

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ANCIENT AND MODERN REACTIONS TO PHILOSOPHICAL APORIA

Eric Omazu

Department of Philosophy, National Open University of Nigeria.

Email: eomazu@noun.edu.ng

Otto Dennis

Department of Philosophy, Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State,
Nigeria.

Email: ottodennis@aksu.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

In Philosophy, *aporia* is a puzzlement that poses a challenge to meaning and understanding of anything or a statement. Characteristically, *aporia* confounds and benumbs human understanding of a view. Its capacity to achieve this derives from its operations at the depth of logical reasoning. How does a philosopher react in the face of a philosophical puzzlement? This question constitutes the problem that this paper aims to solve. And in trying to solve the problem, the paper compares reactions of two philosophers – Socrates and Carnap – representing two different epochs – Ancient and Modern – to philosophical puzzlements caused by two other philosophers – Heraclitus and Heidegger – in the respective epochs. Socrates reacted to Heraclitus' *aporia*, while Carnap also reacted to Heidegger's *aporia*, each following different approaches or methods. The two reactions produced phenomenal philosophies and philosophical insights that are implicative for further studies in reasoning. Consequently, this paper deploys critical analytical method of philosophical discourses to compare the disparate reactions for purposes of highlighting their differences in temper as well as establishing implications of both *aporia* (as a philosophical tool) and the epochal reactionary tempers for development of philosophy.

Keywords: Aporia, Heidegger, Carnap, Socrates, Heraclitus.

INTRODUCTION

Aporias are integral to Philosophy. An *aporia* is a puzzlement or wonder that poses a challenge to meaning and understanding of anything or a statement. Ancient philosophers laid so much emphasis on importance of *aporia*. Most major philosophers of the ancient period derived parts of their philosophy

by responding to the *aporias* of others or by cracking their own *aporias*. This leaves us with a long trail of relationship between philosophy and *aporia*. In this relationship, philosophy becomes the outcome of *aporia*. It is in this regard that Arthur Schopenhauer (2012) regards *aporia* as the mother of philosophy. Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Gorgias, among others, derived a great deal of their philosophical positions from successful constitution or resolution of *aporia*.

For every *aporia*, there are three possible reactions: (1) to abandon the *aporia* and flee, (2) to confront the *aporia* by seeking to crack it and, (3) to violently attack the *aporia* and seek its destruction. In the first reaction, abandoning the *aporia* and fleeing is tantamount to what we mean when we say 'allow the sleeping dog to lie.' When the demand is made to allow a sleeping dog to lie or rest, it is not because of the well-being of the sleeping dog. Especially in an aporetic encounter, allowing the sleeping dog to rest is for the health of the aporetic subjects. This is because *aporia* reveals the intellectual emptiness of the subject. It shows the shallowness of his or her intellectual depth and, in Heideggerian term, 'the nothingness of his or her knowledge.' Thus, the immediate reaction is to quickly take one's eyes off the abyss of subject's intellectual emptiness. This is the attitude of the ordinary mankind in the face of an *aporia*. His or her reason for fleeing is because his or her reasoning cannot withstand its tasking by *aporia*. In the second reaction, confronting the *aporia* by seeking to crack it finds the aporetic subject patiently pecking at the *aporia* like a woodpecker pecking away a hardwood. For such subject, the appearance of an *aporia* is an encounter requiring many attempts at the hardwood. He or she makes a little hole now and then and also anticipates the contribution of others. The third reaction violently attacks the *aporia* and seeks to destroy it. The goal of the aporetic individual is to destroy what he cannot understand. He or she wants his sanity intact, but assumes that the only guarantee of this is the destruction of the *aporia*. The idiomatic corollary for this is 'throwing away a baby with its bathwater.' From the three reactions, the aporetic predicaments of (2) and (3) are what played out in Ancient and Modern philosophic reactions to *aporias*.

