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Virtue and inquiry, knowledge and ignorance: Lessons from the Theaetetus

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Virtue and Inquiry, Knowledge and Ignorance: Lessons From the *Theaetetus*

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For Jane, who gave me life,

and

for Joanne, who saved it.

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ABSTRACT

Plato's dialogues are set in fifth century Athens but they are performed for a fourth century audience. The context of his dialogues, then is wider perhaps than other philosophers and because of the difference in periods, it is clear that it is necessary for an audience member to possess knowledge of the events of the previous generation, viz., the fifth century BCE. When its cultural context is taken into account, the *Theaetetus* can not be read as an attempt by Plato to establish an epistemology in the modern sense of the term. While the characters of the dialogue are searching for the 'essence' of knowledge, Plato is teaching the audience of the dialogue to consider the knowledge that different practices of *paideia* produce and to evaluate that knowledge in light of its implications on the individual and the *polis*. The answer that emerges is that philosophy is the *paideia* that will produce the best individual and the best *polis*, because it is only the practice of philosophy that teaches intellectual virtue. The *Theaetetus* is an account of the practice of philosophy and the practitioner of philosophy.

Chapter One

Situating Plato's Dialogues Historically:

The Place of Dialogue in Ancient Greek *Paideia*

For [Plato] himself knew so well that his philosophy arose in a particular climate of thought and held a particular position in the whole development of Greek mind, that he always made his dialectic take the dramatic form of a dialogue, and begin with an argument representatives of various types of contemporary opinion. On the other hand no great writer more clearly reveals the truth that the only lasting element in history is the spirit, not merely because his own thought survived for millennia, but because early Greece survives in him. His philosophy is a reintegration of the preceding stages of Hellenic culture…. [Plato] must be the culmination of any history of Greek paideia.[1]

   This study of Plato's *Theaetetus* proceeds from a perspective that is, at

once, philosophical, historical and literary. This approach, I will argue, befits Plato's

dialogues, and is required if one aims at understanding just how important they are in the

history of philosophy. Accordingly, its first task is to situate the Platonic dialogue in its

historical context, that is, as a contributor to the cultural conversation of Greece, what is

called *paideia.* There is no denying that the *Theaetetus* is about knowledge; the overall

question Socrates, Theaetetus, and Theodorus attempt to answer is indeed 'What is

knowledge?' Yet, I will argue, the dialogue cannot be treated as an attempt to establish

an *epistemology*, at least not in the way that contemporary philosophers know and treat

epistemology. Plato asks the question in the context of his time, and so asks it for the

purpose of establishing a new type of *paideia*, philosophy. Working against the

standards of the fifth and fourth centuries of who counted as wise, Plato attempts to

define the practice of a *philosophos*, Socrates, in his dialogues. The question 'What is

knowledge?' does not stand alone; the question is asked in a particular context, fifth and

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[1] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: In Search of the Divine Centre,* vol. 2 (New York: Oxford UP, 1943) x.

fourth century Athens, for a particular reason: to demonstrate the inadequacy of archaic

and classical conceptions of *paideia*, evaluated on the basis of their claims to knowledge

and truth. The investigation carried out in the *Theaetetus* exposes the flaws not only in

considering sophists, poets, or the Presocratics to be *sophoi*, it exposes the problems with

democracy and reveals the necessity for a stable, unchanging ground for an education in

aretē.

The Function of Archaic Poetry in Greek *Paideia*

Plato often singles out the problems with poetry as a vehicle for Greek *paideia*,

most notably in *Ion*. There Socrates alludes to problems with the practices and the

reception of both the rhapsodes and the poets.   There is additional criticism in the

Republic, and again in the *Laws* poetry is blamed for the degenerate state of the *polis*.[2]

To understand Plato's criticism, one must understand the role of poetry in Greek society,

education, and politics in both fourth and fifth century Greece. Plato, Isocrates,

Arisotphanes, Euripides, Gorgias, Protagoras, Pericles, Solon, Pindar, Homer, Hesiod –

these men all deal in *poiesis*, and so are *poiētai*. Poetry was an all-encompassing term

that could be applied to any prose work – oral or written.[3] Eric Havelock has argued that

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[2] The dialogues are literally littered with jabs at poetry, poets, those who perform poetry, and those who accept it as authority. Poetry is *mousikē*; poetry was sung, often accompanied by musical instruments and probably dance. Thus Socrates often speaks of music and poetry as the same, and they often receive the same treatment. See Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 118ff.

[3] See Thomas, *Literacy* 113-117. Though properly speaking, Homer and Hesiod are *aoidoi* (singers or bards), not *poiêtai*. There was a shift in archaic Greece from *aoidoi* to *poiêtêi,* probably due to "changing socio-political realties of the *polis*" (Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 20). *Poiēsis* has as its "the root sense the notion of 'doing' or 'making' or 'fabricating' something, and can include the notion of 'making up' an invented tale or a lie" (Walker 19). Poetry was created in the performance, the relation between the poet or singer and the audience. Only with the suppression of dance did a mind and body split, such as is shown in the *Phaedo*, become thinkable. Thinking is no longer in the *thumos, stéthos, kradia* – in short, thinking was no longer integrated with the physical body as it had been in Homer.

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the importance of poetry in early Greek *paideia* is a function of the long period in which writing was not available for cultural purposes among Greek speaking people.[4]

The time period in which Plato wrote, the fourth century, was still in process of becoming a "literate" culture.[5] Though the Greeks had been writing in some form as early as the fourteenth century, the fall of the Mycenaean civilization resulted in the loss of the script Linear B, leaving the populace illiterate once more, if ever they were literate.[6] There is no evidence that Linear B was used for purposes other than keeping inventory of palace goods and it is doubtful that the knowledge of Linear B went beyond the palace scribes. Writing was in use again in the eighth and seventh centuries, though Linear B had been replaced by the Greek alphabet, a system of writing that bears no obvious resemblance to Linear B.[7] Prior to the invention of the Greek alphabet, oral composition

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[4] Of course, societies have long existed and endured without writing systems to record their speech. Speech is present in all human societies; writing is, as Eric Havelock notes, a relatively recent invention. See Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982).

[5] The problem of defining a literate culture stems from the imprecision of the term "literate." What does it mean to be literate? It has long been held that the 'miracle' of Greek rationality was produced by their alphabetic literacy. Goody and Watt argued that it was Greek *writing* that created "democracy, rational thought, philosophy and historiography" (Thomas, *Literacy* 17). But is literacy to be confined to learning letters? The results from an assessment of the 'literacy' of a culture will be inadequate because any definition of literacy is itself arbitrary, Thomas reminds us, citing UNESCO's 1958 attempt to define and survey world literacy (Thomas, *Literacy* 3). Because there are degrees of literacy – for instance, being able to read and write at varying levels to signing one's own name to simply 'knowing one's letters' – setting the boundary between literacy and illiteracy will be with respect to the literate culture making the distinction. Regarding the progress of Greek literacy, see Eric A. Havelock, *Prologue to Literacy* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati) 1971, and Kevin Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984). Literacy is tied to techniques; Thomas reports that the form and even the typeface conveys meaning to the content (Thomas, *Literacy* 75).

[6] William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) i; G. S. Kirk, "Orality and Sequence," *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy,* ed. Kevin Robb (The Hegeler Institute: LaSalle, 1983) 89. For discussion of the extent of Mycenaean literacy see T. G. Palaima, "Comments on Mycenaean Literacy," *Minos* 20-22 (1987): 499-510.

[7] Though it is debatable, evidence supports the Greek alphabet having been adapted from the Phoenician script and not from Aramaic. Comparing the earliest Greek inscription with contemporaneous

appears to be the only method available for the preservation and transmission of Greek myth, customs, rituals, history, and knowledge throughout Magna Graecia.[8] It is worth noting that the earliest extant instances of Greek alphabetic writing recount sentences expressed in dactylic hexameter verse, the language and verse of Homer.[9]

Early Greek writing is also found on sepulchral inscriptions and names scrawled onto pottery.[10] The uses for writing spread, ranging from public writing to graffiti.[11] In the fifth and fourth centuries, writing was used in the courts and to inscribe laws, and the Sophists, Presocratic philosophers and the poets performed the compositions they had written.[12] Writing was used as a supplement to oral communication, and there is no

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Phoenician inscriptions shows a greater degree of similarity than other possibilities. The meter of poetic speech probably provided the impetus for the separation of vowels and consonants. See Kevin Robb, "Poetic Sources of the Greek Alphabets," *Communication Arts in the Ancient World*, ed. Eric A. Havelock and Jackson P. Hershbell (New York: Hastings House, 1978) 23-38, and Eric A. Havelock, "The Alphabetization of Homer," *Communication Arts in the Ancient World,* ed. Eric A. Havelock and Jackson P. Hershbell (New York: Hastings House, 1978) 3-22.

[8] Thomas, *Literacy* 62ff; Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece,* trans. Janet Lloyd (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 12-27; Hershbell 28ff; Eric Havelock, 'Alphabetization', *Preface to Plato* (Harvard UP: Cambridge) 1963, *The Muse Learns to Write* (Yale UP, 1986); Joanne Waugh, "Neither Published Nor Perished: The Dialogues as Speech, Not Text," The *Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies,* ed. Francisco J. Gonzalez (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers) 1995; Thomas Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP) 1991; Bruno Gentili, *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece: From Homer to the Fifth Century,* trans. Thomas A. Cole, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP) 1988; Deborah Steiner*, The Tyrant's Writ: Myths and Images of Writing in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994); Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) and *Literacy* esp. 101 – 127; and Harris 1989. For the problems of ascertaining the details of an ancient oral culture; see Charles Segal, "Spectator and Listener," *The Greeks*, ed. Jean-Pierre Vernant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 194; and see Niall W. Slater, "Literacy and Old Comedy," *Voice Into Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 99-114, for a discussion of the impact that literacy had on Old Comedy.

[9] See Robb, *Literacy* esp. 21-73. Dactylic hexameter verse acted as a mnemonic aid, in place of, or before there were, written texts. That the earliest alphabetic writing was in dactylic hexameter implies the priority of song.

[10] Svenbro, *Phrasiklea* 9.

[11] Thomas, *Literacy* 57-61.

[12] Though writing was used in the courts and the law, it is unclear to what extent the oral codes and laws were reflected in the written law; archaic writing was, Thomas speculates, "in the service of the

evidence that it was intended (initially) as a replacement. Texts were means as a

mnemonic aid, Thomas writes, "an *aide-mémoire*, a silent record of a much richer

experience."[13] Moreover, as ancient Greek writing is *scripta continua*, written without

spaces, it can only be made readily intelligible by reading it aloud; vocalization was

necessary to establish meaning for the audience. "What is written," Svenbro writes, "is

incomplete until such time as it is provided with a voice."[14] Only with the introduction of

word separation did silent reading become intelligible.[15] Though the poetry of Homer

and Hesiod had been written onto scrolls of papyrus at some time, the poetry continued to

have an oral and primarily performative dimension.[16] In the Archaic and Classical ages,

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spoken word" (*Literacy* 68-72). See also Thomas, *Literacy* 128-ff for a discussion of the status of written testimony in the ancient Greek world. The Athenians had a mistrust of written testimony, Elinor West tells us, when it was not vocally endorsed by eyewitnesses (Elinor J. M. West, "Plato's Audiences, or How Plato Replies to the Fifth-Century Intellectual Mistrust of Letters," *The Third Way*, ed. Francisco J. Gonzalez (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1995) 48-49). A written document could not be interrogated, asked for clarification; the letters were silent, as in the example of *Hippolytus* (West 49). See also Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) for a discussion of the Athenian's mistrust of sophists in the context of the Athenian mistrust of writing.

[13] Thomas, *Literacy* 119; see also 101-127. As evidence that writing was used as a device to aid memory, Thomas cites the lists of names of victors or officials; she also discusses officials known as *mnemones* and the authority they and their memory held over and above writing (Thomas, *Literacy* 66-71). Reading silently may have been done as early as the fifth century B.C.E., but it was by no means a common practice. See Svenbro, *Phrasiklea* 163-164; cf. M. F. Burnyeat, "Postscript on Silent Reading," *The Classical Quarterly* ns 47.1 (1997): 74-76.

[14] Svenbro, *Phrasiklea* 44-63.

[15] See Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) for a detailed explanation of the importance of word separation and the development of silent reading.

[16] Havelock suggests that the poems were written down first as a mnemonic aid, much in the same way that rhythm and what he terms the 'echo principle' were used as mnemonic devices. The poetry was eventually preserved in the manner it should be *performed* – it is "conceived as a performance to be heard and seen and memorized but not read" (Alphabetization 19). See Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry,* Rev. ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1999).

writing did not replace the oral preservation and transmission of cultural communication; rather, writing enabled modifications of oral public discourse.

Indeed, Hesiod tells us of the poet's roles in archaic Greek society in the *Theogony*, which is echoed by the description Aeschylus gives of poets in Aristophanes' *Frogs*.[17] Thus was the role of the poets, such as Homer and Hesiod, to educate the Greeks on customs, rituals, history, laws, and morals – in short, their role in Greek society was enculturation, *paideia*. As Socrates observes in the *Republic*, people "…praise Homer and say that he's the poet who educated Greece, that it's worth taking up his works in order to learn how to manage and educate people, and that one should arrange one's whole life in accordance with his teaching …" (606e), echoing Xenophanes: "Since from the beginning all have learned according to Homer …" (DK10).[18]

Hesiod tells us in the *Theogony* he sings "of all the laws and all the gracious customs of the immortals" (66-67). To sing of the laws of the divine is to impose normative standards to the listeners. As anthropomorphic beings that are necessarily 'better' than the "shepherds of the wilderness" (61), the gods set a standard for behavior in society and the home, in both public and in private interactions.

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[17] Hesiod, in the *Theogony,* describes the singing Muses as singing of "the laws and all the gracious customs of the immortals," (Hesiod, *Theogony,* trans. Richard Lattimore (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1959) lines 66-67). In *Frogs,* Aeschylus informs Dionysus, Euripides, and the audience that "… the poets, who helped us escape from the laws of barbaric society. 'Twas Orpheus who taught us to reverence life, a religion of mystical piety; Musaeus who brought us oracular wisdom, and magical methods of healing; And Hesiod told of the tillage of the earth, her opulent beauty revealing…" (Aristophanes, *Frogs*, *The Complete Works of Aristophanes,* ed. Moses Hadas (1962 New York: Bantam Books, 1988).

[18] Xenophanes, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments*, trans. J. H. Lesher (1992 Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

Thus the poets were the 'masters of truth,' as Marcel Detienne puts it, for poets had the ability to sing truth – a talent endowed by the Muses. Note that *aletheia*, which we translate as truth, is the opposite of forgetfulness, *lethē*, and that poetry's function in Greek culture was to ensure its topic, person, or event was not forgotten; poetry was a practice that was "seen as transmitting and preserving the truth."[19] The compositions and epics of Homer, Hesiod and the other poets were acoustic narratives that helped to maintain the social, political and religious structure of Greece.[20] The term 'poet', in archaic Greece, encompasses a number of what currently might be considered separate roles: philosopher, historian, sage, lawgiver.[21] Thus poetry is not something that may be described as merely an aesthetic work; its influential *role* in Greek society, as authority in Greek *paideia*, is evident in the extent of its power in the *polis*.[22]

The poets claim to be 'masters of truth' because they can trace their authority to the Muses. The claim undergoes a transformation which some scholars have linked to the rise of the *polis* and the opportunities writing afforded the poets to other traditional forms. Detienne's analysis of the work of Simonides of Ceos details the transformation

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[19] Thomas, *Literacy* 115. See Nagy.

[20] The demonstrations that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed in a style typical of oral compositions and performance was provided by Milman Parry in a series of journal articles, collected by his son Adam Parry and published as *The Making of Homeric Verse*. That Parry's critical thesis is true has won almost universal acceptance. There are and doubtless will continue to be debates about the details. For further discussion, see Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry,* ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) and Nagy.

[21] Performers are excluded from this list as *aoidos* is the term for singer, or bard, and so is more properly applied to performers.

[22] That is not to say that the poetic qualities were unimportant. Rather, artistry enabled the poet to be the educator of men. Svenbro emphasizes the importance of *kleos* to ancient Greek culture, and the association between voice and *kleos*. To have your name sung by the poets was to achieve a certain measure of immortality. Thus, one of the reasons that poetry was revered is that through it, one could share divine characteristics.

from the type of poetry of Homer and Hesiod to a poetry disassociated, to a certain

extent, from the divine. Simonides treated poetry as a profession, as something to be paid

for, rather like a pre-sophist.[23] Of course, in the case of Simonides, this was

'scandalous', according to Pindar. But Simonides marked out a new path for poetry by

replacing Homer's ideal (of *agathos*) with "the ideal of the 'healthy man (*hugiēs anēr*),

whose virtue is defined by reference to the *Polis* (*eidōs g' onēsipolin dikan*).'"[24] Poets

after Simonides were no longer 'masters of truth;' by breaking the ties between truth,

memory, and the divine, truth began to take on a more familiar meaning. Parmenides'

truth, for instance, claims the status of objective truth.[25] The Presocratics' use of *muthos*

and *logos* suggests a more complicated picture than the traditional one.

The Presocratic philosophers stood "poised between literacy and nonliteracy" and

so "their style of composition is a mediation between ear and eye."[26] They, principally

Heraclitus, attacked the poets in order to establish a different genre of disembodied

discourse.[27] The Presocratics rejected the narrative account of the world preserved in

Homer and Hesiod and aimed at a rational explanation of the *kosmos* – in particular, the

processes of causation. Rather than rely on Olympian gods as the cause or origin of the

kosmos, they introduced impersonal forces, non-anthropomorphic notions of the divine

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[23] Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1996) 107. Detienne reminds us that sophistry, like Simonides' poetry, is "founded on ambiguity" (116).

[24] Detienne 114.

[25] Detienne 133.

[26] Eric A. Havelock, "The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics," *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy,* ed. Kevin Robb (La Salle: The Hegeler Institute, 1983) 9.

[27] Heraclitus' work was not intended for oral performance.

and non-Olympian gods (i.e. the unnamed goddess of Parmenides). Xenophanes is quite

explicit in his dismissal of *muthos* in favor of *logos*; for example, he says "for all things

are from the earth and to the earth all things come in the end" (DK27).[28] It is also quite

evident that the Presocratics were interested in revising morality and customs through an

injection of rationality. For example, Heraclitus criticizes the manner in which blood

crimes are dealt with – if one has committed a blood crime, he suggests sacrificing

animals is not the way to rid oneself of *miasmos*: "They vainly (try to) purify themselves

with blood when *defiled* (with it)! – as if one who had stepped into mud should (try to)

wash himself *off* with mud!" (DK5)[29] Unlike Homer and Hesiod, the Presocratic

philosophers were not so concerned with the preservation of existing cultural values as to

challenge traditional ways of thinking – all the while trying to please their audiences with

their performances.[30]

The instructional tenor of their work initiated a shift from *muthos* to *logos*. Jean-

Pierre Vernant summarizes the traditional view of the Presocratics:

> It is said that in the Milesian school *logos* was for the first time freed from myth,
> just as the scales fall from the eyes of a blind man; it was not so much a change in
> intellectual attitude, a mental mutation, as a single decisive and definite
> revolution: the discovery of the mind. It would accordingly be futile to seek the
> origins of rational thought in the past: true thought could have no origin outside
> itself. It lies outside history … This is the meaning of the Greek 'miracle': in the
> thought of the Ionian philosophers, a nontemporal reason was embodied in time.
> The arrival of *logos* is thus held to have introduced a radical discontinuity into
> history. Philosophy is seen as a traveler without luggage, entering the world

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[28] Xenophanes DK27.

[29] Heraclitus, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, trans. T. M. Robinson, (1987 University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1991); Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., *Philosophy Before Socrates*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) 13.

[30] Havelock, Linguistic 9.

without a past, without antecedents, without affiliations; it was an absolute beginning. [31]

The Milesians were the first to move away from myth and towards reason, but it is not correct, Vernant stresses, to assume that the Milesians abandoned *muthos* entirely to supplant it with *logos*. Rather, the Presocratics mimicked the structure and the details of the myths while removing the "dramatic imagery," and so enhanced and amended what the poets of old had begun.[32] Nor can the importance of the performative aspect of poetry be neglected; poetry was something that, unlike poetry in a fully literate age, was "*actually created* through a process of collaboration and interaction between artist and public."[33] The rationality of the Presocratics was mirrored and, Vernant claims, derivative from changes in the political structure of the *polis*. It was Simonides who first noticed and expounded upon the change in value, that 'The city teaches the man' (*polis andra didaskei*).[34]

Political *Aretē* and Public Discourse

What changed was the political and civic space of Greece. In the eighth century, the political structure in Athens changed from the rule of a *basileus* (king) to the rule of a group of men called the Areopagus. This council held power over the people until the

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[31] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks,* trans. Janet Lloyd with Jeff Fort (1983 Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2006) 371. See also Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Dover, 1982).

[32] Vernant, *Myth* 402; Vernant, *Myth* 372ff; see also F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

[33] Gentili 14.

[34] Detienne 115.

reforms of Solon, himself a poet at well as a lawgiver, at which time the Areopagus was

limited to acting as a judicial body. As Vernant indicates, there were

> affinities between a man like Thales and his contemporary in Athens, Solon, the
> poet and legislator. Both were included among the Seven Sages, who, in the
> Greeks' eyes, embodied the first kind of *Sophia* to have appeared among men: a
> wisdom permeated with moral reflection and political preoccupations.[35]

Solon was a noble who freed the peasants from their endless cycle of debt, which often

resulted in the debtor's enslavement. He expressed concern for nobles and commoners

alike, and put forth laws that had a decidedly moral bent. But it was not until the reforms

by Cleisthenes, beginning in 508, that Athenian democracy became possible. He

reformed Solon's *Boulē* so that it was no longer based on wealth or privilege; every male

citizen had a role in the *polis* through participation in Cleisthenes' Assembly.[36] It was the

polis with its institutional structures that allowed for rational debate, for *politkē*, a

discourse that was both political and competitive. [37] Ober writes that what was at stake in

public discourse was no small thing:

> Every major public confrontation was a chance for a public speaker to establish or
> elaborate upon his own reputation, and to undermine the reputation of his political

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[35] Vernant, *Myth* 404.

[36] Cleisthenes organized the civic space of the *polis,* which in turn had a 'democratizing' effect on
the political institutions. The reorganization initiated by Cleisthenes moved Athens away from the
traditions of archaic Greece and towards the democracy it became in the classical age (Pierre Lévêque and
Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in
Greek Political Thought,* trans. David Ames Curtis (The Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1996) 9ff, 81-97).
Isonomia, or 'equality of men', was what Cleisthenes called his restructuring of the tribes/political
hierarchy and civic spaces. Lévêque reminds us that *isonomia* is a concept developed in the context of
tyranny and oligarchy; "Isonomic Athens is therefore Athens rid of tyrants" (21). As evidence, Lévêque
cites the famous passage:
> "In a handle of myrtle shall I carry my sword
> Like Harmodius and Aristogiton
> When they killed the tyrant
> And rendered Athens isonomous" (21).

[37] Vernant, *Myth* 397: reason "was truly a product of the city."

opponents… The stakes were high, finally, because major speeches to large audiences were occasions for public deliberation on the core values that underpinned the democratic polity and the relationship of those values to practices, public and private: how individual Athenians acted and behaved in institutional contexts and in their everyday lives.[38]

Public discourse was the basis for Athenian political institutions; it also defined and revised truth, "assimilating local knowledges into an overarching democratic knowledge."[39] Truth was produced in the Assembly and the law courts, through public forum and debate; in short, truth was assembled under the hegemony of public discourse. Athenians, Ober says, "predicated their decisions on … ideology rather than established doctrine or scientific principles. Athens' democracy operated on the basis of opinion, not truth."[40] Ober relates that for fifth and fourth century Athenians, it would never have occurred to them that truth and knowledge were anything but political; the political construction of truth was the norm, and accepted by the elite and the *demos* alike. Vernant likens public discourse to a 'political game' – and that political game became an 'intellectual game' for "alongside the mass of common beliefs that everyone shares without question, a new notion of truth takes shape and is affirmed: open truth, accessible to all, and justified by its own demonstrative force."[41] Such was the shift from *muthos* to

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[38] Josiah Ober, "I, Socrates … The Performative Audacity of Isocrates' *Antidosis,*." *Isocrates and Civic Education,* ed. Takis Poulakos and David DePew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004) 21.

[39] Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 154.

[40] Ober, *Athenian* 141.

[41] Vernant, *Myth* 405.

logos: truth and rationality take center stage while explanations grounded in myth must stand aside.[42]

Even though there remained economic class distinctions within the political power structure, as it took wealth to hold the appointed positions, through the leveling force of the Assembly, power was dependent upon a man's ability to deliver convincing, persuasive speeches: "Through speech men were effective in assemblies, established their command, and dominated others."[43] The importance of oratory to Athenian culture is made clear by adopting Ober's analysis of power in democratic Athens as a "discourse paradigm."[44] In this paradigm, power is produced through "the production of social understandings regarding what is true and what behaviors are right, proper, even conceivable."[45] All social interactions are intertwined in the dominant power structure by necessity; if the ideology of Athenian society is constructed through discourse, then all social communications accept, or assume, as their basis that fundamental ideology. The power that oratory held is that through discourse, the social understandings of Athenian society were "produced and reproduced – or challenged and overthrown."[46] Power, then,

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[42] To be perfectly clear, *muthos,* as a type of discourse, was also a type of *logos.* See *From Myth to Reason? Studies in Development of Greek Thought,* ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

[43] Detienne 105.

[44] Ober, *Athenian* 89.

[45] Ober, *Athenian* 89.

[46] Ober, *Athenian* 90. Gorgias, in his piece *Praise of Helen,* speaks to the power *logos* has: "She did what she did … or because she was taken by force, persuaded by words (logoi), or conquered by Love … Not even if speech (logos) persuaded and deceived her soul, it is hard to make a defense against this charge and free her from blame as follows. Logos is a powerful master…" (DK8B11, McKirahan 376). See also W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1971) 42-44.

was discourse – persuasive public speech.[47] It is in terms, Gentili writes, of "expertise in public discourse," that "the activity of the 'wise man' (*sophos*) is conceived in Greece from the earliest period down to the end of the fifth century."[48] The debates, Ober reminds us, waged in public were parallel to "debates among philosophers, by whom I mean all those who claimed the title *philosophia* for their own intellectual enterprises."[49] A 'philosopher' was anyone who claimed such an expertise; moreover, if *sophos* was linked to public discourse then education was aimed at producing experts in public discourse.[50] Hence, many sophists focused on improving their students' rhetorical abilities, and thus people like Meno and Thrasymachus claim that virtue has more to do with power and control than any of the 'cardinal' virtues.

Comedy was an important a vehicle for political discourse: the comic poets "could, indeed were expected to, comment on, and seek to influence public thinking about matters of major importance."[51] There are parallels to the seating arrangements of the theatre and the seating arrangements of the *Boulē*; "the money paid out to citizens to

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[47] The power of public speech was long recognized. The importance of dialogue-speech, as Detienne writes, superseded and eventually replaced the prior "dominion" of magicoreligious speech and poetry. See Detienne 89-106.

[48] Gentili 14.

[49] Ober, *Isocrates* 22.

[50] See Joanne B. Waugh, "Socrates and the Character of Platonic Dialogue," *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*, ed. Gerald A. Press (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) .47. Waugh posits that the expertise Socrates is attempting to undermine in the Platonic dialogues is precisely due to the conception of *sophós* as expertise in public discourse.

[51] Jeffrey Henderson, "Demos and the Comic Competition," *Nothing to Do With Dionysos?* ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 271. Henderson argues that the poets of Old Comedy were a primary vehicle of intellectual and political discourse. See also Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, trans. David McLintock, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990).

attend the festival was distributed by the deme and was tied to registration on the deme census lists."[52]

Paideia in Athens' Classical Age

Despite the fact that in the fifth century the aristocracy was probably literate, no one seemed to recognize the full potential of this new technology of writing. Thus, the culture remained dependent on performed speech – which persisted as the primary vehicle for *paideia*. The educational program of the classical period did not differ dramatically from that of the archaic age; *paideia* was mostly oral, although in the fifth century boys probably learned their letters around the age of puberty.[53] Traditional aristocratic education consisted of two parts: gymnastics and *mousikē*. Aristocratic youth had to be prepared to take part, and compete, in the religious festivals in Athens, Panhellenic competitions and the military. Archaic *paideia* and classical education did just that. Most importantly, the youth were to memorize poetry in order to absorb the values and virtues contained within that poetry. After the boys had been educated in these three categories, they were left to learn the laws from the *polis*.

Then, their fifth-century education was complete. The problem with this education was the gap between the time that the boys finished their education and the age that they were allowed to participate as citizens in the *polis*. From the ages of fifteen to twenty-one the young men needed instruction in how to be a Athenian citizen, for they had finished their core education by age fifteen but were not able to participate as citizens

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[52] John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song," *Nothing to Do With Dionysos?* ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 38.

[53] Havelock, *Literate* 8.

in the Assembly until age twenty-one. During this time fathers or guardians chose

mentors for their sons; this practice became known as *sunousia*.[54] From the attitude and

opinions of Anytus in the *Meno*, we can infer that one reason Socrates was put to death

was that he was perceived to be interfering with *sunousia*, e.g., Anytus condemns the

practice of hiring a sophist for instruction. Implicit in his condemnation are two key

points: that hiring a sophist replaced the need for *sunousia,* and that he takes Socrates as a

sophist (or at least as presenting the same problems to society as a sophist): "It is much

rather those among the young who pay their fees who are mad, and even more the

relatives who entrust their young to them and most of all the cities who allow them to

come in and do not drive out any citizen or stranger who attempts to behave in this

manner" (*Meno* 92a-b).

　　Sunousia, an association with the 'right' man that often took on a sexual

character, filled the years from fifteen to about twenty-one with instruction on the

responsibilities of citizenship and the laws of Athens.[55] The older man (*erastēs)*,

theoretically an accomplished and wise citizen and typically a friend of the family, would

educate the young man (*eromenos*) in *politikē techne*, the art of being a good and

accomplished citizen – gaining experience in what it means to be an expert in public

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[54] See Robb, *Literacy* 87.

[55] See Kevin Robb, "*Asebeia* and *Sunousia*: The Issues Behind the Indictment of Socrates," *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations,* ed. Gerald A. Press (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993) 87. It should be noted that it is a mistake to consider the paideutic practice of *sunousia* as 'homosexual', 'pederasty', or 'pedophilia'. Halperin writes that "sexuality is a cultural production" and as such, it was accepted as a cultural practice, and did not have the stigma that accompanies same sex acts of today (David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York, Routledge: 1990) 25). Men, regardless of their gender preference of sexual partner, were not considered deviant unless they were unmasculine. Though, as Robb notes, while it *could* be a sexual practice, more often than not it was "familial, tribal, and civic, not sexual" (*Asebeia* 91); it is also possible that the sexual practice was a result of the cultural practice.

discourse. The youth was to listen, absorb the wisdom of the older man and learn his

skills, as well as imitate the older man's virtues. The origins of *sunousia* are found in an

oral society, and *sunousia* continues until the last quarter of the fifth century, when texts

became more available, popular, and the institutions of the *polis* began to depend on

texts. Until a culture has acquired a critical mass of literate writers as well as textbooks

and schools, most cultural knowledge would still be transmitted orally. Athens' defeat in

the Peloponnesian war had called into question the *paideia* of the fifth century;

specifically, the traditional educational archetypes for making virtuous young men. Thus,

many young men – and their fathers – were turning to a new class of instructors: the

sophists.[56] The *aretē* that traditional pedagogy worked to inculcate in young men was

political excellence (*dikaiosunē*), and that *aretē* was expressed in the Assembly through

the quality, and the success, of their discourse. Developing a talent for rhetoric or

oratorical speech was mandatory for public achievement as the fundamental outlook of

Athenian society was "established and constantly revised in the practice of public

debate."[57] Sophists billed themselves as professional educators who could be hired, at a

substantial price, to give instruction in *aretē* (public discourse) or to write speeches.

 The Sophists furthered the project the Presocratic philosophers had begun,

supplanting the divine inspiration of the Muse with persuasion (*peithō*). The Sophists

aimed at educating the mind, and, according to Jaeger, had two distinct methods for

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[56] Plato has Socrates say this to Anytus: "Do you not agree that [Aristides] was good? … He too gave his own son Lysimachus the best Athenian education in matters which are the business of teachers, and do you think he made him a better man than anyone else?" (*Meno* 94a) Though Socrates is speaking in the context of providing Anytus with proof that virtue cannot be taught, the observation works equally well with regard to the generalization – of traditional educational practices.

