Portrait of a Philosopher:

Defining Philosophy and Philosophers in the *Theaetetus*

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The *Theaetetus* is a dialogue full of puzzles, not the least of which is the character of Socrates himself. While often considered the face of wisdom and knowledge in all of Plato's works, in this work Socrates constantly proposes bad arguments, goes on long tangents, and leaves us with no definition of knowledge. If Socrates himself cannot be relied on, how can anyone hope to effectively do philosophy? Furthermore, if Socrates is not a proper philosopher himself, is there even one present in the dialogue? I argue that by examining three different ways of practicing philosophy in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates is shown to represent a single specific faculty of the philosopher, therefore practicing only one part of philosophy, explaining his shortcomings and thereby intimating a more robust platonic philosophical method.

Part 1: The Philosopher of the Digression

In what is roughly the middle of the *Theaetetus,* Socrates briefly changes both topic and interlocutor to enter a section called the digression. In this digression we find a detailed description of the philosopher. Framed as a discussion between Theodorus and Socrates on the difference between a statesman or lawyer and a philosopher, the digression seeks to answer questions about the wisdom of philosophers, primarily to explain why they seem foolish or useless to non-philosophers. Socrates answers by exploring the differences between two types of people: the statesmen who are raised in the courts (often referred to as "slaves" of the court) who focus their intellectual efforts on persuading a judge or tribunal to a specific view (172d-e), and the philosophers who care only for the truth and are willing to push their reasoning and discussion towards it at all costs (173c). While the account of the statesman should be kept in mind for a later section, the philosophers are the proper focus for now.

Socrates begins by describing how philosophers are seen by the masses, including a number of generally unflattering observations that others make about the philosopher. Philosophers are seen as unaware of their immediate surroundings, famously saying they do not know "How to get to the marketplace, or where to find a law court, a council chamber, or any other of the city's public meeting places" (173d1-3). As implied by the preponderance of political locations they are unable to find, the philosopher is both politically unengaged and ignorant. They are not even sufficiently aware of their neighbors, or "even whether he's a human being or some other sort of creature" (174b4). This ignorance of their neighbors seems also to extend to social ignorance, as the philosopher is socially offensive to those in power: calling kings shepherds and laughing at those with a proud lineage of heroes and kings (174d-e). Socrates concedes all of these are reasons that explain why philosophers, and philosophy understood more generally, are seen as pointless. Philosophers are disconnected from reality and for this reason appear faintly ridiculous. However, as will we see, the philosopher is detached from reality and political affairs not because of any weakness, but because their rich inner life which compels them to be more noble and wise than any politician could practically be.

To defend the philosopher against the masses Socrates explains that the philosopher's disconnection from mundane reality is really just a symptom of their interest in loftier ideas, philosophers search out "every nature among the things that are" (174a2) both in the "depths of the earth" and "in the heights of heaven" (173e6,7). This focus on a true reality beyond day-to-day existence explains why the philosophers do things like

falling into wells or why they cannot navigate their own cities, but it also recasts the things the philosopher does not know into a new light, bringing into question whether such things are worthy of knowing or of being called knowledge in the first place. If the philosopher is searching out the things that are in all directions, then the fact they do not care enough to know the things right in front of their face must mean that city layouts, political power, and social niceties are in some way not what is.This idea extends to the philosopher's actions around political power as well, as the reason that a philosopher seems so rude is not because they do not know the rules to follow when talking to a king or noble, but because they are easily able to see through the illusions holding up the social hierarchy to the truth that kings are "like a herdsman of some sort" (174d5) as they are only concerned with their material wealth and holding power over their citizens. The philosopher's distinctiveness is cemented at last by describing what happens when a philosopher is able to drag anyone to their own level where confronted with questions on the nature of things like "justice itself" (175c2) or "about human happiness and misery in general" (175c6), those who appeared so clever within the courts find themselves stupefied and exposed as deeply foolish in the way philosophers are thought to be.

Part 2: The Midwife

With the criteria and qualities of a philosopher in hand – being concerned with true being, seeing through illusions or falsehood, and being widely inquisitive – we can begin to examine the various depictions of philosophical method in the dialogue beginning with Socrates' description of his own skills, those of an intellectual midwife. This art is described as having "all the same features as theirs [actual midwifery]" but shifted from the bodies of women to the souls of (typical for the period) men (150b6). Socrates is described as very skilled at recognizing those with the capacity to give birth to ideas and wisdom, a capacity which seems to consist of identifying potential within the soul of his interlocutors. While the exact nature of this potential is unclear, it seems reasonable to assume that it is a potential to acquire the qualities Socrates values in philosophers, and applies to students who are able to work towards understanding what is. What is clear is that Theaetetus has this potential, and we will examine his qualities in detail later.