As opposed to attitude of Ancient philosophers, the 20th Century philosophy was notorious for its abhorrence of *aporia*. The analytic and logical positivist attitude of the 20th Century philosophy treats puzzlement as a consequence of poverty of use of language. Rather than yielding philosophy, 20th Century philosophers construed aporetic statements as sources of confusion in philosophy. Thus they viewed relationship between their philosophy and *aporia* as that between patient and physician. Philosophy's role, therefore, was to cure *aporia* of its sickness.

While Socrates represents Ancient era in this paper, Carnap represents the Modern era. The Socrates' response examined is to one of Heraclitus' *aporias*, and the Carnap's response is to Heidegger's *aporia*. This paper applies method

of critical analysis to examine the two different responses to *aporia*. The essence is to logically draw out their implication for philosophy and philosophizing. To achieve the aim, therefore, the paper is organized in such a way such that it starts with a discussion on meaning of *aporia*, where the paper also highlights the importance of *aporia* in philosophy. It then transits to a discourse on Socrates response to Heraclitus' *aporia*; and further, a discourse on Carnap's response to Heidegger's *aporia*. Lastly, the paper establishes the logical implication of the two responses to philosophy and knowledge enterprise as a whole.

MEANING OF APORIA EXAMINED

The term *aporia* is a Greek word, which means "the absence of a path or way through... It can also indicate a lack of resources (literal or metaphorical) or a state of perplexity or uncertainty" (Peacock 149). In borrowing the word, the English rendered it as *apory*. In English, an apory is a difficult situation or person etc. An apory "is a collection of contentions that are individually plausible but collectively inconsistent" (Rescher, Aporetic Methods 283). Besides its adoption in the English language, some English words directly convey meanings that are close to what the Greeks regard as *aporia*. The English words closest in meaning to Greek *aporia* include cul-de-sac, impasse, trapped, blockage, among others. However, when technically used in philosophy, the word translates to a problematic issue, a perplexity (Rescher, Aporetics 29). Apory is, philosophically, a state of mind. It is a state of being perplexed or puzzled. It is also the object and cause of the state of mind, or cause of perplexity. The two meanings correspond to what can be regarded as subjective apory and objective apory, respectively (Karamanolis & Polis 28). Peacock (27) informs that Plato did not consider aporias as permanent or insolvable puzzle.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* contains 15 *aporias*. Consequently, Aristotle constituted his metaphysics by generating puzzles and resolving them through philosophizing. The philosophical method involving *aporia* is regarded as aporetic method, and it has to do with clearing seeming confusion that exists in or between related concepts, ideas, or situations. The aim is to resolve a philosophical problem. In using the aporetic method, the philosopher generates a state of *aporia* by introducing complex philosophical situations. These philosophical situations are some sorts of hypotheses. Aristotle claims that to qualify as *aporia* the philosophical situations which are resolved by aporetic method must be opposites that are equal or apparently equal in strength. This equal opposites or the philosophical situation is what constitutes philosophical problems to be resolved through philosophising. Aristotle provided an outline of how to resolve *aporia*.

For those who wish to get clear of 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 of our thinking points to a knot in the object; for in so far

as our thought is in difficulties, it is in like case with those who are tied up; for in either case 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, a man does not otherwise know even whether he has found what he is looking for or not; for the end is not clear to such a man, while to him who has first discussed the difficulties it is clear (Aristotle and Barnes 199).

Thus, the condition set by Aristotle above is first to state the problem one is faced with. A proper statement of the problem is an important step, for it demonstrates one's knowledge of subject matter and issues relating to it. After this, one begins to untie the knot which proper definition has made clear. Resolution of an *aporia* leads to clarity of thought and understanding.