[57] Ober, *Athenian* 91-92.

educating it. The first was to furnish it with encyclopedic variety of facts – the material

of knowledge – and the second was to give it formal training of various types.[58] The two

methods had in common that they aimed at teaching political *aretē* by increasing the

powers of the mind through some type of training. Increasing political *aretē* meant

increasing the capacity one had to influence effectively and to convince the Assembly

and thereby to win debates. Sophists also provided texts or instructional speeches that

citizens could memorize to use in the courtroom or the Assembly in order to increase the

citizen's ability for persuasive speaking. Thomas Cole describes how it was that

sophists' texts were adopted by those citizens willing to submit themselves to a text:[59]

> The busy sessions of courts and assemblies, and the crowded halls dedicated to
> Sophistic or eristic debate were an inseparable and characteristic part of Athenian
> life in the fifth century. The neophyte confronted by choice or necessity with the
> prospect of taking part in such sessions would be an eager user of any text that
> could select and compress what was likely to prove of recurring practical value in
> the performances of recognized masters and preserve it in isolation from what was
> less valuable.[60]

The instruction or demonstration texts of the sophists were a pedagogic technique that

failed to move much further beyond the imitative principles of traditional pedagogy. As

with the exemplar from epic poetry, demonstration texts did not address the particular

situation in which the speaker found himself. The speaker had to realize, without help,

how the particular situation might be relevantly similar and dissimilar to that expressed

by the formulae or example. Neither traditional nor sophistic education included training

in reasoning, the speaker would not necessarily possess the critical reasoning skills

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[58] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens,* vol.
1 (New York: Oxford UP, 1939) 292-293.

[59] The author/reader relationship may be expressed as an *erastēs/eromenos* relationship gone awry,
for the reader is being dominated by the writer (Svenbro, *Phrasikleia* 189).

[60] Cole 79.

required to tailor the demonstration text to his situation and so the speech that he gave

was easily otiose, covering irrelevant topics as well as not addressing the appropriate

relevant topics.[61] While students might learn techniques of oratory from sophists, they

did not acquire skills that would allow them to reason.

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[61] In *On Those Who Compose Written Speeches* (or *Against the Sophists)* Alcidamas berates the sophists as having little ability at speaking and rhetoric, and attests that "writing should be practised as an ancillary pursuit" because writing may be memorized and rehearsed, which is in direct conflict with the extemporaneous speaking that he values. Implicit in his contempt for those who prefer the written to the oral is contempt for anyone *buying* speeches – such people clearly fall within his analogy of 'athletes of feeble powers'. Alcidamas, *On the Sophists*, trans. LaRue Van Hook, 20 Jan. 1919, Classical Weekly, 10 Aug. 2006 <http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/alcidamas/alcsoph1.htm>.

Chapter Two

Platonic Dialogue as *Paideia*

If we view Plato's dialogues in their historical and cultural context, one in which texts are produced to serve the needs of Greek *paideia*, the question that arises is how did Plato's dialogues work to educate their audience? Philosophic texts, like other compositions, were written by an author in a particular time and place. In order to best understand any text, including philosophy, readers need to understand as much as possible about the cultural context that the work was composed in, written for, and written about. For Plato more than any other philosopher, these elements are essential to understanding his philosophy for his philosophy is in dialogue form and the speakers are figures with counterparts from history, with whom his audience was undoubtedly familiar.

Plato's works are kindred to the tragedies and comedies of his predecessors for they each have a setting, characters, and, as James Arieti says, "conversation in the character's own persona without benefit of a narrator."[62] At least, this is the case with some of Plato's dialogues, the 'late' dialogues such as the *Theaetetus*. Harold Tarrant believes that Plato initially wrote narrative dialogues in an effort to capture a typical oral narrative (it is assumed that Plato's audiences would be accustomed to this type of

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[62] James A. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Rowan and Littlefield: 1991) 3.

delivery), and then developed the dramatic dialogue modeled after the mimes of

Sophron.[63]

The details that allude to historical events are only possible due to the dialogue

form. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato might as well be regarded as the inventor of

the dialogue, although Aristotle reports that the inventor was Alexamenus of Telos (*Poet.*

I). But Plato was not the first to write dialogue; he was preceded by Aeschines and

Aristippus.[64] Nor was Plato the only one to write *Socratic* dialogues; in the *Poetics*,

Aristotle tells us about a type of imitation that has no name and does not fit into the

standard conventions of what is called poetry; *Sokratikoi logoi* are among the

representatives of this category.[65] Though there is evidence that points to dialogue as an

established literary form, it is one among several; Plato had no shortage of choices for

literary styles.[66] He could have mimicked the tragic, comic, or epic poets with their use

of rhythm and meter; certainly, Plato demonstrates in the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and the

Republic that he does indeed have the skill requisite to craft (good) poetry proper

(tragedy and comedy). Plato also demonstrates in the *Protagoras, Gorgias,* and

Symposium that he possesses the skill to write prose speeches like those of the Sophists.

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[63] Harold Tarrant, "Orality and Plato's Narrative Dialogues," *Voice Into Text: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Ian Worthington (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996) 129-131.

[64] Diskin Clay, "The Origins of the Socratic Dialogue," *The Socratic Movement,* ed. Paul Vander Waerdt (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 28.

[65] Clay states that "Aristotle, who refers to the Σοκρατικοι λόγοι along with the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus as a recognizable yet nameless genre of Greek 'poetry'." Aristotle writes in *Poetics* 1 1447b10: "Ἔχοιμεν ὀνομάσαι κοινὸν τοὺς Σώφρονος καὶ Ξενάρχου μίμους καὶ τοὺς Σωκρατικοὺς λόγους." Clay proposes that "The literary form may have been suggested to Plato in part by other established literary forms, like the drama or the mimes of Sophron" (55).

[66] Besides Aeschines and Aristippus (and Plato and Xenophon), Diogenes Laertius also indicates that Antisthenes, Phaedo and Euclides also wrote Socratic dialogues (Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use if a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 9).

That Plato chose dialogue over the other literary forms of his day suggests that there is something peculiar to the dialogue form that best expresses his philosophy – or that he is able to reach the wider audience beyond the Academy.

The Platonic dialogues appear remarkably similar to Attic drama with regard to Plato's choice of characters. Plato uses historically significant figures as Socrates' interlocutors throughout the dialogues. Like the comedies of Aristophanes, "the *personae* of the dialogues are people of historical reality, the topics are contemporary, and the discussions contain commentaries, parodies, and critiques."[67] Indeed, Socrates himself has historical significance (though unquestionably not as much significance as he attained post-Plato).[68] The reason for Plato invoking historical figures, Mark Gifford contends, is that it is necessary for the use of a literary technique that draws on the audience's common knowledge.[69]

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[67] Arieti 3.

[68] Andokides who was also on trial for impiety in 400, arguably has (almost) as interesting a story as Socrates, but lacks the historical significance that Socrates gains by 'starring' in Plato's dialogues. See Josiah Ober and Barry Strauss, "Drama, Rhetoric, Discourse," *Nothing to do with Dionysos?* ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

[69] Robb remarks that the dialogues are the best source of information available to us for everyday life in fourth century Athens.

> Historians have observed that, by reason of what is found in such details in the pages of Plato's dialogues, we know more about daily life – people's thoughts, activities, concerns, conversations, even their humor – for his century, the fourth, than in any other in antiquity, whether in Greece or elsewhere. That is true. No comparable secular portrait comes to us from any other century or culture, nor would one have been possible without a developed alphabetic literacy. Plato's evidence is second to none. In comparison to what he tells us of Hellenic life in the late fifth century and at the turn of the fourth, any earlier century is for us a veritable Dark Age…. they were written in the first half of the fourth century, and the issues that they address and argue are still those of Plato's own day, a point often made by Werner Jaeger, Robert Brumbaugh, Eric Havelock, and many others (*Literacy* 160).

The dialogues are full of asides, quips, jokes, and comments beyond Socrates' philosophical discussions, as well as the details Robb addresses. For instance, many of the dialogues have proems replete with this type of cultural information. The beginning of the *Protagoras* gives a great deal of information about the sophists' practice, how the Athenians viewed the sophists, the threat the sophists presented to the Athenians – even the difficulty in distinguishing Socrates from a sophist.

> Dramatic irony, understood generically, is made possible by a discrepancy between a character's view of himself and his circumstances, on the one hand, and the reality of his situation, on the other – a discrepancy which the dramatist deliberately produces with the intention that his audience appreciate this disparity between appearance and fact.[70]

Gifford argues that Plato specifically uses a specific type of dramatic irony to convey his philosophical message: tragic irony. Tragic irony was a staple of fifth-century tragedies; for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* employs the technique in that it assumes the audience already knows what happens in the end; the audience is presumed to be 'omniscient'.[71] The audience watches Oedipus make his mistakes that ultimately lead to his fate; they see the qualities of his character prove to be the same qualities that are his undoing. It is only through their full knowledge of the Oedipus myth that the tragedy gains a secondary character: the audience is able to reflect on Oedipus' choices and the qualities of his character while the action of the play unfolds, increasing the emotional impact of the drama and providing a secondary message about self-discovery. When the chorus sings after Oedipus' lineage is revealed, already the audience has been aware of the transitory and illusory nature of human happiness throughout the entire work:

> Show me the man whose happiness was anything more than illusion
> Followed by disillusion.
> Here is the instance, here is Oedipus, here is the reason
> Why I will call no mortal creature happy.[72]

Like the mythological figures of fifth-century drama, Plato's characters' utterances often resonate with the life of the historical person, that is, the life of the person *after* the

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[70] Mark Gifford, "Drama and Dialectic in *Republic* I," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy,* XX Summer 2001, 37.

[71] Gifford 42.

[72] Sophocles, "King Oedipus," *The Theban Plays,* trans. E. F. Watling (Baltimore: 1957) 59.

dramatic date of the dialogue. Plato's dialogues are composed with the assumption that

his audience knows the main events of the lives of his fifth-century characters.

Alcibiades, Critias, Charmides, Nicias, Cephalus – these are all names and lives that

would be familiar to every person in fourth-century Athens. Nails reminds her readers

that

> Plato did not invent Athenians with names, demes, and kin; he wrote about real
> people – some of them active and still living in Athens – people with reputations,
> families, neighbors and political affiliations, people who show up elsewhere in the
> existing historical record: lampooned in comedies, called as witnesses, elected to
> office, being sold, marrying, buying property, traveling, dying. Socrates' society
> was not only a matter of institutions and ideologies, but a matter of actual people,
> individuals within a nexus of familial, social, and political relationships, without
> whom Plato's dialogues would be denatured.[73]

The majority of people in the dialogues exist in other historical records as well as the

dialogues, providing 'empirical' evidence that Plato did not simply invent characters.

The fact that he used real persons should not, however, lead to the conclusion that the

event of the dialogue itself – that is, the interchanges between Socrates and his

interlocutors – actually took place. There is nothing about the dialogues that necessitates

a conclusion that Plato is reporting history.[74] Plato is writing – and speaking –

philosophy using historical persons in a literary form.[75] While the interlocutors and

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[73] Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) xxxvii-xxxviii.

[74] Charles Kahn presents a solid argument for rejecting the view that the dialogues report the life of the historical Socrates. Instead, Kahn reasons that scholars ought to treat the dialogues as historical fiction. That Plato's Socrates is identical with the historical figure, or that the dialogues are records of Socratic conversations, is easily seen as problematic. Many dialogues, including the *Parmenides,* the *Laches, Charmides, Protagoras,* and *Symposium*, carry a dramatic date from before Plato was born or when he was a young child (Charles H. Kahn, "Plato's Methodology in the *Laches,*" *Revue-Internationale de Philosophie* 40 (1986): 9).

[75] We do not, for instance, assume that Shakespeare is writing as a historian, or that he witnessed, recorded, or reported the exact events in his historical cycles. One cannot learn anything of the particularities of the events and characters in Shakespeare's history cycles, for he significantly alters the

Socrates – the audience *in* the dialogue – share a certain perspective and this is reflected

in their speech and their actions, the audience *of* the dialogue has the advantage of full

historical knowledge and so will, more often than not, find the characters' perspectives

pathetic, tragic, and comic. The last lines of the *Charmides,* for instance, become sinister

in their allusion to Charmides' future installment as one of the Thirty Tyrants:[76]

> We are not conspiring, said Charmides. We have conspired already.
> And you are about to use violence, without even giving me a hearing in court?
> Yes, I shall use violence, he replied, since [Critias] orders me, and therefore you
> had better consider what you will do (176c-d).

This explicitly shows a darker side to the youth, one that is prophesied by Socrates and

hinted at in Charmides' earlier exchanges with Critias.[77] One particular way in which

Plato employs dramatic irony is to draw attention to the 'epistemic *hubris*' of an

interlocutor.[78] Ion, a rhapsode, declares that he is an expert in Homeric poetry, making

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details for his own purposes. What *can* be learned from the plays are the generalities – the names of the places and people, a general flow of events, the manner in which people of that time period (or Shakespeare's time period) interacted, their values. Similarly, by understanding the accuracy of the historical content, we may gain insight into what Plato is doing in the dialogue. Because the audience of Plato's time would have been familiar with the history and with the historical events and personages, they would have detected discrepancies and recognized the discrepancy as important to the overall message of the dialogue.

[76] Critias and Charmides are notable, of course, both as Plato's cousin and uncle, respectively, and as members of the Thirty Tyrants. Thirty Tyrants, a group of men that were installed by Sparta after the Peloponnesian War, held an iron grip on Athens for less than a year before the Athenian democrats returned and overthrew and executed them. In the short time that the Thirty were in power, they terrorized the population of Athens by executing, often without trial, anyone they pleased (though generally democrats). Altogether, it is estimated that the Thirty had several hundred Athenians executed. Socrates tells us in *Apology* 32c-d that he was instructed to bring a man to face such an execution. Upon hearing the orders, Socrates went home rather than commit the wrong. He attributes his own escape from execution to the fact that the Thirty were overthrown soon thereafter.

[77] See Socrates' prophecy at *Charmides* 175d-e "But for your sake, Charmides, I am very sorry – that you, having such beauty and wisdom and temperance of the soul, should have no profit nor good in life from your wisdom and temperance." See also 162c-d. There, Socrates reports that Charmides was all but outright taunting Critias, and foreshadows the later violence in which both men participate.

[78] Gifford's term, 38. Gifford provides an argument for Plato's use of dramatic irony both in the *Laches* and *Republic* I.

the outrageous claim that he deserves "to be crowned with a wreath of fold by the Homeridae" (530e). Socrates proceeds to reduce Ion's claim to absurdity, for by claiming expertise it turns out that when Ion claims he is the most able rhapsode, Ion is claiming to be the most able general as well (541a-d). That the claim is preposterous is clear to the reader, as is Ion's *hubris*; Ion, however, maintains that it is the case – due to political and military practices, Athens would not accept him as a general, and so the rhapsode persists in his epistemic *hubris* to the very end of the dialogue and most likely for the rest of his life. But the historical significance of the characters performs a task separate from that of generating irony; they are chosen because, as Gifford writes,

> … rather than leaving it to the audience to infer the value of a character's life from the philosophical deficiencies in his action-guiding principles (proof $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omega$), Plato could set directly and vividly before the minds of his readers the practical implications which certain mistake ethical beliefs can and perhaps actually did have for the quality of a person's life (proof $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\omega$).[79]

The significance of the characters and the familiarity a fourth century audience would have of their fates provides a didactic lesson as well. While the dramatic irony at work in Attic tragedy requires, in many cases, a reversal and a discovery, but a reversal of the sort found in Attic tragedy is not clear in the dialogues; the reversals of the dialogues rely completely on the knowledge their audience members possess.[80]   Platonic discoveries are more explicit. Jill Gordon finds three types of discovery in the dialogues: "(1) an interlocutor's discovery of his own identity; (2) the reader's discovery of an interlocutor's

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[79] Gifford 47.

[80] Aristotle defines a reversal as "the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite" and a discovery as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune" (*Poetics* XI.11 1452a).

identity; and (3) the reader's discovery of her own identity."[81] Theaetetus is an example

of the first type of discovery and the above example of Ion's epistemic *hubris* may be

recast as the second type of discovery. [82] The third type of discovery, the self-discovery

of the audience member, is the undocumented – yet prevalent – discovery of the listener

or reader. I say it is prevalent, obviously so, for the dialogues have inspired listeners and

readers, for over two millennia, to examine themselves, and maybe even examine others.

Dialogue and Dialectic

Though Plato's dialogues share features with drama and sophistry, the dialectic

Plato portrays is meant to be different from the dialectic used by the sophists and

dramatized by the poets, as well as the dialectic of common discourse. That difference is

spelled out in *Republic* VI and the *Phaedo*, the foundation of which is the method of

hypothesis. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates imparts that, due to the failure of others, he was

forced to develop a method that he could use to explain causation. Lapsing into

characteristic metaphor, Socrates explains that rather than burn out his eyes by staring

directly into the sun, he would study it through reflection in water or other surfaces

[hypotheses] (99d).   The metaphor of the sun is a natural way for Plato to exemplify,

using a particular, the abstract concept of knowledge.[83]

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[81] Jill Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 82.

[82] Theaetetus begins from a position of Socratic ignorance/humility and thus is not a reversal-discovery, though it still fits under the umbrella of Gordon's definition. Laches, on the other hand, begins the dialogue from the standpoint of believing he knows and ends the dialogue realizing his ignorance, thus making both a reversal and a discovery.

[83] Bruno Snell traces the link between sight and knowledge to archaic Greece and, he postulates, it arose naturally through the Greek language.
> As far as [Homer] is concerned, ideas are conveyed through the *noos*, a mental organ which in turn is analogous to the eye; consequently 'to know' is *eídênai* which is related to *ideîv* 'to see', and in fact originally means 'to have seen'. The eye, it appears, serves as Homer's model for the

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates says that "I decided that I must have recourse to theories, and use them in trying to discover the truth about things" (99e). This method, the method of hypothesis, does not approach directly the topic of discussion but rather approaches it obliquely through things we say (*logoi*).[84] In the *Republic*, Socrates informs Glaucon and the rest of his audience:

> By the other subsection of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic. It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses – stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything. Having grasped this principle, it reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, comes down to a conclusion without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves, moving from forms to forms, and ending in forms (511b).

Socrates does this to distinguish dialectic from the sciences that accept hypotheses as first principles, like geometry and mathematics must do. Mathematical objects are not really *understood* because the discipline accepts hypotheses as first principles. As such, the discipline does not *know* its subject in the same way philosophy does; philosophy uses hypotheses as tools in order to see, or know, the object itself. The mathematical sciences

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absorption of experiences. From this point of view the intensive coincides with the extensive: he who has seen much sufficiently often possesses intensive knowledge (18).

Homer, of course, was influential in the formation of Western philosophy as 'his' works had a profound effect on the evolution of the Greek language. The link of *noos* to the eye created an occular metaphor that would form the foundation of "Western epistemological vocabulary: *eidos, eidetic, idea, ideation, intuition, theory, theorize*, and the whole cluster of more directly 'optical' expressions such as *reflect, speculate, focus, view, inspect, introspect, insight, outlook, perspective*, etc." (James M. Edie, "Expression and Metaphor," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23.4 (1963) 552). See also Snell, especially 1-22 and 226-245. In the Enlightenment, the commitments of ocular epistemic metaphors expanded to include a disembodied objectivity, forming the basis of what John Dewey termed the 'spectator theory of knowledge.' Vision, as our primary metaphor for knowledge, encourages and promotes the perceived separation of knower from object, as well as a particular conception of objectivity. Dewey stresses that theories of knowledge are "modeled after what was supposed to take place in the act of vision" (John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929 New York: Capricorn Books, 1960) 23).

[84] "ἀλλ' οὖν δὴ ταύτῃ γε ὥρμησα, καὶ ὑποθέμενος ἑκάστοτε λόγον ὃν ἂν κρίνω ἐρρωμενέστατον εἶναι, ἃ μὲν ἄν μοι δοκῇ τούτῳ συμφωνεῖν τίθημι ὡς ἀληθῆ ὄντα, καὶ περὶ αἰτίας καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἁπάντων [ὄντων], ἃ δ' ἂν μή, ὡς οὐκ ἀληθῆ" (*Phaedo* 100a).

can 'know' their subjects, but they apprehend without understanding, without discourse (*logos*).[85] It is discourse that renders knowledge transparent and reveals truth.[86] Plato's thought, however, is greatly influenced by the paradigm of mathematics. Mathematics is placed after philosophy on the *Republic's* divided line precisely because it is a practice that sees a stable truth, a truth that cannot be controverted by any speech (*logos*), unlike truth for the sophists. For the sophists, masters of *dissoi logoi*, any truth is controvertible; for every argument there is a counter argument.

Since sophists' texts did contain dialectical dialogue, distinguishing the sophists' writing from Plato's writing was quite difficult for the average Athenian. R. B. Rutherford explains that the "antithetical and antagonistic forms developed by the sophists, and more particularly the use of mythical dialogue by Hippias and Prodicus for moral instruction" shared elements of Plato's full-blown dialectical discourse.[87] As Plato presents in both the *Meno* and the *Apology*, separating the practice of sophistry from the type of discourse that the Platonic Socrates practiced was no easy task for Athenians. Plato indicates through the character of Anytus that the conservative elements of Athenian society felt threatened by the practices of the sophists because they interrupted the traditional education (*paideia*) of Athens. The historical Anytus is both one of Socrates' accusers and one of the most important of the democratic politicians that returned at the end of the reign of the Thirty Tyrants. He was the son of a wealthy tanner and, although not an aristocrat, was still able to receive a traditional education. Because

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[85] Samuel Scolinov, *Plato's Metaphysics of Education* (London: Routledge, 1988) 87.

[86] Scolnicov 88.

[87] R. B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato*: *Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 11.

of his political importance, Anytus was an influential man that many Athenian citizens, including some aristocrats, would both respect and listen to; thus, his views on sophistry and education are important to Socrates' trial. In *Meno*, Anytus finds no difference between the practice of Socrates and that of a sophist.   It is clear that Anytus harbors an intense dislike for the practices of the sophists; when Socrates postulates that a sophist is a person capable of teaching virtue, Anytus responds with extreme antagonism. Sophists "clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers" and, he claims, they "manifest ruin and corruption of anyone who comes into contact with them" (*Meno* 91c). Those that are willing to pay fees to the sophists "are mad," he says, and implies that Socrates is in fact a sophist at 92b: "Worst of all are the cities who allow them in, or don't expel them, whether it be a foreigner or one of themselves who tries that sort of game," finishing with a mild and, for Plato's audience, portentous threat to Socrates at 94e, warning him "to be careful" (91c, 92a-b). Guthrie writes that during Socrates' lifetime, the Sophists were all foreigners and if this is the case, Anytus' statement is strange unless he is accusing Socrates, "one of themselves," of practicing sophistry.[88] In this brief exchange, Plato depicts Anytus as antagonistic both towards sophists and Socrates and we can infer from historical and textual evidence that Anytus truly considered Socrates to be a sophist. In the *Apology*, Socrates begins by claiming that his accusers misrepresent him by depicting him as an orator, for, he says, "I have not the slightest skill as a speaker – unless, of course, by a skillful speaker they mean one who speaks the truth" (*Apol.* 17b). It does not seem to be the case that Socrates' accusers intend 'skillful speaker' to mean 'one who speaks the truth' for the prosecutors do not desist from bringing charges

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[88] Guthrie, *Sophists* 40.

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meant for sophists against Socrates (17b). Plato has implicitly criticized the profession of

orators – to be an orator does not *necessarily* mean to speak the truth. The irony of

course lies in the text – that Plato's Socrates was indeed a skillful, or effective, speaker.

Within the first few lines of the *Apology*, Plato establishes that there is a difference

between what Socrates does and what sophists do – moreover, Plato lets us know that

what Socrates does is truthful, affixing a normative element to both practices.

The *Apology* sets Plato's practice apart from sophistry and poetry as well as

competing definitions of 'philosophy,' Isocrates' conception of philosophy being a

primary example. Isocrates, Plato's contemporary, wrote eulogies as advertisements for

his school of rhetoric and it is likely that, Arieti claims, Plato was in competition with

Isocrates for students for his Academy.[89] For Isocrates' part, *Antidosis* incorporates

Plato's Socrates in order to assail Plato's conception of philosophy and the philosopher,

using the character as a foil to promote and defend his own idea of philosophy.[90] Ober

relays that *Antidosis*

> is also a discursive form that seeks to demonstrate alike to 'those who are wise'
> and 'those who are ignorant' why it is that Isocratean rhetoric is the most suitable
> vehicle for achieving personal integrity and the renewed political order that could
> … replace the currently messy business of democratic public life.[91]

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[89] Arieti 7.

[90] Nightingale adds that Isocrates is clearly addressing the definition of philosophy found in the *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus* (Andrea Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 29). For a discussion of the 'subversive misperformance' of Plato's Socrates by Isocrates, see Ober, *Isocrates*. In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler discusses a form of resistance, 'subversive misperformance,' wherein people misperform a conventionalized speech or social custom, thus resisting oppressive social institutions (when the conventional performance reinforces behaviors or social standards). See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[91] Ober, *Isocrates* 23.

The content of Socrates' *apologia* works to establish a definition of philosophy by comparing and contrasting it with sophistry by means of a defense against charges of sophistry (*Apol.* 19b). When Plato has Socrates defend himself against the charge of being a sophist, Plato informs us what his idea of philosophy is *not*. Of course there is no reason for the prosecutors or the audience to realize that Socrates' practice differed from that of a sophist until Socrates' defense, just as philosophy itself has no technical definition until Plato assigns one.[92] The ancient Greeks did not consider wisdom to be a gift from the gods or a natural capacity, but something that one must strive to attain. Prior to Plato, to be a philosopher, or to engage in philosophy, was simply to engage in – to value – the pursuit of wisdom. 'Philosophy' meant only the attempt to acquire wisdom, or to cultivate one's intellect.[93] Plato establishes the boundaries of the genre 'philosophy' by setting out what is *not* philosophy – philosophy is not sophistry, and philosophy is not poetry – whether tragic, comic, or epic.

Through common discourse, which was informed by the dialogues of Plato and the speeches by Isocrates (and Alcidamas), parodies by Aristophanes and the other

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[92] Nightingale argues that there was no technical definition for *philosophia* until, in the fourth century, Plato, Isocrates, Xenophon, and others took it upon themselves to create a specialized meaning for the term. *Philosophoi* were the intellectuals of the day, certainly not in the way that we think of philosophers today. It was a term that applied to a great deal of professions: "poets, prophets, doctors, statesmen, astronomers, scientists, historians, inventors, and various kinds of artisans" (Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Ancient Greece 29*). For further discussion on the rivalry between Plato and Isocrates, see Nightingale, *Genres* 13-59 and Walker 29ff; for a statement of Isocrates' position on philosophy, see Ober, Isocrates. Cole and Gentili situate the debate in the political discourse of the day. It is appropriate to include the performance of plays as well, since the performances were used to influence the citizens. Attending the theatre was linked to one's citizenship, as tickets were distributed to citizens by the political council and, since Cleisthenes' time, the theatrical space was arranged just as the political space was arranged (John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, "Introduction," *Nothing to Do With Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 4). See also Havelock, *Preface* 276-311.

[93] Nightingale, *Genres* 1-12.

Sokratikoi Logoi, philosophy acquired meaning as a way of living, educating and conversing.[94] Philosophy is a certain type of discourse, dialectic, which is defined against the type of discourse of the sophists and the poets. The form of the dialogues demonstrates the definition of philosophy in a 'positive' fashion by showing Socrates practicing the art of dialectic. While the form of Plato's dialogues give the definition of philosophy in a positive sense, the content of his dialogues focus, for the most part, upon a negative method for defining of philosophy, that is, defining it through what it is *not*. If Plato had chosen to write philosophical treatises rather than dialogues, the tension between positive demonstration and negative content would not be possible.

It is easy to see why the practice of philosophy as conducted by Socrates was not received well by the conservative elements of the Athenian society. Yet it is just as easy to see, for a contemporary audience, how Socrates' practice of philosophy differs from that of the sophists. His method is aimed at discovering truth through dialectic, often using the hypothetical method; philosophy is a *dialectical process*. Concepts, and understanding of concepts, occur through dialectic. A dialectical method does not aim to achieve an answer or a solution as a sophist's speech aims to do; philosophy is not a rhetorical tactic used to 'win' an argument. The result of dialectical discourse is rarely an answer to an argument, though dialectic is truth-searching, aimed at achieving

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[94] Thesleff disagrees, thinking it obvious that "no coherent Platonic philosophy did ever reach the general public" (Holger Thesleff, "Looking for Clues: An Interpretation of some Literary Aspects of Plato's Two- Level Model," *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* ed. Gerald A. Press (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 1993) 39). He feels that other works of that time (for example, of Isocrates and Xenophon) do not support the conclusion that Plato's dialogues were available to the public. He does, however, agree with Konrad Gaiser that Plato did deliver the pubic lecture Περὶ τα´γαθοῦ. Thesleff accompanies his argument with the relevant passages from the *Republic, Phaedrus,* and the *Seventh Letter*, taking their meaning to be against *publishing* philosophy (i.e. delivering philosophy, in any form, to the public). The lecture 'On the Good' was meant to "shock and mock the Athenians" and to make clear that publishing philosophy is a mistake: the public cannot handle it (*Looking* 39).

understanding while producing an account for the beliefs that have passed the test of consistency.

Philosophy and Midwifery

The midwife metaphors present in the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus* suggest that philosophy is a method for giving birth to ideas, or concepts, and testing the ideas and the person. Philosophy is a method that is distinct from the persuasion and rhetoric of the Sophists. It aims at knowledge, whereas sophistry stops at opinion. Outwardly, the two disciplines may appear to mimic each other as some sophists' texts used dialectic and both are pedagogical practices. It is perhaps the case that only a careful observer or active participant would have been able to distinguish between the two. Socrates' *elenchus* forces the interlocutor to examine his own set of beliefs and assumptions about the subject matter, which, in most cases, is ethics. This is protreptic, propedeutic; now Socrates is able to engage in genuine *dialegsthai*.[95] The interlocutor or acute observer typically realizes that they are not being *told* what to believe or what to think, as happens in the case of sophistry, and that if they stopped to consider, there is no appeal to emotions as there is with sophistry and tragic, comic, and epic poetry.

Socrates does not ask irrelevant questions of his interlocutors. Within the Platonic corpus we find Socrates asking about the nature of temperance, courage, friendship, justice, and implied, if not stated, in each inquiry are the ground for the possibility of teaching each virtue. Socrates inquires about the merits or disadvantages of poetry, sophistry and writing as a means by which to acquire virtue or knowledge, which will amount to the same thing. Plato's inquiry, in the *Theaetetus,* into the nature of

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[95] *Dialegesthai* is a "talking things through" or as conversation.

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knowledge is not a separate, compartmentalized project but rather a question that arises

naturally from his primary inquiry into how to improve the characters of the future

citizens (leaders) of Athens. To tackle that project, he must ask about the nature of

virtue, not only enumerating the virtues but inquiring into the essence of each virtue;

above all he must consider a method for educating men to be virtuous and in the process

evaluate current methods of teaching *arête*; and finally, knowledge comes into play when

discussing the educational aspect of his project. The art of midwifery – philosophy,

truth-searching – is a metaphor about the task of dialectic. In *Theaetetus* (148e-151d)

and *Symposium* (206b) Socrates likens himself to a midwife, saying that he helps others

give birth to ideas – helping *men* give birth to ideas as a midwife helps *women* give birth

to children. Socrates describes himself as a midwife, because, he explains, he helps

others' minds give birth to "something true and genuine" (*Thea.* 150c). Socrates'

midwifery delivers the beliefs of his interlocutor and then examines the belief to

determine if it is a viable belief, or if it is a "wind-egg" (150a-b). This metaphor is

analogous to the art of dialectic and the method of hypothesis; testing a person or a

hypothesis for consistency and eventually leading in the direction of an ultimate,

uncontestable hypothesis – but never reaching that hypothesis (*Phaedo* 101c-e). Once a

person gives birth to an idea, that idea must be examined through discourse to determine

its merit – before it can take root in the soul. If a 'bad' idea lives in the soul, it can be

difficult to tear out at a later point in time. Ideas link together to form conceptual

frameworks and 'lifeworlds' and so attempting to correct an idea can involve revising an

entire conceptual framework – a difficult and often traumatic process. Socrates' dialectic

has an affect on the interlocutor; in the aporetic dialogues, Plato gives us the image of the

angry or the livid interlocutor time and again. Theaetetus is a notable exception, and this

is due, in part, to his training as a mathematician. He is already at a level of thinking

where conversation is possible. Philosophical conversation is active in transforming the

interlocutor, revealing their true (historical) character and giving the audience reasons for

the fates the characters will suffer. Philosophic discourse is distinct from all other types

of conversation, as Socrates chides himself and Theaetetus:

> We seem to be adopting the methods of professional conversationalists: we've
> made an agreement aimed at getting words to agree consistently; and we feel
> complacent now that we have defeated this theory by the use of a method of this
> kind. We profess to be philosophers, not champion conversationalists… (*Thea.*
> 164c).[96]

Philosophic discussion moves beyond superficial conversation, which makes the *words*

agree but not necessarily the *concepts*.[97] Plato's complaint, here, is not limited to

sophists but to anyone else that professes to conduct the activity of philosophy.

