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Finding Comfort in Aporia

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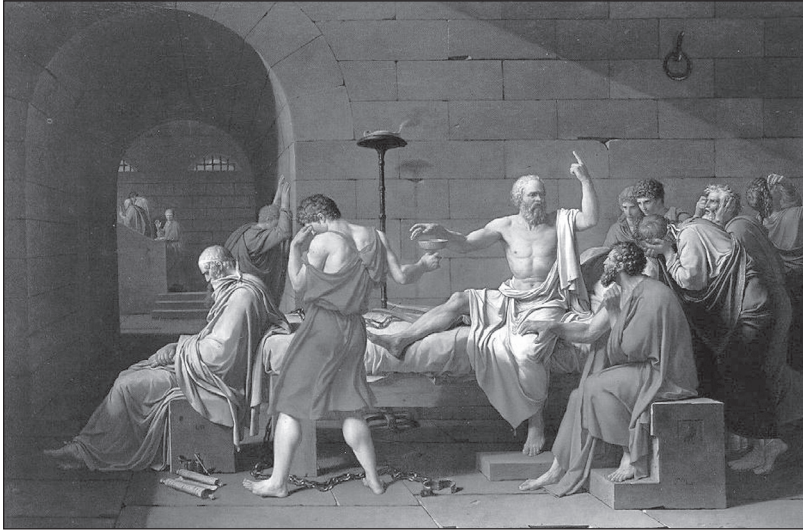
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Finding Comfort in Aporia

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Jacques-Louis David: *The Death of Socrates* Metropolitan Museum of Art

There is a deep comfort in understanding. It allows us to orient ourselves with the world around us and our place within it. Aporia as expressed by Plato takes us far from this sensation of comfort and leaves us distinctly uneasy. Aporia, this “moment where a misconception has been exposed, stripped away, and where a clean terrain now exists for the reconstruction of true knowledge” (Burbules, *Aporia*) is so very unsettling that it is only through conscious effort that we allow ourselves to occupy this space. In his Dialogues Plato illuminates for us the power to be found in accepting this sensation of disorientation as a path to a more meaningful understanding. Plato acknowledges the difficulty of this process but urges us time and again to recognize that embracing aporia and its corresponding discomfort is vital to live a truly authentic life. As we follow Socrates’ life and death in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, *Apology*, and *Phaedo* we see that Plato repeatedly encourages us to embrace aporia and its’ accompanying discomfort. Aporia is the key to the pursuit of wisdom and for both Plato and Socrates that pursuit should be the goal of our existence.

In Plato's Dialogue *Theaetetus* we are party to a discourse between Socrates and the young scholar Theaetetus the protégé of Socrates' friend, the mathematician Theodorus. This conversation takes place just before Socrates is called before his accusers to answer charges brought against him by the city of Athens. This

impending trial will ultimately lead to Socrates' imprisonment and death. On this day one of his last days of freedom, Socrates engages in a discussion on Knowledge and Wisdom. In this discussion Plato introduces us to the feeling of reluctance associated with aporia through the behavior of Theodorus, who is apprehensive about entering into this discourse with Socrates. Theodorus knew Socrates well and was familiar with the possible direction of this conversation. This foreknowledge causes Theodorus to fear having his own truths questioned, and perhaps even disproven. Instead of engaging with the reputed philosopher Theodorus chooses the role of listener. When Socrates challenges Theodorus to lead the exchange (*Theaetetus*, 146A) Theaetetus claims he, "...is unaccustomed to this sort of discussion, and moreover I'm not of an age to get accustomed to it. ...Youth holds in it the capacity for improvement in everything for the one who is young" (*Theaetetus*, 146b). Theodorus is so uncomfortable with the thought of being out of his depth in this dialogue with Socrates that he retreats and offers Theaetetus in his place.

Early on in the discussion Theaetetus finds himself questioning his own previous assumptions. Theaetetus admits to Socrates that, "I don't have the power to persuade myself... that I say anything adequately" (*Theaetetus*, 148e). Socrates comforts Theaetetus by telling him, "Dear Theaetetus, it's not because you are empty that you are laboring" (*Theaetetus*, 148e). Socrates goes on to compare himself with a midwife who oversees a labor and delivery to bring forth a newborn. Socrates teaches that the key to beauty and truth lie within us, just waiting for us to look for it and bring it out into the world. Socrates sees his discussions as the conduit by which he hopes to help these truths find their way into the world. Plato through the use of this analogy counsels his readers as well. Plato utilizes the voice of Socrates to explain that the journey through aporia and the letting go of previous ideas or understandings is painful, but that at the end of our labor lays joy and new birth.