ANCIENT REACTION TO APORIA: SOCRATES' RESPONSE TO HERACLITUS

Heraclitus of Ephesus lived around the 69th Olympiad, corresponding to the period regarded today as 500 B. C. Among ancient philosophers, he was disparagingly regarded as Heraclitus "the Obscure" (Laertus 9:5). Among his ancient admirers included the brave Athenian soldier, Diodotus, who regarded his writing as "a well compacted helm to lead a man straight through the path of life" (Laertus 9:7). In Modern era of philosophy, Hegel admiringly referred to Heraclitus as a deep philosopher. These opposing titles are surprisingly justified on the strength of the nature of Heraclitus' surviving fragments. Whether, in the final analysis, he should be disparaged or admired on the strength of this, remains a matter of philosophical debate resting on two things. One, the possible discovery of any of his full books, and two, the interpretation of extant fragments of his works by philosophers. Beyond the judgement that may be passed either on his person or his writing, Heraclitus "was thought to be fond of riddles, and many of his views are expressed in pithy, pungent and witty aphorisms preserved for us by later philosophers and biographers" (Williams 381). The consequence of his writing style was that his works became difficult to read. He seemed to have had an understanding of the difficulty which reading his texts entails and that seemed to inform his statement that the nature of his writing only imitates complexity of nature that he describes. This is evident in Fragment 1 of his extant writings, which he states:

Of this logos being always [true], human beings are always uncomprehending, both before they hear it and once they hear it; for though all things are becoming in conformity with this logos, they look like the inexperienced, experiencing both words and deeds of the kind that I explain, when I divide each thing in conformity with its nature and point out how each thing is; but all

other human beings are as unaware of all they do when they are awake as they forget while they are asleep.

In the Heraclitean schema, the truth of philosophy is hidden. The hiddenness is due to human non-understanding of *logos* (truth), and not nature of the *logos*. Nature does not excuse the human incomprehensibility as the wheel of reality faithfully follows the path of the incomprehensible *logos*. Heraclitus claims rare insight into *logos*. He understands it and he lays in the open all that he understands. But even his own mediation is useless to his fellow mortals who still could not understand things as explained by him. He did not just claim that other individuals could not understand his philosophy, even other ancient philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle battled with the difficulty of understanding his texts and interpreting them.

Poster (26) considers two possible reasons for the difficulty of understanding Heraclitus' writings. The first reason borders on Heraclitus' incompetence as a writer which he dismisses immediately as improbable, given the nuanced and sophisticated nature of his style. The second and, in Poster's view, the more plausible reason is that the difficulty encountered in his text was deliberate. The duty of scholarship on Heraclitus would therefore consist in deciphering the cause of the reason for the difficulty. That is, interpreters of Heraclitus must decode why he deliberately chose to write difficult obscure texts. Poster's shot at his own challenge views the difficulty as arising from Heraclitus' sharp break with the past whereby he was forced to offer a radical new conception of the world, using the languages developed by a cultural tradition which knew nothing about his new conception of the world. In doing this, Poster claims that Heraclitus deployed linguistic density defined as "the phenomenon by which a multiplicity of ideas is expressed in a single word or phrase" to achieve his aim (Kahn 89). Heraclitus' deliberate obscurity was also in protest against the Ephesians for the exile of his friend, Hermodorus whom he regarded as the best among them. Heraclitus interpreted the exiling of Hermodorus as a consequence of Ephesians' misinterpretation of his (Hermodorus) views. Hermodorus used "language that fools can understand." Accordingly, his counterforce was to write in an obscure manner in order not to have his views understood and then misinterpreted. (Guthrie 62). It was not only the ancient fools that failed to understand Heraclitus: Cicero owned up to having not understood him. (Hegel 199). Even King Darius Hystapes was reported by Diogenes Laertius (9:9) to complain that "Heraclitus' work, *On Nature*, is difficult to understand and difficult to explain." He therefore invited Heraclitus to Persia to "come to him and explain to him what required explanation" in his work on *Nature*. Heraclitus declined the offer but it adds to the fact that ordinary men, statesmen, kings and philosophers alike found his philosophy confounding.

Socrates, reputed by the Oracle of Delphi to be the wisest man on earth in his own time, also found Heraclitus' philosophy perplexing. Euripides, one of the greatest tragedians of ancient Greece once presented Socrates with a work of

Heraclitus. And after he had read the book Euripides inquired about his judgment of the book. Socrates' answer to the Euripides' question constitutes one of the subjects of this essay. According to Diogenes Laertius (2:22), Socrates responded as follows: "What I have understood is good; and so, I think, what I have not understood is; only the book 'requires a Delian diver to get at the meaning of it."