While differences are indeed espoused in argumentation, style of discussion, and

context of the interactions between Socrates and his interlocutors, it is important to

realize as well the positive demonstration of that difference in the structure of the

dialogue itself. It is not only the intertextual 'play' that establishes boundaries between

philosophy and other disciplines but that the dialogues are depicting embodied speakers.

The form of dialogue constructs Plato's conception of philosophy as it supports and

provides a vehicle for the intertextual discursive oppositions required the 'negative'

definition. Poetry is *memorized* and repeated with the intention of preserving the exact

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[96] 'Champion conversationalists' might refer to any form of public discourse at the time, for all
public discourse was competitive (Thomas, *Literacy* 109).

[97] But as P. Christopher Smith observes, if Gadamer is right then this distinction will not hold up
for Plato.

meaning as carefully as possible. Sophists give specious speeches to amaze and persuade

or to teach others how to do this; they also write speeches that will enhance the speaker's

power.   It is Plato's unique dialectical conversation that forms the primary difference

between philosophy and other practices. Concepts, and understanding of concepts, occur

through dialectic as opposed to rhetoric, wherein concepts are given as stable, if not

static, propositions from a persuasive speaker.[98] As Plato is addressing the genres of

discursive practices that make claim to producing a certain type of wisdom, Plato is

concerned with the knowledge that a person may walk away with from each practice.[99]

Plato's dialectical method of instruction, while a universally applicable method, is in

practice particular to both the questioner and to the interlocutors or respondents. The

success or failure of this method to achieve its didactic apex of understanding also

depends on the particularities of the respondents. What is shown in Plato's dialogues is

that we understand concepts through dialectic with ourselves and each other – and in the

aporetic dialogues this is shown negatively, in a failure to achieve knowledge of a

propositional definition of a concept. The failure shows only that language and

statements are not *enough* – expressions and lists add nothing to our true notions.

Sophistry, on the other hand, is devoted to apparent propositional definitions that cannot

yet be trusted for as Socrates relates to Theaetetus, orators and lawyers are "men who use

their skill to produce conviction, not be instruction, but by making people believe

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[98] In the case of Isocrates, who strove to implement his own 'philosophic' enterprise, Ober says that Isocrates' rhetoric could never be reconciled with nor stand up to Plato's idea of philosophy since "For the Academy, rhetoric was a branch of Sophism and as such was inevitably foreign to philosophy proper" (*Isocrates* 26).

[99] All knowledge – or opinion – is, as Socrates observes in the *Protagoras*, taken directly into the soul: "you cannot carry teachings away in a separate container. You put down your money and take the teaching away in your soul by having learned it, and off you go, either helped or injured" (*Prot.* 314b).

whatever they want them to believe" (*Thea.* 201a). From the *Apology* and the other dialogues we can infer that Plato's idea of philosophy was superficially similar to the practice of sophistry, similar enough that demonstrating the divergence between the two was of great importance. Moreover, the form itself presents the difference between philosophy and other genres of public discourse while retaining the customs inherent in oral communication, and introducing a new layer of concerns with the technology of reading and writing.

The contemporary trend of examining Plato's dialogues in a holistic fashion, that is, viewing the dramatic and literary forms of the dialogue as inseparable from the philosophical arguments, reveals that the characters themselves often provide dramatic demonstration of the philosophical argument and concept.[100] Rather than understanding an aporetic dialogue as a failure to reach a definition of virtue, holistic interpretations agree that a positive definition of the philosophical concept is demonstrated, if not spoken: a non-propositional understanding is reached, though a propositional definition is not. The analytic tradition as it is seen in Gregory Vlastos, Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, committed to the logical analysis of arguments, has failed to recognize the value of this approach. Indeed, on this approach it makes sense to ask whether there is a system to be found in the dialogues at all. The practice of attributing doctrines to Plato by constructing arguments that are not made by any character in the dialogues is at odds with the approach adopted here, according to which Plato chooses to write dialogues in which he never speaks in his own voice- attributes than are antithetical to the presentation of a systematic philosophy.

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[100] Though sometimes that demonstration is negative, or opposite, of the virtue being discussed.

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Plato, in attempting to map out the enterprise of philosophy against the background of an oral culture, created a new type of public discourse. But this new type of discourse did not emerge fully formed and all at once. Plato's philosophy was, in part, the product of an evolution of public discourse. Nor did that evolution stop with him. Nietzsche writes that "The Platonic dialogue was, as it were, the barge on which the shipwrecked ancient poetry saved herself with all of her children: crowded into a narrow space and timidly submitting to the single pilot, Socrates, they now sailed into a new world …."[101] Through Plato, archaic and classical *paideia* were transformed by his appropriation of the term philosophy.[102] Poetry had 'shipwrecked' herself between Scylla and Charybdis, between the instability of *muthos* and the relativism of *isonomia*. One must situate Plato's project historically, in order to grasp its full import and see the way between the natural disaster and the monster. The next chapter addresses the importance of interpretative strategy with regard to Plato's philosophy. If, as I have attempted to show in Chapter I, Plato is challenging conventional practices of *paideia* by establishing a new practice, philosophy, then conventional interpretative strategies must be rejected in favor of a hermeneutical approach. Conventional interpretation strategies generally assume that Plato has doctrines, either exoteric or esoteric, and do not consider the historical context of the dialogues – nor do they see form, and content, as necessary for Plato's philosophy.

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[101] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (Random House: Toronto, 1967) 91.

[102] It is also possible that nothing much actually changed; Plato had made serious recommendations for the renovation of education – whether or not those changes were adopted is a matter of serious study. See John P. Anton, "From *Sophia* to *Philosophia*: The Greek Conception of Philosophy," *Conceptions of Philosophy: Ancient and Modern*, ed. K. Boudouris. (Athens: Ionia Publications, 2004) 26-37.

Chapter Three

Reading the Dialogues: In Search of an Interpretative Strategy

The Problem of *Mimēsis*

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle begins his discussion of poetry with an enumeration of

the different types of poetry:

> Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-
> playing an lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation
> (μιμήσεις). But at the same time they differ from one another is three ways,
> either by a difference of kind in their means, or by differences in the objects, or in
> the manner of their imitations (μιμεῖσθαι) (1447a10-15).

The *Sokratikoi logoi* belong to a nameless class of poetry, a type of poetry that "imitates

by language alone, without harmony, in prose or verse …"[103] As Plato wrote *Sokratoi*

logoi, what he wrote was (according to Aristotle) a type of *mimēsis*. What does it mean

that the dialogues are a species of *mimēsis*, particularly considering Plato's critique of the

poets in the *Republic*? Eric Havelock reminds us that *mimēsis*, which is imperfectly

translated as imitation or representation, was applicable to more than poetry – and that

poetry, for the ancients, had a different role in their society, than that of contemporary

poetry. Ancient poetry also had a different purpose in its composition.[104] For us, poetry

is not used primarily or exclusively for the purpose of conveying custom, tradition, moral

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[103] 1447a 25; cf. Clay 34 fn.22. Clay writes that Aristotle had a "critical habit of restricting mimesis to poetry. If there can be conversations that are mimetic and mimes that are conversational, mimesis cannot be restricted to poetry." Havelock, too, notes that *mimesis* can be descriptive or dramatic or both, and that one of the points Plato makes in the *Republic* is to differentiate between the types, in particular criticizing the imitation in performance (*Preface* 21).

[104] See Havelock, *Preface* especially 20-60.

knowledge as it was in ancient times; instead, it is used to express emotion and provoke

aesthetic pleasure in its readers or listeners. The role of poetry in ancient Greek society

was *educational. Mimēsis* is a complex term that cannot be captured in a one to one

correspondence with an English expression, because *mimēsis* implies much more than

mere 'imitation' or representation as late as the classical period. Indeed, Ferrari goes so

far as to claim the meaning of *mimēsis* is closer to identification or emulation.[105] Eric

Havelock speculates: "Poetry represented not something we call by that name, but an

indoctrination which today would be comprised in a shelf of text books and works of

reference;" however, the centrality of the role poetry plays in education was not the

passive works of reference found in contemporary libraries, but active instruction "on the

ground that it provided a massive repository of useful knowledge, a sort of encyclopedia

of ethics, politics, history, and technology which the effective citizen was required to

learn as the core of his educational equipment."[106]

The *mimēsis* which Plato attacks in the *Republic* is not all forms of *mimēsis,* but a

particular kind that evokes a particular effect on the audience. As Ferrari remarks, the

exposure to poetry today is similar, if not as pervasive, to the exposure of ancient times:

"citizens experienced poetry … as members of an audience." [107] For contemporary

citizens, poetry may be experienced in the context of a classroom, theatre, or coffee

house but in ancient Greece, the social context was much broader. Plato is attacking the

authority the poets held over moral knowledge in particular, challenging their claim of

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[105] G .R. F Ferrari, "Plato and Poetry," Cambridge *History of Literary Criticism*, ed. G. A. Kennedy, Vol. 1. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 116.

[106] Havelock *Preface* 27.

[107] Ferrari 93.

knowledge and expertise. "Poetry," Ferrari offers, "being oriented towards the values of

performance, is by its nature indifferent to the wisdom it its practitioners."[108] This, he

claims, is the lesson we are to learn from Plato's *Ion* and why he has Socrates engage

such a vain peacock in conversation. It is only because we can see from the character of

Ion that he *is* vain and a rather silly, though apparently quite talented, rhapsode, that the

problems with poetry are revealed, that is, that poetry does not value truth as we think of

it, i.e., as what the philosopher seeks, but instead values truth as what the poet performs,

the knowledge of "what is, and what is to be, and what was before now," the knowledge

he gains from the Muses.[109]

Plato's critique of poetry is not a critique of poetry per se but a critique of the

values poetry holds and expresses, not to mention the psychological phenomenon created

by public performance.[110] Havelock writes that in the fourth century "*mimēsis* has

become the word *par excellence* for the over-all linguistic medium of the poet and his

peculiar power through the use of this medium … to render an account of reality."[111] The

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[108] Ferrari 97. Here, Ferrari intends wisdom not in the sense the Ancients used *sophia,* that is, expertise ("For our expertise is better than the strength of men and horses" ῥώμης γὰρ ἀμείνων / ἀνδρων ἠδ' ἵππων ημετερη σοφιη, Xenophanes says (DK2.12). The expertise of a *sophos* is more valuable to the *polis* than brute strength. This expertise is more valuable than physical strength because truth was established through public discourse, and thus could be affected by anyone with a convincing speech or performance. As mentioned above, a *sophos* was, in Archaic and Classical Athens, someone who possessed *expertise* in public discourse. Plato's agenda involves breaking the tie between *sophia* and expertise in public discourse by introducing *philosophia* as expertise in abstract, rational thought.

[109] Hesiod 125.

[110] See Havelock *Preface* 57 n22. Havelock contends that Plato understood the psychological phenomenon associated with the experience of *mimesis*. A rhapsode, Plato tells us in *Ion*, is successful when his recitation has an obvious emotional impact on the audience, when they are swept up in the drama. Havelock believes this identification with the rhapsode, or actor, as the case may be, can only be achieved "at the cost of total loss of objectivity" (*Preface* 45).

[111] Havelock *Preface* 25.

poets use the medium to twist reality "by appealing to the shallowest of our sensibilities."[112] Poetry, like sophistry, appeals not to our rationality, as Plato would have it, but to our unthinking emotions. The performance of poetry that he critiques in *Republic* III is a critique of poetry that does not promote truth-yielding inquiry: he critiques the *muthoi* that deceive. Though Havelock posits that during Plato's lifetime Athenians were literate, the content of cultural communication continued to include – even in Plato's dialogues – the stories that were central to the success and appeal of the *oral* poetic performance.

In the fifth century Simonides made poetry something that could be bought and sold, and once it had 'cash' value, the poets' focus became even more a concern with performance over content. Because the focus is on performance, no one is critically assessing the content of the poetry – most importantly, the values and virtues that an audience member might be swayed to imitate, or to think correct. Moreover, Simonides sings the praises of men for either heroic acts for the *polis* or being victorious at athletic competitions and, in so doing, he alters Homeric ideals.[113]

Poetry engenders a value in performance that surpasses any value placed on the content, except insomuch as the content can enhance the performance. Yet Plato levels criticism at both the form and the content of poetry, in the *Republic.* In the *Republic,* Socrates critically assesses the values expressed in the content of poetry. Socrates objects to the stories "that Homer, Hesiod, and other poets tell us" because they are false stories that do not 'paint a pretty picture' of the gods, for they tell of the gods acting in ways

[112] Havelock, *Preface* 26.

[113] Detienne 114.

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men should not (*Rep.* 377d ff). These misrepresentations of the gods and heroes are, as Xenophanes had said, "all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men; theft, adultery, and mutual deceit" (DK11). Poetry is problematic for Socrates, Waugh insists, due to "the mechanism by which it affects beliefs and behavior" for when it portrays gods and men 'doing wrong,' it "inspires its performer and audience imaginatively to identify with them in their immoral behavior."[114] As Socrates informs Adeimantus, the poets are dangerous because of the role and authority the poets held and the eagerness by which the young men soaked up the lessons contained in the poetry: they will "listen to these stories without ridiculing them as not worth hearing" and so will imitate the behavior of the characters, lamenting every small misfortune and other, more dangerous behaviors (*Rep.* 388d).

Plato continues the attack on the poetic tradition that begins with the Presocratics because poetry, in Plato's time, is still "first and last a didactic instrument for transmitting the tradition."[115] What values might an audience take away from a performance, that Socrates finds so objectionable? Poetry promotes the fear of death, which is surely a problem for educating future warriors (386b ff). Moreover, poetry preserves the lamentations of gods and heroes, thus encouraging that type of behavior, which is the behavior of 'cowardly men, and women' (387c ff); it tells of violent mood changes (389a), which can hardly be a good thing for an audience to 'imaginatively identify with' when moderation is a considered a virtue. Not all poetry corrupts; there are some

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[114] Joanne B. Waugh, "Art and Morality: The End of an Ancient Rivalry?" *The Journal of Aesthetic Education,* 20.1 (1986): 7. Plato was aware of the effect of a tragedy like *Medea* on the audience.

[115] Havelock, *Preface* 43.

instances when poetry upholds the values that Socrates and company wish to instill in their ideal city, i.e. moderation, which Homer's Diomedes encourages (389e).[116] The problem is that contradictory values are expressed in Homer and the other poets, as Socrates quotes an earlier passage from the *Illiad* that demonstrates a *lack* of moderation (389e) and a passage from the *Odyssey* demonstrating, again, a lack of self-control (390a).

The dialogues are Plato's replacement for poetry as a vehicle of *paideia* and for sophistic speeches as means of generating truth. They are meant to instruct the audience *of* the dialogue on how to live a good life; the instruction received by the audience *in* the dialogue contributes to the larger discussion of the good life by showing philosophy as a search for non-relative truth. If Plato's dialogues are of the genre of *Sokratikoi logoi*, and *Sokratikoi logoi* are a form of *mimēsis*, then the dialogues must be seen and treated as *mimēsis*, as an educational method and a way of life. A Platonic dialogue, then, is operating on several levels. The first is as a paradigm of *paideia*. This encompasses its form, its aim, as well as its actual practice. An analysis that takes the dialogues as a form of *mimēsis* must also take into account the external audience – what is the intended effect? What does (should) the audience learn from the dialogue? Second, the dialogues critique fifth and fourth century educational practices so that there is an interaction between different forms of *mimēsis* – Plato defines his form through criticism of other

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[116] Though of course what they are busy constructing is not the *ideal* city, the 'city of pigs', but rather the city of luxury. See John P. Anton, "Plato as Critic of Democracy, Ancient and Contemporary," Philosophical *Inquiry: International Quarterly* 20.1-2 (1998): 1-17.

forms as he articulates the practice of philosophy.[117] The third level is also internal to the

dialogue, and that is the positive demonstration of technique shown in the dialogue. For

this analysis, the audience within the dialogue needs to be considered. How are they

being educated? What should they learn? What do they learn, if anything? If not, why is

that the case? Because of the historical importance of Plato's choice of characters, their

historical counterparts must be taken into account in any 'internal' analysis, as must any

cultural details for which we have evidence.[118] Finally, there is the consideration of the

philosophical concepts in the dialogue. It remains to be seen how interpreting Plato's

dialogues as *mimēsis* affects our understanding of Plato's philosophy, for many

contemporary philosophers writing in the analytic mode ignore, if not dismiss, the

techniques and assumptions required to examine the dialogues as *mimēsis*. But

increasingly philosophers are taking an approach that is historical rather than merely

analytic; they believe that looking at the dialogues as *mimēsis* is essential to

understanding Plato's purpose.

Hayden Ausland, for instance, insists that "Plato's dialogues require a treatment

in terms germane to their philosophical nature" and that they "need to be appreciated as

real works of literary art, conveying what they do as poetic wholes rather than as vehicles

for views attributed to select characters."[119] As his works are dialogues that never feature

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[117] See Nightingale, who argues that "Plato uses intertextuality as a vehicle for criticizing genres of discourse and, what is more important, for introducing and defining a radically different discursive practice, which he calls 'philosophy'" (*Genres* 5).

[118] This is not to be confused with what Tigerstedt terms the 'genetic approach'. The most renowned proponent of this approach is Ulrich von Wilamovitz-Moellendorff, who Tigerstedt characterizes as believing "we can and must interpret Plato's works as expressions of his life" (Eugene Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Stockholm Studies in the History of Literature, 1977) 40).

[119] Hayden Ausland, "On Reading Plato Mimetically," *AJP* 118 (1997): 373.

the character Plato, Plato relinquishes authorial authority and, in so doing, avoids

appropriating the audience's understanding in a dogmatic fashion.[120] Instead, he shapes

the audience's understanding by directing their attention to key questions and issues – but

he does not attempt to *control* it. The conversation in the dialogues is extended to the

reader; moreover, as Ruby Blondell remarks, "dramatic mimēsis just *is* the suppression of

the authorial voice."[121] Yet, Ausland relates, most scholars who do attempt interpret the

dialogues mimetically "still seek to maintain the reader somehow critically outside the

theater of action."[122] In an attempt to treat the *Theaetetus* as *mimēsis*, one of the features

of the interpretive strategy I will take is a sensitivity to the audience *of* the dialogues.

Problems in Interpretation: Dialogue, Drama, and Doctrine

Acknowledging that Plato's dialogues are a species of *mimēsis* requires that one

give careful consideration to the manner of their interpretation. The interpretative

strategies recognized and adopted by many scholars fall into two main categories that we

will designate as doctrinal and esoteric. In keeping with Aristotle's characterization of

the dialogues as a species of *mimēsis*, these strategies must be assessed in terms of their

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[120] Ludwig Edelstein raised the problem of Platonic anonymity in "Platonic Anonymity," *The American Journal of Philology,* 83.1 (Jan. 1962) 1-22; Edelstein discusses the possibility, given the content of the Platonic epistle, Plato's true thought does not even begin to resemble the philosophy of the dialogues. He firmly banishes that possibility – for it is impossible to imagine that all of Plato's associates (who make reference to the dialogues when discussing Plato's philosophy) would not "have grasped a clearly avowed injunction that the endeavor to study his writings for the purpose of finding out about his 'serious' teaching would be futile …" (5). With his anonymity, Edelstein writes, Plato is not unique, but Presocratic philosophy did stress authorial originality as well as the author's opinions (11ff).

[121] Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 16.

[122] Ausland 377.

capacity to deal with both the form and content of the dialogues. What does it mean if one interprets Plato as treating form and content as (1) separable and (2) inseparable?

Interpreting Plato is not an easy thing to do, as Schleiermacher remarks, for there is not only the customary difficulty of deciphering philosophical thought, there is also "his utter deviation from the ordinary forms of philosophical communication," i.e., treatises.[123] Of course, Plato did not write in a form that deviated from the norm of writing in *his* day – it is only due to the two millennia that have passed since Plato wrote, two millennia filled with philosophical treatises establishing systems of philosophy that present enchantingly "straightforward" and "clear" philosophical notions and doctrines, that scholars consider Plato an eccentric.[124] Schleiermacher continues, "Whoever then is spoiled by use of the expedients which these methods seem to afford, will necessarily find everything in Plato strange, and either devoid of meaning or mysterious."[125] While Schleiermacher does attempt to base his interpretation in the idea that Plato's dialogues are *mimēsis*, he finds the purpose of that *mimēsis* is to produce Plato's doctrines and such an assumption, I will show, is problematic at the very least.[126]

Mining the dialogues for Platonic doctrines is not incompatible with seeing the dialogues as a species of *mimēsis,* as we can see in Schleirmacher's case. The esoteric

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[123] Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher's Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, trans. William Dobson (New York: Arno Press, 1973) 5.

[124] Yet, Schleiermacher remarks, Plato "*could* have availed himself of the Sophistical method of long and continuous discourses [emphasis added]" (16). But its identification with the sophists and the audience's inability to criticize a speech – even Gorgias' "On Nature" – while it is being performed, may be relevant here.

[125] Schleiermacher 7.

[126] Specifically, that the dialogues are an imitation of his "oral instruction" (Schleiermacher 17). There is also the issue of Schleiermacher assuming that Plato had these doctrines from the very first dialogue (for him, the *Phaedrus*) and for reasons unknown decided to reveal those doctrines gradually.

approach also arrives at Platonic doctrines, but on this approach one can only arrive at

Plato's thought by reading the dialogues as drama.[127] The doctrinal approach has several

defining characteristics, but the approach generally begins with the assertion that Plato's

thought developed over the years. However, the doctrinal approach often takes the form

of ignoring most, if not all, of the dramatic aspects of the dialogues. The character of

Socrates is sometimes granted dramatic significance, but more often than not Socrates is

seen as the mouthpiece of Plato, or representing the historical Socrates' views, or

frequently as both. 'The Socratic problem' – that is, locating the historical Socrates' true

thought – has been dealt with by such doctrinal scholars as Vlastos and Irwin through

viewing the Socrates of the 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues as representative of the

historical Socrates.[128] In *The Philosophy of Socrates*, Vlastos writes: "The Socrates of

this book is the Platonic Socrates … That this figure is a faithful and imaginative

recreation of the historical Socrates is the conclusion of some very reputable scholars

…"[129] Vlastos offers, as an alternative to this view, Xenophon's Socrates, but then

refutes the alternative immediately thereafter. The problems with searching for the

historical Socrates are many, and typical of the problems of the doctrinal position as a

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[127] Esoterists come from a long tradition of Platonic interpretation that claims Aristotle as its progenitor. The idea of 'unwritten doctrines' gained momentum with the Neoplatonist tradition, but the Neoplatonist interpretation was for the most part rejected in the 1700's (See Eugene Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato: An Outline and Some Observations* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica (1974)). Wilhelm Göttfried Tennemann began a new esoteric movement, one that rejected the Neoplatonic system yet maintained that there was a system within Plato's dialogues. Tennemann was followed by Karl Friedrich Hermann, Philip Merlan, Konrad Gaiser, Hans Joachim Krämer; these scholars point to evidence in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Epistle* that Plato had unwritten doctrines. See Tigerstedt, *Interpreting*, 63-91.

[128] See Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

[129] Gregory Vlastos, "The Paradox of Socrates," *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Gregory Vlastos (New York: Anchor Books, 1971) 1.

whole. The dependency on chronology – that is, Vlastos clearly relegates the 'historical'

Socrates to the 'early' dialogues, yet does not deal with several 'early' dialogues that

would confound his position, as well as including 'middle' dialogues when it suits him –

is problematic because of the problems with chronology in general as well as the

haphazard fashion by which scholars adhere to it.[130] Havelock refers to Aristotle's

Poetics and argues that if we take Aristotle at all seriously, we must recognize that

Plato's dialogues are "mimetic '*poiesis*'" and as such, when Aristotle refers to Socrates,

he is referring to the *character* Socrates; moreover, while refuting the collective positions

in Vlastos' volume, Havelock observes that "It is amazing how many readers of Plato can

get hung up on a confusion between the two [the historical Socrates and the character

Socrates], as though dramatic realism were a sign of historical fidelity."[131]

Doctrinal types of interpretation of the sort found in the work of Gregory Vlastos

and Terence Irwin came to prominence when the Anglo-analytic tradition was at its

strongest, i.e. from the 1960's until the mid-1980's. This type of interpretation mines the

dialogues to put together systematic doctrines, usually relying on chronological

composition schema to buttress that system with developmentalism. In "The State of the

Question" Gerald Press outlines six principles that, by and large, these mainstream,

dogmatic interpretations employ as principles: doctrines, development, didactic function,

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[130] See Holger Thesleff, *Studies in the Styles of Plato* (Helsinki: Acta Philosophica Fennica 1967) for further discussion of the problems of the developmentalist position. See Eric Havelock, "The Socratic Problem: Some Second Thoughts," *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 2, ed. J.P. Anton and A. Preuss (Albany: SUNY Press 1983) 147-73,for a piercing criticism of the Vlastos-Irwin position.

[131] Havelock, *Socratic* 154.

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probative arguments, seriousness, and treatises.[132] Press points out that the doctrinal

element of contemporary interpretation can be traced back to Eduard Zeller who claimed

that to be a philosopher, one needed a doctrinal system.[133] If so, Zeller has had a marked

and lasting effect on the scholarship, though perhaps not for the reasons he might have

preferred.

The second element in the doctrinal approach is the assumption that Plato began

with a Socratic system of doctrines, became disenchanted with Socrates' ideas and finally

developed his own system.[134] Developmentalism holds that there are three periods of

Platonic writing that register the developments of his doctrines and system.[135]

Interpretations grounded in the developmental view are especially problematic given the

inherent uncertainty in ascertaining chronological composition and authenticity.[136] The

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[132] Gerald A. Press, "The State of the Question in the Study of Plato," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34.4 (1996): 509-510.

[133] Press, State 509. Though Zeller assumes a system, he admits that any system formed must depend on developmentalism (chronological composition) and that anyone constructing a system faces the difficulty that Plato never states that there is a system or that he intends for there to be one; in *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* in the section entitled 'Character Method and Divisions of the Platonic System' he remarks: "Although Plato's philosophy is nowhere transmitted as a systematic whole and in the dialogues we can only observe from afar its gradual growth and development, it is only in the form of a system that any account of it can be given. The justification for this is the incontestable fact that in the dialogues we see circles spreading wider and wider until they finally embrace the whole universe" (Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* trans. L.R. Palmer (New York: The Humanities Press, 1980) 126). Zeller, Tigerstedt maintains, "retained the Hegelian conviction that philosophy must be systematic – or cease to be philosophy" (*Interpreting* 16).

[134] Press, State 509.

[135] See Tigerstedt for a comprehensive discussion of the rise of the developmentalist interpretation. "How can we ever be quite sure that the difficulties which oppose any systematization of Plato are not intentional?" Tigerstedt asks while discussing Robinson's observation that there are many logical fallacies in Plato "which are consciously and deliberately used by him" (Tigerstedt, *Interpreting* 22).

[136] See Charles M. Young, "Plato and Computer Dating," *Plato: Critical Assessment*, Vol. 1, ed. Nicholas D. Smith (London: Routledge, 1998) 29-49 for a serious criticism of stylometric analysis with respect to two books: Leonard Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Gerard R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989). Young points out a serious problem that can be leveled against all stylometric

developmental view is intertwined with the view that Plato had doctrines, though it is not

necessarily the case that a scholar who finds doctrines in Plato must also hold with

deveopmentalism.[137] Adopting a developmental thesis means that the scholar constructs

doctrines by stringing together pieces of the dialogues in accordance with a chronology –

which is clearly problematic, given the inherent uncertainty in ascertaining chronological

composition. Developmentalism advocates the view that the contradiction among the

dialogues is evidence *par excellence* of Plato's development of a systematic

philosophy.[138] Doctrinal and esoteric interpretations tend to assume a didactic principle

of sorts, although they do not recognize the dialogues as *paideia*, it is assumed that Plato,

as is the case with later philosophers, wrote dialogues in order to "teach or communicate"

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analyses of Plato: the selection of variables for the analysis involves assumptions regarding the chronological ordering of the dialogues. With Ledger, he "compares groups of dialogues 'known' (Ledger's word) to be early with other groups 'known' to be late" (41). The same criticism applies to the stylometric analysis conducted by Levinson, Morton and Winspear (See M. Levinson, Q. Morton and A. D. Winspear,"The Seventh Letter of Plato," *Mind* ns77.307 (1968): 309-325). I submit that their study cannot be sufficiently objective, for their conclusion depends on a sequencing of the dialogues which is still in question. The selection of dialogues they chose for indicators in their study is suspect and relies on the idea that the *Apology* is an 'early' dialogue and that the *Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias* and *Laws* are all 'late' dialogues that were written close together. While there is good reason to consider the *Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias* and especially the *Laws* as 'late' dialogues, when setting out to determine chronology, if a chronology is assumed and made an integral part of the testing method, the study cannot be seen as anything other than circular reasoning.

[137] See Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933) who has a Unitarian doctrinal view. Shorey's argument against developmentalism, in its simplest form, is that to consider more than the broadest strokes in chronology (i.e. that *Laws* and the *Timaeus* are late dialogues) "is to beg the question; it is to assume the very point in controversy that the philosophy set forth in the dialogues did develop in the sense required by the argument" (3). Shorey maintains that Plato has doctrines but does not think Plato has a system: "Expositors of Plato seem strangely oblivious of the limits thus far set to all systems of philosophy. They treat as peculiar defects of Plato the inconsistencies which they detect in his ultimate metaphysics after they have elaborated it into a rigid system which he with sound instinct evaded by poetry and myth" (6). It is impossible, he writes, for "a complete system of philosophy with principles subordinate, derivative, and interdependent, and a fixed terminology, cannot be extracted from the Platonic writings" (8). Shorey applauds those who, instead, treat the dialogues in an atomistic fashion.

[138] Tigerstedt notes that scholars pedaling these types of interpretations claim that "All those obscurities and ambiguities, gaps and contradictions that trouble us in the Dialogues are as many testimonies to this change or rather evolution in his mind" (*Interpreting* 25).

these doctrines and the arguments in the dialogues are arguments for those doctrines.[139]

Another flavor of the doctrinal position involves rejecting the humor and irony of the dialogues on the grounds that its purpose is to mask the doctrines that were unpalatable to audiences of Plato's time. Finally, doctrinal interpretations cannot help but strip the dialogues of the features of the dialogue form in order to make clear the propositions that the dramatic elements confuse; as Press puts it, "[for them] literary and dramatic characteristics are merely formal, at best unimportant sugar-coating, at worst, confusing and inhibiting."[140]

When scholars seek out 'Platonic' doctrines, little to no thought is given to the possibility that *assuming* that there are doctrines, and especially these particular doctrines, is all it takes to find those doctrines in the dialogues. On the basis of this circular reasoning, some philosophers mine the dialogues for support of these doctrines – either positively or negatively – and in so doing, assume that the very form of the writing is unimportant to the philosophy contained within. [141] An assumption that is often prominent to systematic interpretation is that Socrates – or the main speaker in each

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[139] Press 510.

[140] Press 510. Thesleff dismisses, with finality, any attempt to order the dialogues using a developmental thesis: "The shortcomings of the attempts to determine the chronology of Plato's writings principally from theories of 'development', and the unreliability of the apparent accumulation of secondary chronological 'evidence' from constructions on lines of development based on the traditional chronology – however elegant such constructions may appear to be from a mainly philosophical point of view – require no more comments" (Holger Thesleff, "Platonic Chronology," *Phronesis: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 34(1989) 6. See also Thesleff, *Studies* 40-52).

[141] What I call cherry-picking and what Tigerstedt calls 'resorting to the scalpel' amounts to the same thing. Scholars begin with an interpretation and then either cherry-pick the parts of the dialogues that support their interpretation or, they remove the parts (sometimes entire dialogues) that disagree with their interpretation, either by declaring the section or dialogue inauthentic or arguing the dismissal of the portions of which they are not in agreement.

dialogue – is espousing *Plato's* views and that the other characters of the dialogue are unimportant ancillaries.

Unwritten Lectures and Esoteric Doctrine

The Tübingen school is most representative of contemporary esoteric interpretations of Plato. The Tübingen school holds that Plato does indeed have doctrines but these doctrines are unwritten. While they reject Schleiermacher's principle that form is inseparable from content, they endorse the principle that Plato's philosophy is systematic. According to some of the esotericists, the unwritten doctrines may be understood only through a study of secondary sources, for they were delivered orally by Plato to the Academy. The Tübingen school takes as the foundation for their interpretation Aristotle's mention of the doctrines Plato delivered orally (the lecture 'On the Good' and the One and the Indefinite Dyad).[142] It is a revival of the Neoplatonic tradition, where Neoplatonic indicates, as Tigerstedt lays out, "the transformation into a metaphysical or theological system, occurring in the last century B.C. and the first two centuries A.D."[143]

While the esoterists are grounded in the Neoplatonic tradition, they have staked out differences between oral and written. The Neoplatonists made no such distinction; for them, the dialogues were the same as Plato's oral teaching and the results of their interpretation was at once both theological and esoteric. Wilheim Gottfried Tennemann is often seen as inspiring contemporary esotericism, of which the most prominent

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[142] For a thorough discussion of the unwritten doctrines see Guthrie, *Plato* 418-442; Tigerstedt, *Interpreting* 62-90; both Tigerstedt's *Decline* and John Findlay, *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) are substantial studies of the matter.