The midwife is also skilled at inducing and assisting "labor" by posing questions and eliciting elaborations, and if the midwife decides they are the wrong person for a particular idea or interlocutor, they are also skilled at determining effective matches for conversation. Most crucially, the midwife has the skill to determine whether any ideas developed are "a phantom and a falsehood or something fruitful and true" (150c2-3). These formidable skills come with a severe downside however: just as Artemis only blesses midwives who are themselves barren (149b10), Socrates is barren of wisdom himself (150d).

This section raises many questions, not the least of which is the restriction on Socrates' own ability to produce wisdom. There are a few different ways we can understand the claim that Socrates is barren. On the one hand, Plato may be suggesting that Socrates completely lacks the capacity to produce ideas, which would fit the analogy to actual midwifery better since Artemis blesses women who are truly barren, not just women who choose not to have children,

On the other hand, Socrates may be able to attain wisdom but doing so would interfere with his ability to help others develop their own ideas. This is supported by his claim that "the god" compels him to refrain, which would be more in line with Socrates refusing to use his own abilities (150c8). Speaking to this interpretation Scott Hemmenway, in his paper "Philosophical Apology in the *Theaetetus",* proposes that Socrates's restraint detaches him from possible results of inquiry, e.g. his own theory being proven right or

wrong, so that he can focus entirely on using his skills as a midwife (Hemmenway, 1990). We see evidence in support of Hemmenway's interpretation when Socrates cautions Theaetetus not to grow attached to his ideas "like a mother over her first baby," so perhaps this is really just a sacrifice Socrates has made to focus purely on dialectic. The restraint interpretation is intuitively more reasonable than the innate barrenness interpretation since it is hard to imagine that anyone as intelligent as Socrates has no ability to produce ideas.

Regardless of which interpretation we follow, there is still a seeming inconsistency in Socrates' self-characterization and his actions. If Socrates is truly intellectually barren, by choice or by nature, we may wonder why he seems to take the lead in the discussion with some regularity, especially in the *Theaetetus*. Almost immediately after explaining his role and abilities as midwife, he launches into presenting a detailed theory of perception and change, though framed as merely explaining Protagoras' viewpoint. However, even accepting the instances where Socrates presents others' views, he seems to propose entirely new ideas, such as the 'wax block' and 'aviary' accounts of memory, both of which are entirely novel psychological models seemingly developed in the middle of discussion. The answer to this inconsistency is found in the distinction between the statements concerning being that are, in Socrates's metaphor, the "child", and the parts of conversation which are instead tools for "delivery". Notably, through the whole of the *Theaetetus* Socrates very particularly avoids providing *definitions*. While he is perfectly happy to explain the theories of Protagoras or propose new analogies and explanations for memory, it is left to Theaetetus alone to propose definitions of knowledge. All of the work that Socrates does, except perhaps in the Digression, are tools to help Theaetetus fully understand (to use the midwife language, 'deliver') the meaning, consequences, and ultimate warrants of his proposed definitions. This observation falls in line with the earlier argument that Socrates's barrenness prevents attachment to a specific theory or outcome, as it is just *his own* definitions of knowledge that he would want to avoid being attached to. It would not matter that much if he were particularly attached to a specific metaphor for memory but the entire structure of Socratic dialogue would fall apart if he himself were too attached to any one theory of knowledge.

With these concerns out of the way, we can consider whether Socrates as a midwife fits the description of the philosopher provided in the Digression. Beginning with the similarities, it is clear that the more skeptical aspects of the philosopher are mirrored by the Socratic midwife. In the same way the philosopher sees through the particulars of mundane life and arguments, Socrates is very skilled at picking apart the appearances of things, especially arguments and ideas, to reveal false ideas and failed arguments for what they are. The interests of the philosopher are also the interests of Socrates himself.

Philosophers are concerned with the nature of fundamental things such as justice or happiness, and the Socratic midwife is concerned with similarly large questions; they even share the same signature approach when attempting discussion with non-philosophers. With non-philosophers, the philosopher turns specific questions into general definitional questions, "asking what sorts of things they are" (175c6) in regards to kingship, happiness, misery, or other similarly broad topics.