In the ancient times, the town of Delos in the Island of Apollos possessed many expert divers. The Delian divers could go deep to discover what lay beneath the sea. To a non-diver, what lay under the sea was lost. It was beyond grasp and should be forgotten. An amateur diver could attempt a recovery. But he can only go to a certain length under the ocean hoping to find the object of his search floating halfway to the farthest depth of the ocean. But he gets scared for his own life. His fears are for his diving ability and the strength of his limb to go further down the ocean. Thus, the amateur diver can only recover semi-heavy objects which could not go deeper in the ocean. The Delian diver was different. He possessed the ability to reach the bottom of the ocean. For him nothing is lost underneath the ocean. He would reach the floor in order to find those objects that sank deeper into the waters.

By invoking the analogy of the Delian diver, Socrates lends credence to the charge of difficulty which was made against Heraclitus' works. But the difficulty spoke about Heraclitus depth of wisdom and knowledge. Heraclitus had accused some of his predecessor philosophers of possessing knowledge without wisdom.

Abundant learning does not form the mind; for if it did, it would have instructed Hesiod, and Pythagoras, and likewise Xenophanes, and Hecataeus. For the only piece of real wisdom is to know that idea, which by itself will govern everything on every occasion. He used to say, too, that Homer deserved to be expelled from the games and beaten, and Archilochus likewise (Diogenes Laert 9:2).

It is to the credit of Heraclitus that Socrates, another great philosopher that succeeded him bore witness to the depth of his wisdom. After reading his work Socrates divided them into two: (A) what he (Socrates) could understand and (B) what he could not understand. Both contained in the book.

Analysing this critically, we find that Socrates' judgment about A and B is problematic. And this is mainly as it applies to B. His judgment is that both A and B are good. It is correct to describe A as good having understood it. Thus, the fact of understanding alone informs this judgment. It is difficult to say the same thing of B. Non-understanding is an impediment to judgment. It is perplexing that the same Socrates who declared that ignorance is the cause of error in judgment is passing judgment on a matter he has professed non-understanding and is therefore ignorant. A few explanations can be offered here in defense of Socrates. One, Socrates applied inductive reasoning where

inferences about what is yet unknown are derived from what is known. This point betrays Popper's claim against Aristotle who Popper accused of falsely claiming that Socrates invented inductive reasoning (Popper 199). Without using the term, induction, it can be shown that it is only by such inference that Socrates could have arrived at the conclusion that what he had not understood was good. Thus, given the seriousness, depth, stark wisdom, rich language, and logic, which he encountered in Heraclitus' work as well as the meaning which the parts he understood conveyed, he could easily attest that the entire work was good. Two, Socrates is known to be mainly concerned with ethics. His interest was on how mankind ought to live (Irwin 20). Heraclitus' book, *On Nature*, is a compendium in the field of Politics, Logic, Ethics and Physics. Of the fields, Socrates had interest in the first three – with Physics being the only one he lacked interest. Consequently, the one understood can as well mean 'the one that interest me.' In the same way, the one not understood can mean 'the one that did not interest me.' This point derives from Socrates' reputation of having refocused philosophy from the study of nature to the study of the human person and his affairs. He is setting the stage here for disciplinary knowledge where each professional is mindful of his disciplinary interest.

