Knowledge, Politics, and Midwifery

Introduction

My interpretation of Plato’s *Theaetetus* aims to give full weight to the political substance of the dialogue. Readers will be excused for thinking this aim should have produced a work considerably shorter than the one they now hold in their hands. It assuredly is not due to its political insight that the *Theaetetus* ranks among the most studied of Plato’s dialogues. The dialogue earns that privileged place because of its penetrating examination of no less a question than what is the meaning of knowledge. In the rarefied atmosphere of such a question my consideration of the dialogue’s political teaching may seem an unwelcome, because unwise, lowering of our sights. But I do not recommend that we look at politics instead of knowledge. Rather, I hope to show that Plato's treatment of the *Theaetetus*’ pervasive theme can only be properly understood through careful attention to the dialogue’s political character. To begin to establish the plausibility of my thesis I want to sketch the more prominent political features of the *Theaetetus*. I start with the dialogue’s conclusion because it locates the *Theaetetus* as a whole in an eminently political context.

At the dialogue’s end, Socrates makes this portentous announcement: “But now there’s something I need to go and face in the courtyard of the king-archon, in response to the indictment which Meletus has drawn up against me (210d2–4).”1 With Socrates’ walk to the courtyard he begins his inexorable

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march to death in an Athenian cell. The political character of the *Theaetetus* would be an issue worth pursuing if for no other reason than to discern why Plato has the knowledge-obsessed *Theaetetus* initiate the series of dialogues through which he weaves the story of Socrates’ political trial.² Approaching the *Theaetetus* with this broad dramatic context in mind must already prompt us to ask what connection Plato might intend between the dialogue’s abstract theme and this concrete political outcome. Other prominent passages make this question even more salient. To use Socrates’ oft-repeated phrase, let’s begin again at the beginning.

The dialogue actually begins with a Prologue set some thirty years after Socrates’ death.³ In it, two Megarian philosophers, Euclides and Terpsion, reminisce about Socrates. They recall the extraordinarily stimulating discussion he had with the young Theaetetus in the days prior to Socrates’ death. What prompts the Megarians’ reminiscences of Socrates and his death is Euclides’ chance encounter with the now-mature Theaetetus as he is carried back to Athens, having been wounded in battle. Thus, the Prologue ensures that the specter of politically hued deaths hovers over the subsequent proceedings.

The looming presence of Socrates’ trial continues to cast its shadow as the dialogue moves from the Prologue to the conversation about knowledge. Well before the culminating lines of the *Theaetetus* Socrates expresses awareness of the community’s disdain for his activity, acknowledging also the likely consequence of that disdain. Through the famous image of the midwife, Socrates makes clear that challenging conversation with promising youth about the community’s constitutive opinions plays a crucial role in his philosophic activity. He does not pretend that these conversations have any other result than to generate perplexity in these future leaders. Neither does he blink the fact that this result earns him his fellow citizens’ denunciation.

In addition to the *Theaetetus’* beginning and conclusion, politics is most powerfully present in the dialogue’s very heart. Here Socrates provides what may properly be regarded as a brief for his upcoming trial. This central passage of the dialogue contains a vigorous defense of the philosopher’s life as superior to the politician’s. It is perhaps too vigorous – and in other ways too subtle – a

² Insightful treatments of the series of dialogues involved in Socrates’ political-philosophic trial can be found in Joseph Cropsey, *Plato’s World: Man’s Place in the Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Jacob Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates’ Philosophic Trial* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

³ There is some controversy concerning the date of Theaetetus’ death. At issue is the exact battle in which Theaetetus was wounded. The only battles that fill the bill occurred in 369 BCE and 364 BCE. I have accepted the later date following Benardete’s suggestion that the earlier date “would seem to condense Theaetetus’ achievements into too short an interval.” Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*, I.84. For arguments supporting the earlier date see Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 276. For a brief overview of the participants in this long-standing debate, see Timothy Chappell, *Reading Plato’s Theaetetus* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 30.
defense to be effective in court. But for just these reasons it contains one of the most enlightening treatments of the central issue of Socrates’ trial found anywhere in the entire saga.

Together, these passages provide a basis on which to speak sensibly of the dialogue’s political character. Furthermore, given their prominence, they substantiate the need at least to consider the connection between the meaning of knowledge and this political character in any comprehensive interpretation of the dialogue. Precisely this prominence, however, raises an immediate question for any new interpretation of this much-studied dialogue. If through these conspicuous passages Plato does place this connection squarely before the reader, why have so many thoughtful readers managed to overlook it?

