

Plato: A Practitioner of Preconceptual Stasis Theory

by

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Unlike those of the classical period, today's students come from a broad variety of social, economic, and racial backgrounds and have varying levels of preparedness when they reach college. "A few generations ago," Walter Ong reminds us, "there was no academic population with today's mix of family and cultural backgrounds, with the same assortment of entering abilities and disabilities, of skills and lack of skills, of desires and aims" (37). Furthermore, today's students are living in a world that is generating information at a rate never known before. In the midst of such chaos, it is only natural for students to feel a sense of alienation from themselves and their world. The stasis theory, by virtue of its innate ability to teach students the skill of dialectic, can aid students in integrating themselves into the world and its knowledge. Stasis theory provides students with a means of training themselves to receive and process the information they need, thus allowing them to participate in their worlds in a way not formerly possible. But how to teach students the art of dialectic?

Based on the postulation that there is a definite, though largely unexplored relationship between the classical theory of stasis and Plato's concept of dialectic as present in his dialogues, it is possible to conceive of a composition classroom where such critical thinking skills as those illustrated in the Platonic dialogues can be taught. Students can be instructed to ask those questions that will reveal to them the true nature of what they write and know and read and experience.

Rather than sitting in peer editing groups discussing the presence of comma-splices, or the lack, they think, of an adequate number of words, students would be able to engage in dialogues that would significantly explore the contents of the papers they have written. The group would have the ability to engage in dialectic. They could learn to discover the stases or standstills that occur in arguments, that rather than causing the dialogue to disintegrate, lead the conversation to a deeper level -- through the use of dialectic.

Perhaps this seems like an overly simplified and certainly optimistic proposal. Teach students, introductory composition students, to engage in dialectic? Yet it is not, if it is remembered that the key to making such a proposal function is the suggested correlation between stasis and dialectic. The existence of stasis theory, obviously, has never been questioned, and neither has the presence of the art of dialectic, yet no relation has been drawn between the two. Scholars generally agree that stasis theory can be found in its earliest form in Aristotle's work. Plato's works, however, precede Aristotle's, so it perhaps seems illogical to question the possibility of the

presence of a theory supposedly developed by Aristotle in the works of a rhetorician who predated him. However, a study of Plato's dialogues, namely the *Phaedrus*, will illustrate that the method of critical thinking that occurred in these dialogues, what we know as dialectic, bears an unquestionable similarity to what later is named stasis theory. This work will not argue that Aristotle did not first conceptualize (set down for the purpose of study by others) the theory of stasis in his works. It will, however, argue that Plato began attempting to conceptualize the method of stasis that he employed in his other dialogues in the *Phaedrus*.

Scholars of the classical theory of stasis are generally in agreement concerning the location of the earliest evidence (or perhaps precursors would be a better word) of the stasis theory (Nadeau, "Some Aristotelian"; Dieter). As a whole, these scholars believe that the earliest existing stasis theories were those of Aristotle, in both his physical sciences and his *Rhetoric*, and the Stoics. It is also generally acknowledged that Hermagoras, typically known as the father of the stasis theory, used these early theories of stasis to develop his fully conceptualized theory of rhetorical stasis. There are others, however, who recognize the presence of something resembling stasis theory in the works of Plato. For example, Ray Nadeau believes, "The discerning reader of Plato can readily see a sort of recognition of the function of stases in the philosopher's references to positions taken on the opposites of right and wrong, ugly and beautiful, good and bad" ("Hermongenes' *On Stases*" 374). Despite acknowledging this view, however, neither Nadeau nor any other scholar has studied this phenomena in full. It can be proven, though, that the earliest evidence of stasis can be found not in the works of Aristotle or the Stoics, but in the works of Plato. The possibility that Plato used preconceptual stasis in his dialogues is further supported by Rosemary Desjardins, who analyzes the use of elenchus and aporia within the Platonic dialogues, elenchus being an inquiry process, and aporia a condition much like stasis. According to Desjardins:

Given the problem of ambiguity in language, and the need to move from surface to deep-level meaning, it is hardly surprising that the first step in a dialogue's development usually requires that one be shaken from a complacent kind of satisfaction with the surface of language and forced to recognize that language does not transparently and unequivocally *mean*, just like that. This process--in which one is made to realize that to come up with even the right words is not enough, that one's unquestioned assumptions are often really obstacles to true understanding -- constitutes the familiar pattern that we know as elenchus; it is carried out, so the *Sophists* tells us, for the positive purpose of purification. (116)

Aporia occurs within the process of inquiry:

When it is first discovered that words do not simply *mean*, that language is indeed beset with what Plato regards as a basic 'weakness' that is due to obscurity, uncertainty, or instability and consequently, that one does not know what one thought one knew -- produces a state of perplexity, or aporia, and usually constitutes an important phase of Platonic inquiry. (Desjardins 116)

Desjardins continues explaining that aporia, "meaning literally 'no way out,' 'no exit' -- is intended, of course not as an end but rather as a beginning" (116-117). Furthermore, it is helpful "in hastening discovery that 'besides not knowing, one does not think he (she) knows'" and also aids in "giving assistance toward finding out the truth of the matter" (116-117). Thus, aporia can be seen as a synonym for stasis -- a standstill. In both cases a pause has occurred due to a disagreement based either on lack of knowledge or false information. And this standstill, rather than causing the dialogue to disintegrate, is intended to lead the discussion to a deeper level. It is this process of shaking their complacency through elenchus, making the search for aporia or stases possible, that can be instilled in students through the use of stasis. Students do not have the critical thinking abilities to allow them to engage in a process such as elenchus without guidelines to follow. The stasis theory provides such an empirical framework by providing a starting point for the inquiry process. The stasis theory has a broader use than that of a mere heuristic intended to determine the issue of a given case or subject. The stasis questions can be used as a framework for a course in critical thinking -- as a means for teaching students to think beyond the limitations of their personal ideologies. The stasis theory can teach students:

The gradual process of coming to understand through pursuit of logical analysis--this kind of purifactory testing that pares away false of inadequate interpretations -- constitutes, then, the discursive aspect of an education that helps us see beyond, or beneath, ambiguity. (Desjardins 119)

In other words, as Plato intended for Socrates' dialogues to instruct the young through the process of elenchus, the stasis theory can teach the young to construct dialogues of their own. And now I will offer an analysis of the use of stasis in the *Phaedrus*.