Furthermore, Euripides' testimony about Socrates portrays one of the few times where Socrates, who in many occasions claimed not to know anything, actually professed knowledge. There is a huge connection between knowing and understanding. Indeed, understanding presupposes knowledge. One understands only because one knows. In other words, knowledge without understanding or understanding without knowledge is impossible. But, according to Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, Hecateus and Hesoid knew without understanding. That, therefore, constituted his (Heraclitus') charge against them. Extending the charge to Socrates, it would be discovered that in accepting to have understood the non-understandable part of Heraclitus' book, he (Socrates) made a rare admission of knowledge without understanding. This error in Socrates' non-understanding but knowledge of Heraclitus' book is further demonstrated by his invocation of the Delian divers' analogy. By this he meant that any understanding or interpretation of Heraclitus requires wisdom as only a truly and deeply wise person could understand the writings. But Socrates' claim to have understood part of the book makes him a Delian diver. And he is just one person. Yet, the task of understanding is not a one man's affair. It is both a collaborative and incremental affair of more than one man. As a Delian diver; one man, he had understood some parts. Subsequent Delian divers would have to seek the understanding of what remained. Socrates' approach, therefore, establishes that knowledge is open, progressive and collaborative.

MODERN REACTION TO APORIA: CANARP'S RESPONSE TO HEIDEGGER

In his 1929 Inaugural Lecture titled "What is Metaphysics," delivered as the Chair of Philosophy of University of Freiburg, Martin Heidegger centralized the idea of Nothingness. Heidegger began by claiming that the idea of Being has assumed the sole subject matter of the sciences. Besides this subject matter, the sciences study Nothing. For the scientists, Nothing entails emptiness, void or, in Heidegger's word, "nullity." Science avoids Nothing. However, Heidegger demonstrated in many ways that Being and Nothing are identical. One always lurks at the background of the other as any study of Being also entails a study of Nothing. However, it is only in moments of anxiety that Nothing is revealed.

The possibility or impossibility of existence of Nothing, as proclaimed by Heidegger, has since been pursued by many philosophers. For instance, Lowe (96) vehemently denies the possibility of nothing existing. Inwagen (99) claims that the idea is "as improbable as anything can be". While not sticking his head for a positive response to the question, Baldwin (19) offers a probable defense of Heidegger's thesis by stating that "there might be nothing." (231). While the possibility or impossibility of existence of Nothing does not constitute our present concern, we focus rather on interpretability of a particular statement made by Heidegger in the 1929 Inaugural Lecture. And that is the statement originally given in German as *Das Nichtsnichtet* or in English as "The nothing itself nothings" (Heidegger 16).

In a 1931 article titled "Die Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analysis der Sprache," which translates in English as "Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," A. J. Ayer, a philosopher friend of Rudolph Carnap who owns the article, claims that Carnap's title is flawed. Ayer suggested that the title would have rather read "Overcoming of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language." This is because, in Ayer's view, Carnap made a Logical Positivist point in the 1931 article which claimed that its concern was a representative demonstration of the meaninglessness of metaphysical statements. Consequently, such meaninglessness is always to be overcome.

Metaphysical sentences are pseudo sentences. Carnap identified the two possible ways in which a sentence can be a pseudo sentence: (1) it may violate grammatical forms or syntax, and (2) it may also violate logical forms or syntax. It is possible for a statement to violate a grammatical form while retaining logical integrity. Heidegger's statement above was held by Carnap to have violated both grammatical and logical forms. A summary of Carnap's argument is that the statement:

is not only meaningless because it contains the meaningless predicate "nothings", but also because from a logical point of view the (quasihomophonous) expression "nothing" occurs in it misleadingly. For as regards logical form, this expression is not used in the statement in the only logically correct way it may be

used; namely, as a quantifier, as it occurs in negative existentially quantified sentences of the kind “there is nothing that Fs”, “ $(\sim\exists x)(Fx)$ ”. Rather, it pretends to be used as if it were a singular term. Thus, it precisely contributes to yielding a logically ill-formed sentence. From Carnap onwards, in some philosophical quarters that sentence or a close reformulation of it has become the paradigm of a nonsensical sentence (Voltolini 20).

Heidegger’s statement, Carnap claims, is meaningless for it fails to comply with basic rules of language as it relates to grammar and logic. Accordingly, the statement can never be translated into “logically correct language” (Carnap 70). Carnap was effective in his attempt at constituting Heidegger’s statement as a prototypical example of logical positivists’ claim that metaphysical statements are problematic. Carnap divided metaphysics into two: traditional and continental metaphysics. While he dismissed continental metaphysics – the type practiced by Heidegger – as meaningless, he charged that traditional metaphysics – the example of which is Aristotle’s metaphysics – while not being meaningless, is false. The meaninglessness of European continental metaphysics deprives it of any subject matter. It may refer to objects that can be conceived, but cannot refer to any object that can be verified.