The common scholarly reaction to the central passage of the *Theaetetus*, usually called the Digression, provides sufficient evidence of this neglect. Until very recently this passage has received little sustained scholarly attention. Those theorists that are most interested in the *Theaetetus*, those preoccupied by the meaning of knowledge or by what is sometimes called “Plato’s epistemology,” find the Digression philosophically inconsequential. Those who do think it of some value often believe, following Schleiermacher, that its rehearsal of apparently familiar Platonic themes simply means to provide reassurance that, despite the dialogue’s skepticism, the stable Platonic world remains firmly in place. This assessment, however, judges the Digression as at best auxiliary to the central theme. Characterizing its content as extraneous, another more recent commentator maintains that the Digression contains material “which in a modern book might be served by footnotes or an appendix.” There is, in short, a broad consensus that the Digression “does not contribute to the main inquiry.”

In my treatment of the Digression I argue against this last assessment at some length. Nevertheless, here I would affirm that such conclusions are perfectly understandable. The political theme of the Digression does seem to spring up abruptly from this intensely abstract discussion between Socrates and two mathematicians concerning the meaning and even possibility of knowledge. Its confident praise of the philosophic life does sit uneasily in the heart

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8 Burnyeat, *The “Theaetetus” of Plato,* 36.
of this most skeptical of dialogues. Socrates does identify the passage, at least once, as a digression. The dialogue itself, then, makes the passage seem anomalous, its political theme detachable from the dialogue’s main business. So although Plato does undeniably place the political character of the *Theaetetus* squarely before us, it would be most accurate to say that the dialogue’s surface poses the connection between politics and the meaning of knowledge as a question.

This being the case, the most prevalent scholarly reaction to the dialogue provides a key to Plato’s intent in the dialogue, although not in the usual manner. For, the reluctance of many commentators to engage this question mirrors the disposition of the interlocutors Plato provides Socrates within the dialogue. In this conversation about knowledge, Socrates converses with Theodorus, an older geometer, and Theaetetus, his young, brilliant student. They too resist the invitation to reflect on the dialogue’s political themes. They too abstain from the examination of the connection between the dominant theme of the dialogue, the meaning of knowledge, and its political character. These theorists much prefer the more serious and lofty examination of knowledge to the mundane, and perhaps more uncertain, consideration of political life.

However, in his portrayal of these theorists Plato begins to reveal the inner connection between these issues by showing the cost of such neglect. In particular, their unwillingness to examine rationally political and ethical matters leaves these mathematicians unable to defend the good of their own theoretical activity. Plato’s portrayal of this inability directs us to the heart of the dialogue’s concern. Connecting politics and the meaning of knowledge is this question: is it good to pursue knowledge? It is a question that properly introduces the story of one who forfeits his life for this pursuit.

Contrary to his interlocutors’ neglect of this concern, Socrates’ philosophic inquiry concentrates unceasingly on the human meaning of the pursuit of knowledge. The reaction of his fellow citizens to that pursuit doubtlessly helped affirm for Socrates its questionable character. Yet, this reaction, so I will argue, was an effect not a cause. Socrates’ philosophic pursuit embroiled him in political controversy to an unprecedented extent as a consequence of a theoretical insight. He saw more clearly than did his predecessors the partiality of our knowledge and the question raised by that partiality for the validity of the knowledge-seeker’s pursuit. This theoretical insight heightens the danger of Socratic inquiry because, as I also argue, in response to it Socrates sees the

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9 This intertwining of the question of good with politics may seem pertinent only to nonliberal political orders. Yet liberalism too can be understood as embodying a notion of a right way of life. For an example of such an understanding, see William Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). However, even more specifically pertinent to the *Theaetetus*, part of Socrates’ refutation of the notion that knowledge is perception involves showing that the relativism (and conventionalism) that underlies liberal neutrality is itself animated by a notion of good. See esp. Chapter 5.
need to place the philosophic study of politics at the center of philosophy as a whole. More specifically, to state the central claim of this study, the *Theaetetus* shows that only through this study can Socrates attain the self-knowledge that both justifies philosophic inquiry and guides it toward knowledge properly understood.\(^\text{10}\)