[143] Tigerstedt *Decline* 7.

contemporary exponents are Konrad Gaiser and Hans Joachim Krämer. According to

these esoteric interpretations, Plato delivered the doctrines orally to his students in the

Academy, in which case the only way to learn of his doctrines is through secondary

sources. As evidence, they point to the *Phaedrus*, the *Seventh Letter*, Aristotle and

sources referring to Aristotle. Giovanni Reale sums up what the esoteric tradition

accomplishes: "by revealing the essential characteristics of the *Unwritten Doctrine*, and

hence offering us that *plus* that the dialogues lack, bring us knowledge of the chief

supporting axes (that the highest concept or concepts) that organize and unify in a

remarkable way the various concepts as presented in the dialogues."[144] For Reale, there

is "no doubt" that Plato was interested in constructing a system – that is, when 'system' is

considered not in the Hegelian sense, but as "an organized connection of concepts, in

function of a central concept (or of some central concepts). And, naturally, understood in

this way, the system does not involve any rigid, dogmatic, closed ordering, but rather it is

an open-ended project of chief supporting axes of researches and of connected supporting

axes and their implications."[145]

Reading Between the Lines

Leo Strauss' version of the esoteric position is distinctive; it is a rejection of

Neoplatonism and a return to what Strauss views as the original Plato. Strauss' aim is to

recover a Plato that modernity and history had perverted – one that establishes the

original link between philosophy and civic life. Esoteric interpretations blur the line

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[144] Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy II: Plato and Aristotle,* trans. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 24.

[145] Reale 23-24.

between seeing form and content as separable/inseparable. And Strauss and his followers

do, at least, see the form and content as inseparable, while most traditional doctrinal

strategies do not. Leo Strauss believed that given the history of the phenomena of

persecution, writers adapted their literary techniques in order to hide their actual theories.

In this way, Strauss can make the claim that works have an exoteric and an esoteric

meaning; the exoteric is meant as a cover for the masses, to prevent persecution, while

the esoteric is meant not for "the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as

such, but the young men who might become philosophers."[146] Strauss advocates reading

between the lines to reveal the unwritten doctrines intended for the potential philosopher.

In the case of Plato, this involves considering the dramatic elements of the dialogues.

Straussians may be viewed as a branch of the esoteric school of interpretation, stressing

the import of every dramatic detail of the dialogues, sometimes in order to realize

unwritten doctrines. Because Straussians are constructing a system, their interpretation is

open to the same criticism of the doctrinal interpretation. Still, their stress on the

dramatic provides interesting and worthwhile observations. For instance, Klein's rich

commentary on the *Meno* is governed by his attempt to see the dialogue as a drama, and

takes seriously the device of irony.[147] Klein writes that "Everything about Socrates'

irony depends on the presence of other people who are capable of catching the irony, of

hearing what is not said. A dialogue, then, presupposes people listening to the

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[146] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (3rd reprint Greenwood Press, 1977) 36.

[147] Klein quotes J. A. K. Thomson: "The old Irony of the tragic or comic reversal of fortune they [Plato's contemporaries] perfectly appreciated. But this new kind, which had a trick of making you uncomfortable if you took it as a joke and of getting you laughed at if you took it seriously? People did not like it …" (Jakob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (1989 Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965) 5).

conversation not as casual and indifferent spectators but as silent participants" and, he

continues, the dialogue "has not taken place if we, the listeners and readers, did not

actively participate in it."[148] But Klein does not find the dialogues to be devoid of

doctrines – he just denies that there is a philosophical system to be discovered in the

dialogues.[149] He advocates being wary of certain ideological interpretations: "to become

obsessed by the view that the chronology of the Platonic dialogues implies a

'development' in Plato's thought" or "to render what is said and shown in the dialogues

in petrified terms derived – after centuries of use and abuse – from Aristotle's technical

vocabulary" is to distort our understanding of Plato's philosophy.[150]

In his introduction to the *Republic*, Alan Bloom immediately displays for us one

of the main problems with the Straussian interpretive principles: "The dialogue is," he

says,

> the synthesis of these two poles and is an organic unity. Every argument must be
> interpreted dramatically, for every argument is incomplete in itself and only the
> context can supply the missing links. And every dramatic detail must be
> interpreted philosophically, because these details contain the images of the
> problems which complete the arguments.[151]

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[148] Klein 6.

[149] "The dialogues not only embody the famous 'oracular' and 'paradoxical' statements emanating
from Socrates ('virtue is knowledge,' 'nobody does evil knowingly,' 'it is better to suffer than to commit
injustice') and are, to a large extent, protreptic plays based on these, but they also discuss and state, more or
less explicitly, the ultimate foundations on which those statements rest and the far-reaching consequences
which flow from them. But this is never done with 'complete clarity.' It is still up to us to try to clarify
those foundations and consequences, using, if necessary, 'another, longer, and more involved road,' [*Rep
IV*, 435d3] and then accept, correct, or reject them – it is up to us, in other words, to engage in
'philosophy'" (Klein 9).

[150] Klein 9-10.

[151] Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968) xvi.

The problem is with the notion of 'completeness.' It requires assumptions about Plato's

dialogues, namely, that they are imitations of oral teachings and that there is a systematic

completeness to be had. Berger argues that Straussian interpretations fail to avoid

making dramatic assumptions about the text, even when they avoid making philosophic

assumptions (of doctrines or a system). Klein, specifically, "assign[s] the written text the

job of completing the unfinished oral discussion by its representation of 'the drama itself,

'the deed,' the 'work,' the *ergon'* [17].'"[152] Straussians all, by and large, assume the

'mouthpiece fallacy,' that is, assuming that the major character in the dialogue speaks for

Plato and searching out the 'true doctrines' of Plato.

In some instances, the esoteric position takes its point of departure from Aristotle

and the *Seventh Letter*. Many scholars now consider the *Seventh Letter* to be authentic,

as debates about its authenticity are not as vigorous as they once were.[153] Bowen writes

that we cannot necessarily depend on the most temporally proximate interpreters for

> Aristotle and the Neoplatonists … aimed to determine what Plato was really
> trying to say, always in contexts determined by *their own immediate
> philosophical purposes*; they very clearly felt no obligation to render Plato's
> thought as he thought it, that is, to defend by reference to the text their accounts as
> ones to which Plato would have assented or to connect these accounts closely
> with the letter of the text [emphasis added].[154]

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[152] Harry Berger Jr., "Levels of Discourse in Plato's Dialogues," *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* ed. Anthony Cascardi (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1987) 85. His criticism of Friedländer, whose position is similar to the Straussians, in that he assumes "Platonic writing is a copy justified by the original it represents."

[153] See Appendix A for a discussion of the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*.

[154] Alan C. Bowen, "On Interpreting Plato," *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings,* ed. Charles L. Griswold, Jr. (New York: Routledge 1988) 58. See Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (1935 New York: Octagon Books, 1964) for a discussion of Aristotle's manner of rendering history.

Bowen's criticism of Aristotle's interpretation of Plato is startling, until one considers analogous contemporary examples. R. M. Hare believed that his students got him wrong – and so, David Sedley argues, it is easy "to imagine a Plato who denied or minimized discontinuities in his own work, even when challenged by *his* eminent pupil Aristotle, who is widely agreed to make a sharp distinction between Plato's Socratic dialogues and those representing his mature work."[155]

A Third Way of Interpreting Plato: The Hermeneutical Approach

Instead of attempting to recapture an oral doctrine, Berger advocates a different approach, one that avoids the mouthpiece fallacy:

> To approach Plato in terms of a dialectic between oral and written discourse is to situate the interpretive project in a more general discussion that has been going on for some time. I refer to the hermeneutic theories of Gadamer, Ricoeur, Benveniste, and others, and more specifically to Ricoeur's two basic propositions about the changes produced by the transfer of a text from speech to writing: (1) emancipated or 'distanciated' from speech, speaker, and author, the text becomes autonomous, is appropriated by readers … and opens itself up to the endless conflict of interpretation; (2) in this process, the intentional control of a speaker and author over their texts diminishes, and the margin or surplus of unmeant meaning increases.[156]

Revealing the shortcomings in these two general categories of interpretation speaks to the need for a third way of interpreting Plato. Recently, a number of scholars have sought to interpret the dialogues using a hermeneutic approach, in order to avoid the problems of the first two strategies. The hermeneutical strategy begins by seeing the dialogue form as necessary and involves examining the dialogue as a unity, taking into account the literary and dramatic details for, as mentioned above, the burden of proof rests on those who

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[155] David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004) 14.

[156] Berger 96.

would assume that the dialogue *form* is not necessary to convey the *content*. Indeed, a

hermeneutical strategy disputes the very division between form and content. This

strategy situates a text in relation to the author's original audience. Attempting to situate

the text in its original context requires an examination of the assumptions made about the

past. By addressing the fact of presuppositions, any interpretation is left open for future

revision. The result is a position irreconcilable with both the aforementioned groups,

because the hermeneuticists shun the notion of unwritten doctrines, as it implies the

dialogue form is not necessary, and, in fact, some call into question whether Plato had

doctrines at all or at the very least, deny that Plato had a system. Most controversially,

they point out that there is little evidence in the dialogues for the '*doctrine* of Forms' as it

has been articulated by those who attribute doctrines to Plato.[157] The movement is an

attempt, writes Francisco Gonzalez, to move away from "interpreting the dialogues as

aiming to either establish or refute philosophical doctrines."[158] A main feature of this

third way is to emphasize the importance of the historical, literary and dramatic elements

of the dialogues – in short, to see the dialogues as integrated wholes. Distinguishing

form from content is to treat the content alone, but the content without the form is an

incomplete picture of Plato's philosophy. Gonzelez writes that "if we can show the real

opposition between philosophy understood as systematic and philosophy understood as

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[157] Francisco J. Gonzalez, "A Short History of Platonic Interpretation and the 'Third Way'," *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies,* ed. Francisco J. Gonzalez. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995) 12. See Kenneth Sayre, "Why Plato Never Had a Theory of Forms," *Boston Area Colloquim in Ancient Philosophy*. V9 1993 (Lanham: UP of America) 167-199, based on the claim, found in the *Seventh Letter*, that Plato never wrote down his philosophy … language altogether, written or spoken, is not a sufficient vehicle for philosophy … "it clearly is Plato's view that this knowledge comes to fruition as a state of the soul, and that the object of this knowledge cannot be adequately represented in propositional language" (183).

[158] Gonzalez, Third 2.

dialectic and show further that Plato sides with the latter conception of philosophy, then we will be in a position to avoid both 'developmentalism' and 'esotericism.'"[159]

Hermeneutics imparts a method of understanding, the paradigm of which is found in our understanding of texts and works of art. 'Hermeneutics,' which of course comes from the Greek word ἑρμηνεία, was initially used (in modern times) to describe a method of interpreting the Bible, and Schleirmacher expanded the use of hermeneutics to include interpreting Plato. Dilthey moved further away from Biblical hermeneutics by appropriating hermeneutics as the methodology of the human sciences. Seen in this way, hermeneutics was not only applied to texts, but also to "any human phenomena whatsoever, including actions, historical events, monuments, works of art, and social institutions."[160] To understand humans, it is necessary to make sense of the revisionist narrative that human beings bring to their lives.

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer makes explicit the basic conditions for understanding (a text or another person) through an analysis of why understanding is often not achieved between persons. There is no exact *method* for understanding. Gadamer observes that method as such conceals; method superimposes a 'grid' on its object of study, forcing things to fit into a pre-given blueprint of assumption. The best we can hope to do is to avoid a systematic, pre-defined approach and instead make use of a phenomenological attitude and *describe* the process of understanding. With this attitude Gadamer can impart the basic conditions required for understanding. Like other

[159] Francisco Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998) 13.

[160] Frank C. Richardson, Blaine J. Fowers and Charles B. Guignon, *Re-envisioning Psychology: Moral Dimensions in Theory and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999) 201.

hermeneutical philosophers, Gadamer believes that every individual is entangled in a historical culture and as such always possesses a tacit understanding, or prejudice (*Vorurteil*), of what things mean in our world: "Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live…*That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*."[161] Prejudices are the conditions for our understanding, as interpretation is always a circular process. To understand any part of the text or conversation, we must already possess some grasp of the whole; yet, to understand the whole, we must possess understanding of the parts. The tacit understanding we possess is our frame of reference. Any conversation is an attempt to reach an agreement, based on a shared understanding, and it occurs in the context of this hermeneutical circle. In a conversation, we begin with this pre-understanding absorbed from our historical culture, and our questions and answers proceed from presuppositions. As the conversation progresses, we revise the initial presuppositions. The importance of acknowledging that humans bring tacit understanding to a conversation is twofold. To understand a text or another human being, it is necessary to understand the historical context of that text or human, else the process of understanding cannot be undertaken. Second, the misunderstandings that arise in a conversation are dependent upon the inferences that each individual brings to the conversation from their tacit understanding of the subject matter at hand. To understand texts that we are temporally distant from, we must attempt to gain like-mindedness with

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[161] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2nd Rev. Ed. New York: Continuum, 2000) 276-277.

the culture of that time, to reconstruct. Human nature is essentially the same – that is, we begin from "a shared understanding that results from our enculturation into communal practices and our mastery of a common language" – and thus it is not an impossible task, but it is a task that necessitates imperfection, especially considering that ancient Greek is a dead language. [162] If we follow Gadamer's advice and conceive of philosophy as "a human experience that remains the same and that characterizes the human being as such" then the task, recast thus, is well within reach.[163] Press calls for a different type of interpretation that, like Gadamer's, requires that "the dialogues are no longer taken to be the *kinds* of texts they were widely believed to be at mid-century. There is need for a broader inquiry into the nature, presentation and audience of the texts based on historical knowledge," for large and pivotal portions of the dialogues involve myths and character-building.[164] Only by ignoring the text can scholars truly proceed with a doctrinal or esoteric interpretation.

What criteria can be used to evaluate interpretive strategies? To evaluate interpretive strategies is to give voice to value systems that are often incommensurable – at best incompatible. Perhaps we can recur to the criterion used as a primary evaluative factor in sorting out scientific theories: explanatory power. Explanatory power seems a good rule of thumb by which to judge these strains of interpretation and the end result is that a hermeneutic interpretation ignores the *least* amount of actual text and require the *least* amount of juggling to make the 'idiosyncrasies' of the dialogues fit within a

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[162] Richardson 118.

[163] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic and Aristotelian Philosophy,* trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 6.

[164] Press 517.

philosophical system or set of doctrines. Press asks, "Given the growing consensus that Plato is not (directly, primarily) teaching doctrines in the dialogues, for example, we need to investigate what kind of 'philosophic meaning' the dialogues might have *other* than dogmatic or doctrinal?"[165]

At the end of the day, surprisingly enough, this study will take to heart Terence Irwin's advice regarding interpretative strategies, although surely not in the way he intended it, and certainly not in agreement with his conclusions. Irwin suggests that it is a mistake to focus exclusively on questions of interpretation; "We are likely to take a method of interpretation more seriously if it produces philosophically interesting and significant results … It is an illusion to think we can find the right interpretative methods and strategies in advance of considering the philosophical merits of the conclusions they yield."[166] Though I think Irwin is misguided in an apparent belief that the 'philosophical merits' of a strategy will exclude the hermeneutic or philological approach to Plato, and that he intended this bit of advice as an admonition against just such interpretative strategies, I will treat it as serious advice. The fact of the matter is the third way of interpreting Plato *does* yield "philosophically interesting and significant results" – though the results of these analyses often are in opposition to the analytic approach that Irwin upholds.[167]

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[165] Press 515.

[166] Terence Irwin, "Reply to David Roochnik," *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings,* ed. Charles L. Griwold, Jr. (New York: Routledge 1988) 198.

[167] Though it is likely Irwin and I intend 'philosophically interesting' in different ways, I think it a good criterion even with the ambiguity inherent to the word 'interesting'.

Because I adopt a hermeneutic approach to the dialogues, I recognize that it is impossible that one may approach a text with *no* assumptions or preconceptions – thus, I will list the assumptions I consciously bring to the interpretation of the *Theaetetus*:[168]

1. The dialogue form is necessary to Plato's philosophy. I will assume that the dialogue form is important, integral, to Plato's philosophy. This assumption is in no way outlandish or unsupported by the dialogues themselves; the frequent jabs Plato takes at the sophists throughout the dialogues are often grounded in the lack of discussion that is inherent in the form of discourse of a sophist – giving speeches and not inquiry.[169]

2. If the dialogue form is necessary, the characters, setting - in short, the dramatic details which make up a dialogue are necessary to convey Plato's philosophy. It is the *entirety* of the dialogue that demonstrates Plato's dialectical method, i.e., the reopening of questions presumably closed, not solely the character Socrates or Socrates' questions, answers, and arguments. The respondents are equally as important as the main speaker, and the respondents must be understood in terms of the arguments they offer, their historical counterparts, and their dramatic actions in the dialogue in order to investigate the meaning of the dialogue.

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[168] The hermeneutic circle, to be sure – every interpretation begins with preconceptions. But, "during the act of interpretation the scholar should always be able and ready to adjust or even change his initial view, as his knowledge of and insight into his subject deepen" (Tigerstedt, *Interpreting* 21). That willingness to yield to a new insight, to adjust, to leave claims of expertise aside – this is what dogmatic, systematic interpretive strategies lack.

[169] Henry Teloh remarks that the dialogue form, "unlike [a] treatise … imitates different conversations within the *psychai* of different interlocutors in a way that is impossible for a treatise" (*Socratic Education in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 5).

3. Plato is first and foremost concerned with *paideia.*

4. Like all plays, the dialogues have two distinct audiences: the audiences *in* the dialogues, and the audience *of* the dialogues. The meaning of the dialogue differs according to the perspective of the audience.[170] In Chapter I, I outlined Mark Gifford's discussion of the literary technique known as dramatic irony. Ultimately, this technique depends on the audience *of* the dialogue possessing a fuller and more complete understanding of a character's life. Thus, the external audience will grasp a meaning of the dialogue that differs from that of the audience *in* the dialogue, the audience that does not possess the future knowledge. The audience in the dialogue participates in philosophic inquiry, and the audience of the dialogue participates in philosophic inquiry of a related, yet disparate, sort.

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[170] This is not to be confused with the Straussian technique of 'reading between the lines' to discover unwritten doctrine.

Chapter Four

Problems in Interpreting the *Theaetetus*

The *Theaetetus* appears to be an anomaly among the dialogues, or so some scholars have held, for several reasons: the embedded dramatic dialogue, the uniqueness of Theaetetus' appearance and character, its aporetic character despite it being a 'later' dialogue, and its being the only dialogue of Plato's (ostensibly) devoted to the question of knowledge.[171] I will argue that the *Theaetetus* is *not* an anomaly; the embedded dialogue serves a philosophic purpose, as does the oft-neglected prologue, and that Theaetetus' – and others' – characterizations are essential to achieving its purpose. Finally, I will argue that the *Theaetetus* is not concerned with the epistemological question qua epistemology, viz., what is knowledge, but rather with understanding *how* to pursue knowledge; the concern is centered on pedagogy (*paideia*) and not epistemology by itself. The reason why some scholars see these features as anomalies is that the scholars in question attempt to turn Plato into a contemporary philosopher, i.e., they attribute to Plato their own philosophical conceptions instead of looking for his.

False Starts

The first sort of interpretative strategies ignore, completely, the dialogue form. Any scholar working from the dogmatic interpretative principles described above will

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[171] The relative uniqueness of the *Theaetetus* is reflected even in the grammar of the first sentence: "Of the Platonic dialogues other than *Theaetetus*, only the *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus* and *Menexenus* begin with a sentence not containing a verb" (Joan C. Harrison, "Plato's Prologue: *Theaetetus* 142A-143C," *Tulane-Studies-in-Philosophy* 27 (1978): 111). Harrison comments on the opening sentence, relating how there is irony by Eucleides not using a verb – verb is motion, and there is no physical motion (Eleatic) - Zeno's paradoxes.

ignore the prologue. Gail Fine is a good example of a scholar working within this sort of interpretation.[172] She accepts the common chronological grouping of the dialogues, though notes – and skims over – that there are alternative chronologies as well as arguments warning against chronological groupings at all. Following Vlastos, Fine assumes that the early, or Socratic, dialogues represent the historical *Socrates'* philosophy, not Plato's. Fine extracts a full-blown epistemology from *Theaetetus*, *Meno*, and *Republic* and in doing so, strips away the dialogue form and examines the dialogues as if they were no more than dressing for treatises. Reducing the dialogues to propositions and principles is indeed one method of interpretation that yields 'philosophically interesting results' and enables the construction of a systematic philosophy. It is not that Fine constructs a theory from nowhere; her type of interpretation has the advantage of being able to point to the text, as opposed to some of the esoterics who at times forfeit that luxury of using Plato's texts as evidence. The problem with this type of interpretation is that it does not consider that which is *most* evident about the text – that the text is a dialogue, or if you will, drama or poetry. Thus, by excluding the dramatic elements of a dialogue, scholars that indulge in this type of interpretation inadvertently shape Plato's philosophy in an anachronistic manner and more often than not, they interpret the statements in the text in the language emblematic of contemporary philosophy. This is not to say that such analyses do not bear useful or interesting results. It is to say that they should be considered with a critical eye.

A reductionist, analytic interpretation of Plato's dialogues necessarily ignores the dramatic nuances, as well as entire sections of the text. For instance, nowhere does Fine

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[172] CIte

discuss the prologue; based on her interpretative strategy, there can be no information useful to her analysis within the prologue. Even Rosemary Desjardins' commentary on the *Theaetetus* begins with the interchange between Socrates and Theaetetus, skipping the prologue.[173] In terms of explanatory power, this method of interpretation falls short as the only explanation for numerous lines must be "trivial dressing." Such interpretations, while philosophical in a most familiar way, lapse into proleptic.

A second sort of interpretation takes into account the dramatic elements of the dialogue yet holds that the philosophic content does not depend, or is separable, from the dramatic form.[174] For example, Cornford's interpretation of the *Theaetetus* does make mention of the prologue, using it as an opportunity to mention the problems with fixing its dramatic date, as well as to remind the reader that it is possible that the prologue we have now may not have been the original. The prologue that is currently attached to the dialogue is there to commemorate Theaetetus – a familiar view that Cornford feels no need to defend. The prologue explained as a commemoratory addendum releases the prologue from having philosophic import, either on its own or contributing to the philosophy of the dialogue proper. He devotes a scant two paragraphs to a section he titles 'Midwifery and Anamnesis'. Had Cornford turned his attention to the characters and the proem, he might not have downplayed the importance of the *Theaetetus*: "the dialogue is concerned only with the lower kinds of cognition, our awareness of the sense-

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[173] Desjardins, Rosemary. *The Rational Enterprise: Logos in Plato's Theaetetus.* New York: State University of New York Press, 1990.

[174] This is not to say that these types of interpretations do not produce valuable insights and analysis; in general, though, they are limited.

world and judgments involving the perception of sensible objects."[175]   Cornford's

contention is that the *Theaetetus*, a 'later' dialogue, serves only the purpose of making it

clear that any epistemology requires the Forms. The dialogue fails, Cornford believes,

due to the omission of the Forms.

Guthrie, like Cornford, finds doctrines in the dialogues and yet Guthrie himself

writes that "the dialogues are not systematic treatises" and "there are limits to the extent

to which they can legitimately be synthesized."[176] He does not dispute the categorization

of the dialogues in the typical early, middle, and late periods and yet for the most part

manages to avoid relying on that chronological structure in his discussion. Guthrie's

commentary on the *Theaetetus* does mention the dramatic elements, the historical and

cultural content of the dialogue, but he does not link the two and thus remains at the level

of analyzing the philosophic content apart from the dramatic and historical content.

Guthrie calls the *Theaetetus* a

> brilliant adaptation of the manner and plan of the earlier dialogues to the more
> critical and probing approach to knowledge of Plato's late maturity. The
> restoration of Socrates to his original role, with much of his original personality,
> shows Plato still anxious to be regarded as the true heir and continuator of
> Socratic teaching.[177]

Plato shows the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* to be similar to the Socrates of the earlier

dialogues. Invoking the midwife analogy, Plato shows Socrates is "not just a thinking-

machine like the Eleatic visitor," the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* work together, with a

philosophical purpose: "the one aporetic, setting forth problems, the other didactic,

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[175] Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The* Theaetetus *and the* Sophist (1957 Mineola: Dover, 2003) 28.

[176] Guthrie, *History* 97.

[177] Guthrie, *History* 64-65.

solving them."[178] For Guthrie, the *Theaetetus* is replete with reminders of the earlier

dialogues: Socrates desires to discover the best and the brightest boys; Socrates and his

interlocutors set out to give a concept a definition, the first suggestion is comprised of

instances; and the dialogue "ostensibly ends in failure."[179] Knowledge is the concept

under scrutiny, Guthrie says, that sets the *Theaetetus* apart from the other aporetic

dialogues. The question is not an ethical or aesthetic concept, but knowledge itself.   He

looks at the opening moves of the dialogue with the intention of making the relation

between the *Theaetetus* and the early aporetic dialogues. But surprisingly, he has nothing

to say about the midwife metaphor as he did with regard to the proem.

Burnyeat's commentary on the *Theaetetus* involves more discussion of the

dramatic elements than either discussion of Cornford or Guthrie, and also takes an

approach that is more open-ended, in the spirit of Socrates' dialectic. In the Preface, he

refers to own approach as unorthodox,[180] which is immediately evident in his

commentary on the prologue: "we should not fail to think about the dramatic emphasis

which Plato has contrived to place on the notion of expertise."[181] But he does not address

anything in the outer dialogue beyond that single provocative comment, and neither does

he comment about the midwife metaphor.[182]

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[178] Guthrie, *History* 65.

[179] Guthrie, *History* 65.

[180] Myles Burnyeat, *The* Theaetetus *of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990) xiii.

[181] Burnyeat, *Theaetetus* 3.

[182] It should be noted that Burnyeat has published an article on the Socratic midwife ("Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 24 (1997): 7-16.) and perhaps it is meant to be understood that the article should be read in tandem with the commentary.

In an effort to provide a maieutic commentary on the dialogue, Burnyeat presents multiple possible interpretations in order to allow the reader to discuss and decide on her own which interpretation is more likely. He begins by stating "This is a dialogue, not a treatise. As such it invites us not merely to witness but to participate ourselves in the philosophical activity of the speakers."[183] Burnyeat splits the dialogue into three parts, as most scholars do, but his reasoning is a little different: he claims the first and longest part is a discussion that could be used to educate undergraduates, the second for graduate students, and the final section is for fellow academics. Keeping in line with the protreptical nature of the dialogue, Burnyeat wishes for the readers of his commentary to make their own decision about the interpretations he presents. But for the most part he favors discussing the philosophic content, and while he does not dismiss outright the dramatic elements from the interpretations he presents, he does not present an interpretation to counterbalance the dogmatic interpretations or attempt to construct one himself. He carries two interpretations throughout the commentary, which he labels 'A' and 'B'. Though Burnyeat prefers the 'B' interpretation, the interpretation that follows Bernard Williams, Burnyeat presents an alternative interpretation that follows Cornford. Burnyeat's error is that his commentary lacks the synthesis of philosophical and contextual elements.

David Sedley, uses Burnyeat's presentation as a launching point for his own interpretation. Sedley makes clear from the outset the strategy which he will use to interpret the *Theaetetus*, situating it between contemporary and traditional interpretations. He does not dispute, but upholds, the traditional ordering of the dialogues. Along the

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[183] Burnyeat, *Theaetetus* 3-4.

same lines as Vlastos, Sedley believes that there are Socratic and Platonic phases, while

conceding that "the dialogues of the [Platonic] phase necessarily *succeed* in achieving

historical authenticity … [they] showcase, for better or worse … Plato's own perspective

on the historical figure Socrates."[184] He considers the interpretations of both Cornford

and Burnyeat. On the Cornford interpretation, the dialogue fails shows that one cannot

construct an epistemology without the Forms, setting the stage for the *Sophist*. On

Burnyeat's interpretation, he says, dialogue is to be seen as a "dialectical exercise rather

than a doctrinal one."[185] For Sedley this involves a "double dialectical confrontation" –

one within the text, the other between the audience and the text.[186] Sedley echoes A. A.

Long's approach to the dialogues: "Long properly emphasizes where most others have

failed to do so is its Socratic aspect: in one way or another, the *Theaetetus* is Plato's re-

evaluation of Socrates."[187]

Sedley's appears to be a third sort of interpretation that he calls a 'maieutic

interpretation'.[188] According to Sedley, Socrates is forced to stop at the end of the

dialogue:

> Because, as the dialogue tells us, the correct philosophical method is that of
> midwifery, where it falls to the interlocutor, and no one else, to give birth to the
> true doctrine. Once Plato has brought us, the readers, as close as he can to the
> true definition, short of actually stating it, his work is done.[189]

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[184] Sedley 3

[185] Sedley 4.

[186] Sedley 4.

[187] Sedley 6.

[188] Sedley's principles of interpretation are not especially novel; as Press has noticed a traditional interpretation often involves doctrinal, developmental, and didactic principles (though not in the sense of *paideia*). See above, page 50-51.

[189] Sedley 5.

Sedley's is a motley interpretation, with bits from each of the afore-mentioned

interpretations. He takes the idea of the *Theaetetus* as a late dialogue, and as such

evincing late Platonic doctrine, adding Burnyeat's idea of two simultaneous readings, and

recognizes there the distinction between the author and the character Socrates, who in this

case is a version of the Socrates that appears in the early dialogues.[190] To that medley

Sedley injects his own "maieutic interpretation: that the internal and the external dialectic

are both, in their own way, applications of philosophical midwifery."[191] Sedley's

interpretation, he himself notes, is in opposition to the essays found in Press' 1996

collection, in that Sedley's reading takes the most recent of many 'orthodox' positions –

the view that the main speaker, generally Socrates, espouses Plato's own views.[192]

However, the *Theaetetus* should be seen as an exception to treating speaker and author as

one, for he feels that *Theaetetus* involves "*autobiographical self-commentary.*"[193]

     Sedley's interpretation does not involve a break from characteristic doctrinal

interpretation, but he does *approach* the hermeneutical way of interpreting Plato. Sedley

does not believe that Plato's message in the *Theaetetus* is voiced by Socrates for

"Socrates fails to see the Platonic implications, and instead it is we, as seasoned readers

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[190] Sedley 6

[191] Sedley 6.

[192] Sedley 6. See *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*, ed. Gerald A. Press (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

[193] Sedley 7

of Plato, who are expected to recognize and exploit them."[194] In a move that is favorable

to the third way of interpretation, Sedley makes explicit that there is a distinction to be

found between the intended results of the dialogue internally and the intended result of

the dialogue externally; that the internal dialogue's midwifery fails but the external

midwifery has a chance at success: "the external midwifery consists partly in the

dialogue's power to bring us to the point where we are ready to abandon the written text

and continue the dialectic for ourselves…"[195] But Sedley is also caught up in the

dogmatic, doctrinal approach to Plato and thus constructs his analysis on the following

assumptions: that Plato has a doctrine of Forms and that it is found in, at least, the

Republic; that the *Theaetetus* was written after the *Republic*; and that because this

doctrine is not present in the *Theaetetus* (yet is present in 'later' dialogues) its absence

must be accounted for, in order for the system of doctrines to continue to cohere.[196]

Notably, Sedley finds the purpose of the *Theaetetus* is just that – to show Plato's

systematic coherence; he writes that "by developing this implicit portrayal of Socrates as

the midwife of Platonism, Plato aims to demonstrate, if not the identity, at any rate the

profound *continuity*, between, on the one hand, his revered master's historic contribution

and, on the other, the Platonist truth."[197] Sedley devotes a few words for the dialogue's

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[194] Sedley 8. Sedley does subscribe to the doctrines usually described as Platonism. Sedley simply makes a mistake by assuming that a contemporary audience full of seasoned *readers* would have the same reaction and see similar 'Platonic implications' as an audience of fourth century *listeners*.

[195] Sedley 11.

[196] "Any serious interpretation of the Theaetetus must explain the lack of Forms." (Gokhan Adalier, "The Case of *Theaetetus*," *Phronesis: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 46.1 (2001): 1-37.)