The Carnapian position has been successfully challenged, debunked, and rendered obsolete (Hintikka 91). For instance, Carnap is argued to have raised a strawman argument in his critique of Heidegger. The Heideggerian expression which Carnap supposedly minced is this: “The Nothing itself Nothings.” Even Carnap criticized a personally formulated version of it “Nothing nothings.” Scholarship has shown that his attack is mainly due to his misrepresentation of the original statement (Voltolini, 15). This misrepresentation was deliberate. It was constituted as part of the missiles needed by the logical positivists in their quest to nail the coffin of metaphysics.

CONCLUSION

The two reactions – Ancient (Socrates) and Modern (Carnap) – to the two *aporia* – Heraclitus and Heidegger – examined above highlight the nature and role of understanding in engaging, interpreting, and developing philosophy. While Carnap’s view of Heidegger’s *aporia* is entirely flawed because it arose either from deliberate misrepresentation or non-understanding of philosophical statements, Socrates’ view of Heraclitus’ *aporia* presents a parallel attitude. Socrates did not blame the difficulty of Heraclitus’ *aporia* on the statement. He ascribed the blame on limitation of human understanding while, at the same time, appreciating the depth of Heraclitus’ mind. He also understood that individuals understand things at different levels. Thus, what A understands may pose some difficulty to B. In such a circumstance, A is not to claim all-knowing. He is not to assume that what he does not understand is useless or meaningless.

Against Carnap, Voltini (20) argues therefore that once Heidegger's statement is:

appropriately understood, there is no problem with its logical form. Moreover, it will be claimed that the predicate "nothings" is definitely meaningful. For the present purposes, this is enough. Yet one may even say that, if one endorses certain metaphysico-ontological views about impossible denotata and their identity, (the statement) can turn out to be not only meaningful, but also true. Admittedly, these views are rather controversial, as we will see soon below. Yet the controversy on this concern precisely regards metaphysico-ontological preferences, not semantic issues. Carnap's challenge is won if (the statement) is both logically well-formed and meaningful, regardless of whether it is true.

While this paper is not so much concerned with the ground on which Carnap's standpoint is refuted (Voltolini has a good work on that subject), our concern is with implication of the standpoint and attitude to development of philosophy. Given this, we can submit immediately that it is negative. It was to kill Philosophy. Carnap wrote magisterially and dismissed a statement he apparently did not understand. "No-thingness can only be known by being understood" (Walsh 310).

But *Aporia* requires a special skill to unravel. This is a fact which Socrates recognized by his allusion to Delian divers. The needed skill is the capacity to articulate arguments for or against the inherent conflict in the *aporia*. Carnap's method was to label as meaningless any work (philosophy) that poses a challenge to understanding. He and other logical positivists are known to have made so much meaning of connection between provability and truth such that only what can be proven is to be accepted as true. Yet:

Kurt Godel, the Logician who once sat at meetings with the Vienna Circle, an organised association of intellectuals led by Rudolf Carnap, successfully demonstrated to them that mathematical numbers, though true cannot be proven. Godel's conclusion that all the truths of mathematics cannot be captured by any logical system led to a new theorem called the first incompleteness theorem. (Holt, 2018). Metaphysicians have since argued that the same thing is applicable to truth of metaphysics (Omazu 21).

Socrates' approach, thus, is correct and developmental in viewing knowledge as a collaborative venture. The term "Delian divers" is a metaphor for collaborators who provide the other perspective which one man (Socrates) lacks. This way of interpreting Understanding is absent in Carnap and it highlights the wide gap between his reaction (Modern) and Socrates' reaction (Ancient) to *aporia*. It is no wonder that while Ancient approach to knowledge

inspires many philosophical offshoots, Modern approach has as its objective the death of philosophy.

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