If this claim is true, then it is the essential requirement of Socrates’ distinctive philosophic activity that brings about Socrates’ trial and execution. In this case, it would clearly be a mistake to regard either these political events or the political character of the *Theaetetus* as merely a dispensable dramatic frame for Plato’s presentation of Socratic philosophy. Neither would it be sufficient to conclude that Socrates’ study of politics is only a matter of prudence for the self-protective philosopher. Again, I wish to substantiate the more comprehensive claim: this study is, for Socrates, central to philosophic inquiry itself. As such, it does most profoundly “contribute to the main inquiry” of the *Theaetetus*. With its apparently anomalous juxtaposition of political and epistemic themes, the very surface of the dialogue invites us to consider their relationship and work through for ourselves the reasons for their paradoxical connection. The interpretation contained herein seeks to respond to this invitation.

Plato exhibits the significance of this connection through the lamentable result of its neglect. Through the reluctance of these knowledge-seeking interlocutors to engage this same connection, Plato exhibits as well the imposing barriers to its consideration. But the effort to surmount these barriers remains worthwhile. The invitation still deserves a response because the issue to which Socrates’ novel approach responds also persists. We are acutely aware of the critique of reason, expressed powerfully by Nietzsche and Heidegger. One compelling strand of that critique charges that the choice to seek guidance from reason is itself dogmatic, and so not truly rational.\(^\text{11}\) This critique renders reason’s capacity to provide the most vital knowledge – the knowledge that might guide life – dubious. As Plato makes clear in the drama of *Theaetetus* and *Theodorus*, this incapacity cannot help but rebound on any and all claims for reason’s efficacy. In this light, the concerns of the *Theaetetus* remain our concerns.

Through the consideration of the *Theaetetus*’ political character that follows, I undertake to show that the dialogue can help us respond to this critique. It

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does so in its articulation of an approach that offers the possibility of a reasoned defense of the good of philosophic inquiry. Socrates formulates this defense in full awareness of the limits of reason because it is prompted precisely by this awareness. Midwifery is the distinctive name Socrates gives to this distinctive approach. Through this practice, which takes its bearings from the political opinions of his interlocutors, Socrates inquires into all things, including the prerequisites, theoretical and practical, of his own inquiry. Is Socratic midwifery still viable? Any response to this question requires first an interpretation of this dialogue in which Socrates explores these prerequisites. But it is at least some measure of midwifery’s viability that such an investigation is best undertaken with the kind of self-awareness characteristic of this practice. We cannot afford to succumb to the fate of the self-forgetting theorist when the question is no less than whether reason can guide life.

Interpretations

A perception shared by otherwise divergent interpretations of the Theaetetus is that the dialogue possesses a profoundly skeptical tenor. Several prominent features of the dialogue make this an apt characterization. First, the dialogue ends in explicit aporia. Referring to the dialogue’s three great attempts to define knowledge, Socrates employs the imagery of midwifery to ask Theaetetus: “Then our art of midwifery declares that all these things came into being as wind-eggs and are not worth rearing? (210b8–9).” Theaetetus responds: “Absolutely (210b10).” With one additional speech by Socrates, the dialogue thus concludes. Also contributing to the dialogue’s skeptical tone is the absence of the doctrines of the Forms and Recollection which, in other dialogues, provide a guarantee of ultimate intelligibility. Their absence is especially conspicuous because in an examination of the meaning of knowledge we would have expected them to occupy center stage. Add to these facts an unusually self-critical and cognitively humble Socrates, and we have clear justification for the characterization rendered in the preceding text.12

From this shared perception, however, interpretations of the Theaetetus diverge according to their reactions to this skeptical character. As David Sedley has shown, the main strands of these competing interpretive reactions were already present in antiquity.13 The most general division among the interpretations lies between those that take the dialogue’s aporetic conclusion at face value and those that do not. Two distinct considerations place interpreters in the former camp. The first, more characteristic of ancient than of contemporary

12 Sedley provides a useful list of the problems posed by the Theaetetus with respect to its skepticism. David Sedley, “Three Platonist Interpretations of the Theaetetus,” in Form and Argument in Late Plato, eds. Christopher Gill and Mary Margaret McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 84–5.
13 Ibid.
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interpreters, is the possibility that in the *Theaetetus* Plato is found “retracting or undermining the confident manifesto of knowledge presented in the *Republic*.“  

In this way, he reveals himself finally as a thoroughgoing skeptic. More evident in contemporary skeptical interpretations, however, is the judgment that in the *Theaetetus* Plato seeks to formulate a defensible definition of knowledge but fails. Accordingly, we are to take the dialogue’s conclusion as Plato’s sincere confession of failure.  