Plato drives home this theme further when later the discussion turns to the possibility of finding knowledge in perception. Socrates challenges Theaetetus to look at his world differently. Socrates disrupts the comfort Theaetetus feels in trusting the familiar way he perceives things as well as Theaetetus' evident acceptance that this familiar way is the only way to perceive all things. Theaetetus once again expresses his sensation of "being in the dark" and declares he is "in a state of wonder" (*Theaetetus*, 155c). Socrates encourages Theaetetus to embrace this feeling, for "...this experience, wondering, belongs very much to the philosopher" (*Theaetetus*, 155c). This reference to philosophy is particularly important as it is the only time that Plato gives us a definition of Philosophy.

When we consider the prospect of wonder we often associate it with a sensation of childlike awe, a feeling of amazement and admiration caused by something beautiful, remarkable, or unfamiliar (referred to as "Wonder"). When Theaetetus expresses his wonder he associates it in this context

with “being in the dark”, a distinctly disquieting sensation. This is a less common interpretation of wonder, one of fear or doubt. To Socrates being a philosopher is a high calling, one that he himself was compelled by the god to pursue. (*Apology of Socrates*, 30e) Plato is acknowledging the importance of embracing both the uneasiness brought on by aporia and the awe of the discovery it portends. It is this combination that lets us know we are on the track to truth which is the ultimate goal of every philosopher.

Plato implies that the journey through the state of aporia can be successful even if it uncovers no new truths. The success comes from dispelling misconceptions or assumptions that we formally held uninterrogated as truths. Plato clarifies this towards the end of the Dialogue:

Socrates: Have we given birth to everything? Then our art of midwifery declares... [that] all these things are not worth rearing?

Theaetetus: Yes we have, by Zeus

Socrates: Then you'll... be full of better things on account of the present examination... you'll be less severe with those around you and gentler... not supposing that you know things you don't know" (*Theaetetus*, 210b,c).

Plato indicates that sometimes the only truth revealed is that what we think is true is not. Assuming we “have all the answers,” while comforting to ourselves, is actually a form of arrogance (Marinoff, *Plato, Not Prozac*, 172). If we can accept that we do not know, and not race to fill that gap with an untruth, then we can view the world around us with greater clarity. We can abandon the mask of arrogance and realize that we are all struggling to find our own ‘truth’.

In the *Apology of Socrates* Plato, once again speaking through Socrates illuminates another perspective of aporia when Socrates speaks of the ultimate fear – the fear of death. Plato writes, “For fear of death, men, is in fact nothing other than to seem to be wise, but not be so” (*Apology of Socrates*, 29a). Socrates explains that no one knows with certainty what happens after we die, therefore what is there to fear? We are afraid of aporia. Our fear of death is merely a reflection of our inability to be at ease in the space of the unknown. Plato compels us to consider why the unknown is unable to exist as unknown, without being judged or feared. He writes, “So compared to the bad things which I know are bad, I will never fear or flee the things about which I do not know whether they even happen to be good” (*Apology of Socrates*, 29b). In this passage Socrates offers us powerful advice; he is asking us to focus our attention and energy on the things over which we have control, the important things. He presses us to shift how we view life and death. Socrates wants us to know it is how we live that counts, not how long we live. Socrates who will soon drink the poison that will end his life proclaims, “I do not even care about death in any way at all...my whole care is to commit no unjust

or impious deed" (*Apology of Socrates*, 32d). Plato shows us that Socrates saw himself as a work in progress; that is to say that Socrates *lived* in a state of aporia.

Later in this same dialogue after Socrates has been found guilty and his main accuser, Meletus, has proposed the death penalty, Socrates is given the opportunity to present a counter proposal. Plato uses this opportunity to illuminate the danger of allowing a fear of aporia to control our decisions when Socrates addresses the court with the declaration, "What would I fear? That I might suffer what Meletus proposes about [death] which I say that I do not know whether it is good or bad? Or instead of this, should I choose something from among the things that I know well are bad and propose that?" (*Apology of Socrates*, 37b) Socrates is sharing a crucial secret about the unknown with his accusers. The unknown is only that which we have yet to experience. Why must we crouch in fear? We have no control one way or another, so let go of fear. Experience the unknown and revel in it! Socrates refuses to allow his life, or his death for that matter, to be defined by fear.

Instead Socrates asks us to consider that the unknown, whose embrace is known as aporia, may well be a wonderful surprise.

... Let us also think in the following way how great a hope there is that it is good. [For if] ... it is like a sleep in which the sleeper has no dream at all death would be a wondrous gain. ... On the other hand if death is like a journey from here to another place ... what greater good could there be than this ... to associate with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer, how much would any of you give? For I am willing to die many times if these things are true... spending time there would be wondrous... (*Apology of Socrates*, 41b)

Socrates concludes his address to those who have condemned him with a hope that they too may find comfort in the face of the unknown by living their lives in pursuit of the good. Socrates explains in this passage that fear can be a result of guilt. If we strive to live a life in which we are focused on improving our soul and in being just in our choices, for ourselves and for others, than we can step confidently into that next place, the place unknown.

