THE EFFECTS OF SOCRATES' DIALECTICAL METHOD ON SOCIETY

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GREK 4090
March 5, 2018

Introduction

Ancient wisdom literature abounds with exhortations for the foolish to embrace wisdom instead of folly,[1] and to appreciate those who rebuke them rather than resent them. In the *Apology*, Socrates presents himself as on the receiving end of foolish people who did not heed such advice – people who, instead of being grateful for someone pointing out the errors in their thought, become resentful and even violent. This paper will examine Socrates' point of view by pondering some of the implications of Socrates' dialectic method wherein false beliefs are torn down without any argument necessarily being put forth to take their place. It will be argued that the situation is not as clear cut as Socrates presents it, and that while truth is always a virtue to be held in high esteem, constantly bringing others into ἀπορία without at the same time helping them come to a superior epistemic position has the potential to be societally destructive.

Societal Expectations

Society functions at some level on a set of convenient assumptions that may or may not be good or edifying. Enlightenment philosophers named the group of (what they viewed as) positive assumptions the "social contract" – a set of regulations on behavior and morality that are necessary for the proper functioning of a state.[2] The concept of the social contract was (and still is by many) viewed as necessary for proper relations between the state and the individual; however, exactly what things are contained within the social contract and what things are not is an open question.

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[1] And not just Western literature. The Proverbs of Solomon, for example, contain much along these lines.

[2] See Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and Rousseau's treatise *Du contrat social; ou Principes du droit politique* ("On the Social Contract; or, Principles of Political Rights").

For this reason, context-dependent normative societal expectations will, for the purposes of this paper, be treated as a brute fact of life, divorced entirely from abstract conceptions of what a functioning social contract "should" or "should not" be. At any given time and place in history, for better or for worse, society places expectations upon individuals. If an individual wants to take part in society, these expectations must be followed, or at least must not be flouted with such great regularity or flamboyance so as to be effectively ignored.

The phrase "context-dependent normative societal expectations," henceforth CNSEs, requires a bit of explanation.[3] "Context dependent" means that expectations are not uniform, but vary by family pedigree, societal class, past action, and so on. In other words, the expectations for all individuals are not the same. "Normative" means that the expectations are present the majority of the time that the circumstances for the expectation are met (i.e., the "context" is satisfied). "Societal" means that the expectations have their origin not from one particular individual or set of individuals, but from a large group of people on a city or national level (depending on how broad one wishes to make "society"). "Expectations" is self-explanatory.

Philosophers and CNSEs in the Abstract

CNSEs as defined above have no absolute moral value. That is to say, whether or not a particular time and place's CNSEs are "right" or "wrong" is not of primary interest to those living under the expectations; to such individuals, CNSEs simply exist and must be followed. Some CNSEs in any given context are probably good and necessary (expectations regarding not murdering innocent civilians, not stealing the property of neighbors), while others may be difficult to categorize (expectations regarding style of dress), or fairly clearly harmful, at least by

[3] This phrase is of my own creation.

today's standards (expectations regarding the behavior of certain ethnic groups that were perceived as inferior).

Given that CSNEs are not uniformly good, and most do not have weighty philosophical arguments behind their existence, we should expect philosophers to ignore them in their systems of ethics, or at least view them with displeasure, as unfortunate realities that must be dealt with and handled before *real* moral guidelines can be given. In other words, even without any particular examples in mind (of CNSEs or philosophers), we would expect the two to be in direct conflict with one another. As we shall examine in the coming sections, Socrates did indeed put himself in direct opposition with the CNSEs of Athenian society relating to public behavior and the spending of one's time by subjecting individuals whom CNSEs suggested would be wise to intense questioning.

Socrates and CNSEs

Based on our understanding above, we would expect Socrates to act in ways not concordant with the typical CNSEs of ancient Athens. In fact, this is exactly what the *Apology* shows. Right before launching into a description of his trip to the Delphic oracle and Chaerephon's witness to it, Socrates imagines a question on the part of the jurors:

> ὑπολάβοι ἂν οὖν τις ὑμῶν ἴσως: "ἀλλ', ὦ Σώκρατες, τὸ σὸν τί ἐστι πρᾶγμα; πόθεν αἱ διαβολαί σοι αὗται γεγόνασιν; οὐ γὰρ δήπου σοῦ γε οὐδὲν τῶν ἄλλων περιττότερον πραγματευομένου ἔπειτα τοσαύτη φήμη τε καὶ λόγος γέγονεν, εἰ μή τι ἔπραττες ἀλλοῖον ἢ οἱ πολλοί."[4]

[4] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 20c:4-8.

> Therefore, perhaps one of you might retort: "But Socrates, what then is your business? From where have these slanders against you arisen? For certainly with you practicing nothing more remarkable than others such a report and account would not then have arisen, unless you were busy with something of another sort than the many."