It is in the *Phaedrus* that Plato makes his most definite attempt to conceptualize the technique of dialectic inquiry. After having illustrated what he considers both sophistic and ethical rhetoric in two speeches, Socrates closes the dialogue with a discussion of rhetoric's existing nature as he views it, and the possibilities that exist for rhetoric as an art if it is properly practiced. According to Socrates:

...rhetoric taken as a whole, is an art of influencing the soul through words, not merely in the law courts and all other public meeting places, but in private gatherings also? Is it not the same when concerned with small as with great matters and, to put the matter in the right light, is it to be esteemed no more when involved with important affairs than it is when occupied with the trivial? (48, 262)

Socrates' dubious regard for rhetoric is obvious, and he further defines his viewpoint as he continues, clearly illustrating what he believes the art of the rhetorician to be:

When men are deceived, therefore, and find their opinions at variance with the facts, it is clear that this error has slipped through some sort of similarity among those facts....Will it then be possible for an expert rhetorician regularly to lead his auditors step by step

through a maze of similarities from the truth about each point he makes?...So, my friend, any man who does not know the truth, but has only gone about chasing after opinions, will produce an art of speech which will not seem not only ridiculous, but no art at all. (50, 262)

It is in this short passage that Socrates succinctly sums up the nature of the "art" that most students produce in response to any persuasive assignment. Rather than learning the truth concerning their topic, they build a fragile argument composed of unsubstantiated opinions designed to beguile the reader into accepting as fact what is nothing more than emotion. Socrates' answer to this dilemma was the use of dialectic, but the answer is actually two-fold.

The stasis theory can be adapted for use as a method of teaching critical thinking -- a version of Socrates' dialectic, digested for student use. The stasis theory can in fact be used as an analytical interpretive instrument. That Socrates shared a view similar becomes clearer as the dialogue continues:

If one uses a word like "iron" or "silver," all of us understand the same meaning, don't we?...But when one mentions "just" or "good," what happens? Don't we all veer off in different directions and dispute the meaning, not only with others, but with ourselves?...On some points we agree, but in others we do not. (51, 263)

Obviously, Socrates is referring to the impasse that can always occur when two or more people discuss any given subject. This impasse can be called a stasis, though Socrates does not employ that term. And the means Socrates suggests for a speaker to overcome this impasse is also much like that of the stasis theory:

So, then a man who is going to develop an art of rhetoric must first make methodical distinctions and grasp the distinguishing mark, as it were, of each class, of both the class of terms whose meanings must generally be interpreted variously and of that in which they generally are not. ... Then, I suppose, when he comes to deal with particular terms, he must not fail to notice, but must, in fact, clearly perceive to which of the two classes his belongs [debatable or undebatable]. (51, 263)

Here Socrates expresses the major shortcoming of many students: the necessity of looking beyond one's own narrow viewpoint and realizing that personal knowledge is not necessarily true knowledge. And Socrates proves his point by analyzing the speeches read earlier, showing that each in its definition of the main term *madness*:

took it for granted that mental aberration was a single subject, a kind of entity possessed in common by many; each assumed that element of madness, as a natural kind in us, was like a body in the sense that, though a unity itself, its natural part were sets of pairs, each pair consisting of a member called by the same name, one on the left-hand side, the other on the right. (55, 265-266)

Socrates clarifies his viewpoint, saying not that he disagrees with divisions, but only with divisions that exclude one half of a dialectical pair. For as Socrates explains, each term has two halves which are not mutually

exclusive. "Dialectic is the faculty of discovering available arguments to answer proposed questions, and in Plato it is the only acceptable form of philosophical reasoning" (Kennedy 46). Plato's reasons for his advocacy should be clear in regard to his dialogues and his views concerning the "knack" of rhetoric. Philosophers -- seekers of truth -- employ dialectic as a means of discovering truth; rhetoricians employ persuasion based on opinions with little regard to truth because they are concerned only with effective persuasion. An effective rhetorician can successfully persuade an audience without presenting a case based on carefully researched truth; however, the average person is not likely to be able to mimic this success. Furthermore, as Plato knew, there is the ethical issue to consider. These views were considered by those rhetoricians -- namely Hermagoras of Temnos, who later conceptualized the stasis theory -- a formula to help rhetoricians prepare themselves to speak on a given topic by providing them with a method of objectively exploring the subject in question. The stasis theory was after all adopted by rhetoricians as a means of elevating rhetoric to the level of "art" -- the title denied it by Socrates and his student, Plato. But was the stasis theory "invented" post-Plato and his teachings, or was it part of the already existent truth Plato advocated?

I believe the preceding analysis has made the answer to the question quite clear. Furthermore, in their search for an answer to Plato's accusations, where would rhetoricians most likely search and study? In Plato's dialogues. So is it unfair to assume that those men who formalized the stasis theory were affected, perhaps unconsciously, by Plato's method of dialogue based on question and answer? Definitely not.

Works Cited

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