In the *Phaedo* Plato presents Socrates' last discussion before his death. Within this dialogue Socrates explores the immortality of the soul with a group of his companions who are understandably distraught that this is to be Socrates' last day. Socrates initiates this discussion in a deliberate attempt to help his friends cope with their anxiety and grief. Socrates hopes not only to console his friends as they experience this painful event but he also attempts to help his supporters confront and be secure within the most universal and compelling question to trigger a state of aporia, what happens after we die?

As Socrates guides his supporters through his final philosophical discussions they find themselves in a state of aporia again and again as Socrates repeatedly forces his companions to concede the logos, or core, of each argument he has just persuaded his friends to accept, cannot be true. A follower tells us, "...all of us felt ill at ease... because we had been so powerfully persuaded... [The arguments] now seemed to shake us up again and cast us back into distrust, concerning not only the arguments that came before but even what would be said later on" (*Phaedo*, 88c).

Socrates has led his friends purposefully into this state of aporia in order to illuminate for them the most potentially dangerous reaction to the mistrust of one's own judgments. Socrates warns, "Let's be on our guard that we do undergo a certain experience... we don't become haters of arguments... [There is no] greater evil than hating arguments" (*Phaedo* 89d). Plato does not share this statement intending Socrates to promote strife but rather to help us understand that it is the exchange of ideas that reveals the very highest aspects of humanity. Acquiescence and accord would lead to stagnation, not growth. Growth comes from the mingling of perspectives to see which will, in the end, prevail. If we can step confidently into a discussion with confidence that the discussion will prove fruitful, not confident that we will be proven correct, then that is philosophy at work.

Socrates explains to us that when we place our trust in a particular belief, or view (logos), and then are proven wrong, not once, but time and again, the feeling of discomfort and unease created may lead us to give up on making sense of anything. He suggests that we must approach our beliefs "artfully", i.e., with balance. We must realize that although we are naturally drawn to awareness of extremes, most of what truly exists in the world lies between those extremes. This understanding of what is true as existing in the middle of a grand spectrum may make us more comfortable within the state of aporia. If we can carry this awareness with us when we view one another, and our beliefs about one another, or the world around us, this is acting with "artfulness" (*Phaedo*, 90a).

Being mindful of our own participation in the creation of aporia and the ensuing discomfort it brings can help us to suspend our desire to "push the blame off [ourselves] and onto the arguments ... [and] be robbed of the truth and knowledge of the things that *are*" (*Phaedo*, 90d). When we are more interested in proving ourselves right, rather than in actually understanding what is right we may, "...run the risk of... not to love wisdom but to love victory" (*Phaedo*, 91a). Here again Plato, through Socrates, touches on the arrogance associated with the avoidance of aporia. When we cling to our beliefs rather than risk the possibility of admitting we are wrong we deny the possibility for truth to reveal itself. This is not living with what Socrates might call "artfulness".

When we examine Socrates', (and by extension Plato's) discussion of the acceptance of aporia and the power to be found in being comfortable within aporia, we may be examining the beginnings of philosophy itself, both for Socrates and for ourselves. Plato's only mention of the attributes of philosophy in all of his discourses appears when Socrates councils Theaetetus to embrace his feeling of wonder because, "...wondering belongs very much to the philosopher" (*Theaetetus*, 155d). Socrates may not be endorsing just the sensation of "awe, amazement, and admiration," (Wonder) or the seemingly opposite sensations of puzzlement and discomfort, but instead counseling us to embrace them both within the state of aporia, that incredible sense of wonder, which is the beginning of the philosophical search for truth.

Experiencing aporia is deeply disturbing; consciously willing ourselves to stay in aporia seems almost counter intuitive. It is physically uncomfortable; we feel restless and perhaps even panicky. We are psychologically disconnected, as it, "...affects our senses of identity, of competence and purpose" (Burbules, *Aporia*). When Socrates councils us to deliberately expose ourselves to this experience he challenges us to live our lives fully. Socrates and Plato ask us to push ourselves past our assumptions, beliefs and opinions. Socrates tells us that when we settle only for what we think we know we are merely marking time. Truth is often elusive and we may only touch upon it briefly, but it is the pursuit of truth that is important. In fact, the pursuit of truth is the only thing that makes our existence meaningful. Plato has asked us to bear witness to Socrates' last days and moments to show us that Socrates acceptance of his death – the ultimate unknowable – and comfort in his final experience of aporia provides the ultimate lesson. It is within this belief that Socrates lived his life, and how he challenges us to live our own.

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