Socrates, of course, goes on to explain his τι ἀλλοῖον in the following lines. The interesting part of this passage is Socrates reflexively noting that his method and behavior is in fact remarkable – that the sorts of things occupying his time are in fact different from οἱ πολλοί.

The clearest example of exactly what Socrates claims to do comes much later, as he is explaining that even if the jurors were to let him go on the condition that he stop philosophizing, he would not stop:

> ταῦτα γὰρ κελεύει ὁ θεός, εὖ ἴστε, καὶ ἐγὼ οἶομαι οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μεῖζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν. οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο πράττων ἐγὼ περιέρχομαι ἢ πείθων ὑμῶν καὶ νεωτέρους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους μήτε σωμάτων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι μήτε χρημάτων πρότερον μηδὲ οὕτω σφόδρα ὡς τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται, λέγων ὅτι "οὐκ ἐκ χρημάτων ἀρετὴ γίγνεται, ἀλλ' ἐξ ἀρετῆς χρήματα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀγαθὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἅπαντα καὶ ἰδίᾳ καὶ δημοσίᾳ."[5]
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> For know well: the god orders these things, and I suppose that until now no greater good has arisen for you in the city than my service to the god. For I go about doing nothing other than persuading you, both younger and older, neither to care for your bodies nor money before, but not so vehemently as, how your soul will be the best possible, saying

[5] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 30a:5-30b4.

> that "Not from money does virtue come, but from virtue comes money and all the other good things for human beings, both private and public."

Here Socrates claims that his primary drive is persuading society[6] to embrace virtue as the root of personal and societal good. We might then suppose that exhortations to embrace virtue would feature in Socrates' descriptions of examining various societal groups in his quest to prove the oracle wrong. But do they?

Socrates Reducing Others to *ἀπορία*

The Apology describes three main classes of people that Socrates examines: the politicians, the poets, and the craftsmen. These three classes collectively represent society within Athens proper (farmers were important to Athenian society as well, but were not located within the city). Socrates examines the politicians in 21b:1-21e:2, the poets in 21e:3-22c:9, and the craftsmen in 22c:9-22e:5.

In these three sections, Socrates only mentions examination/refutation explicitly in the first section, regarding the politicians. He states that "ἐπειρώμην αὐτῷ δεικνύναι ὅτι οἴοιτο μὲν εἶναι σοφός, εἴη δ᾽ οὔ"[7] – "I tried to show him [the first politician] that he supposed that he was wise, but was not." However, Socrates' discussion after describing the three classes makes it clear that he was examining people from all three classes: "οἴονται γάρ με ἑκάστοτε οἱ παρόντες ταῦτα αὐτὸν εἶναι σοφὸν ἃ ἂν ἄλλον ἐξελέγξω… ταῦτ᾽ οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι καὶ νῦν περιὼν ζητῶ καὶ

[6] Right before this passage (30a:2-4) Socrates describes his "target audience" as essentially everyone, saying that "ταῦτα καὶ νεωτέρῳ καὶ πρεσβυτέρῳ ὅτῳ ἂν ἐντυγχάνω ποιήσω, καὶ ξένῳ καὶ ἀστῷ, μᾶλλον δὲ τοῖς ἀστοῖς, ὅσῳ μου ἐγγυτέρω ἐστὲ γένει" – "these things I will do to whomever I chance upon, both younger and older, both foreigner and townsman, but more to the townsmen, inasmuch as you are closer to me with respect to kin." In other words, Socrates is very much speaking "to society."

[7] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 21c:7-8.

ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεὸν καὶ τῶν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων ἄν τινα οἴωμαι σοφὸν εἶναι: καὶ ἐπειδάν μοι μὴ δοκῇ, τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν ἐνδείκνυμαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι σοφός."[8] – "For on each occasion, those present supposed that I myself was wise with respect to the things by which I refuted another… On account of this I even still now, going about, both seek and search for someone of the townsmen and foreigners (whom) I would consider to be wise, according to the will of the god: and whenever it does not seem to me (that someone is wise), aiding the god, I demonstrate that he is not wise."

It is interesting that in this Socrates never mentions virtue as the solution to these groups' epistemic errors. Having established above that persuading others to embrace virtue was a part of Socrates' "mission," it would be logical if after bringing people into ἀπορία Socrates led them to right knowledge through virtue ethics. But if this is in fact what he did, it is notably absent in Plato's description of Socrates examination of these groups in the *Apology*. While the Socratic question obscures our understanding of Socrates' thought as distinct from Plato's, it is entirely worth pointing out that all of the early Platonic dialogues end in a similar manner, with Socrates bringing the interlocutor into a state of ἀπορία without elucidating the matters himself.[9] It is possible that some of the developed thought in the *Republic* comes from Socrates, but Plato's portrayal of Socrates in the *Apology* and elsewhere suggests that the *Republic* may instead be Plato's attempt at coming up with answers to fill the voids left by Socrates' dialectic method.

[8] Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 23a:3-23b:7.

