed to be a different question prior to it, namely, a question that is of the form whether or not *F* is *G* and that articulates a particular aporia. The aporia is "prior to" the *ti esti* question precisely in the sense that it serves to motivate and justify the raising of this question.

### Recommended Reading

Politis, Vasilis. "The Place of Aporia in Plato's Charmides." *Phronesis* 53 (2008): 1-34.

---

COLLOQUIUM, 03.11.2009

## Method of inquiry in Plato's early dialogues:

## 'What is it?' questions, Whether-or-not questions that articulate aporiai, and their relation

1. Introduction and background: the state of aporia as the source of philosophical inquiry

- *thaumazein* and *aporein* as the source of philosophical inquiry: Plato's *Theaetetus* 155d, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A. 983a

- the content, and cause, of this mental state (Aristotle, Topics VI. 145b)
- my general thesis about Plato's early dialogues, and how this differs from a traditional reading: such aporiai are present in these dialogues, and under that title, 'aporiai'; they are primary in the order of inquiry; they are prior, in the order of inquiry, to the 'What is it?' question; and they motivate and justify: (a) Plato's raising of the 'What is it?' question, (b) his view that it must be answered with a general (and unitary, and explanatory) definition, and (c) his affording this question a particularly central function.

## 2. What distinguishes questions that articulate aporiai?

- they are two-sided questions: whether or not p, whether p or q (where p and q are apparently incompatible propositions)
- there appear to be good reasons on both sides
- this appears so to one and the same person, not (just) to different people (Why is this important?)
- an example (from the first book of the Republic): Is justice 'another's good'?

## 3. What is distinctive of the place of aporiai in philosophical inquiry?

- compared with everyday, practical inquiry (e.g. 'Shall I walk or take the bus?')
- compared with empirical scientific inquiry (e.g. 'Is it a particle or a wave we're witnessing here?')
- proposed answer: in philosophical inquiry, aporiai are primary in the order of inquiry; and there are no 'shortcuts' to an answer (i.e. the answer can be established, if at all, only through an inquiry that is thoroughly aporia-based)

## 4. What distinctions in reasons do we need to make - and can it be argued that Plato makes - if we suppose that aporia-based inquiry can aim at knowledge pure and simple?

- apparently good reasons versus good reasons
- good but inconclusive reasons versus conclusive reasons
- good reasons considered individually versus good reasons all things considered
- thinker-relative (= subjective) reasons versus not-thinker-relative (= objective) reasons

## 5. Plato's 'What is it?' questions in these dialogues

- the everyday meaning of the question 'What is F?': a request for a standard for a thing's being such as to be F
- in everyday use, this question is preliminary of and preparatory to the use of the term; and it has no further function (other than clarificatory) in the use of this term
- how Plato transforms this question:

he rules out an answer that is by appeal to an everyday recognized example-and-exemplar; and he requires that the answer must be, first, general, second, unitary, and third, explanatory;

he argues that answering the question 'What is F?', and doing so according to these requirements, is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for knowing (for certain G) whether or not F is G

## 6. Why Plato's raising of the ti esti question requires justification

## 7. Textual interlude: reading the ending of the dialogue Protagoras (360e-end)

## 8. What is behind Plato's 'What is it?' question: an attempt at identifying Plato's motivation and justification for this question

- the notion of a radical aporia: an aporia regarding F that renders questionable the status of everyday recognized

examples-and-exemplars of things that are F

- why, if there is a radical aporia regarding F, is it necessary, for the purpose of resolving this aporia, to raise the question 'What is F?'
- why, if there is a radical aporia regarding F, is it necessary, for the purpose of resolving this aporia, to answer the question 'What is F?' in a general way (and not by example-exemplar)?
- why, if there is a radical aporia regarding F, is it sufficient, for the purpose of resolving this aporia, to answer the question 'What is F?'

## Reading

I've put three papers in the WIKO library (I can send you any of them electronically, on request):

1. 'What is behind the ti esti question?' is along the lines of the present presentation
2. 'The Place of Aporia in Plato's Charmides' is an analysis of the aporia, in the dialogue Charmides, about the possibility and value of reflexive knowledge
3. 'Explanation and Essence in Plato's Phaedo' is an analysis of Plato's aporia, in the dialogue Phaedo, about the uniformity of explanation; and of his resolution of this aporia with a theory of the nature of explanation which claims that explanations are based in the essence of the things they explain.

If you want more, I have a long manuscript entitled: 'Aporia and Argument in Plato's Protagoras'

Politis, Vasilis (2018)

Aporia and sceptical argument in Plato's Early Dialogues

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1725320258>

Politis, Vasilis (Cambridge,2018)

The aporetic tradition in ancient philosophy

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1002711827>

Politis, Vasilis (2012)

What is behind the ti esti question? : [manuscript]

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029322104>

Politis, Vasilis (2010)

Explanation and essence in Plato's Phaedo

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029324646>

Politis, Vasilis (2008)

The place of aporia in Plato's Charmides

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029322848>

Politis, Vasilis (2007)

The aporia in the Charmides : about reflexive knowledge and the contribution to its solution in the sun analogy of the Republic

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029320950>

Politis, Vasilis (2007)

Is Socrates paralyzed by his state of aporia? Meno 79e7 - 80d4

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=670716375>

Politis, Vasilis (2006)

Aporia and searching in the early Plato

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029323453>

Politis, Vasilis (2006)

Non-subjective idealism in Plato : (Sophist 248e - 249d)

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029320381>

Politis, Vasilis (2006)

The argument for the reality of change and changelessness

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1029319936>