Any refutation of this position must obviously contend with Socrates’ reference to the several definitions of knowledge as “wind-eggs” and “not worth rearing.” Such a refutation might begin from the recognition that these phrases occur in a question posed to Theaetetus not in a statement made by Socrates. But even if Socrates did pronounce this judgment as his own we would still need to consider whether the position belongs also to the author of the dialogue. The more general point is that a determination of these phrases’ meanings rests on a coherent account of the whole rather than a particular statement (or question) voiced by one of the characters.  

In adopting this interpretive stance, I follow the widespread view that the dialogues are more akin to dramas than treatises. Given this form, the dialogue yields its meaning only to the reader willing to consider the import of all its details. Accordingly, I strive to conceive how such considerations as the interlocutors’ characters and deeds, not only their sound arguments but also their faulty arguments, might all contribute to the fulfillment of the author’s intent. I hold that we must, in short, attend as carefully as possible to the world of the dialogue in all its particularity. Such attention is especially demanded in the case of the *Theaetetus*, for in its opening pages we learn that a contributing

14 Ibid., 84. On the skeptical interpretation in general see ibid., 86–9.  
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author of the forthcoming conversation edited the transcript with a view to suppressing these particulars. But this fact as well is one of the particulars to which we must attend.

My initial rationale for adopting this approach is that it enables the greatest degree of openness to such intricacies of the text’s manifest literary form. However, at several points in the *Theaetetus*, and thus in my interpretation, the philosophic significance of the dialogic form becomes thematic. This should not be surprising. Given the pervasive themes of the *Theaetetus* – how we come to know, how we learn – we might expect this text to provide enlightenment regarding the philosophic judgments underlying Plato’s choice of the form in which he instructs his readers. These judgments explicate further the rationale underlying the dialogue form and thus substantiate further the interpretive approach adopted herein.

It is noteworthy, however, that numerous commentators adhering to a variety of interpretive approaches recognize that the *Theaetetus* yields its meaning only to the active reader. Perhaps owing to the desire to account for the dialogue’s anomalous skepticism, there is extensive recognition that the paradoxical aspects of the dialogue are not simply Platonic shortcomings but rather provocations aimed to engender in us our own reflections. Such a reader, one who regards the dialogue’s outcome as only apparently negative, would still need to explain why Plato omits the doctrines of the Forms and Recollection, and why he portrays such a skeptical Socrates. This reader would, in sum, need to articulate the positive meaning of those dialogic elements that make the skeptical interpretation plausible. The other two strands of interpretation noted by Sedley take up this task.

Sedley calls the first of these an “object-related interpretation,” so designated because it takes the *Theaetetus* to be concerned with the appropriate objects of knowledge. More specifically, through its concentration on sensible objects rather than the Forms it shows us what the objects of knowledge are not. Most famously expressed by Francis Cornford, this interpretation

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17 Ellen Haring writes, “the dialogue itself licenses and encourages active interpretation.” E. S. Haring, “The *Theaetetus* Ends Well,” *Review of Metaphysics* 35 (1982): 510. Myles Burnyeat’s commentary on the dialogue makes such interpretation thematic. He holds that Plato intentionally sets before the reader two interpretations, designated by Burnyeat as Reading A – generally speaking a version of the Cornfordian approach (see following text) – and Reading B – Burnyeat’s own interpretation that is again, generally speaking, a Revisionist account (see following text). Given this conception of Plato’s intention, the dialogue yields its meaning only to the reader who is willing to engage in the dialectic between these two readings. Burnyeat, *The “Theaetetus” of Plato*, passim. In his own book-length commentary Sedley endorses Burnyeat’s view and sees the need for the reader to go beyond the dialogue to “rear” those thoughts engendered by the dialogue. David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 5–6. See also Rosemary Desjardins, *The Rational Enterprise: Logos in Plato’s “Theaetetus”* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 4–8.