[197] Sedley 8.

frame, comparing it with other dialogues' proems that stress the source of the information as well as the relation between memory and writing.[198]

Though Sedley addresses the prologue and the metaphor of the midwife, it is not taken so seriously as to become a cornerstone for Sedley's argument; on his interpretation there remain many unanswered questions. Beginning with the assumption that the prologue was written by Plato – even assuming its dedicatory capacity – why choose Eucleides, one might ask, as the record-keeper; why begin with the Megarians? Why spend time developing the similarities between Socrates and Theaetetus, and why are two mathematicians chosen for Socrates' interlocutors in a dialogue about knowledge? Mark McPherran suggests that these questions might be answered with due consideration to the nature of *philosophic character*, i.e. by answering what is it about Socrates and Theaetetus that characterizes the virtue, moral excellence, of the philosopher.

The Interpretation of Literary Form and Philosophical Content

This is precisely what commentators such as Paul Friedländer and Ruby Blondell attempt. Of the prologue, Friedländer says it has significance in three ways: it fixes "the ideal historical accuracy of the report," emphasizes the main dialogue's importance, and it provides information about Theaetetus's character as a grown man: we are shown how the youth of good (epistemic) character becomes a man of good moral character.[199] Because we learn in the prologue that the conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus took place before the events of the *Apology*, the references later in the dialogue about court become intelligible and hold meaning beyond what is gained from an analysis of

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[198] Sedley 16.

[199] Paul Friedländer, *Plato III*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1960) 145-146.

the digression.[200] As the final scene in the dialogue is also a reference to Socrates' trial,

Friedländer finds that the dialogue, bookended by the references to the trial (and death) of

Socrates, "shows the sublime yet precarious existence of the philosopher."[201] Friedländer

thinks it significant that Plato chooses the same Megarians that are present at Socrates'

death in the *Phaedo* to be the prologue's speakers. These dramatic details as well as the

connection with dramatic details of other dialogues give what Friedländer terms a

"personal dimension" that provides the grounds for the later discussions.[202] Friedländer

focuses on the likeness between Socrates and Theaetetus, both the physical and the

psychic resemblance; surely there is significance in the resemblance and the question of

the dialogue – in that there is something that inheres in Theaetetus that is relevant to the

question at hand, so that the question 'what is knowledge?' may *only* be discussed with

Theaetetus. Similarly, the inclusion of Theodorus is for both personal and philosophical

reasons. Friedländer sees the midwife metaphor as an extension of the relevance of the

'personal dimension,' noting that the practice establishes an idea of a model teacher and a

model student. He sees Theaetetus in terms of one of the *Republic*'s guardians, as does

Ruby Blondell. Blondell also emphasizes the interrelationship between form and

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[200] We are reminded of Socrates' death in the prologue of the *Theaetetus*: Eucleides tells Tepsion that "It was not long before [Socrates'] death … that he came across Theaetetus, who was a boy at the time" (142c).

[201] Friedländer, *Plato III* 147.

[202] Friedländer, *Plato III* 148. Polansky finds a similar conclusion, based on the use of the word wonder (θαυμάζω); from Socrates' statement "μάλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, τὸ θαυμάζειν· οὐ γὰρ ἄλλη ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας" (155d). Polansky assumes that the three uses of 'wonder' or its derivatives in the outer dialogue are meant to 'foster philosophical activity' among the external audience (35). See Aristotle *Met* I.1

content.[203]   The approach is a necessary one for she adopts a hermeneutical principle,

and so takes as her basis that "the fundamental literary-critical axiom that every detail of

a text contributes to the meaning of the whole" but cautions against attempting to give

equal weight to every detail.[204] A consideration of the dialogue form recognizes that

what the dialogue shows is people, and Blondell believes that the dialogue form lends

itself to the conclusion that it is "a vehicle for characterization."[205] Specifically, Blondell

argues that:

> Through the characters and their interactions, abstract epistemological issues are
> shown to play themselves out in the world of specific, particularized human
> beings, with their varied abilities to learn from the world, themselves, and each
> other. It is this personal dimension of epistemology – the fact that we are
> particular, embodied individuals – that generates most of the problems explored in
> the dialogue (especially the reliability and the subjectivity of sense-perception).
> This makes *Theaetetus* peculiarly self-referential in a dramatic sense, in so far as
> its subject is the very process in which the participants are engaged.[206]

Blondell's hermeneutic approach takes into account both the literary and dramatic

context; what is lacking and what must also be accounted for is the historical context.If

we take the literary context seriously, then we must also take the historical context

seriously – for Plato writes dialogues populated with historical figures related to

historical events, in existing settings and about actual issues.   Thus, his philosophy

demands that an interpreter account for context. Indeed, one may miss or mistake his

philosophy if one does not account for the historical context in the synthesis of form with

content.

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[203] Blondell 2.

[204] Blondell 4. See Griswold 11-16.

[205] Blondell 53.

[206] Blondell 252.

A method for relating form and content has been suggested by Holger Thesleff: "the so-called 'pedimental' principle of composition."[207] This means that the literary composition is like a Greek temple, with the most important thing is in the center – Greek temples have arrangements of figures in this manner, as do other genres of ancient literature.[208] This principle of composition is seen in other ancient genres and involves placing the most important things in the center.[209] At a basic structural level, then, the heart of the *Theaetetus* is the self-proclaimed digression about philosophy. Drawing on Thesleff's 'pedimental' concept, I will assume that because the 'digression' regarding the philosopher is set at the heart of the dialogue it is what is *most* important about the *Theaetetus*. As Benitez and Guimares point out, making such an assumption does not obviate the discussion of knowledge; in fact, the discussion of knowledge has everything to do with the discussion of the philosopher, as I will show.[210] If knowledge is wisdom (145e), and a philosopher is a lover of wisdom, a philosopher is a lover of knowledge.[211] The question of the dialogue, then, pertains and is directly related to the question of philosophy – both what it is (in terms of a practice, a way of living) and its object (what is produced by that practice). I will argue that the future character of Theaetetus is at

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[207] Thesleff, Looking 19.

[208] Thesleff, Looking 19 n4.

[209] Thesleff relates this to that arrangement of figures in a Greek temple.

[210] Benitez, Eugenio and Livia Guimaraes, "Philosophy as Performed in Plato's Theaetetus," *Review of Metaphysics* 47.2 (1993): 297-328.

[211] This is a surprising move, for it seems Socrates equates s*ophia* with *epistēmē*: ταὐτὸν ἄρα ἐπιστήμη καὶ σοφία. However, it is not *entirely* the case that Socrates thinks the two are one and the same, for very soon thereafter (150b) he claims that his knowledge (*techne*) of midwifery does not grant him wisdom (150c).

stake; determining what knowledge is, or rather what educational technique will produce

it, will in turn shape his life. The description philosopher does, and how he lives his life,

should be paramount to Theaetetus' further education. Theaetetus must be 'matched' to

the appropriate instructor. While the audience in the dialogue is having a specific,

controlled discussion about knowledge, the audience *of* the dialogue is participating in

that same discussion but on a much larger scale. Fourth century audiences, as the people

that determine *endoxa*, are part of the ongoing debate as to what constitutes a *sophos*, as I

noted above. What they witness in the dialogue is slightly different than the audience in

the dialogue; they see a youth in need of further education; representations of a sophist, a

mathematician, and a philosopher are present to display their wares and so, the audience

is directed to compare the *knowledge* that each discipline brings. The dialogue asks the

audience to evaluate which is the best type of education for Theaetetus and presumably

their own sons. Clearly the answer to the best type of education for Theaetetus worked;

the prologue tells us as much by vouching for the character of the future Theaetetus.

Even if the *Theaetetus* were written before the *Republic*, it does address questions

that are raised and discussed in the *Republic*. In so doing, the *Theaetetus* raises questions

that are central to the *Republic*. This would be true even if the language in which

Theaetetus is described were not that of a Guardian, as Ruby Blondell has noted. The

Republic is central to any discussion of Platonic *paideia* and so the discussion of the

Theaetetus as concerned with pedagogy must consider the *Republic*. Like the *Republic*,

the *Theaetetus* is also concerned with the problem of *mimēsis*, although it is not readily

evident to present day audiences as it would have been to fourth century Athenians.

Indeed, the character of Socrates unites the dialogues as do his concerns and his projects;

thus, my concern with the relation of the dialogues to each other is not in terms of doctrines, but character-oriented. The projects of other characters, as well, shape the dialogues and Socrates' questions (and manner of questioning). Henry Teloh identifies a distinction between two 'modes' of Socratic dialectic: *elenchus* and *psychagogia*. *Psychagogia* is used when the interlocutor is favorably situated towards the inquiry, or as Teloh puts it, uncorrupted. *Elenchus* is reserved for confrontational interlocutors and "refutations proceed by making use of the beliefs of an answerer, and hence we cannot infer that Socrates endorses the premises used in refutation."[212] In the *Theaetetus*, I believe Socrates engages in *psychagogia* with both Theaetetus and Theodorus, leading them towards the realization that it is only through dialectic that they might grasp knowledge, if only for a moment.

`The 'Outer Dialogue' (142a – 143d)

At first glance, the prologue, a scant two Stephanus pages, does not seem to contain any philosophical insight if 'philosophical insight' is identified with contributing to 'Platonic epistemology.' It has traditionally been seen as a charming dedication to a fallen comrade before 'getting to it' – discussing philosophical doctrines concerning knowledge and ontology. Paying tribute to Theaetetus could be the reason for the dialogue's frame. Still, it is doubtful that Plato would have written a frame that was not tied to the main dialogue in some substantial manner. In any event, in applying the hermeneutical principle and adopting Thesleff's pedimental assumption, we must ask how it contributes in the procession to the highpoint of the dialogue – the 'digression' about philosophy.

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[212] Teloh, *Socratic* 23.

In the opening scene, set in Megara, Terpsion meets up with Eucleides, who has just returned from the harbor.[213] There, he informs Terpsion, he witnessed Theaetetus being transported from an army camp in Corinth to Athens. Theaetetus, though badly wounded, wished to return home to Athens rather than stay in Megara. Eucleides mentions that he has heard Theaetetus' praises sung and reflects to Terpsion that after a conversation with Theaetetus, Socrates remarked that Theaetetus would certainly become famous, if he lived to adulthood.[214] Theaetetus, Eucleides says, has lived up to Socrates' prophecy. Terpsion inquires as to the specifics of the conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus, and we learn that Eucleides did not witness the conversation, but had Socrates recount the conversation to him, which he then wrote down in full, making several trips to Athens to be certain he got it right.[215] He went to extremes to be sure that he had the story exactly as Socrates told him, for he checked his written account with Socrates several times. Eucleides offers to have the written version of Socrates' conversation with Theaetetus read to Terpsion; Eucleides either cannot remember the conversation in full, or he does not trust his memory. The dialogue is thus "authored" by Eucleides, and though the manuscript is ostensibly a record of Socrates' narration,

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[213] The proem is most likely set in the spring of 391 according to Nails; see 275-278. Guthrie, believing it a tribute to a recently dead Theaetetus, so considers battles at Corinth. There are two candidates. One battles occurred around 394 and the other in 369. Guthrie reports that most scholars place the date at 369/7. See Guthrie, *History* 62-63.

[214] John Anton notes that Theaetetus, while becoming a famous mathematician, did not become a great leader, such as a philosopher-king. I speculate that this is most likely due to lack of training in dialectic; as this dialogue takes place when Theaetetus is a young boy and Socrates is put to death soon after, Theaetetus lacked the educator that could have moved him beyond mathematics.

[215] Nails reports that "Gellius (*NA* 7.10) … adds that, when Athens was hostile toward Megara, Eucleides dressed as a woman so he could avoid arrest when walking back and forth to Athens to see Socrates" (145). For Plato's audience the level of determination would have been noted, for Eucleides to disparage himself by dressing as a woman.

Eucleides has taken the liberty of editing out the "I said" when Socrates spoke and the "he said" when Theaetetus or Theodorus spoke. Just as Plato writes dialogues in which there is no character Plato and so writes himself out of the dialogue, Eucleides writes both himself as the author and Socrates as the narrator out of the text.

John McDowell, in his commentary on *Theaetetus*, remarks, as many other scholars do, that although it is not unusual among Plato's dialogues for the main dialogue to be embedded within a dialogue frame, "*Theaetetus* is unique in that the embedded main dialogue is in dramatic, not narrative, form."[216] Through the Megarians' conversation, the frame narrative strategically positions several concepts for further exploration in the remainder of the dialogue: the issues of writing, reading, recollection and understanding, to say nothing of the death of Socrates and of Theaetetus. These issues of writing, reading, recollection and understanding are not minor issues, despite the fact that contemporary philosophers often treat them as such. That they should appear to be unimportant to contemporary philosophers simply underscores the fact that for us, reading and writing are so familiar and so taken for granted, that we fail to consider the material and cultural differences in *paideia* between fifth and fourth century BCE. Today, writing is used in every sector of our society, from communicating information to storage of information.

To modern day philosophers, the use and significance of writing has become transparent, as the outermost ring, something we take for granted, even going so far as to label oral cultures 'pre-literate'. Illiteracy is regarded as a problem and a disadvantage for full participation in our culture, though the illiterate person undoubtedly mastered oral

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[216] McDowell 113.

communication – or sign language. Part of what is not captured in written texts is the performative aspect of language – an aspect which is readily present in oral communication. J. L. Austin identifies sentences that *do things* as performative utterances: that the utterance is itself the action; for example, by saying 'I do" when asked 'Do you swear to tell the truth …' you have performed the action with the utterance. 'I do' is not a report of the action; it is the action itself.[217] In archaic Greece, writing was a supplement to oral practices of communication and information preservation. We need to remind ourselves that the attitudes towards writing and reading in archaic and classical Greece were quite different; it is unlikely that the ability to read and write were widespread in the fifth and fourth centuries, and even more dubious that silent reading was a common practice. The first mention on record of a solitary reader reading a text for the sake of enjoyment alone is in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 BCE); reading and listening was, in archaic and even classical Greece, a shared experience – at least, for the audience. [218] The role of the reader was separate from that of an audience member.

Svenbro talks of a gap between a reader reading a text aloud and an actor performing memorized lines, stressing that the actor is not reading: "they may have read the text to memorize it, but during the performance their voices replace the text, conspicuously absent from the stage."[219] Moreover, reading a text aloud meant that the

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[217] See J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Harvard UP: Cambridge, 1962).

[218] See Harris 13, and G. M. A. Grube, "How Did the Greeks Look at Literature?" Lectures in memory of Louise Taft Semple: second series, 1966-1970, ed. C. G. Boulter et. al., (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press for the University of Cincinnati, 1973).

[219] Svenbro, Interior 371.

reader was subjugating himself to the author; a performer does not suffer that same

binding: "a reader's voice simply does not have the autonomy of the actor's voice."[220]

Note that in of both types of speech acts the audience members are considered passive.[221]

In classical Greece, reading was an activity fit for slaves because to speak others' words

was to turn oneself into an instrument of the author, thus submitting oneself to a status of

powerlessness.[222] The author dominates the passive reader. Thus it is the slave who

reads the words Eucleides has written – that were, originally, the words of Socrates. That

a slave is made to read Eucleides' transcription of Socrates' conversation is predictable

and conventional. But in the *Theaetetus* this reading aloud may have an additional

purpose. Tarrant attributes this shifting of authorial voice to the structure of oral

narratives:

> In the *Theaetetus* the slave simply reads aloud, while the author sinks into the
> audience, thus allowing the words and arguments themselves to have their own
> independent effect upon his friends and colleagues. In allowing the slave to read
> he is allowing the book to speak for itself he is testing its ability to be released
> into the public domain, and thus to speak to others as well.[223]

The issue of writing is one of the most important philosophic issues about the Platonic

dialogues, but our literacy makes that issue disappear. For the ancient Greeks, the

performative aspect of language could not be replaced by written words. Because

reading was seen as emasculating, the use of written testimony in court was frowned

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[220] Svenbro, Interior 372.

[221] Svenbro suggests that "the passivity of the reader is modeled on the passivity of the spectator" (Interior 373). The reader is not in control of his speech, but is the instrument of another, of the text.

[222] Svenboro, *Phrasiklea* 189. Tarrant notes that "The slave thus plays the strange role of a solo actor, giving animation to all part of the drama in the presence of the playwright and his friend" (133).

[223] Tarrant 132-133.

upon. Writing was incomplete without a voice; the "purpose of writing … was to produce and to control a deferred oral statement."[224] Written contracts required witnesses, which implied "an agreement was built up partly from the memory and scrutiny of the witnesses, partly through the written document."[225]

As Tarrant remarks, written works are likely to involve a more complicated structure if the work is not committed to preserving an oral narrative.[226] Certainly, this is indicated by Eucleides' transposition of narrative to direct speech. But even as direct speech, the framed narrative displays features of oral narrative and the frame story holds this tension of an oral versus a written narrative. As Socrates protests in the *Phaedrus,* a failure of texts, and learning from texts, is the motionlessness of written words; the preference of motion to motionless is reflected in the *Theaetetus*, too, at 153b. Even though a person wrote the text (or transcribed it), it is impossible to converse (sanely) with a text in order to determine if one has understood what the author was attempting to communicate.[227] A problem of language is that it, and consequently the inferences drawn from it, is open to error. Conversing in speech accommodates the fact that language is open to revision, to correct errors in understanding a hearer can ask the speaker for clarification or elucidation - one can ask as a midwife. There is no midwife when dealing with texts, for their author is not present for questioning. In the beginning of *Theaetetus*,

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[224] Svenbro, Interior 367. *Nomos* "is originally conceived as a 'reading aloud,' and thus as a reading voice" (Svenbro, "Interior" 372 fn. 20).

[225] Thomas, *Literacy* 89.

[226] Tarrant 139-140.

[227] The assumption, here, is that Plato values *understanding* over and above other types of knowledge. Understanding is best achieved when the one has a responsive partner in the learning process.

we learn that Eucleides makes several trips to Athens for the purpose of writing down the precise words of Socrates' conversation with Theaetetus; however, Tarrant points out that "one recognized feature of oral composition is the tendency to repeat something with variation."[228] Despite Eucleides' obsession with writing the *precise* words, it is unlikely that Socrates tells the tale using the same words every time, as if he were no more than a voice recorder. What Socrates conveys is *meaning* – and exhortation – something that Eucleides may fail to grasp in his eagerness to capture, instead, the exact words. The 'opposition' that may be observed in the outer structure, between meaning, or understanding, and precision, is echoed in the dialogue by the use of mathematicians as interlocutors. Just as it may be more precise to represent propositions, arguments, even speakers as symbols (i.e. 'A' and 'B') that precision is aimed at capturing a logical structure, not the underlying 'messy' inferences that convey meaning.

Plato's text, as opposed to Eucleides' text, puts together both the transcription and the transcriber, calling attention to the dramatic elements of the dialogue, perhaps indicating that it is the meaning and exhortation, and not the words, that is important. Due to Plato's melding of transcription and transcriber into dialogue, more, rather than less, of the meaning of the words are captured by the portrayal of actions, events, and speakers. Plato appears to be gently injecting humor to the transcription process by pointing out Eucleides' weaknesses as a philosopher. Eucleides was the founder of an Eleatic school of thought that "denied potentiality and had recourse only to *logos* in

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[228] Tarrant 139. See also Havelock, *Preface* 72-3.

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rejecting all phenomena."[229] Eucleides hears but may not understand; he preserves bare

words but not necessarily their meaning. He memorizes but misremembers. Eucleides

repeats the words of Socrates but it is not clear that he *understands* what the words mean,

when taken as a whole. As a whole, the sum is greater than the parts; the meaning behind

the words can only make sense as a unity, as a whole – the parts alone are just random

names. For the Megarians, "language itself becomes an issue and is subject to

revision."[230] Ironically, the Eleatic-minded Eucleides is a link between the past, present,

and future; the Eleactics believed that there could be no motion, either temporal or

spatial. Eucleides, in the 'present,' has a slave read a dialogue Eucleides recorded in the

past before the death of Socrates – and Theaetetus, the prominent interlocutor in the

dialogue, is going to die in the near future. The irony in the dialogue's frame abounds,

for though we are told that Socrates related the event to Eucleides and Eucleides writes

down Socrates' words, Eucleides proceeds to efface Socrates as author of the text, but

notice Plato always does that to himself. So how should we view the scribe, Eucleides?

He is neither the author nor the reader, but stands in between the two as a seer stands

between the divine and the individual seeking prophecy.

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[229] Seth Bernadete, *Plato's* Theaetetus*: Part I of The Being of the Beautiful* (1984 Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) I.84; See Diogenes Laertius II 106-12 (105). Aristotle says: "There are some who say, as the Megaric school does, that a thing 'can' act only when it is acting, and when it is not acting it 'cannot' act, e.g. that he who is not building cannot build, but only he who is building, when he is building; and so in all other cases. It is not hard to see the absurdities that attend this view" (*Metaphysics* IX.3 1046b30-1047a20).

[230] Harrison 112. Evidently the Megarians attempted to do away with the copulative *esti*, according to Aristotle *Physics* I.2 185b28-32: "So some … were led to omit 'is', others to change the mode of expression and say 'the man has been whitened' instead of 'is white', and 'walks' instead of 'is walking', for fear that if they added the word 'is' they should be making the one to *be* many – as if 'one' and 'being' were always used in one and the same sense." The audience listening to the dialogue would be certain to catch the implications of the Megarians involved in the dialogue.

Hayden Ausland suggests that an outer dialogue is meant to increase audience involvement for "by observing a fictional surface dialogue about a hypothetical earlier dialogue we by analogy contemplate a further living dialogue about one or another of these."[231] Taking Ausland's suggestion, I propose that the prologue of the *Theaetetus* points to an educational purpose for the audience *of* the dialogue; that by extension, the purpose of the *Theaetetus* – of any Platonic dialogue – is to bring the conversation to the audience so that they might discover the answers for themselves. The dialogues are pedagogical works, and the *telos* of the works is increased understanding in a topic or a discussion. Plato does not desire his audience to remain passive, like the slave reading Eucleides' transcription. Plato does not attempt to subjugate his listeners; by composing a dialogue, by extending the conversation to the listeners, Plato is inviting the audience members to participate – in both the inquiry and the ethical life.

The dialogue is set grimly before Socrates faces the indictment by Meletus – in fact, the dialogue ends on that note – and thus the entire dialogue is shadowed by the impending death of Socrates. There is no way to know precisely why Plato chose to set the dialogue before that event, but there are a few things that are perhaps so reasonable so as to escape the realm of idle speculation. First, it is worthwhile to ask how Socrates, the philosopher of the *Apology,* compares with the philosopher described in the *Theaetetus*. Secondly, with Socrates' death looming in the future and the many references to parentage and offspring in the dialogue, it seems right to see one aspect of the dialogue as addressing whether or not the young Theaetetus is a suitable replacement for Socrates: can Theaetetus be Athens next gadfly? Finally, for the audience of the dialogue, it lends

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[231] Ausland 387.

a sense of urgency to the dialogue in general and the comparison of the attorney to the philosopher in particular. It seems clear that the audience of the dialogue is meant to have the trial and death of Socrates in mind as they hear this dialogue – in fact, it is imperative that they make connections between the dialogue and the historical facts.

The parallel between the appearances of Theaetetus and Socrates contributes to a reinterpretation of the death of Socrates as patriotic. From the discussion of the Megarians, we might infer that since Theaetetus was dying due to wounds he earned in the military – surely a patriotic death – that we can infer that Socrates, too, dies a patriotic death, though he dies for the *polis* as a philosopher and not a soldier. Plato here seems to be extending the concept of patriotism beyond dying for Athens on the battlefield, for Socrates dies for Athens' *paideia* by portraying Theaetetus as someone on the road to becoming a philosopher – a Guardian – and Socrates as a philosopher, in contrast to Theodorus, the mathematician.[232] But what is the process that will take Theaetetus from the level of mathematics to that of philosophy, i.e. from the purely theoretical to the existential? The answer seems to be within the prologue: the midwife, wielding the art of dialectic.

The Midwife of the Inner Dialogue (143d -151d)

He explains to those assembled that much as his mother was a midwife to women, he is a midwife to men, delivering them of ideas. In declaring himself a midwife, Socrates claims that he himself is barren, unable to conceive – a claim that matches with his usual claim of ignorance. Socrates' midwifery is also an art that distinguishes "the

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[232] In the *Crito* Socrates stresses that to do anything (like escape) other than die would be apolitical, or unpatriotic.

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true from the false offspring" – truth from falsehood (150b). This is an apt description of Socratic *elenchus*, wherein Socrates generally leads his interlocutors to realize their beliefs are logically inconsistent and that should, but often does not, cause the interlocutor to reject the belief as falsehood. But a midwife has a skill other than the abilities to determine if they ought to induce a birth or a miscarriage as well as to deliver a baby safely, and that skill is matchmaking. A true midwife knows which two people will bring forth the best offspring.

Socrates often complains when interlocutors make an appeal to authority, by reciting what others have said and not their own beliefs. In the *Protagoras*, when Protagoras realizes the first logical trap Socrates has allowed him to walk into, he protests, claiming, "What does it matter? If you like, let us assume that justice is holy and holiness just" (331c). Unable to respond, he appeals to Socrates to simply continue as if they had managed to reach an agreement on the subject. Socrates' reply is poignant: "It isn't this 'if you like' and 'if that's what you think' that I want us to examine, but you and me ourselves" (331c). In other words, the discussion cannot uncover any truth unless both Socrates and Protagoras are engaging each other as they engage themselves. Gifford agrees with the importance of the many instances that Socrates chides the interlocutor that it is their *selves* they should examine, to obtain any truth:

> …a main goal of Socratic questioning is to reveal the quality of an interlocutor's life … it is in this dialectical form of argumentation that he himself mimetically replicates in the dialogues (however much he may modify it for dramatic ends of his own.[233]

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[233] Gifford 46.

Indeed, it is the willingness to examine one's self that Socrates requires of the interlocutor. The self-knowledge gained from the dialectical experience with Socrates may not be of any help in putting into words a definition of whatever concept they are discussing, but it *should* put them in a better position to put the concept into *practice*. It provides the grounds for the possibility of virtue, both moral and intellectual virtue. The problem is what *paideia* will bring a person to virtue – the answer is obviously philosophy. In the *Theaetetus* the concern, I argue, is clearly with the epistemic virtues – and these virtues are specific to *philosophers*; philosophers must know, inquire, and live in the right way. This can be seen in the moral character of Theaetetus and the guiding question of the dialogue. Theaetetus is already a youth of good moral character, according to Theodorus.

Michael Stokes writes that in order to take the dialogue form seriously we must take the characters of the dialogues seriously, and that "includes examining the constraints placed upon them by the context in which they speak."[234] This means both the constraints of the character – who and what they are – and the constraints of the actual conversation with Socrates. Any action that the historical personage makes in life is taken to follow from the beliefs and desires expressed in the dialogues.

While it is not novel to consider the *Theaetetus* as a dialogue about the philosopher, my interest lies in not only assuming that common conclusion, but examining what it is the external audience is to learn from the dialogue, in the context of learning what is required of the philosopher. In the *Theaetetus*, we are able to see what is

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[234] Michael C. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations: Drama and Dialectic in Three Dialogues* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.) 32.

particular to the goals and the practice of philosophy through its comparison to other

epistemic practices, how the practice works, the kind of person a philosopher is, and the

way of life a philosopher leads, as well as the way a philosopher dies. In the case of

Theaetetus, the manner of his death is addressed in the very beginning of the dialogue.

By placing the death *first*, in a manner that demands attention from the audience, Plato

may be giving tribute to Theaetetus, as many commentators have suggested. But the end

of the transcribed dialogue taking place right before the event of the *Euthyphro* and

subseqently the *Apology*, suggests a significance to the concept of death – and elevating

the prologue, with its references to both Socrates' and Theaetetus' death, above a

laudatory tribute to an admired colleague. Death may be a physical representation of the

problems with the first definition, that knowledge is perception. The knowledge of the

philosopher extends beyond the 'realm' of physical perception, into the furthest reaches

of the abstract.

Chapter Five

Knowledge and Ignorance

I have argued above that the fourth century was marked with a specific

conception of *sophos*, one that stresses successful public speaking – that is, public

speaking that sways and influences other citizens – as a criterion. In the *Theaetetus*, as

well as other dialogues, Plato subverts the meaning of *sophos* through a critique of

knowledge-yielding practices, in order to establish the life and practice of a philosopher.

Through a discussion of the meaning of 'knowledge,' Socrates shows that truth, or the

failure to reach truth, is a direct result of the *practice* that yields that 'knowledge.'

Indeed, any knowledge-yielding practice requires that the learner possess particular

virtues, and it is those virtues, as well as those practices, that fail to meet Plato's standard

of embodied virtue: Socrates. In the other aporetic dialogues, it has been argued that

Socrates exemplifies the virtue under discussion in both word (λόγῳ) and deed (ἔργῳ):

the *Charmides* shows him as temperate, the *Laches* shows him as courageous, the

Euthyphro shows him as pious, and so on and so forth.[235] In the *Theaetetus* we have a

perplexing situation, if we wish to extend this trend among aporetic dialogues to include

the *Theaetetus*: the 'virtue' in the *Theaetetus* is knowledge and Socrates is well known

for his professions of ignorance. How, then, can Socrates exemplify knowledge when he

himself denies having it and the dialogue itself ends in *aporia*, irresolution to the

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[235] Though, technically, the virtue in both word and deed is in both cases a type of action. In the *Laches* we are told of Socrates' courage in battle, and we see that he is courageous in inquiry. The latter is a different *type* of action, one that is expressed in discourse and cannot be expressed otherwise, and so I will refer to it as virtue in word.

question? As we, and Plato's intended fourth century audience, are aware, Socrates' only

claim to knowledge is that he does not know: he claims to know that he knows not. How

can Socrates *embody* knowledge in the same manner that Socrates embodies *sophrosūne*

or *andreia*, in both words and actions? One can be courageous or temperate in words and

deeds, it is easy to see, but it is not so easy to see in the case of knowledge. If, however,

knowledge is characterized by *Socratic knowledge*, a profession of ignorance of what one

knows they do not know, then one can be knowledgeable in word and deed, through a

display of epistemic virtue. The profession of ignorance is a necessary, though not

sufficient, condition for a successful inquiry to occur; it requires a certain humility that

indicates disinterest in power or winning. It shows an interest in Truth. To be

knowledgeable in word and deed, then, is to *inquire* in a particular way, one that requires

the speaker to have epistemic virtue.

Knowledge as Species (143d – 151d)

The transcribed dialogue opens with Socrates inquiring if Theodorus has come

across exceptional Athenian youth – which, of course, Theodorus has. Theodorus praises

the boy in everything but his appearance – in appearance, Theaetetus looks rather like

Socrates.[236] Socrates uses this claim of similarity to launch into a discussion of the nature

of knowledge. Theaetetus' first response is to enumerate the sciences – geometry,

astronomy, mathematics – and adding to this list, crafts such as cobbling. Theaetetus

appears to be making the same mistake all of Socrates' aporetic interlocutors make on

their first attempt – answering with an example, an instance of the concept under

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[236] Theaetetus' form is similar enough to Socrates' form that the two might be mistaken for each
other from a distance.

discussion. His answer is also tied to personal experience, as seen in *Laches*, *Euthyphro*,

and other aporetic dialogues, for he begins his enumeration with what the subjects he is

learning from Theodorus, a not unimportant point as the dialogue unfolds. Socrates

gently shows him the error in attempting to form a definition from instances, and then

declares him "pregnant." When Socrates proposes to deliver Theaetetus' idea concerning

knowledge and Theaetetus offers the definition of 'knowledge as *aisthesis*,' Socrates

proceeds to refute the definition in the context of the *sophoi* with whom he identifies it,

i.e, in the context of practices of *paideia*.

Theaetetus has been training with Theodorus in the subjects of mathematics,

geometry, and astronomy. Of course, none of these subjects are the highest possible

object of knowledge, that which is revealed in the pure science of dialectic, but

considering what Socrates says in the *Republic* about the training of the guardians, these

three subjects stand close to philosophy. When Theaetetus' first attempt to define

knowledge is lacking, for it is only a list of instances of knowledge, Socrates offers an

analogous definition of clay (147c-d) so that Theaetetus might better understand how to

answer. In return, Theaetetus tells Socrates about a problem he and Socrates the younger

were attempting to solve. Following a demonstration by Theodorus that was intended to

show a "point about powers" (147d), the two boys attempted to define 'power'

(*dunamis*).[237] This is an example of "a transformed *dialegesthai*," writes P. Christopher

Smith, that is, "not as 'talking' something 'through' in ordinary word names, but as

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[237] "Theaetetus speaks in the manner typical of geometers of numbers 'arising,' as if the subject matters of mathematics were locked in a dynamic process… Socrates aids Theaetetus to appreciate that the 'perception' involved in mathematics is not sense-perception and that the intelligible objects of mathematics have a different ontological status from objects of sense" (Ronald Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge: A Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus* (Cranbury: Associated UP, 1992) 71).