[9] Maurice Cohen even goes so far as to compare the ending of Sophocles conclusion of *King Oedipus* with the endings of Plato's early dialogues, stating "Even the conclusion of *King Oedipus* may be compared with that characteristic of Plato's early dialogues: the tragedy does not really resolve the question of Oedipus' guilt, and the work ends with a kind of moral aporia…" (Maurice Cohen, "The Aporias In Plato's Early Dialogues", 165).

Consequences of ἀπορία

It is important not to construct and subsequently knock down only a straw man of Socrates' behavior in examining the politicians, poets, and craftsmen. It is entirely possible that Socrates did in fact spend time attempting to explain to these individuals what they *should* be doing (rather than leaving them sputtering in confusion), and Plato just failed to record it. Moreover, the text does not portray the groups as particularly responsive to Socrates arguments (part of Socrates' reason for concluding that he was in fact wiser), which means that most individuals so examined probably did not lose sleep wondering about Socrates' points.

However, operating on the assumption that Socrates' intense questioning produced some amount of ἀπορία in some of the individuals examined, it is interesting to consider the societal impact that such ἀπορία could have, given the role of the respective groups in society. Would doubt and uncertainty in these groups cause problems for society?

The Politicians

The leading political men in Athens wielded an enormous amount of power. While they may not have sat on the βουλή perpetually, or always been able to influence the προβουλεύματα directly,[10] they could shape public opinion and influence decision-making in this way. People then, like now, made decisions based on the input of the few.

If all the leading men suddenly contracted a bad case of ἀπορία at the same time, it would most certainly disrupt the normal flow of Athenian politics. However, what is more likely is that Socrates would sow doubt in a few who would quickly get pushed out by less thoughtful factional opponents.

[10] While these things were still in effect, that is.

It would be during the time when the few in power were confused but not yet replaced that damage could be done. Situations like riots or wars require quick and decisive action, not philosophizing. In fact, Socrates himself talks about how he would not be able to "survive" in the political sphere, presumably because politics, in many ways, is not a place for the principled and idealistic. On time-critical issues, thinking too much is worse than making imperfect decisions with rapidity.

In the oblique case that Socrates-befuddled-politicians were in power when a time-critical issue arose, societal harm would be possible. But there are a number of circumstantial factors that would have to line up for this to occur.

The Poets

Poets influence society more indirectly by shaping values and perceptions. Given that tragedy and comedy were the dominant forms of *new* poetry during Socrates time (not that poets did not still deal with epic or other forms, cf. Plato's *Ion*), the question is this: would a sudden cessation or sea change in tragedy or comedy have negative societal consequences?

It is difficult to say exactly how much power the poets wielded. Plato is famously scornful of poets, but never dismisses the impact that they had on shaping people. For example, in discussing the concept of the "noble lie" in *Republic* 3.414c, Plato explicitly acknowledges that poets traditionally played a large role in shaping beliefs: "πρότερον μὲν ἤδη πολλαχοῦ γεγονός, ὥς φασιν οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ πεπείκασιν"[11] – "it has already happened before in many places, as the poets say and have persuaded people." We may surmise then that a certain amount

[11] Plato, *Republic*, 3.414c. This Greek is on page 330 in the Loeb text – the translation is my own.

of control was exerted by poets, and it follows that disrupting their production would thus affect society in some way.

However, a case of ἀπορία among the poets would have no direct mechanism for significantly damaging society. A lower production or change in discussed topics would, over time, affect the beliefs of the masses. But would these consequences of ἀπορία on the part of some poets bring society to its knees? Probably not.

The Craftsmen

Perhaps the most straightforward of the three, ἀπορία in craftsmen could cause economic disruption, depending on the severity and duration of the ἀπορία. It would take a fairly significant number of confused craftsmen to have a significant impact on the overall Athenian economy, but depending upon the influence of the craftsmen Socrates got a hold of, some amount of disruption could occur.

Discussion

Returning to the concept of CNSEs, we may note that ἀπορία in these cases is essentially a Socratic challenge of CNSEs, to the point where they may no longer be accepted wholesale. CNSEs exist for a reason, as discussed: to give a shared basis for living together in society. It is therefore not surprising that calling them into question has the potential to have societal consequences.

Much more could be said on these topics. One might note, for example, that Socrates had many young men replicating his method of examination, which could expand the effects of ἀπορία more than readily apparent. Socrates was also quite poor, and by his own admission, was not knowledgeable in matters of the public or skills like those of the craftsmen. The more people

he converted to his way of thought – sitting around pondering the world, essentially – the greater the economic and social impact.

This paper has not argued that Socrates' dialectical method is wrong, *per se*. CNSEs do change over time, after all, mediated through people like Socrates that challenge the status quo and push for different sets of values and behavioral norms. What this paper has done, however, is note that Socrates' method (as presented in the *Apology*) of reducing people to ἀπορία without necessarily suggesting good alternatives has the potential to cause societal harm, and should thus not be viewed as an unconditional good.

Works Cited

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