18 Sedley, “Three Platonist Interpretations,” 90

19 Ibid.
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maintains that we are meant to see “in the failure of all attempts to extract knowledge from sensible objects” that “knowledge has for its objects things of a different order – not sensible things but intelligible Forms and truths about them.”

Accordingly, we are to understand the Forms as separate from any material instantiation, unchanging and imperishable. The dialogue’s failure thus provides a positive argument for the necessity of the Forms so understood.

Cornford’s line is especially attractive to those Platonic scholars sometimes called Unitarians. These commentators argue that neither the Theaetetus, nor any other of what are called late dialogues, represent a substantial departure from the doctrines for which Plato is most famous. Again, in the case of the Theaetetus, it is rather that its unresolved perplexities point us precisely to the necessity of these doctrines. Or, to use the title of the most recent version of this understanding, Plato has Socrates serve here as “the midwife of Platonism,” permitting the reader to see that the inadequacies of his understanding can be remedied by Platonic metaphysics.

In introductory typologies of Theaetetus interpretations, such as the one I am now offering, the Unitarians are often opposed to the Revisionists. As the name suggests, the latter group regards the Theaetetus as a rejection, or at least a substantial revision, of the orthodoxies of Platonic metaphysics. However, I want to indicate briefly why I think it is misleading to consider the dialogue through the lens of the Unitarian-Revisionist alternative. In this way, I can show why I regard the third strand of interpretation noted by Sedley as providing a more appropriate approach to the Theaetetus than does the preceding object-related interpretation.

Confining ourselves to the Unitarian-Revisionist alternative begs many questions: Can we determine the order of the dialogues? Do we know enough to speak sensibly about Plato’s “development”? Just what should we understand by Plato’s metaphysics? Still more problematic, however, is that this

20 Cornford, Plato’s Theory of Knowledge, 162–3.
21 Ibid.
22 For another example of Unitarianism, see W. D. Ross, Plato’s Theory of Ideas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).
24 For a recent example, see Chappell, Reading Plato’s Theaetetus, 16–21.
26 In the course of interpreting 186c7–e12, McDowell argues that it is unlikely that Plato has in mind here the Theory of Forms because the passage lacks the features of “the typical expositions of the Theory of Forms.” To this claim, Chappell, a committed Unitarian responds, “We could ask, pedantically maybe, whether Plato offers us even one exposition of the
alternative directs our attention to an issue that is extrinsic to the dialogue’s concern. My point is illustrated when, early in the dialogue, Socrates rejects one of Theaetetus’ attempts to define knowledge just because it does take its bearings from the \textit{object} of knowledge. To this attempt Socrates retorts, “but what was asked, Theaetetus, was not that, what things knowledge is about, or how many pieces of knowledge there are; for we didn’t ask it because we wanted to count them but in order to discern knowledge itself – whatever that is (146e7–10).” The guiding question of the dialogue directs us not to the object of knowledge, not to what knowledge is \textit{of}, but to the requirements of knowing, out of which the character of the object emerges.\textsuperscript{27} To the extent that a picture of the object of knowledge does emerge in the dialogue, it does so as a response to these requirements. These requirements stand at the heart of its concern; hence the emphasis throughout the dialogue on the activities of learning and of inquiry.

For this reason, the third group in Sedley’s typology of ancient interpretations of the \textit{Theaetetus} is particularly significant. This group comprises commentators who sought to provide a “subject-related interpretation.”\textsuperscript{28} Such interpretations do consider the crux of the \textit{Theaetetus} to be its examination of those requirements of knowing that shape the available objects of knowledge. They do not presuppose the character of those objects from the start. My interpretation shares this orientation. However, to avoid an anachronistic and potentially misleading understanding of the term \textit{subject} in this regard, I must immediately add that I do not subscribe to the view that Plato means \textit{only}, in Sedley’s words, to “[define] knowledge in terms of the knowing subject’s own state.”\textsuperscript{29} This statement undoubtedly forms part of the picture. But the requirements of knowing pertain not only to our psychic apparatus but also to what the beings must be insofar as they are knowable in the ways that they are. The requirements of knowing are not as clearly separable as the subject-object distinction would imply. Apart from this significant caveat, however, my interpretation does agree with this third line of interpretation regarding the direction of the dialogue’s inquiry. The \textit{Theaetetus’} consideration of knowledge...


\textsuperscript{28} Sedley, “Three Platonist Interpretations,” 94.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.