

Plato's Meno, the "Eristic Paradox," and the Epicurean Response

Post by "Cassius" of March 8, 2023 at 9:01 AM

In our review of the work of David Glidden on Epicurean "anticipations," we see a topic that Dr. Glidden has mentioned that goes by the name of the "eristic paradox."

Quote from Author Unknown, From "Educheer"

The eristic paradox, which stems from this view of knowledge, states that if you know what it is you are inquiring about, you need not inquire, for you already know. If, however, you do not know what it is you are inquiring about, you are unable to inquire, for you do not know what it is into which you are inquiring.

Below is a brief description of the issue from a website called "Educheer." (probably not the best source but the first I can find that seems relatively clear). It would seem almost certain that Epicurus was aware of this argument and fashioned his own philosophy of knowledge (especially "anticipations") in a way as to show how Plato/Socrates were wrong. Therefore in this thread let's discuss what Epicurus would have seen as wrong with Plato's assertions and how Epicurus responded. (The eristic paradox, and Epicurus' likely position in response, are discussed in Dr. Glidden's articles.)

The Eristic Paradox and The Slave Boy

Quote

Throughout history, philosophers have sought to understand the nature of true knowledge and how to achieve it. Most believe that true knowledge is acquired empirically, and not latent in our minds from birth. In Plato's Meno, Socrates argues in favor of the pre-natal existence of knowledge, the opposite of this proposal: that knowledge is essentially latent, and is brought to light through questioning.

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One consequence of this view is Plato's rejection of empiricism, the claim that knowledge is derived from sense experience. However, when one examines the scene

in the Meno between Socrates and the slave boy in greater depth, one can see the flaws in this paradox. Plato uses Socrates' experiment, in which he draws one of Meno's slaves out from the gathered crowd and proceeds to demonstrate the theory of recollection using geometry; however, this experiment's purpose tests the credulity of the reader; and in some cases Socrates' questions are blatantly leading. Socrates merely places obvious propositions in front of the boy that can be immediately recognized.

<>Also, contrary to what Plato asserts, knowledge can be obtained by other means, and not exclusively through intellectual inquiry and questioning. It is far too difficult to dismiss, as Plato does, any and all claims or assertions about the physical or visible world, including both common-sense observations and the propositions of science, as mere opinions. Furthermore, the interpretation of the experiment with the slave boy can be expanded to suggest yet another position: that Plato is demonstrating the flawed nature of sophistry by showing that what on the surface appears to be Socratic dialectic is really Sophistic practice. In light of all of these factors, it becomes clear that the eristic paradox is, in fact, flawed. In the experiment, Socrates guides a slave through a series of geometric proofs in an effort to illustrate that the slave already possessed this knowledge and, therefore, that learning is not acquisition but recollection. Plato maintains that the slave is simply recalling knowledge learned in a former incarnation.

Source: <https://educheer.com/essays/platos-...ristic-paradox/>

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Here is a strong, and even witty at the expense of the Stoics, hint from Dr. Glidden as to how he thinks the Epicureans responded:

themselves were forms of sensory recognition and that *ἔννοιαι* followed suit as well, as forms of mental recognition. This is an important difference.

The Epicureans claimed to be undaunted by the **eristic** paradox, though according to Sextus they themselves were caught: “The Epicureans... say, either you understand what demonstrative proof is or you do not. And if you understand and have conception of it, there is demonstrative proof. But if you do not understand, how do you find in the first place what you do not understand?”³⁰ Sextus interrupts at this point to object: “By saying this they pretty much turn themselves upside down, since it is agreed that *πρόληψις* and *ἔννοια* must precede every inquiry, for how can one even inquire, having no conception of the thing being sought?”³¹

Sextus’ objection is misleading. Of course, Epicureans were themselves known to have asserted that *πρόληψις* is the *sine qua non* for inquiry and thought.³² But the Epicureans never said *ἔννοια*, or conception, is a prerequisite as well. There is a difference, after all, between having the full conception of a thing (what the Stoics, for example, meant by the articulate, definitional character of both *πρόληψις* and *ἔννοια*) and having some perception of a thing, in particular what the Epicureans meant by *πρόληψις* as a perceptual form of sortal recognition. Consequently, once one has already seen enough instances to recognize something of that sort (a man, for instance), one might already have a proleptic perception prior to the full conception of what it is to be a man. Sextus’ objection hangs on an equivocation between “having no conception whatsoever of a thing” (excluding a *πρόληψις* even) and “having no full conception of a thing” (having no defined *ἔννοια*). This equivocation provides sufficient space for an Epicurean to swerve, even though it might catch a Stoic.

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And here is a section from [Diogenes of Oinoanda](#) that on its face seems to be directed more toward physics, but probably impacts the same question:

Fr. 4

... [as is supposed by] some of the philosophers and especially the Socratics. They say that pursuing natural science and busying oneself with investigation of [celestial phenomena] is superfluous and unprofitable, and they do [not even] deign [to concern themselves with such

matters.]

Fr. 5

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

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Meaning of "Eristic" -

In [philosophy](#) and [rhetoric](#), **eristic** (from [Eris](#), the ancient Greek [goddess](#) of chaos, strife, and discord) refers to an [argument](#) that aims to successfully dispute another's argument, rather than searching for [truth](#). According to [T.H. Irwin](#), "It is characteristic of the eristic to think of some arguments as a way of defeating the other side, by showing that an opponent must assent to the negation of what he initially took himself to believe."^[1] Eristic is arguing for the sake of conflict, as opposed to resolving conflict.^[2]

[Eristic - Wikipedia](#)