'sorting out,' by collection into a genus (*genos*) and division according to species (*eidê*), some preconceived thing in its relationships to other preconceived things."[238] Theaetetus' description of his solution to the *dunamis* problem seems to rely heavily on diagrams and visual cues, as would be expected from a mathematician's pupil.[239] Socrates advises Theaetetus to "Try to imitate your answer about powers …now I want you in the same way to give one single account of the many branches of knowledge" (148d).[240] Theaetetus' next attempt is then made using the mathematician's method, the transformed *dialegesethai* – and, of course, it fails to satisfy the conditions of the philosopher.

The philosopher inquires for the purpose of revealing truth. Truth is the object of the practice of philosophy – but it is a particular *type* of knowledge that only a philosopher, one who possesses appropriate epistemic virtue and practices philosophy, one who *lives the philosophic life,* can pursue. Truth is not necessarily the property of a proposition, and philosophy is not, or not merely, the formulation of propositions. Communicating what philosophy is – a way of living – requires at least dramatic embodiment. All that is carried out in linguistic discourse – what is communicated in philosophy – also requires embodiment. If the *Theaetetus* is about what it is to be a philosopher – which includes the practice of philosophy – then the question 'what is knowledge?' has a context: what is knowledge if one's goal is to establish the practice of

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[238] P. Christopher Smith, "Between the Audible Word and the Envisionable Concept: Re-Reading Plato's Theaetetus After Gadamer," *Continental Philosophy Review* 33.3 (2000): 327-44. 329.

[239] Smith 329.

[240] As usual, Socrates tailors his discussion to the individual he is speaking with, in this case, advising Theaetetus to attempt to answer in a manner with which he is comfortable and accustomed.

philosophy? In the dialogues, philosophy is shown to reveal non-propositional (and in many cases inarticulable) concepts.

The *Theaetetus* presents misconceptions of knowledge in Athenian society, and how those misconceptions are tied to political practices, which are bolstered by practices of *paideia*. Knowledge is typically conceived as perception– but this is wrong. Knowledge can not be perception nor can knowledge be the *doxa* that is a product of debates in the democratic *polis*.[241] Since the practices of sophistry and poetry produce the conception of knowledge as relative and democratic, they should not be standard practice. Philosophy is a type of discourse that allows for open-ended investigation; it is a dynamic *process* that does not have an assumed end, unlike debate in the *polis*. *Endoxa*, 'received belief(s)', is the starting point for rhetorical *pistis*, which is opposed to the self-evident *arche* of mathematical *apodeixis*. A debate conducted by *sophoi* presents the speaker's position and then contrives, through rhetoric, argument, and emotional persuasion, to 'win over' the audience. A debate and sophistic speech or dialectic is always, first and foremost, about winning, about power, about skill in persuasive technique. It is not aimed at establishing truth: the performative aspect of sophistry prevents it from being a truth-seeking practice. The performative aspect of poetry does the same; moreover, the performative aspect becomes the *reason* for the practice of poetry. Poetry (re)presents events and characters from history and myth, creating a

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[241] See Aristotle, *Rhetoric.*

pleasurable experience for the audience, an experience in which they can forget their own troubles.[242]

Knowledge as *Aisthesis* (151d – 186e)

Theaetetus' second definition of knowledge is that it is perception (*aisthesis*). On one level, attempting to define knowledge as perception answers a challenge to Plato's conception of philosophy. The knowledge of the philosopher extends beyond the 'realm' of physical perception, into the furthest reaches of the abstract. If sense perception is knowledge, then appearances are all that is. There would be no need to look for a greater truth; no need for philosophy. The good life is then comprised of whatever each person conceives it to be and the *polis* is left without clear direction, wallowing in the opinions of the moment (*endoxa*). The discussion in the *Theaetetus* makes clear to the fourth century audience the problems involved in defining knowledge as perception, and implies that any practice resulting in perception can not be the 'answer' the *polis* needs: a lasting true standard. It can not provide principles for the Good life.

When examined from the perspective of a fourth century citizen, the *Theaetetus* is, as most of the aporetic dialogues seem to be, about defining philosophy as a new standard of *paideia*. In particular, this dialogue highlights the differences between the practice of philosophy and that of mathematics, as evidenced by the choice of interlocutors. However, the first definition of knowledge is arguably *not* about mathematics; and the lengthy discussion that knowledge is *aisthesis* seems to be more about democratic knowledge and traditional conceptions of a *sophos*. Designating

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[242] As Smith points out, this is key because poetry calls things into presence for the listeners for the first time, rather than reminding them of preconceived realities.

knowledge as perception allows for Plato to accomplish several things. First, separation of the practice of philosophy from the practice of the poets, the sophists, and the Presocratics – from their language of word-names. Secondly, this distinction draws attention to the failure of mathematics to completely devote itself to abstract, *a priori* reasoning; and thirdly, it draws attention to and deals with the common opinion of many Athenian citizens. *Aisthesis* indicates the problem with mathematics as well, viz. its reliance on diagrams – or the staticity of sight, at least for puposes of *paideia*, as we see in the *Meno*. Geometry concerns figures that have spatial dimensions, albeit ideal spatial dimensions.

It is evident, when one situates the dialogue in its historical and cultural context, that Socrates' response to Theaetetus' suggestion that 'knowledge is perception' is a response that is meant to provide an opening of the practices of *paideia* to criticism. Thus, Socrates conflates Theaetetus' definition with Protagorean relativism, that 'man is the measure of all things.' Protagoras, we see, is to represent the sophists, the class of educators who were mostly not Athenian but foreigners, and who educated the *mekarion* in virtue, or anyone willing to pay a hefty fee. In the *Protagoras*, Plato has the character of the name argue that all the wise men before him were, in fact, sophists and so it is fitting that in the *Theaetetus*, too, Protagoras is grouped together with Heraclitus, Empedocles, Epicharmus and Homer.

Understanding what these *sophoi* have in common and what Plato found objectionable about their positions will inform us of what Plato thinks philosophic *paideia* ought to be. Most of the *sophoi* listed speak to a world of change, of becoming – the world that we are able to *perceive*. All claim (or, others claim for them) that their

work is an instance of *paideia*. Rather than addressing Theaetetus' definition in an abstract manner, Socrates grounds the definition in terms of instances of *sophoi*, each of whom represents a particular practice of *paideia* and yet each one of these practices grounds Truth in a world of flux. What is common to all is the implications for knowledge that emerge from their practices.

The structure of the argument for knowledge as perception (*aisthesis*) has an introduction and two main refutations, interspersed with a 'digression' about the nature of the philosopher. Upon Theaetetus answering 'knowledge is perception' Socrates immediately relates the definition to Protagoras' doctrine: "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, and of things which are not, that they are not" (152a). Using the example of wind, an object that does not exist except as a perception, in a few brief moves Socrates equates 'perceiving' with 'appearing;' the definition, with substitution, is now 'knowledge is appearance.' This, in turn, leads to the inclusion of …

> … all wise men of the past … Let us take it that we find on this side Protagoras and Heraclitus and Empedocles; and also the masters of the two kinds of poetry, Epicharmus in comedy and Homer in tragedy. For when Homer talked about 'Ocean, begetter of gods and Tethys their mother', he made all things the offspring of flux and motion (152e).

The inclusion of these *sophoi* indicates the problem with the definition of knowledge as perception is tied up in the problem with public discourse, *paideia*, and the implications the definition has for morality. Their conception of the 'world of becoming' is damaging, in particular, because of the authority these *sophoi* held over the general population as well as other *sophoi*. These *sophoi* are present in the *Theaetetus* for the same reason they are included in other dialogues: Plato is attempting to appropriate the term philosophy for

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a practice of *paideia* that stresses universal truth over temporary spectacles of appearance; a practice that examines the eternal divine and not the immediate now.

This is a problem with these 'fluxers,' for neither truth nor knowledge can be grounded in perception. Philosophers, after all, love the sight of truth, not of sights and sounds (*Rep.* 475d), whether of the sensible world or the poetic realms. The changing sights and sounds catch the eye, and perhaps even the imagination; certainly, they catch the appetites, which come and go as does truth and knowledge in a democratic city. Socrates' combination of these *sophoi* serves to demonstrate that the problem with the definition of knowledge as *aisthesis*, and the ensuing problematic implications, is a problem that reaches to the very heart of Hellas, for it is a problem entrenched in Homer.

The poet and his audience inhabit a world of sights and sounds, one which Socrates tells us in *Republic* 10, is even less stable than the ordinary sensible world. The poet need not understand the world of which he sings, or the sensible world that it imitates; the poet needs only to capture its look and feel. Homer is chosen to represent the tragedians because of the authority and the established role his poetry held in archaic *paideia*, which Socrates also documents in *Republic* X. In Homer, memory (*aletheia*) comes from the muses; whatever stability knowledge has, it has because of the Muses. Even the muses move and change and perform, as Hesiod, who is paired with Homer in *Republic* Books II and III, shows us in the opening twelve lines of the *Theogony*:

> Let us begin our singing from the Helikonian Muses
> Who possess the great and holy mountain of Helikon
> And dance there on soft feet by the dark blue water
> Of the spring, and by the altar of the powerful son of Kronos;
> Who wash their tender bodies in the waters of Permessos
> Or Hippokrene, spring of the Horse, or holy Olmeios,
> And on the high places of Heliokon have ordered their dances

> Which are handsome and beguiling, and light are the feet they move on.
> From there they rise, and put a veiling of deep mist upon them,
> And walk in the night, singing in sweet voices, and celebrating
> Zeus, the holder of the aegis, and Hera, his lady
> Of Argos, who treads on golden sandals …

Hesiod sings from the Muses, those who are tender and soft, and beguile men with their dances – dances which are part of the poetry.[243] They rise from a deep mist – and mist, as we all know, obscures our senses and plays tricks on them.

Of Epicharmus, little is known, though there is evidence to suggest that he was known as the first comic playwright and as a philosopher, but a fragment from Epicharmus reveals that his work, as well, has themes of transience and its implied relativism:[244]

> *A.* In the same way now consider mankind: one grows, another dwindles, and we are all subject to change every moment. But what changes by nature, never remaining in the same state, must therefore be different from that which has suffered alteration. Thus both you and I are not the same men now that we were yesterday; later we are others again and never the same according to the same argument.[245]

Thus, one might argue that a man could not be tried for crimes he committed yesterday on the basis that the man in the present is a different man.[246] It is easy to make the connection to Heraclitus and the theory of flux in the above fragment. Epicharmus implies that identity can not be maintained without the stability of something *beyond*

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[243] Dancing was as much a part of poetry as singing and the playing of instruments.

[244] Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Comedy* (1931 London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1964) 84; "Hippobotus placed him on a list of philosophers which included Thales and Pythagoras."

[245] Norwood 86.

[246] In a footnote, Levett comments that "Epicharmus made humorous use of the idea that everything is always changing by having a debtor claim he is not the same person as incurred the debt" (*Theaetetus* trans. M. J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat, ed. Bernard Williams (Indianapolis: Hackettt, 1992) 15).

appearance. Identity requires an immaterial stability, which may be found in the divine.

For the Greeks, whatever exists, never goes out of existence and is not visible – unless it

chooses to be – is divine. What makes the divine *divine* is that stability that Vernant

attributes to the "divine super-body," which stands in stark contrast to the ephemeral,

congenitally doomed mortal body.[247] The properties of the gods' bodies are the

contraries of mortal bodies and were not, contrary to common opinion, conceived as

anthropomorphic because the human body was used as a model, but just the opposite:

"the human body reflects the divine models the inexhaustible source of a vital energy

when, for an instant, the brilliance of divinity happens to fall on a mortal creature,

illuminating him, as in a fleeting glow, with a little of that splendor that always clothes

the body of a god."[248]

> The mortal body must return and lose itself in the nature to which it belongs, a
> nature that only made the body appear in order to swallow it up again. The
> permanence of immortal beauty, the **stability of undying glory** in its institutions,
> culture alone has the power to construct these by conferring on ephemeral
> creatures the status of the illustrious, the 'beautiful dead.' If the gods are
> immortal and imperishable, it is because, unlike men, their corporeality possesses,
> by nature and even in the very heart of nature, the constant beauty and glory that
> the social imagination strives to invent for mortals when the no longer have a
> body to display their beauty or an existence that can win them glory. Living
> always in strength and beauty, the gods have a super-body: a body made entirely
> and forever of beauty and glory.[249]

But the gods, as portrayed by the poets, have fleeting emotions that give rise to arbitrary

actions, anthropomorphic actions. Perhaps it is the fact of this anthropomorphism that

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[247] Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals* (Princeton, Princeton UP: 1991) 31; or as
Heidegger puts it, "the most beingful beings" (Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave
Allegory and Theaetetus* (Continuum New York, 2002) 124-125.

[248] Vernant, *Mortals* 35-36.

[249] Vernant, *Mortals* 41. Emphasis is mine.

makes the gods suspect in Protagoras' eyes. Among the fragments we have of Protagoras' book – named, ironically enough – *Truth*: "Concerning the gods I cannot know either that they are or that they are not" (DK B4). According to Protagoras, we can not even have knowledge of the gods, calling into question the very possibility of an incorporeal, immortal existence. Without the divine, then man truly *is* the measure. It is this focus on the anthropomorphic characteristics of the divine that obscure what it is that Plato reveals: Plato points to a conception of knowledge and truth modeled on the divine, that deathless 'shining, radiant existence.'

As Socrates presses Theaetetus on the problem with relative terms, Socrates strengthens the bond between perception and flux. Perception, if Protagoras is correct, is unerring – for the perceiver's judgment of his perceptions is always correct for him. There are not, however, any reasons or arguments (*logoi*) given for the judgment. The statement "I believe it is cold" is a subjective statement for no objective truth can follow from it. A perceiver can report his perceptions, and while they are true for him, it is not necessary that they be true for anyone else. It also follows that it is impossible for the perceiver to not know the things that he perceives (160d). Assuming that the world itself is in constant flux, the problem for truth is worsened; it is not just that there is no truth between, or shared by, perceivers, but even subjective truth – truth for the individual perceiver – is called into question. The world become unintelligible, and we cannot trust our own perceptions. The only thing that could persist through flux is *a priori* knowledge: objects that do not have an appearance, objects that are non-sensible, i.e., intelligible objects. Clearly, the world is in a constant state of becoming and we can state with assurance that sensible objects do not persist for eternity. Knowledge, for Socrates

and Plato, must be akin to the "shining radiant existence" of the gods. Thus, our perceptions are not the proper objects of knowledge because perceptions are ephemeral, and perceptions change as the world changes. Moreover, reliance on appearance for description leads to a violation of the law of contradiction. This is seen through Socrates' example of the dice. Six dice on a table are both more and less, depending on whether you add or take away dice from the table (154c). Relational concepts such as greater and lesser, larger and smaller, generate these types of contradictions; four dice are more than three dice and at the same time, less than six dice.[250] In order to resolve the contradiction caused by relational concepts, a kind of cognition that does not rely on appearance is necessary.

There are two types of change: there is relational change, as in the example of the dice, and there is absolute change, as in the example of the size of Theaetetus, whose change from a shorter, younger Theaetetus to a taller, older Theaetetus who grows no more (155b). Everything is in motion – all is becoming and nothing *is* and there is no being – Socrates strives to remove all unity from the theory, to return to what William James called a 'blooming, buzzing confusion.'[251] Next, Socrates moves from sense perception to judgments and considers the judgments of the insane, diseased, and dreamers (157e) – and then having completed melding perception with flux, proceeds to bring objections to the theory and its associated parts.

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[250] Of course, one of the things "Protagoras'" theory may be challenging is the principle of non-contradiction.

[251] Polansky 102. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 462.

The two types of change correlate to the practices of *paideia.* Philosophic

dialectic brings about knowledge that transforms, absolutely, the knower while other

practices create relative changes in the knower, that is, beliefs. But as for knowledge as a

fixed object, there is no room for that sort of knowledge in the doctrine of flux, in

equating knowledge with perception. *Paideia* that affixes Truth to phenomena lapses

into relativism and confusion.

This introduces the second of the two major figures that Socrates refutes: the

Heracliteans. One aspect of the problem with defining knowledge as appearance may be

seen in the ontology of Heraclitus and Empedocles. These two philosophers have been

singled out because their theories of phenomena imply particularly provocative

conclusions for one who shares Plato's concerns about knowledge and truth. Knowledge,

for these *sophoi*, is relegated to descriptions of phenomena and their understanding of

phenomena. Knowledge is predicated on the shifting phenomena that is the world; for

example, Empedocles tells us that

> … these things never cease from constantly alternating, at one time all coming
> together by love into one, and at another time again all being borne apart
> separately by the hostility of strife…in this respect they come to be and have no
> constant life; but insofar as they never cease from constantly interchanging, in this
> respect they are always unchanged in a cycle (DK 25.6).

Heraclitus' ontology represents the world as a constantly changing entity. All that we

can say about our experience is to give a phenomenological account, but as Socrates

ridicules the Heracliteans at 183b, they would have to establish another language in order

to discuss their beliefs and not be hypocritical. *Logos,* when pronounced and heard, has

the status of phenomena. Language fixes a description of phenomena; if the phenomena

are in constant motion, language needs to account for that, somehow. Therefore, the position of Heraclitus and Empedocles make *logos* itself an impossibility.

Nor is there room in the theory of flux for a necessary condition of knowledge: memory. Memory is what allows us to recognize, re-identify and represent what we have perceived; through memory the world of which we are a part is stabilized, and its objects become objects of knowledge. But as we are part of the world of appearances, coextensive with nature, how do we account for the fact that we can fix objects in memory? The answer is dependent on understanding that the Greeks saw nature as intelligent and alive in its own right. Nature, of which we are a part, is alive and intelligible *if one knows how to think about it*. Vernant explains how the Greeks thought of their relationship with nature "Man and his body are embedded in the course of nature, *phusis*, which causes all that is born here below to rise, mature, and disappear …. Man and his body therefore, bear the mark of a congenital infirmity; like a stigma the seal of the impermanent and evanescent is branded on them."[252] Because Man is embedded in the natural world, a soul that is not exactly part of the natural world is necessary for memory. Memory is necessary for knowledge; a timeless soul is necessary for memory.

The *logos* that must accompany true belief is that which talks of what is timeless in the language of the timeless 'is', the answer to the Socratic question 'What is X?' But this *logos* and the knowledge it reveals exceeds our grasp of the world of becoming. In a world of becoming a mortal's knowledge – a philosopher's knowledge – of that *logos* is fleeting and insecure, but we must resist the impulse to comply with what we see and

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[252] Vernant, *Mortals* 31-32.

hear and sense. Protagoras' maxim 'man is the measure' would provide us with a knowledge no less secure and fleeting than what we see when we glimpse the *logos*.

The account – the *logos* – of our beliefs must reveal that knowledge that exceeds our grasp of the world of becoming; the *logos* must be stable, based on the model of the divine. Non-philosophical practices of *paideia* do not reveal; the *logos* they offer is *muthos*, representation, and a narrative that is relativistic. Heraclitus and Empedocles can only give accounts based on the *now* since the world of phenomena is completely changing. Two paradigms were present in the ancient world: that of an ever-changing Heraclitean reality, and the Eleatic world, wherein all that we take for granted, our senses, is deceiving, causing false judgment. Parmenides and Melissus are the only Presocratics that Socrates names who present the possibility of a timeless, unchanging 'is'.

The wise' mean those who are better at determining 'better' or 'worse' from previous argument; Protagoras says things are for every man what they seem to be (*Theat.* 170a); all men believe they are wiser than others in some area, and others are wiser than them in other areas: "You find also men who believe that they are able to teach and to take the lead" (170b). Wisdom is what is true and false judgment results from ignorance. For Protagoras, things are true for every man, as he believes – that the judgment a man makes is true for him. What an individual judges is true only for him; it can be false for everyone else (170d-e). Still, *endoxa* (received opinion) is quite powerful, and that power explains the use of persuasion: the more people that believe X is false, though one person holds X to be true, the more X seems false (171a). If one holds man is the measure, she must admit that while her belief is true, that others who

think that man is *not* the measure have a true belief as well. A contradiction is generated: "man is the measure" is both true and false. At 172a, Socrates shows the relationship between the theory of flux with politics, and that some hold the same view of wisdom as Protagoras:

> "It is in those other questions I am talking about – just and unjust, religious and irreligious – that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it seems" (172b).

Protagorean relativism is, as we all know, paradoxical and self-defeating: the claim that 'all truth is relative' – a universal claim that, if true, makes the claim false. A. A. Long points out that refutation itself is a problem for Protagoras: if he believes all truth is relative there is no point to attempting to defend his belief, just as there is no point to refuting a relativist.[253] Discourse becomes moot; strangely enough, the relativism results in an unchanging and epistemically empty unity. Socrates also makes this criticism against the Heracliteans at 183b, declaring that they would have to establish another language in order to discuss their beliefs and not be hypocritical.

The problem that follows from the *homo mensura* doctrine is that it was the measure for Athenian politics – that justice is simply what the *demos* agrees it is – because all men's opinions or expertise must necessarily be equivalently empty. Justice was, in Homeric times, "a procedure, not a principle or any set of principles."[254] In the fifth century that convention was still in practice. Justice was found in the agreement of

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[253] Alex Long, "Refutation and Relativism in Theaetetus 161-171," *Phronesis: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 49.1 (2004): 24-40.

[254] Havelock, *Greek* 137.

the *demos*, not in adherence to a rationally determined standard; thus, the definition of *sophos* has to do with the power wielded through public speech.

The best thing a man can do, says Socrates later in the dialogue, is to become 'like god,' that is, to become "just and pure, with understanding" (176b). To see becoming just as the best thing a man can do, Socrates implies that there are rational principles to appeal to; thus, "with understanding." Clearly, Socrates does not believe justice is a procedure, which follows naturally from the *homo mensura* principle – that there are no experts. When pressed on the issue, his interlocutors do not agree on the equality of men's opinions (as we see at 178b-e). It is also unlikely that Protagoras believed that all opinions are equal – else there would be no need for his services as an educator.

Theaetetus does recognize that something else is needed to persist through the world of phenomena when he offers that an illiterate person perceives letters – that is, knows the shape and color of the letters – but requires the additional perception of an instructor in letters (163b-c). Yet what is perceived, there, is not perceived by the senses.[255] He agrees with Socrates that "seeing is perceiving" and "sight is perception" (163d).[256] To see is to know; thus, it only makes sense that to perceive is to know. Given the Greek culture's focus on 'the spectacle,' it was common to believe that knowledge was gained through the senses, particularly the sense of sight. But what Theaetetus has realized is that sometimes we "see" with our soul rather than our physical eyes.

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[255] It is natural for Theaetetus to realize that something else is needed for, as Smith remarks, it is mathematics that uses written signs to communicate imperceptible realities.

[256] As I mentioned in an earlier note, the notion that "seeing is perceiving" – if we are equating perceiving with knowing, has its basis in the Greek language. See Snell, 1-22 and 226-245.

Knowledge as perception has two problems (1) the object perceived, an appearance, may be deceiving and (2) the locus of truth is with the perceiver. The second problem has the added implication that it encourages relativism and coincides with the power struggles that took place in public debate. Sense-perception cannot be knowledge and Theaetetus must now offer a different suggestion as to "whatever we call that activity of the soul when it is busy by itself about the things which are" (187). That suggestion is that knowledge is true judgment.

Knowledge as *Doxa Alethēs* (187b—201c)

Theaetetus' suggestion leads to a problem that Socrates has been bothered by before: the problem of false judgment. Socrates begins by bracketing off learning and forgetting in order to concentrate on the idea that one either knows or does not know an epistemic object (188a). The previous discussion revealed the necessity of memory for knowledge, which leads to the problem of false judgment. To get at this problem as well as examine the definition that Theaetetus has put forth, Socrates formulates two models of the soul: a wax tablet and an aviary. These two models allow for a discussion of the nature of knowledge acquisition and retention. The soul, as the receptacle for knowledge, opens a space for the possibility of error, much in the same way a text opens itself to the possibility of error (as opposed to a speaker – who must rely on his fallible perceptions to determine if he is being understood correctly). The reader of a text has no way of knowing whether or not she understands the text – or the author – correctly; she also is unlikely to have access to the author to discuss the text.

If perceptions are directly pressed into the wax how, then, is it possible for a person to make an error, either in believing that one knows what one does not, or

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mistaking what one knows for something else that one knows, etc. (192a-d)? Still within the analogy, Socrates explains that if a person's wax is too hard or too soft, dirty or impure, then a correct corresponding imprint of the perception will not be made. There is the self-evident problem of the unreliability of the senses, and there is the problem of forgetting. Both are causes of error in judgment. But once Socrates has come to the conclusion that false judgment does exist, he calls himself garrulous; he has not yet examined the possibility of an error made in pure thought, without a corresponding perception. In that case, it becomes possible for a man to "know and not know the same objects" (196c) – which is a contradiction and as such, impossible.

But if thinking is "a talk (λόγος) which the soul has with itself about the objects under its consideration" (189e) and a judgment is a statement that is silently addressed to oneself (190a), then perhaps Socrates is suggesting exactly what is enacted by his discussion with Theaetetus. In the *Theaetetus*, we have Socrates in discussion with a younger version of himself. Socrates also carries on conversations between himself and himself posing as Protagoras, or an unnamed person. One gets the feeling that Socrates is, perhaps, having a conversation with himself – his soul – about knowledge. A dialogue, with yourself or another, is in motion. There is no chance of inscribing 'knowledge' into the wax during the dialogue – not until a conclusion is reached (and no conclusion is reached). In the case of the wax block, Socrates expresses a *tabula rosa* model of the mind/soul/person. Knowledge is *inscribed* – so that all we need do is be careful passive listeners, spectators, or readers in order to acquire knowledge. This is the common way that knowledge and knowledge acquisition is thought of – in contemporary times, as attested by the practice of lecturing, and silent solitary reading. It seems that in

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ancient times it was also a common belief that knowledge could be obtained by a passive audience. All knowledge – or opinion – is, as Socrates observes in the *Protagoras*, taken directly into the soul: "you cannot carry teachings away in a separate container. You put down your money and take the teaching away in your soul by having learned it, and off you go, either helped or injured" (*Prot.* 314b). If something is inscribed directly onto the soul without reflection or consideration, without a midwife's dialectic, the resulting inscription is mere opinion. The 'inscription' ought not be left unexamined – even if one passively listens and takes teachings directly into the soul without reflection, dialectic can still reveal and challenge the 'inscription.' Accordingly, the *polis* faced this same issue – *polis andra didaskei.* Inscriptions, physical or otherwise, no longer are left the luxury of remaining untouched – reasons are required to express understanding. Understanding of a concept is a *process*, a process that is represented – and fostered – by Socratic dialectic. One person may believe that they truly understand a concept – but discover that, in expressing it, they do not have the knowledge they thought they had. In trying to make another understand, one's own understanding must be understood.

Judgments are about epistemic objects that one knows or does not know. In order for a judgment to be false, the man must judge an epistemic object that he knows as an epistemic object that he does not know, or vice versa. According to this either/or setup, the possibility for false judgment appears non-existent. Yet we see that Socrates and Theaetetus make false judgments; they catch themselves as they make false judgments, but they make them nonetheless. The action of the dialogue allows a reader or listener to see the process of knowing, ignorance, learning: the making of true and false judgments. How is it that one is able to recognize false judgment? We are given the answer through

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demonstration; by *talking it through* rational discussion, Socrates is able to question each

conclusion in a continual spiral of dialectic, never claiming to know, in fact, espousing

ignorance – until he must leave the conversation.

In order to talk about thinking, a new metaphor is introduced. In this metaphor,

again the soul is represented, this time by an aviary. While the metaphor of the wax

block discusses the errors that may follow from perception, the metaphor of the aviary

discusses errors that may follow from theorizing, such as mathematics, and forming

judgments. How can one know that one does not know, viz., how is Socratic ignorance

possible? In the aviary are many different birds, in various combinations: flocks, small

groups, and solo birds. The aviary is empty when we are young, and gradually fills as we

learn. The birds represent pieces of knowledge. Catching the birds for examination

places a requirement of both activity and active attention to the knowledge acquisition

process. It also represents how easily we are reduced to confusion when we have many

'pieces of knowledge' as well as the difficulty in holding on to a piece of knowledge that

seems to always be struggling to elude our grasp. As Socrates notes, towards the end of

this portion of the dialogue (*Theat.* 200c-d), they need to answer the prior question, 'what

is knowledge,' before attempting to answer 'what is false judgment.' This issue mirrors

the *Meno* – surely they know something about what they do not know.

Indirectly, Socrates critiques the mathematical sciences, for they can 'know' their

subjects, but they apprehend without understanding, without *logos*.[257] Socrates also uses

the example of orators and lawyers to explain that Theaetetus is wrong in thinking that

knowledge is true judgment. The jury can make a true judgment but they do not have

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[257] Scolinov 87.

knowledge. If we think of knowledge as something to collect and hold, like a bird in the hand, and not use or achieve, then we are, in essence, playing the role of jury members.

The wax tablet and the aviary present two models of pedagogy, the first static and the second dynamic. Judgment can be false if the information is not gained in an active investigation that will waylay the possibility of error. This is the necessity behind the philosophic method; avoidance of error. What is distinct about philosophic dialogue is that it engages reason rather than emotion, promotes understanding rather than acceptance. It is teaching rather than persuading – which is the difference between knowledge and true judgment. The jury example that Socrates uses, shows that it is possible to have true judgment and not knowledge. The jury is persuaded by testimony – and implied is the notion that the reporting of an experience is *not* knowledge – of a thing, but without the firsthand experience of the eyewitness, they do not have knowledge.

Socrates' critique of other practices of *paideia* established not only that knowledge is not *aisthesis*, but that knowledge must be infallible and stable.[258] The practices that Socrates critiques – of the *sophos* – show that the character of the 'knowledge' that the practices produce is one of ever-changing flux. Next, Socrates considered the possibility of false judgment …. Showing that knowledge must be true. Between the two discussions, we realize that the truth – and knowledge – that Socrates is searching for must be produced by another practice, the one he is engaged in: philosophy. Finally, Socrates and Theaetetus turn to the last condition for knowledge: *logos*.

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[258] Socrates gives the attributes of infallibility and the stability of eternity when he says "Perception, then, is always of what is, and unerring – as befits knowledge" (152c).

Socrates and Theaetetus turn to a definition that Theaetetus has 'heard' and

Socrates dreamt. Theaetetus had *forgotten* that he had heard of this definition – that

knowledge was true belief with *logos*. Considering the last part of the discussion, it

seems relevant that Theaetetus *forgot* this, for now the external audience has an example

of precisely what Socrates and Theaetetus discussed. Theaetetus knew something but

forgot and so he knew something that he did not know. Socrates (ever the midwife)

causes Theaetetus to remember. This turns to a discussion of 'knowables' and

'unknowables' – objects that we have no *logos* of and therefore no knowledge. With

unknowables defined as objects without *logos*, the previous understanding of ignorance is

undermined. Theaetetus' forgetting no longer means he did not know something he

knew.

At 201c, Theaetetus remembers that someone suggested that knowledge is true

belief plus *logos*. Socrates asks him how it was that this someone distinguished between

knowables and unknowables; when Theaetetus does not recall, Socrates offers 'a dream

for a dream'. He relates a theory of primary elements "of which we and everything else

are composed" that "have no *logos*" (201e). Each element "can only be named" and the

elements are "woven together" to become a *sumplokē* (202a-b). Therefore, "the elements

are unaccountable and unknowable, but they are perceivable, whereas the complexes are

both knowable and expressible and can be the objects of true judgment" (202b). In

Socrates' dream, people said that the primary elements "of which we and everything else

are composed have no account" (201e). These primary elements are nothing besides the

name, neither being or not-being and, Socrates says, "the elements are unaccountable and

unknowable, but they are perceivable, whereas the complexes are both knowable and

expressible and can be the objects of true judgment" (202b). If knowledge is true belief with a *logos*, Socrates has already found an exception: these primary elements have no *logos* and yet it seems we must have knowledge of them in order to have knowledge of anything else. *Logos*, here, means something different from merely 'speech' or 'talk.' It is not clear exactly what *logos* means at this point in the *Theaetetus*. The ambiguity motivates disagreements among scholars as to the meaning of the entire final section of the *Theaetetus*.

If we follow Gilbert Ryle in taking *logos* to mean 'sentence' or 'statement' then to not have a *logos* is to be unable to express the element in a proposition. Gail Fine argues against Ryle's suggestion that *logos* means 'sentence' or 'statement'. Fine argues that the dream theorist's account is sensible only when *logos* is taken to mean account or evidence, the kind that brings knowledge.[259] She circumvents the issue that elements can be described in other ways, that is, sentences may be ascribed to them, and settles on forcing a very modern epistemology onto Plato.[260] The dream theory indicates that elements are unknowable, in stark contrast to both Russell and Descartes who hold a similar theory in order to avoid infinite regress (infinite analyzability) but that their elements may be known non-propositionally (intuited directly). These elements may be named and perceived, but a name is hardly knowledge and perceiving as a source of knowledge has already been refuted. Fine's analysis of the dream theory contains the

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[259] Gail Fine, "Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*," Plato *on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 231-232.

