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Plato and Aristotle on the Origin of Philosophy

At *Theaetetus* 155d3, Plato calls “wonder” (*thaumazein*) the origin of philosophy. Notoriously, Aristotle follows Plato in this assessment at *Metaphysics* 2.982^b12-13. However, despite the eminent role *thaumazein* must play in their understanding of philosophy, neither Plato nor Aristotle explicitly tells us what precisely he means when speaking of “wonder” (*thauma*). Is anyone who marvels at somethings already beginning to philosophize? Or is the philosopher’s *thaumazein* so defined as to set her apart from the non-philosopher, i.e. anyone else? Given Plato’s and Aristotle’s silence, we can only try to infer the intended meaning of “wonder” from the context of our two passages. A look at *Theaetetus* 154b6-155c7 shows that Socrates is addressing a situation characterised by the following formal features. There are three basic assumptions on which Theaetetus and Socrates are agreed. Theaetetus is to answer a question to which there are two possible answers. Answering this question in accordance with the first two assumptions, he will obtain one answer. Answering the question in accordance with the third assumption, he will obtain another answer. The two answers contradict each other. So the set-up is such that, given these three assumptions, Theaetetus cannot arrive at a consistent answer, however he tries to look at the problem. If he gives an answer in agreement with principles one and two, he will be refuted by reference to principle three. If he gives another answer in agreement with principle three, he will be refuted by reference to principles one and two. There is no way out. No matter how hard he thinks about the problem, he is caught in the dilemma. The result is an acute feeling of intellectual helplessness (cf. *Theaetetus* 155c8-10). Now, it is Theaetetus’ confession of his dilemma which leads Socrates to his remarks about the origin of philosophy. This suggests that Plato uses the word *thaumazein* in a much more narrowly defined sense than is commonly assumed, namely in the sense “to be in *aporia*” (*aporein*). A look at *Parmenides* 129a6-e4 and 130c1-4 confirms this impression. There, Plato’s Socrates characterises as *thaumaston* arguments which force one to make contradictory claims like ‘The many are one’ or ‘The one is many’. What is *thaumaston* about such arguments is that they lead to conclusions we find impossible to accept and, at the same time, impossible to avoid. They reduce us to *aporia*. Now, if this is right, then, Plato takes philosophy to arise from a state of perplexity. On the one hand, this is not surprising, for Plato’s model philosopher Socrates himself claims to be in *aporia* regarding those issues over which he is used to reducing his interlocutors to self-contradiction. On the other hand, however, this raises the question what distinguishes someone like Theaetetus so that his *aporia* can define the beginning of a life dedicated to philosophical inquiry while Socrates’ average respondent feels far from being drawn towards philosophy by his subjection to *aporia*. A comparison of *Theaetetus* 155d1-6 and *Parmenides* 130e1-4 sheds some light on the matter. Parmenides explains Socrates’ confident dismissal of certain *aporiai* with reference to the fact that due to his youth he has as yet not become sufficiently philosophical to appreciate these problems. However, Theaetetus, who is more mature than the young Socrates, is said to be particularly apt for philosophical inquiry precisely because he finds it impossible to discard his *aporia*. So what distinguishes the philosopher from the non-philosopher is some kind of sensitivity for contradictions which compels her to solve her *aporia*. This impression is confirmed by

the way Aristotle speaks of *aporia* at *Metaphysics* 2.982^b12ff. and, especially, in the second book of the *Metaphysics*. He regards *aporia* not only as the beginning of philosophical inquiry, but, as importantly, also as the method by which the inquiry proceeds. Being puzzled by an argument, the philosopher examines the assumptions on which this argument is built. Her aim is to arrive at an understanding of them such that an *aporia* does no longer arise. Taken this way, the philosopher's sensitivity for *aporia* becomes crucial for the success and, indeed, the viability of philosophical inquiry. What is more, it can be shown that already Plato in the *Theaetetus* (cf. 155d7ff.), and also in the *Sophist*, instrumentalizes *aporia* precisely in this way. Thus, we can see a continuous line running from Socrates' elenctic practice through Plato to Aristotle which characterises philosophy with reference not to some vague notion of wonder, but to the much more sophisticated notion of *aporia* as experienced and instrumentalized in philosophical inquiry.