1 Introduction

The Aristotelian concept of a problem arises naturally from the Socratic world of question and inquiry. The “logic” of Socratic elenchus is erotetic, not assertoric: the questions asked determine an inquiry’s trajectory and the kinds of answers that are appropriate. It focuses attention on the process of coming to know. In the second chapter of the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle bases his concept of unqualified demonstration on having knowledge of the cause of the predicative relationship identified in the conclusion of a demonstration. That causal knowledge rests, as the *Physics* stresses, on having proper answers to the question ‘on account of what?’ (διὰ τί;), the types of answers being as many as the types of causes (*Phys*. 2.3.194b18–20; 2.7.198a14–17).1

It is thus not surprising that when Aristotle opens the second book of the *Posterior Analytics* (*APo.*) by distinguishing four things we seek (τὰ ζητούμενα), corresponding to four sorts of things we know, these are identified as two pairs of questions: an affirmative answer to the question “Is there an X?” leads naturally to the question “What is X?”; an affirmative answer to the question “Is it the case that X is Y?” leads naturally to the question “Why is it the case that X is Y?” (*APo*. 2.1.89b23–35). One pair of inquiries eventuates in knowledge of a thing’s essence, formulated in a definition; the other pair eventuates in knowledge of the reason why some state of affairs is as it is, formulated as a demonstration, in which the middle term refers to the cause of that state of affairs. The first ten chapters of that book are engaged in a quest to understand how these two pairs of inquiries are related. By the conclusion of chapter 10, they have been shown to be tightly interwoven inquiries—indeed, one type of demonstration prevalent in science as Aristotle depicts it can be reformulated as a definition of the phenomenon being explained.2

---

1 On the Socratic background to Aristotle’s epistemology, see Ferejohn (2013).  
2 As he puts it, such a definition “will clearly be like a demonstration of what something is, differing in arrangement from a demonstration. For there is a difference between saying why...”
And yet, if Aristotle is to avoid the paradox of the *Meno*, an issue about which he repeatedly shows himself to be concerned, inquiry does need to be a process with distinguishable stages—for it must begin with our perception of distinct particulars and it must end with first principles which are universal, indemonstrable truths, and which identify fundamental causes constituting the essences of things.

Immediately after quoting the opening lines of *APo*. 2.1, the author of a commentary on *APo*. 2 attributed to Philoponus glosses it in a most insightful way: “He [Aristotle] says that there are as many *problems* that are investigated as there are ways by which we have scientific understanding and know. There are four things that are investigated; therefore there are four ways by which we know” (366.4–6, trans. Goldin). The actual Greek for the subject of this sentence in Aristotle's text is τὰ ζητούμενα (“the things sought” or “the objects of inquiry”) but our commentator feels comfortable substituting τὰ προβλήματα for it. Similarly, in the commentary on the *Topics* authored by Alexander of Aphrodisias, while drawing a distinction between natural problems and dialectical problems, he makes the same tight connection between Aristotle's opening taxonomy of inquiry in *APo*. 2.1 and the method of problems:

So since things stated this way—“why is this the case?” or “what is this?”—are not <dialectical> premises to begin with, neither would problems <stated this way> be dialectical; still, it is possible that the things proposed in this manner are natural problems, as has been said in the work *On Problems*; for natural things, the cause of which are unknown, are natural problems… And all the dialectical problems might be reducible to “that it is” and “whether it is” inquiries, which are two of

---

3 The “aporia of the *Meno*” is explicitly referred to at *APo*. 1.1.71a29 (as is that dialogue’s doctrine that learning is recollection at *APr*. 2.21.67a21). But it is also clearly in the background of the *aporia* that introduces *APo*. 2.19. On Aristotle's responses to the Meno paradox, see Charles 2010a.

4 For a good discussion of the reasons for doubting that the commentary on *APo*. 2 is by Philoponus, see Goldin (2009, 1–4). Unless otherwise noted, the translations in this paper are my own, though for the *Posterior Analytics* I have regularly consulted the translations of Barnes, McKirahan, and Tredennick.