[260] That knowledge includes an account, a modern formulation that is often read back into the *Theaetetus*. I'm not denying the possibility that Plato meant that, because if *logos* does map best to account then clearly scholars that interpret it in this manner are correct. If, however, *logos* does not mean account, Fine's theory (as well as others) doesn't hold water.

following disclaimer: "I do not deny, of course, that in the *Theaetetus* Plato thinks

knowledge requires propositional expression; indeed, I think Plato always assumes that

knowledge is essentially articulate…."[261]

Guthrie conflates the final attempt to define knowledge with the contemporary

definition: "A man knows that *p* … if (*a*) he believes *p*, (*b*) he has adequate evidence for

p, (*c*) *p* is true … knowledge is justified true belief."[262] But, he adds, "there is a

difference in that the modern definition speaks only of knowledge in propositional form

(knowledge of facts) whereas in Plato it is more like knowledge of things, not

'knowledge that' but knowledge with a direct substantival object."[263]

What is common to the aforementioned treatment of *logos* is the assumption that

knowledge can be articulated, but it is by no means obvious this is the case. For example,

Frank Gonzalez maintains that knowledge of certain things in Plato is nonpropositional;

"knowledge of something whose nature or essence cannot be reduced to a set of

properties … it cannot be *articulated* in any proposition."[264] Some objects cannot be

conveyed through proposition, but require analogy, metaphor, (unscientific)

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[261] Fine 231. Here Fine is hedging her bet by equivocating 'propositional expression' and 'essentially articulate' – the set of articulations, utterances, does include non-propositional statements. Gonzalez argues in *Dialectic and Dialogue* that moral knowledge, for Plato, is always going to include a non-propositional component, at the very least. As Plato is essentially concerned with 'moral *paideia'* it stands to reason that moral knowledge is, in the main, the only kind of knowledge of which he is concerned.

[262] Guthrie, *History* 67.

[263] Guthrie, *History* 67.

[264] Gonzalez, *Dialectic* 8.

demonstration – knowing *how*, or as Gonzalez describes it, "what is manifest *without* being describable."[265]

The nonpropositional character of knowledge for Plato is demonstrated in the dialogue form itself. Knowledge is not simply description; the purpose of knowledge is *action*. Success, in terms of knowing, is acting. Dialogue enables people to reach an understanding with themselves and others which provides the basis on which to act. Though the conditions for understanding another speaker or text are never explicitly laid out in Plato's dialogues, they are demonstrated by his use of embodied speakers. Understanding a concept requires a process of negotiation between one 'horizon of understanding' – which is confined and restricted by the tacit assumptions absorbed from a person's culture – and another, resulting in a fusion of horizons. The interactions of the speakers demonstrate that understanding, and knowledge, are gained through a dialectical exposure of assumptions through contradiction. Plato's conception of philosophy is expressed in the fluidity of dynamic interaction, in dialogue. The understanding or knowledge achieved through dialogue is not the type of object that can be pinned to a wall and ogled for years to come, but an object that must be reconstituted anew each time it is considered. Of the latter part of the *Theaetetus,* Hans-Georg Gadamer comments:

> Like all knowing, philosophical knowing is identification of something as what it is and has the structure of recognition, or 'knowing again.' But the object of philosophy is not given in the same way as the object of the empirical sciences. Rather, it is always reconstituted anew, and that occurs only when one tries to think it through for oneself. [266]

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[265] Gonzalez, *Dialectic* 8. Gonzalez is quick to point out that even though a thing is irreducible to a description does not mean it is entirely ineffable.

[266] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980).

Our interaction with the texts of Plato is the same hermeneutical interaction as the characters in the dialogue for the simple reason that Plato chose to write dialogues rather than treatises, to show characters perform concepts rather than present us with clear answers, with propositions. A reader interacts with a text with the same hermeneutical methodology that is demonstrated in the dialogue and thus the structure of the dialogue itself mimics and reflects the hermeneutical content. Rather than reaching propositional definitions, more often than not the characters of the dialogues are left in a state of *aporia*. Our interaction with the text, then, is dialectical, for we are left to further the questioning with ourselves and others.

Plato's dialectical method of instruction, while a universally applicable method, is in practice particular to both the instructor or questioner and to the interlocutors or respondents. The success or failure of this method to achieve its didactic apex of producing virtuous men and virtuous actions also depends on the particularities of the respondents. What is shown in Plato's dialogues is that we understand concepts through dialogue with ourselves and each other – and this is shown negatively, in a failure to achieve knowledge of a propositional definition of a concept. The failure shows only that language and statements are not *enough*.

While a variety of pedagogical methods serve to instruct a person in propositional knowledge, *understanding* is provoked strictly through the philosophic method demonstrated in Plato's dialogues. Still, there is a problem in thinking the dialectical method is all that is required to instruct and ensure understanding. While a dialogue demonstrates how it is possible to provoke understanding in an interlocutor using the

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dialectical method, *aporia* demonstrates that understanding, and incorporation of that type of knowledge, must proceed from the particular individual from a conscious, internal decision to recognize the knowledge that they do and do not know. Once that understanding has been reached, a conscious choice must be made by the interlocutor to keep or reject the understanding he has attained. Socrates' method of inquiry, then, succeeds or fails due to no fault of his or his *method*; it is contingent upon the interlocutor's decision to self-reflect. If he does choose to engage in the self-reflective process, then he should be transformed.[267] *Dialegesthai* with one's self is the necessary self-reflection. Yet not every conversation is a successful dialogue; not every conversation results in a shared understanding or insight between participants.

Although the dialogue ends in *aporia*, one thing has changed: Theaetetus. As the inquiry progresses, so does his skill at participating in the inquiry increase. Theaetetus is learning *something*, though he is not learning the definition for knowledge. Theaetetus is learning to inquire by inquiring; he is learning to philosophize by *doing* and *speaking*, and he is learning via the practice of philosophy. Learning through poetic performance by means listening, absorbing, aping, imitating, but there is little in the way of active engagement. It is intended for a passive receptacle: 'Let the wisdom of the poets fill you!' As Socrates makes quite clear in the *Symposium*, knowledge is not the kind of thing that can be passed like a cup of wine from one person to the next (*Symp.* 175d). What is gained by imitation is not knowledge, but the *appearance* of knowledge. There is no deeper understanding underlying the appearances. What Theaetetus learns is not

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[267] See *Meno* 97e – 98a. Socrates is examining what will tie down knowledge: "To acquire an untied work of Daedaulus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if tied down, for his works are very beautiful" (97e).

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propositional; it is a knowing how, not a knowing that. What philosophy teaches is virtuous inquiry (*episteme*).

At the beginning of the dialogue, Theaetetus is putting his heart into the discussion – he genuinely attempts to answer Socrates' questions. Socrates describes Theaetetus as "inspired" (*Thea.* 154e) and Theaetetus calls himself "giddy" (155c). He hardly contributes to the conversation, either agreeing with Socrates or asking for clarification, and admits confusion (at 157c, 164d). After the 'digression', Theaetetus' intellectual involvement in the conversation increases. Socrates praises Theaetetus for answering him as "one ought – with a good will, and not reluctantly, as you did at first" (187c); Theaetetus encourages Socrates to pursue the question of false judgment if "this appears for any reason to be the right thing to do" for, he reminds him, they are not pressed for time (a quality of the discussion a philosopher holds) (187d). However, Theaetetus is still clearly not the leader in the discussion – Socrates chides him at 189c: "you have not much opinion of me; you don't find me at all alarming." Socrates is still the only one self-reflecting:

> "I should be ashamed to see us forced into making the kind of admissions I mean while we are still in difficulties. If we find what we're after, and become free men, then we will turn round and talk about how these things happen to other people – having secured our own person against ridicule. While if we can't find any way of extricating ourselves, then I suppose we shall be laid low, like sea-sick passengers, and give ourselves into the hands of the argument and let it trample all over us and do what it likes with us" (190e-191a).

Socrates echoes his earlier statement later on in the dialogue:

> "I'm afraid a garrulous man is really an awful nuisance … I'm annoyed at my own stupidity – my true garrulousness. What else could you call it when a man will keep dragging arguments up and down, because he is too slow-witted to reach any conviction, and will not be pulled off any of them? (195b-c)

Theaetetus makes an intellectual contribution in the metaphor of the aviary by suggesting

that some of the pieces flying about the soul are pieces of ignorance (199e). Socrates

hints at the need for experience with his reference to a fable (200e-201a) and finally we

see Socrates has stirred the soul of Theaetetus, for he remembers something a man said to

him, that true judgment with *logos* is what constitutes knowledge (201c-d). Plato's

critique of these other techniques of *paideia* and their ability to bring about an adequate

account of *aletheia* concludes when the final definition of the *Theaetetus* is put on hold as

Socrates and Theaetetus fail to put forth a *logos* that adds anything to true belief. In the

end, as Guthrie writes, Plato shows the need for the divine:

> though he enjoys playing with the indefensible thesis that all knowledge is
> provided directly by the senses … there is for him only one unassailable
> refutation of these theories, which he is saving for the end: the need for *mind*,
> which can go beyond the senses to use its peculiar power of reason, drawing its
> own conclusions from the data which the senses present but cannot interpret.[268]

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[268] Guthrie, *History* 84-5.

Chapter Six

Virtue and Inquiry

I suggested in the previous chapter that the only character in the *Theaetetus* who changes and grows is Theaetetus himself; he is the one benefiting from Socrates' instruction in the dialogue. But in what might Plato be instructing his audience? To answer this question, we need to examine the structure of the dialogue – its physical composition and characters. In a dialogue ostensibly about knowledge, it is safe to assume that the characters stand-in for something to do with the acquisition of knowledge. In this case, the historical context, that is, the debate about what it means to be a *sophos*, an expert at public discourse, provides the orientation for the discussion. Representatives of different types of educational practices are instantiated by the characters: sophistry or rhetoric in Protagoras, traditional *paideia* in the poets, "physical" theories in the Presocratic philosophers, and mathematics or demonstration (*apodeixis*) in Theodorus. Theaetetus represents the aristocratic youth that receive their education through such practices; in a more general sense, Theaetetus represents the future of Athens. Socrates, of course, is a *dialektikos*, representing philosophy through the use of dialectic. What is at stake in this dialogue is what a *philosophos* is, and does, and how he lives his life.

While the internal audience works towards a definition of knowledge, the external audience is instructed in what is *unique* about philosophy as a pedagogical practice, Socrates' *dialegesthai*. It is unavoidable that the audience will compare this dialogue to

other Platonic dialogues they are familiar with, which is likely to include another aporetic dialogue, and it is unavoidable that the audience would ask the question: 'Why does the execution of Socrates' *dialegesthai* have a different tenor in the *Theaetetus* than in the other dialogues?' Both the dramatic action of the dialogue and the content of the discourse exchanged between Socrates and the two mathematicians constitute an instance of pedagogy. What we, members of the external audience, are learning is what is *required* for knowledge – epistemic virtue – even as Theaetetus and the internal audience strive to learn what knowledge is. Even prior to establishing the essence of knowledge, one must have a method for obtaining the answer to the question. Clearly, Plato's method is philosophy and Socrates is his example of a philosopher. But the curiousness of the aporetic dialogues leads one to wonder if it is the *object* of the inquiry that produces the result of *aporia,* or if it is the *subject* involved. Given that objects of inquiry from non-aporetic dialogues such as the *Republic* are similar in nature to the objects of inquiry of the aporetic dialogues, I suggest that the difference in 'epistemic success' – that is, reaching a satisfying conclusion – among dialogues is the purpose, the *telos*, of the dialogue. Aporetic dialogues are not intended to reach a propositional definition; rather, they are intended as a demonstration of *inquiry* that, when conducted in the proper way, leads to the very object under discussion. The aporetic dialogues are explicitly about intellectual virtue, in the sense that they enact a mode of discourse that requires. Obviously Plato's "epistemology" is not modern epistemology, for Plato's epistemology is not concerned with the same things as modern epistemology, at least its dominant formulations. Still there are some topics in contemporary epistemological discussions that echo what we find in Plato.

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We can see in the entirety of the dialogue, if we examine it from the standpoint of the audience, that Plato's epistemology is more akin to what we might call a *virtue* epistemology, an epistemology inspired by contemporary conceptions of virtue ethics. This view of knowledge focuses on the concept of intellectual excellence – how and why we learn and should hold particular beliefs. Contemporary epistemologists who favor this approach see "intellectual virtue is the primary normative component of both justified belief and knowledge, and their concern is with "epistemic evaluation on properties of persons rather than properties of beliefs or propositions."[269] We, the audiences *of* the dialogue, are in a constant state of evaluation when reading or listening to the dialogues. As I argued in Chapter One, Plato engages in dramatic irony, which implies an expectation for the audience to evaluate the characters' words, actions, choices, and lives. The audience is expected to evaluate the statements that the characters make, but they are also in a position to evaluate how the characters conduct themselves in the inquiry. Their conduct has an effect on the success of the inquiry, the length of the inquiry, and the other characters involved in the inquiry; the characters' conduct is a product of their intellectual virtue. One of the lessons learned from the *Theaetetus* is that intellectual virtue is key to being a philosopher.[270]

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[269] Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 3.

[270] In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle – as we know- divides intellectual virtue into *phronesis* and *theoria*. I am suggesting that the intellectual virtue required for productive inquiry is more than those virtues for Plato – the love of truth, for instance, and the appropriate attitude. Aristotle does account for the things that I suggest Plato is bringing out in Socrates' discussions, but it must be remembered that because we do not possess the esoteric teachings of Plato (if there were any) nor the exoteric teachings of Aristotle, that it is unclear how much of Plato's philosophy may be found in Aristotle. Regardless, I am attempting to avoid the approach of reading Plato through Aristotle.

Theodorus, the Mathematician

Theodorus enthusiastically informs Socrates of Theaetetus, who he thinks is "remarkable" and "amazingly gifted" – for all that he looks like Socrates, with a snub nose and bug eyes. Theodorus does not say that Theaetetus is like Socrates in terms of attitude towards inquiry and potential, but this is what Plato's audience would infer. When he calls Theaetetus over, Socrates asks if they should accept Theodorus' judgment, or should they discover whether Theodorus has the expertise required to make a true statement; Theaetetus thinks they need to inquire. Socrates declares that they shouldn't accept any claims that Theodorus makes about their physical similarities but should consider the claims that their souls are similar, for Theodorus is a master of geometry, astronomy, and arithmetic. The assumption here is that Theodorus has expertise (wisdom) in those matters and so it is possible that Theodorus is making an expert claim. It is telling that Socrates discounts Theodorus as possessing expertise in drawing conclusions about physical similarities, in appearance – Socrates examines *every* claim before accepting it as truth. However, Socrates is more concerned with whether Theodorus is an expert about that which can not be perceived with the senses: intellectual and moral characteristics. The question of similarity between Theaetetus and Socrates is never really about their physical characteristics.

Including Theaetetus' teacher, Theodorus, in the dialogue gives the dialogue a feeling of commencement; Theaetetus is graduating from mathematics and moving on to dialectic, from one instructor to another: Theodorus the mathematician to Socrates the philosopher. The metaphor of the midwife helps to indicate this potential commencement – the metaphor evokes the idea of Theaetetus' beginning a new life, a

philosophical life in which he may realize his potential. The mathematical instruction that Theaetetus receives from Theodorus uses demonstration, and this involves visual signs and symbols. It is its dependence on the visual, which exists only in the phenomena, that relegates mathematics to a category of practice that cannot reach truth because the participants are not exercising the necessary epistemic virtues.

Socrates' attempts to have Theodorus take on the role of the sophist are met with fierce evasion. Theodorus may not wish for the wisdom he has to be mistaken for that wisdom that Protagoras claims to possess and disperse through instruction. Theodorus is identified as an expert in geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and music – and these are the subjects that he teaches (or will teach) Theaetetus (145a-c). But what else do we know of the character? Socrates implies with his response to Theaetetus at 145c that he believes Theodorus is a truthful man.[271] He opts out of the forthcoming discussion by claiming unfamiliarity with the discussion and his age makes him unsuitable as an interlocutor – for he will not benefit from the discussion, whereas someone younger would.[272] We do, however, learn that he engages in discussions about geometry; Theaetetus offers that Theodorus was demonstrating powers to both him and the younger Socrates with the use of diagrams (147d). Socrates allows him to bow out of the discussion, though it is interesting to compare his reason, old age, with the conclusion of the *Laches*, where everyone there enthusiastically desires further instruction, regardless of age. Of course, that scene in the *Laches* served the purpose of acknowledging what

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[271] Socrates assures Theaetetus, "That is not Theodorus' way."

[272] Theodorus' 'excuse' is a poor attempt to cover his reluctance to enter into the conversation – a reluctance that Socrates criticizes Theaetetus for later in the dialogue.

Socrates' dialectic brings – awareness of ignorance – and a revision of educational practice. Here, Theodorus' comment on age perhaps reinforces the educational program in the *Republic* where the guardians-in-training must start there education at a very young age. It suggests that Socrates may have changed his position from the one he held earlier in his (dramatic) life. Has he accepted that some people will not change?

Later in the dialogue, Socrates declares Theodorus a "lover of discussion" – a description to which Theodorus readily agrees. This enables Socrates to bait Theodorus by asking him to defend his friend, Protagoras. Theodorus resists, because if he takes part in the discussion, he will be helping to refute his friend but acknowledges that the refutation may be something he will agree. This, again, shows that Theodorus is a man interested in truth, not falsehood. He knows that his diligence to what is logically true must win out over his friendship. But his loyalty to his friend is what keeps him out of the discussion (for a little while), which speaks both highly of his moral character and poorly of his intellectual character. Most people in the dialogues who resist entering into a conversation with Socrates do so out of fear: they are afraid they will be made fools of, or shown to not possess the knowledge they claim to have. After a brief exchange with Theaetetus, Socrates once again invites Theodorus to participate by claiming Theodorus is 'guardian' of the 'orphan' of Protagorean relativism – orphaned because Protagoras is not present. Again, Theodorus begs off, claiming the true guardian of the Protagorean orphan is Callias, and that he himself is "very soon inclined away from abstract discussion to geometry" (165a).[273] Theodorus will "get tripped up" (165b) if he is

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[273] Benitez finds that the translation of φίλοι λόγοι into 'mere words' is superior to 'abstract discussion.' Really, translating it as 'abstract discussion' does not make much sense, since geometry itself is an abstract science – in the main (304).

Socrates' interlocutor and likens talking with Socrates to wrestling, accusing him of playing Antaeus (169a-b). Theodorus admits at 165b that that he is concerned for his own dignity and begins to sound like the typical resistant interlocutor of the aporetic dialogues: "Tell us both, Socrates; but the younger had better answer. It will not be so undignified for him to get tripped up" (165b). On Socrates' third attempt, Theodorus quits resisting Socrates, and allows himself to be pulled into the discussion, although he accuses Socrates of using the methods of Sciron (169a).[274] By maligning Socrates, Theodorus shows us that he sees Socrates as a sophist, someone who is pursuing winning – which in this case, means Theodorus participating in the discussion – and Socrates quickly reinforces the analogy, claiming he has met "many a Heracles and Theseus in my time, mighty men of words" (169b). Socrates does not attempt to change Theodorus' mind, but simply states the truth, that he has met and spoken with powerful and clever men. Theodorus must come to the conclusion that Socrates' discourse is different from a sophist's. Indeed, we see that Socrates urges Theodorus to reflect on what he thinks of Socrates and Protagoras, in the discussion that ensues. Socrates remarks that Theodorus sees him as "a sort of bag of arguments" (161a) – it is evident that Socrates observes that Theodorus does not perceive a difference between Socrates and other *sophoi* such as Protagoras. By making this observation present to Theodorus, Socrates invites Theodorus to examine the statement to determine if it is true, viz., whether it is true that Socrates is a bag or arguments or whether Socrates is doing something else. From the

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[274] The example seems worthy of note as it refers once more to Megara, though there is no indication of a deeper meaning to the reference. In our uninformed case, it simply reinforces the importance of Terpsion and Eucleides as narrators.

perspective of the external audience, however, we can see that because Theodorus is

standing in for Protagoras, acting as a guardian for Protagoras' orphan. Plato likens

mathematics, which Theodorus stands for with sophistry, to what Protagoras stands for.

Rather than seeing Socrates as a sophist, Plato equates Theodorus' practice with

sophistry, albeit in a gentle manner.

If mathematics is placed next to philosophy in the intelligible portion of the

divided line, then its practitioners should be able to think abstractly as well. Indeed,

Theodorus groups himself with the philosophers at 173b, claiming that 'they' are the

masters of their arguments, not the slaves (173b-c): "We have no jury, and no audience

(as the dramatic poets have), sitting in control over us, ready to criticise [*sic*] and give

orders" (173c). The claim here is that unlike politicians, sophists, or poets, philosophers

have no concern for the performative aspect inherent in all of the above practices.

Mathematical science, as well, has no need to 'perform' – being a wise mathematician,

geometer, astronomer, or philosopher has nothing to do with an audience, that is, these

disciplines have nothing to do with non-rational *persuasion*. In the *Republic,* Socrates

implies that studies are only valued insofar as they are useful to the city – this is why no

city has developed solid geometry (*Rep.* 528b-d). What is useful, besides the obvious

crafts that a city requires, is persuasive speech. Controlling and influencing opinion

through public discourse is extremely useful in the democratic *polis.* Those skilled

sophoi, Nightingale says, Plato relegates to the banausic class of workers:

> [In the *Republic*] Plato defines the philosopher, in part, by way of opposition: he
> juxtaposes this new kind of sage to a disparate group of individuals identified as
> nonphilosophers. In particular, Plato targets intellectuals and sophists who
> offered serious competition to his own programme – men reputed to be wise and
> powerful … Plato portrays these men as banausic 'laborers for hire' in contrast to

the philosophic theorist: the servility of the nonphilosophers stands in diametrical opposition to the freedom of the theoretical philosopher.[275]

Only the philosopher is free to be impartial regarding all political, social, and ethical matters. By considering these wise men as banausic, Plato is relating them to the mercantile class, telling the audience that the *sophoi* are interested in power and wealth but not truth. Indeed, the coinage of power in Athenian democracy was persuasive public speech.

Theodorus' characterization of the Heracliteans highlights their lack of epistemic virtue by depicting them as "always on the move" (179e); not giving answers or maintaining consistency with what they have said before (180a); also, they use "enigmatic phrases," give "no conclusions," their philosophy is full of "strange turns of language" such that they "give no account of themselves" (179e-180c). Theodorus denigrates the Heraclitians and advocates that he and Socrates "take the doctrine out of their hands and consider it for ourselves, as we should a problem in geometry" (180c). This shows that Theodorus is interested in the answer, not the way to the answer; if he were to wrest the doctrine from the Heracliteans and 'solve' it, he has a solution but no action has been conducted. The Heracliteans can not learn anything by the answer alone – only by going through the process of obtaining the answer can they understand and fully accept it. The problem with Theodorus being a "lover of discussion" is that he is not going through the process of dialectic – he wants to be entertained, and then he wants the answer, like someone reading a mystery novel. The reader will not be happy with the author of the text unless both of those conditions are met. But, Socrates points out the

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[275] Nightingale, *Spectacles* 123.

importance of method to Theodorus, for the Heracliteans used poetry to discuss the doctrine of flux, and this is a problem 'inherited from the ancients.' Poetry, he says, is used to make their theory, that every thing is in motion, intelligible to all men. Theodorus happily ducks out of the role of interlocutor, claiming that "when these matters were concluded I was to be set free from my task of answering you, according to our agreement, which specified the end of the discussion of Protagoras' theory" (183c). Theaetetus immediately protests for that leaves the other half of the discussion, the discussion of Parmenides, untouched and unfinished. Theodorus accuses Theaetetus of attempting to teach him to be unjust, as he would break his agreement. Again, we see Theodorus is reluctant to pursue the inquiry and so he again takes up the role of spectator.

If we consider the place of mathematics and geometry in the *Republic*, we find that their place on the divided line is with philosophy in the intelligible portion. The mathematical disciplines rely on figures and begin "from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle but to a conclusion" (*Rep.* 510b). Thus the hypotheses, in mathematics, are treated as first principles. While both mathematics and philosophy deal with abstractions, mathematics inevitable relies on demonstrations – images – and does not question its hypotheses. Polansky conjectures that Theodorus opposes speculation and philosophical discussion – that he may "well view the foundations of his science, its ultimate hypotheses, as merely conventional, human suppositions."[276] Theodorus aligns himself with philosophy insofar as it promotes abstract, rational thought and does not rely on the empirical, relative appearances, and yet he sees no difference between the rhetorical techniques of the sophists and what Socrates does. This is reflected in the structure of the

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[276] Polansky 111.

dialogue, as Socrates speaks for Protagoras. Plato clearly points out that what Protagoras does, and what Socrates does, is very similar and easily conflated. The dialectic Plato portrays is meant to be different from the dialectic used by the sophists and dramatized by the poets. In philosophic dialectic, there is no assumed end. It is not necessarily a search for 'the answer,' as in mathematics. As such, philosophical dialectic requires from its participants characteristics that Socrates has and Theodorus clearly does not. It is through the character of Theodorus that the audience is able to see the limitations of mathematics but also the limitations of his generation. All of Theodorus' complaints about dialectic being for the young lead the audience to believe that this is something that *older* men cannot do (notice Theodorus is never specific in his attempts to bow out of the conversation – it is always the young, *like* Theaetetus, not Theaetetus only and specifically). This is most likely the reason that Theodorus is paired with Socrates for the "digression" rather than Theaetetus. Plato is presenting what the older generation believes about philosophy, and perhaps why the older generation are causing the polis problems.

Socrates, the Philosopher

While it is a mistake to understand Socrates to be Plato's mouthpiece, there can be no doubt that Socrates stands as the paradigm for a philosopher in the dialogues. What Socrates does and *how* he does it, what Socrates says and *how* he says it, and the effect Socrates has on those around him tell Plato's audience what a philosopher is and does, and in so doing, what philosophy is. Guthrie believes the lesson of the "digression" is easily seen:

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> The attempts to define knowledge in the main part of the dialogue are carried out by every means short of the doctrine of Forms, and end in failure. The digression assures us that the teaching of *Phaedo* and *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus* has not been abandoned, and that a successful search for the nature of knowledge lies beyond Plato's self-imposed limitations here.[277]

I believe the purpose of the digression is quite different than what Guthrie believes. The digression seems more for the audience *of* the dialogue than the audience in the dialogue, for it is speaking to a fourth century audience that would be aware of the irony of Socrates' presentation of the lawyer in light of the philosopher. If the main discussion is with the young then perhaps it is *for* the young (in terms of education – education for the young); but in the digression, Socrates insists that Theodorus take up the role of interlocutor.

Theodorus points out that they have "no jury and no audience (as the dramatic poets have)" – an observation that Theaetetus echoes later in the dialogue. Socrates decides to tackle Theodorus' assumptions head on, that is, Theodorus' perceptions of the lack of difference between sophists and philosophers. In doing so, Socrates enters into a 'digression' that compares the two lives, the two types of education that lead them to live their lives, and then evaluates the two lives. First, he evaluates the lives from the standpoint of the general citizenry and second, he uses standards based on 'universals'. The practical man, the lawyer or sophist, speaks with one eye on the clock and the other on his opponent. His speeches are composed for a specific purpose; he cannot speak on a subject of his choosing. Socrates likens him to a slave serving a master, the master being the *demos* (172e). And of course, any speaker concerned with persuading the *demos*, with gaining political power, must, in the end be more concerned with *them* and their

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[277] Guthrie, *History* 91.

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endorsement then with the content of his speech – or the truth of his words. A man of the law-courts does not have the 'luxury' of truth for truth's sake. Socrates describes him as: "keen and highly-strung, skilled in flattering the master and working his way into favour; but cause his soul to be small and warped" (173a). The conditions of the lawyer's life "forces him into doing crooked things … and so [he] resorts to lies and to the policy of repaying one wrong with another" which drains the vitality from his now-stunted soul (173a). Socrates describes this morally-deficient man as believing himself to be "a man of ability and wisdom" (173b). Clearly, the lawyer is lacking in at least one more area: he lacks the self-knowledge that would inform him that he is not a man of ability and wisdom. Besides lacking in moral virtues, the lawyer lacks the desire for the truth that governs the philosopher, i.e. proper epistemic motivation; he also takes no epistemic responsibility for the persuaded jury or *demos*, for he is persuading for the sake of someone else. It is no surprise, then, that his soul becomes so warped.

This discussion occurs in the midst of refuting Protagoras' relativism, and it easily relates to that surrounding argument. The life of the lawyer is lived as if he were a slave; in fact, he *is* slave to the ever-changing beliefs and emotions of the people. His 'truth' will, therefore, be relative to the people and must change with their caprice. The philosopher, on the other hand, has no constraints and is in a position to seek Truth.

The listening or reading audience learns that participating in inquiry about topics such as knowledge, virtue, and beauty is itself a particular way of life – for these are the marks of a free man and a philosopher. Engaging in speech only for a set purpose, say to win an argument or a case, is damaging to the soul. For instance, in the *Republic* Book

VII Socrates has a great deal to say about sophists, and it complements what he says in

the *Theaetetus*:

> There are other ways of living, however, opposite to these and full of pleasures,
> that flatter the soul and attract it to themselves but which don't persuade sensible
> people, who continue to honor and obey the convictions of their fathers…And
> then a questioner comes along and asks someone of this sort, 'What is the fine?'
> And, when he answer what he has heard from the traditional lawgiver, the
> argument refutes him, and by refuting him often and in many place shakes him
> from his convictions, and makes him believe that the fine is no more fine than the
> shameful …from being law-abiding he becomes lawless (538d – 539a).

The problem with shaking someone from his convictions is that, if there is nothing

offered in return, the person may end up believing everything is equal and relative, and

that what is good is equivalent to what is shameful. That type of *elenchus* is utterly

destructive and not instructive – it does not give the person tools with which to then seek

an answer – that is, such *elenchus* does not instruct the person on *how* to inquire. The

paideia that Socrates offers is instructive – the interlocutors learn, through dialectic, skills

such as the appropriate way to inquire (which will turn out to be epistemic virtue),

something about the topic under investigation, and the notion that there is an objective

standard. Interlocutors learn that values should not be relative, based solely on the

current, non-lasting opinion of the *demos*. Socrates implies that it is that very lack of

objective standard that allows people to stray and to become unjust. Part of the art of

sophistry is to argue both sides (antilogic) of an argument, and to argue them equally

well, regardless of the sophist's own beliefs.[278]

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[278] What is considered Gorgias' display piece, *Praise of Helen*, is meant as an example of what
students would learn from Gorgias. In the piece, the speaker argues that Helen is blameless for eloping
with Paris and then presents an equally strong argument that she should be held accountable for leaving
with Paris (McKirahan 376-377).

The philosopher of the digression seems a description of the exact opposite of Socrates, for the philosopher of the digression is not acquainted with his neighbor, does not know the way to the marketplace, the courts, or the assembly. This description echoes Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates in the *Clouds*. When the philosopher is forced to discuss phenomena, his words are comedic to everyone who hears them. Because he keeps himself outside of society he is entirely unaware of the current gossip. He places no value in the landholding of citizens, or how noble a pedigree is – attributes which were important measures of a citizen's status, in ancient Greece (and even today). The philosopher is characterized as someone removed from the social and political world. When the philosopher does have to engage with the common man, he is socially inept and awkward – a great source of amusement to any observer. The philosopher, too, is clumsy, in line with the anecdote about Thales falling into a well. The picture that Socrates initially paints for Theodorus is a mocking distortion of a philosopher – the philosopher of the digression appears as the Oliver Hardy of Classical Greece. We know Socrates' character from this dialogue and the other dialogues and indeed, he is very familiar with all his neighbors, spends most of his time in public places, is curious about the latest gossip; in short, Socrates is *only* concerned with politics and ethics. The philosopher of the digression is not concerned with concrete instances of politics and ethics, he is only concerned with the abstract. While there is nothing in the dialogues to attest Socrates possessing physical gracefulness, Socrates knows how to handle himself on a battlefield – as well as a courtroom. Even if we limit our evidence to the *Theaetetus* itself, we can see that when Theodorus introduces Theaetetus, Socrates does take an interest in Theaetetus' pedigree, calling him a "thorough-bred;" this provides some

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evidence that Socrates is *not* describing the philosopher as Plato sees him, but the philosopher as seen from a satirical perspective (144b-d).

Socrates describes a philosopher that seems at odds with his own behavior. When we study carefully, we see that the philosopher does not value things that are *becoming*, things that change, things that grow and decay. There *are* some similarities with Socrates, once the description of the imaginary philosopher is generalized and abstracted. Neither the philosopher nor Socrates are concerned with obtaining and holding political power. They are interested in the intelligible, universal, and the abstract and their values are not 'in line' with the values of the *demos*. They concern themselves with inquiry into the essence of "human happiness and misery in general," which is surely the purview of ethics (175c).[279] Moreover, they are both concerned with "the proper method by which the one [happiness] can be obtained and the other [misery] avoided" (175d).

Theaetetus, the Potential Guardian

Theaetetus is forcefully depicted as a youthful Socrates in all but name – for there is a younger Socrates present, but he is given none of the attributes ascribed to Theaetetus. Theodorus describes him as "snub-nosed, with eyes that stick out," although the features that have cursed Socrates to be ugly are luckily not as pronounced in Theaetetus (143e). The physical resemblance between the two speaks to a few things: it alludes to parentage, with Socrates as father obviously, it is also a curious take on the typical Greek view that beauty on the outside means beauty on the inside (though we

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[279] The task of philosophy is … "What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings?" (174b)

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know, and Plato shows us time and again, that this is not the case.[280] Socrates has

hitherto been *the* exception). The likeness between the two gives rise to the question of

how far that likeness stretches – can we use our perception of Theaetetus (via his

appearance) to determine anything at all about him, but chiefly, if Theaetetus is virtuous?

Here, it is very clear that virtue in this dialogue is not the moral virtues alone, but has just

as much to do with intellectual faculties. If knowledge is virtue, as the Platonic dialogues

imply, and the only thing our moral exemplar knows is his own ignorance, then this

knowledge, his self-knowledge, is the condition for the possibility of virtue is self-

knowledge, as is suggested in the *Charmides* and the *Phaedrus*.[281]

Though the dialogue ostensibly ends in *aporia*, there are more dissimilarities than

similarities between the *Theaetetus* and the aporetic (early) dialogues. From that break in

pattern, we may expect that Theaetetus' behavior should be different from a Euthyphro or

a Nicias. Theaetetus is special because he does not follow the pattern of a typical

interlocutor. First, Theaetetus claims no expertise, so there is no assumption of

knowledge that Socrates must try to move the interlocutor past. Second, though the

dialogue does deal with Plato's typical compare and contrast between the knowledge and

method of philosophy and the knowledge and method of the sophists, Theaetetus does not

manifest a sophist's traits, nor answer with a sophist's words – he is no Meno, speaking

for Gorgias, or Nicias, speaking for Damon.

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[280] Theaetetus has a conversation about mathematics with young Socrates – "Prima facie, we should expect this homonymy to be significant. Greek culture attached great significance to verbal similarities, which were often presented as imaging a more profound resemblance (cf. eg. *Thea.* 194c9)" (Blondell 261-262).

[281] See Griswold.

Plato's concern with *paideia* can easily be seen as present in the other aporetic

dialogues; that this dialogue is also aporetic begs the question of *why*. Why, if scholars

are in any way correct about the chronological composition, return to an earlier form of

composition when Plato has been creating dialogues of a different nature?[282] The

Theaetetus has some of the elements of an aporetic dialogue: the dialogue opens with

Socrates' interest in young men, Theaetetus' first definition is an enumeration, the

question put to the interlocutor is in a 'what is x?' format, and the dialogue ends in

aporia. Yet in content it is quite different from the other aporetic dialogues. Socrates has

a worthy interlocutor that does not have a terrible future in front of him;[283] Socrates'

treatment of the interlocutor is quite mild in comparison to the rough way he treats

interlocutors in the other aporetic dialogues; the topic under consideration is not

technically a moral virtue (though it has close ties to the moral virtues).[284] The absence

of the moral virtue as the topic of inquiry does not dismiss the question of virtue from the

dialogue; rather, it presupposes it. From the very beginning, Theaetetus' character is

under scrutiny and at stake.

Ruby Blondell suggests that Theaetetus may be seen as a guardian in training. At

146a, Socrates mentions a game where the winner will be King and make the others

answer "any question he likes" – which is perhaps a reference to the philosopher-kings of

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[282] David Sedley's response to this question is to link the Socratic philosophy of the early
dialogues with the mature Platonic philosophy of the middle and late dialogues. In this way, he believes
that Plato assures his audience that he has not entirely abandoned his Socratic roots.

[283] History has not made us aware of, or recorded, any terrible fate for Theaetetus – though
certainly, it is possible. Considering the pattern of other dialogues, where Plato has the characters acting in
ways that we would expect, given their historical lives, it seems safe to assume that the promising youth
grows into a good man.

[284] In other aporetic dialogues, Socrates is often ironic to the point of abusive, or outright abusive.

the *Republic*. In the *Republic* Socrates reminds his audience that the guardians are

chosen based on "natural qualities conducive to this education;" that is, that they excel at

learning, have a good memory, are persistent, and enjoy the effort – both mental and

physical (*Rep.* 535b-c). Moreover, Socrates adds to this list of qualities that a guardian

should be virtuous and interested in truth. When compared with the description of

Theaetetus introduced by the Megarians and by Theodorus, the similarities between the

two abound. The Megarians tell us that a wounded Theaetetus shows his devotion to

Athens with his desire to return home (presumably to die) even though the journey

evidently will be painful; he has suffered grave injury in battle for Athens and we are told

that he distinguished himself in battle, so he possesses the *andreia* that we learn in

several dialogues that Socrates possessed; Theaetetus is skilled in mathematics and

historically, we know that the Theaetetus developed that skill, so it is clear that he is

intelligent and loves knowledge. Theodorus tells us that the youth Theaetetus is quick,

temperate, manly, generous, with an intellectual capability garnished with a good

memory and presumably a maturity that belies his youth (144b). Throughout the

dialogue, Theaetetus demonstrates both a desire for truth and persistence in inquiry.

Plato's audience would surely make the comparison and find Theaetetus the embodiment

of a guardian. If all the above evidence is not enough, Socrates labels Theaetetus the

kind of person has a predisposition to philosophy: "For this is an experience

characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and

nowhere else" (155d).

As is often the case in the dialogues, the focus of this dialogue, too, is *paideia* –

specifically, the *Theaetetus* is about the education of one with a philosophic nature, the

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educational program for the philosopher. It seems that Socrates is testing Theaetetus; is

he graduating from studying mathematics, geometry and astronomy with Theodorus to

the study dialectic, with Socrates? Mathematics is the propaedeutic to philosophy,

according to the *Republic*, and Theaetetus has been studying mathematics. Theaetetus

seems to be a reflection of Socrates in many ways. Yet the defining characteristic of

Socrates, in contrast to many of his interlocutors, is his recognition of his ignorance. In

the *Republic*, we find that it is not enough for a philosopher king to possess moral virtue.

What is required is *intellectual* virtue as well as a natural disposition towards

philosophy.[285] Like the moral virtues, intellectual virtue is a skill.[286] We see Theaetetus'

intellectual virtue improve through the course of the inquiry; by the end of the dialogue,

he demonstrates eagerness rather than reluctance; he is motivated by truth rather than any

decaying phenomena, such as power, fame, winning, or goods; and from the very

beginning, Theaetetus was presented – and presents himself – as having a good character,

the capacity for abstract thought, and the gift of persistence.

    The method of philosophy demonstrated in the Platonic dialogues has a purpose

that is traditionally brushed aside as irrelevant: to encourage the interlocutor to engage in

critical self-reflection through recognition of a contradiction in her beliefs or values.

Rational recognition of a contradiction forces a confrontation within the self and tests the

character of the interlocutor. An epistemically virtuous person, for Plato, will let go of

her irrational belief *A* once she has recognized the status of belief *A*. This happens via the

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[285] *Republic* 487a and 490c-d.

[286] See Julia Annas, "The Structure of Virtue," *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 15-33. It is worth mentioning, but irrelevant to pursue further, that the intellectual virtues require a natural disposition – whether they are considered cognitive faculties or an exercise of cognitive faculties.

rational persuasion which is the purpose of Socratic *elenchus*. The interlocutor is rationally persuaded of a contradiction in her belief: the result of this persuasion is *aporia*. Once she experiences *aporia* she has a choice to make: to continue inquiring (aiming for truth) or to ignore the contradiction. Thus, the inquiry itself becomes a virtuous act because it demonstrates a virtuous character – one who has the *andreia* to continue the inquiry, the *sophia* to know that one does not know, and the *sophrosune* to subsume the potential emotions from entangling reason and halting the inquiry. Neither poetry nor sophistry induces the kind of labor pains involved in dialectic; neither practice forces a contradiction in a person's beliefs or values. It is the contradiction that is essential to the *instruction* philosophy gives its students. The success of the instruction hinges on the epistemic virtues of the interlocutor – what the interlocutor does once the contradiction a recognized.

If self-knowledge is defined as knowledge of knowledge (*episteme epistemes,* as in the *Charmides*), and we understand Plato to say that Socrates is his moral exemplar, then self-knowledge plays a strong role in establishing a virtuous character. The 'only' thing that Socrates knows is that he does not know; Socratic ignorance is a major component of Socrates' character. The only manner by which one can know that one does not know is through inquiry. One can achieve knowledge (thus a Theaetetus) only by rooting out (and uprooting) beliefs. The *logos* comes into play when attempting to determine understanding (*episteme*). It is possible to have beliefs that one does not *understand*; therefore the sophists are quite dangerous. If one is persuaded into *accepting* a belief and there is no understanding, the belief may fade into the background of preconceptions – unexamined preconceptions. An epistemically virtuous agent does not

express *akrasia* – in action, choice, or intention against one's best judgment.[287] Mark

Gifford observes that:

> On several occasions Plato announces that what Socrates investigates through his
> surgical questioning is not simply the philosophical acceptability of the prevailing
> ethical ideas of the day, but the actual lives of the interlocutors. Socrates wants to
> learn the views his conversation partners hold about justice, courage, and so on,
> not merely in order to determine the abstract merits of those ideas, but also so that
> he can examine the ethical standards by which these individuals are directing their
> actions and thereby assess the ethical worth and overall value of the lives so
> lived.[288]

Socrates is examining not just the ideas of the interlocutor, but the interlocutor himself.

He examines Charmides (and perhaps Critias) for *sophrosūne*, Laches and Nicias for

andreia, Glaucon and Adeimantus for justice – but he does not examine Theaetetus nor

Theodorus for knowledge. He examines them for the *conditions* of knowledge: the

intellectual virtues. When there is an interlocutor with a natural disposition towards

philosophy, the dialogue shows that interlocutor gaining intellectual virtue through the

very act of inquiring, as is the case in the *Theaetetus*. Theaetetus shows increasingly

greater intellectual virtue as the dialogue progresses.

It would seem that if Theodorus is correct about the likeness between Theaetetus

and Socrates, then Theaetetus must demonstrate the quality of self-knowledge (the

condition for the possibility of virtue). Griswold notes that "towards the start of the

Phaedrus Socrates declares in extremely strong terms that he cares only about knowing

himself, every other pursuit being 'laughable' to him so long as self-knowledge is lacking

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[287] Christopher Hookaway, "Epistemic *Akrasia* and Epistemic Virtue," *Virtue Epistemology:
Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility,* ed. Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford:
Oxford UP, 2001) 179; Hookaway describes an akratic agent: "Generally we are motivated to act in
accordance with our evaluations and to conform to our commitments unless we acquire good reason not to
do so. The akratic appears to lack this motivation" (182).

[288] Gifford 45. See *Laches* 188, *Apology* 29d, *Protagoras* 333c.

(*Phae.* 229e4 ff.)"[289] Socrates makes a similar claim in the *Apology*: "it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men" (*Apol.* 38a). To say the unexamined life is not worth living is to make a strong normative claim that privileges examination; thus it becomes a clearly laid out path to becoming good: to continue examining one's self to discover one's preconceptions (beliefs) and examine them to see if the one belief stands in contradiction to the rest of your beliefs, to see if it is logically *consistent* (true), to see if it is the kind of belief that will lead to the Good. This self-knowledge is expressed and demonstrated through inquiry. What are the results? Knowledge, or self-knowledge, or towards what does Socratic inquiry aim? And we, the audience, witness this in the dialogue; as Blondell remarks, "Through Sokrates, Theaitetos, Theodoros, and their interactions, Plato explores yet again the conditions under which Socratic pedagogy may successfully take place."[290] Does the *Theaetetus* show a successful inquiry? Did the interlocutors learn anything? While I do not believe the dialogue is a 'failure', as scholars historically have deemed the aporetic dialogues, for failing to achieve a propositional definition of a concept, I believe the majority of the educating, the learning, occurs with the external audience. Griswold believes that "Socrates wants to connect self-knowledge with leading a morally right life" and though Griswold is concerned solely with the *Phaedrus*, I think this holds true for the *Theaetetus* as well.[291] The very idea of ignorance of one's ignorance is both shameful

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[289] Griswold 2.

[290] Blondell 252.

[291] Griswold 3.

and fearful to Socrates. Socrates claims that he is "annoyed at his own stupidity" for fear that someone might ask him about false judgment and Socrates would answer 'yes' (195c-d). Ignorance of one's own ignorance is a stumbling block, or rather a wall, that must be eradicated before any true progress towards understanding can be achieved. Theaetetus, we learn, is a boy of both moral and intellectual virtue, with the potential to be like Socrates. The audience does not yet know what is sufficient for knowledge, but they have an understanding of what is necessary, from the example they have listened to or read: dialectic and epistemic virtues.

Conclusion

It is possible to interpret Plato in many ways, and of late, many scholars have preferred to "mine" the dialogues in an attempt to formulate Platonic "doctrines." These doctrines, in turn, are knitted together — to the extent that this is possible — to comprise a systematic philosophy that is identified as the philosophy of Plato. In the case of the *Theaetetus*, as I have argued in chapter four, this "doctrinal" approach to Plato takes the form of identifying Plato's epistemology, where 'epistemology', in keeping with contemporary practice, is divorced from ethical considerations. I have argued against this approach to Plato on two grounds. First, Plato chose to write philosophy in the form of dialogues, and it seems reasonable to assume that he did so in order to accomplish some goals in line with his conception of dialectic. The choice of form is, I have found, a reflection of the progression of the tradition of oral and written *paideia*, the aim of which is to produce virtuous citizens. *Paideia* took place originally in the form of poetry. On the whole, poetry was orally performed before an audience. Eventually writing became used in public institutions, first as a mnemonic device and a way of keeping records storage of valued public experience, or promulgating laws. Writing, in education, was an imitation of the traditional oral instruction. Traditional *paideia* presented the truth as the Muses enabled the poet to sing it, and while writing enabled poets to develop new poetic forms, poetry was still performed. The rise of the *polis* brought another occasion and another means for *paideia*: public debate.

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Debate became a vehicle for negotiating virtue — and truth — in the *polis*. But one could be effective in debate without being virtuous or even having any concept of virtue, and power resulted from the ability to speak and debate regardless of one's character. The Sophists exploited the opportunities that writing afforded to employ those rhetorical devices that had been proven effective. The result was speeches, suitable for performances on all occasions, written in advance of the occasion of their delivery, without knowledge of either the problem to be resolved or the context in which public decisions had to be made. The measure of truth and virtue was the ability to prevail in argument. A *sophos* was a man who had the skill to prevail in argument or persuade others.

There are certain current conceptions of philosophy that fail to recognize that Ancient philosophy is about a way of living – and that believing something true is a commitment to act and live in certain ways. Ancient philosophical writing instructs its audience just as writing does in other ancient genres such as poetry. This entails that the dialogues, just as other genres, are written for a specific audience, an audience that would appreciate and understand the insinuations and references to historical events and persons. Plato's use of characters named for historical persons evokes the lives of those historical persons so that the audience members already possess certain assumptions about the characters. As Mark Gifford remarks, ancient tragedies rely on the knowledge of the *external audience* in order to relay their educational and political message. Aeschylus' *The Persians*, for instance, provides a lesson in *hubris* because the audience members are already familiar with the story. Though Xerxes does not understand the reasons for his army's defeat, the audience knows of his *hubris*. Interpreting the

statements of these characters with only the knowledge provided within the dialogue itself is to treat these characters as if they were simply 'A' and 'B'. There would seem to be little point to Plato's using historical figures in the dialogues if their historicity did not matter in understanding their presence in the dialogues and interpreting their statements. The reason that Plato is invoking historical figures, Mark Gifford contends, is that it is necessary for the use of a literary technique that draws on the external audience's common knowledge: irony.

The dialogues are a form of *mimēsis*, a presenting or making manifest. With the poets, the singer re-presents events and characters from history and myth, creating a pleasurable experience for the audience. The dialogues function as an occasion both for re-presenting a philosophical discussion that its audience may continue after the dialogue is read, and as a dramatic illustration of what comes from living – or not living – a philosophical life. As *mimēsis*, a dialogue functions as an instance of the education described in the *Republic*, a way of making that method *manifest* by having the audience be included in the experience. The audiences' experience of the dialogue--both the internal and the external audiences – is a "making manifest" that is appropriate for a world in which things happen and change, and are many, and are seen: a world of becoming. In the *Theaetetus*, we are given a discussion about the philosopher: his education and his way of life. The education of the philosopher in the *Republic* points to Theaetetus' actual education; the young man is not only receiving instruction in mathematics, but he excels in the subject.

Theaetetus is moving from mathematics to dialectic. Theaetetus begins with knowledge as *aisthēsis*, what we know by our senses and where we all begin – but we

must move beyond our senses. The difficulty of that move is reflected in the lengthy

discussion of the second definition for knowledge. To make sense of *aisthesis*--and

doxa--something more is required: intellectual virtue that arises from a passion for

inquiry. That passion cannot be communicated by propositions or even described in the

abstract curriculum of the *Republic* – it must be ignited by watching someone live this

way.[292] *Aisthesis* is not enough; participation, *doing*, is required if one is to reach

knowledge. One must inquire and do so virtuously. Knowledge is not an accumulation

of statements, like those of the Sophists, divorced from knowing how to live a virtuous

life. Knowledge is part and parcel of the good life, for open-ended inquiry is itself a way

of living – the way a philosopher lives.[293]

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[292] If we accept the *Seventh Letter* as genuine, Plato provides an example of that sort of learning:
To "living with the subject itself in frequent dialogue suddenly, as a light kindled from a leaping flame,
[knowledge] comes to be in the soul" seems that to gain knowledge of the subject matter requires attention
to the subject. See Appendix A.

[293] John P. Anton suggests that the *Theaetetus* is necessary to the Platonic canon because while the
Republic describes a method of education for the philosopher, it stops short at how it is one gets from
aisthesis to philosophy. The *Theaetetus* shows Socrates explaining leading a pupil, Theaetetus, from
aisthesis to *episteme*. When one moves along the divided line from *aisthesis,* one reaches mathematics.
The knowledge one obtains from sense experience is hopelessly corrupted by the unreliability of the senses
– if one is uncritical of the senses. The cognition one receives from sensation is *doxa*, while *logos* is an
opinion which stems from the exercise of the senses giving it reasons.

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Appendix A: The Authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*

The *Seventh Letter* is of particular import to scholars of Plato's philosophy, as it contains a significant digression detailing a method that is concerned with metaphysical, epistemological and linguistic issues (340c-345c). If the letter were proven authentic, this digression would be the most straightforward writing by Plato on those concerns and could settle several major debates regarding interpretation. Yet it is also this controversial section of the *Letter* that ostensibly provides evidence for the letter's inauthenticity. I argue that due to scholars' interpretative strategies, the *Seventh Letter* is claimed to be inauthentic. Scholars for, or against, the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* must eventually rely on the degree of consistency between their interpretation of the philosophical digression and Plato's philosophy. In many cases, those interpretations are based on the tenuous assumption that Plato has doctrines.[294] The result of situating the *Seventh Letter* within a doctrinal interpretative strategy is unreliable. The content is forced to fit the scholar's assumptions about Plato's "philosophical system" and, if it does not fit, the letter is thrown out as spurious.

The persistent problem of certifying the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* stems from a lack of historical records regarding the letter as well as the particularities of the history of imitative letter writing. According to Glen Morrow, the first reliable reference to Plato's *Letters* occurs in "the canon of Platonic works drawn up by Aristophanes of

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[294] See Chapter Three.

Byzantium toward the end of the third century B.C., and also in the canon of Thrasyllus, dating from the first century after Christ."[295] We do not know which, or how many, letters were included in the list by Aristophanes. Even though authors such as Plutarch and Cicero refer to the letters as authentic, the evidence along this line of certifying the authenticity of the letters remains circumstantial. There is also the difficulty of how the letters were kept and discovered; there is "no positive record of their existence prior to the flourishing of the great library at Alexandria."[296] In antiquity, it was common for students of the schools of rhetoric to compose letters in the styles of famous men such as Plato.[297] Thus, the possibility of a forgery entering the library under the name of Plato is likely. That the letter is inauthentic is, of course, possible since we have no *certain* evidence that the letter was composed by Plato.

There are three main ways with which to investigate the *Seventh Letter's* authenticity: to compare historical content, stylometric analysis, and the consistency of content with the 'authentic' dialogues. Scrutiny of the historical content confirms that the letter is genuine. Stylometry as a technique has varying results, depending on the criteria used in analysis. The methodology of stylometry differs but generally, it involves analysis of grammatical structure or analysis of words – that is, lexical techniques that examine, for example, word length, sentence length, or ubiquitous words such as (and). One stylometric analysis in particular is referred to as the standard: an analysis conducted in 1968 by Levinson, Morton and Winspear. Earlier, a study by Cox and Brandwood

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[295] Glen R. Morrow, *Plato's Epistles*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962. 5.

[296] Sayre, Kenneth M. *Plato's Literary Garden: How to Read a Platonic Dialogue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. xx.

[297] Morrow 3.

used stylometric analysis to formulate a chronological sequence for all the works of

Plato. Based on their study of the last syllables of sentences, they formulated a sequence

indicating the order in which the dialogues were written.[298] This study placed the

Seventh Letter between the *Critias* and the *Statesman*, something that Levinson et. al.

claim that most scholars find unacceptable.[299] The Levinson group's own stylometric

analysis does not attempt to sequence Plato's works; rather, using different techniques,

they compare the *Seventh Letter* to the *Apology* and determined that the results indicate

the letter is not authentic.

In 1965, Morton had argued that "the sentence length distributions are constant

for the works of an author unless these are separated by a large period of time allied with

a considerable difference in literary form."[300] Levinson's group used the principle

developed by the sentence length distribution survey conducted by Morton as their

criteria: "the distribution of the conjunctive *kai*," and "distribution of the particle *de* as

second or third word in sentences."[301] The group agrees, to varying degrees, that the

Seventh Letter is not *entirely* a work of Plato's, and perhaps not written by him at all, but

in all likelihood the philosophical digression is most certainly *not* authentic, and, they

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[298] Any attempt to order the dialogues is suspect; see Holger Thesleff, *Studies*. For general problems with stylometric analysis, see Charles M. Young, "Plato and Computer Dating," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1994): 227-250.

[299] Levinson 312. See D. R. Cox and L. Brandwood, "On a Discriminatory Problem Concerned with the Works of Plato," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 1959. 195. Levinson's statement is of course based on the interpretive strategy of his time, which I later argue is a mistaken strategy.

[300] Levinson 313.

[301] Deane 113.

conclude, the letter was likely written or edited by Speusippus, Plato's nephew and successor at the Academy.

There are serious concerns about the stylometric analysis conducted by Levinson, Morton and Winspear. Philip Deane calls into question the criteria used for the analysis and opens a space for the possibility that the letter is authentic. The tests, by their own admission, fail a work of Isocrates' that is believed to be authentic. They account for the discrepancy by claiming that Isocrates was senile. Yet, they do not extend that same probabilistic reasoning to the *Seventh Letter*. I submit that their study cannot be sufficiently objective, for their conclusion depends on a sequencing of the dialogues which is still in question. The selection of dialogues they chose for indicators in their study is suspect for it relies on the idea that the *Apology* is an 'early' dialogue and that the *Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias* and *Laws* are all 'late' dialogues that were written close together. If stylometric analyses are as debatable as the authenticity of the letter, arguments must, in the end, rely on the degree of consistency found between the content of the letter and the content of Plato's dialogues.[302]

Having touched on some of the problems with the use of stylometric analysis to determine the *Letter's* authenticity, I will now discuss the interpretative strategies that are used in analyzing the philosophic content. The choice of interpretative strategy involved requires examination, in these instances, for the methodology of interpreting Plato's

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[302] For instance, Edelstein's rejection of the *Seventh Letter* is based on the inconsistencies he finds between the *Seventh Letter* and his interpretation of Plato's dialogue. See Ludwig Edelstein, *Plato's Seventh Letter* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966). As with many doctrinal analyses, Edelstein's rejection is based on his limiting interpretative strategy. The effect of placing a pre-formulated interpretative strategy onto the *Seventh Letter*, or any Platonic dialogue, is that the content is pre-judged rather than revealed. The content is forced to fit this pre-conceived interpretation and, if it does not fit, is thrown out as spurious.

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dialogues has been a point of disagreement among philosophers since Plato's death. The question of the most appropriate way to interpret the dialogues has yet to be settled.

Historically, interpretations of Plato fit into one of two categories. The first type of interpretative strategy is constructive; it assumes that the dialogues are statements forming Plato's doctrines, generally this occurs by first advancing a developmentalist position. Adopting a developmental thesis means that the scholar constructs doctrines by stringing together pieces of the dialogues in accordance with a chronology. The assumptions involved in this strategy are that 1) Plato does indeed have doctrines, 2) that these doctrines develop over time in accordance with the pre-established sequence and 3) the chronology the scholar subscribes to is accurate. In the past three centuries, philosophers have approached Plato's dialogues as if approaching a modern philosopher, drawing conclusions about Plato's philosophy via such a developmental thesis. It is unquestionable that theses regarding the developing thought of Leibniz or Kant have grounds for their claims – however, the distance in time and the lack of records, makes any *certainty* regarding the chronology of the dialogues impossible and as such, any thesis dependent upon a particular ordering of dialogues is dubious at best. It is also the case that scholars tend to anachronistically 'read in' questions that, while we take for granted are important, the Greeks would not have considered, such as questioning the reality of the external world or the fixation with certainty that infuses philosophy following the Scholastic period. A subcategory of the 'constructive' interpretation is the position that Plato had doctrines, but that they are unwritten. Instead, these interpretations say that Plato delivered the doctrines orally to his students in the

Academy, in which case the only way to learn of his doctrines is through secondary sources.

The second type of interpretative strategy is destructive, for it assumes the dialogues are chiefly about refuting the interlocutor(s).[303] Scholars of this school of thought reduce the dialogues to their backbone of propositions and arguments, utterly ignoring the dialogue form with its dramatic and literary elements and instead, read the dialogues as if they were treatises.[304] But no one forced Plato to write dialogues; he could have just as easily written treatises instead. With that in mind, it is reasonable to assume there is something important about the dialogue form, something that makes it necessary for Plato's philosophy. Revealing the shortcomings in these two general categories of interpretation speaks to the need for a third way of interpreting Plato. In the last thirty years a group of scholars has taken a hermeneutic approach to Plato's dialogues in order to avoid the problems of the first two strategies. The hermeneutical strategy begins by seeing the dialogue form as necessary and involves examining the dialogue as a unity, taking into account the literary and dramatic details for, as mentioned above, it is reasonable to assume that the dialogue *form* is necessary to convey the *content*. A hermeneutical strategy situates a text with regard to the author's original audience. Attempting to situate the text in its original context requires an examination of the assumptions made about the past. By addressing the fact of presuppositions, the interpretation is left open for future revision. The result is a completely irreconcilable

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[303] Gonzalez, *Third* 1.

[304] For an explanation of why these two interpretative strategies do not do justice to Plato's dialogues as well as the historical lineage of the strategies, see Gonzalez Short.

position with both the aforementioned groups, because these scholars shun the notion of unwritten doctrines, and, in fact, call into question whether Plato had doctrines at all. Most notably, they point out that there is little evidence in the dialogues for the traditionally accepted 'doctrine of Forms'.[305]

Generally speaking, scholars have two primary problems with the philosophical digression of the *Seventh Letter*, all of which are grounded in their interpretative strategy. (1) The digression claims that Plato never put his philosophy (specifically, the philosophy of first principles) in writing and (2) the digression makes mention of first principles without referring to the Forms. Morrow writes that "The chief difficulty in accepting this passage as genuinely Platonic arises from the statement that Plato has never written about 'these matters' that were the subject of Dionysius' book."[306] In fact, the author goes a step further and claims that 'these matters' can *not* be expressed in words, like other disciplines. 'These matters' are almost certainly first principles. When 'first principles' are presumed to mean Forms then the letter is shown as inauthentic, for on a constructivist interpretation, there appear to be in the dialogues clear discussions of the Forms as first principles.

There is nothing strange or non-Platonic about the author's critique of the written word; language, in both oral *and* written form, fails to capture certain kinds of knowledge. A simplistic example is color; it is impossible to explain color in general, or a specific color, without the coinciding experience. One can know all there is to know about the color red, but there is something lacking in an understanding of the color if it

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[305] Gonzalez, Short 12.

[306] Morrow 66.

does not include the actual experience of red. Experience is the kind of knowledge that cannot be expressed propositionally – not completely, anyway. There is always something lacking in propositions about an *experience*.

Earlier, the author of the *Seventh Letter* claims that one may know any object in five ways, through names, images, and accounts, which taken together form the fourth type, *episteme* (scientific understanding) and finally, *nous*, intuitive apprehension taken directly into the soul. None of these results in actual knowledge of the object. The closest we can get, the author says, is the fifth type, *nous*. The digression indicates that knowledge of true being is gained as an insight by means of a particular method, dialectic, that 'rubs together' (tests) names, images, and accounts (propositions). Language is defective in that it can only describe qualities of the thing itself, but even so, *nous*, or insight, may be gained using it. The author writes "Yet the process of dealing with all four, moving up and down to each one, barely gives birth to knowledge of the ideal nature in someone with an ideal nature."[307] Because the author carefully says 'barely', we can not see this method as producing an end to inquiry – a static, stable knowledge.[308]

The beginning of the letter stating the author's disappointment in the ethics of Athenian political leaders fits with the dialogues' emphasis on virtue; however, a key element to the Platonic catchphrase "virtue is knowledge" is understanding what, exactly, Plato intends by 'knowledge'. Knowledge is gained when "living with the subject itself in frequent dialogue suddenly, as a light kindled from a leaping flame, [knowledge]

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[307] Gonzalez, *Dialogue* 250.

[308] Gonzalez, *Dialogue* 267. The word that qualifies it is μόγις.

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comes to be in the soul." To gain knowledge of the subject matter requires attention to the subject. It is by engaging the subject that knowledge may be acquired. This is true for any practice. One cannot 'know' how to build a chair until one builds the chair; once one knows how to build a chair one cannot pass on that knowledge using language. If virtue is construed as a *practice* then it makes perfect sense for the author to claim that language fails to present knowledge of virtue because language is static. Writing, of course, is more static than speaking; in a discussion, accounts can be revised to promote a better understanding, something that can not be done with a text, particularly an ancient text, for classical Greek was written *scripta continua* on scrolls of papyrus. Revision was all but impossible without recreating the entire scroll. What language can do is provide the starting point for understanding. Dialogue, a process, becomes a method by which one can gain knowledge. This is evident from every one of Plato's dialogues. However, as Paul Friedländer remarks: "I repeat August Boeckh's methodological principle that only forgery, not authenticity, can be proved conclusively – in the absence of external evidence, to be sure."[309] The evidence presented to reject the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* may serve equally as well to promote its authenticity. Since the arguments regarding content are almost entirely based on the scholar's interpretation of Plato's dialogues, it is possible that a new type of interpretation will show consistency between the content of the *Seventh Letter* and the content of the dialogues – for example, the excursus (*Seventh Letter* 340c-345c) is often seen as contrary to the philosophical content of the dialogues.[310] As Gilbert Ryle has noted, we should be concerned with the

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[309] Friedländer, *Plato III* 236.

[310] Sayre xxi-xxii.

accuracy of the *content* of the *Seventh Letter*, which will stand or fall regardless if the letter is authentic. To understand the precise difficulties with ascertaining the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: The Later Plato and the Academy,* vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978) 401n, Shorey; Léon Robin, *Platon* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1935)*,* Ronald Bartlett Levinson, *In Defense of Plato* (New York: Russell and Russell 1953). For arguments upholding the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*, see A. Brinckman, "Ein Brief Platons," *RhM,* LXVI 1911: 226-30; Werner Jaeger, *Aristoteles: Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1955) 111; Georges Meautis, *Platon Vivant*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1950); A. J. Festugiere, *Contemplation et vie Contemplative Selon Platon* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1936); Luc Brisson, *Platon: Lettres* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1987).

About the Author

Jennifer F. Ingle grew up in a small rural town in northern Indiana. She earned bachelor degrees in both Biology and English from Purdue University in 1996. With her degrees in hand and the bright-eyed innocence of the recently graduated she entered the doctoral program in English at the University of South Florida. However, she soon realized that her passion lay in a different field but she had to take a job outside of the university. Spending her days working in the pallid glow of a computer and her nights struggling to read Kant, she was finally able to devote her full attention to academia when offered an assistantship teaching philosophy. After receiving her M.A. in philosophy at USF, Ms. Ingle was devastated by a series of strokes. After re-learning to speak, write, and walk, she continued her pursuit of knowledge and earned her doctorate.