The final core trait of the philosopher is their intellectual openness and freedom, which is also partly reflected in the midwife. Just as the philosopher is always willing to move onto a different thesis or argument, the midwife avoids attachment to any particular idea by refusing to propose any theses themselves. This specific un-attachment, however, is also where the midwife falls out of alignment with the philosopher.

The flaw that prevents completely matching the midwife with the philosopher is revealed in the most famous line from the *Theaetetus* as Socrates says, "Philosophy starts nowhere else but with wondering" (155d4) but it is not clear that Socrates has any ability to wonder. Focusing again on his status as intellectually barren, we see

that Socrates cannot begin philosophical inquiry with his supposed philosophical skills. Furthermore, even though he cares deeply about the true nature of things, he has no way of searching out their nature in the way the philosophers do. If Socrates wishes to maintain his own impartial stance, he cannot begin to approach the questions of being, which is to say questions of definition, that a philosopher is concerned with.

Part 3: The Sophists

Since Socrates does not fulfill the role of philosopher, it might be tempting to instead consider another group of Greek intellectuals, the Sophists, and, more generally, rhetoricians. In fact, Socrates' midwifery has some overlap with sophism in expertise and style. Socrates himself draws attention to this overlap when he says his arguments have gone wrong in some way. The first notable example comes after the first refutation of the Protagorean theory of knowledge. Socrates brings the dialogue to a halt to proclaim that "We've reached agreement between us in the way antilogicians do" (164c9,10). The antilogicians were a specific school of rhetoricians who would lead interlocutors, regardless of position, into seeming contradiction. This definitely seems like what Socrates as midwife does, but with a few differences that Socrates notes.

First, Socrates claims that he has been arguing against the weakest version of Protagoras' argument, and arguing against it without anyone really available to defend it (164e), presumably because Theaetetus does not properly understand the Protagorean view. Particular concern is placed on attacking "what I'm [Protagoras] actually saying" (166c3) and on avoiding bad rhetoric, like saying that Protagoras' work placed man on the same level with pigs and baboons (161c5-8). These sorts of attacks and strategies are therefore placed squarely at the feet of rhetoricians rather than midwives acting properly. Clearly, rhetoricians and sophists are sufficiently different from Socrates and his midwifery but could they fill the role of the true philosopher?

It should not be surprising that the answer is no. However, just as the differences between the Sophists and Socrates illuminate more fully the skills of the midwife, the reasons that the Sophists fail to be philosophers reveal an important characteristic of the role itself. The first way rhetoricians are likely to fail is in the first way the philosopher succeeds: the rhetoricians are, by practical requirement, biased. Consider the statesman, or anyone found in the court, who need to stick to one side of an argument above all costs, often because of what is at stake in arguments in court (173a1). This alone prevents a rhetorician from being intellectually open and free as a philosopher, but this bias may not preclude expertise in argument.

It could be argued that some Sophists, like Protagoras or the antilogicians, do not have to perform in court and are therefore free to use their skills to discover the truth without bias. This is even alluded to in the instances where Socrates speaks more positively of various Sophists, especially when defending the fluxers against Theodorus, as Socrates allows that "they do divulge such things at leisure to whichever of their students," allowing that some sophists may show the same capacity for open-ended dialogue that the philosopher does (180b8). However, even the best sophists and rhetoricians lack another important ability required of a philosopher: they cannot reliably discern truth from falsehood.

The second way a Sophist fails to be a true philosopher is more fundamental to their mode of argument. To understand why rhetoric fails to actually reach truth, consider again the disdain Socrates has for the antilogicians. Because an antilogician can twist any thesis and any argument into a contradiction, their methodology does not actually distinguish between true statements and false ones; both can be manipulated in some way to produce a seeming contradiction. The same sort of problem appears in the Protagorean view of knowledge but flipped, as the Protagorean also has no ability to distinguish true from false considering

everything is true under its subjective lens illustrated best by the hypocrisy of Protagorean expertise (see 179a). This complete rejection of meaning and truth as discernible in speech and argument presents an inescapable reason why Sophists and rhetoricians cannot be considered philosophers. Again, a predictable conclusion, but one that illuminates subtle differences between Socratic midwifery and pure argument.

Part 4: Theaetetus or The Interlocutors

Moving away from those who might be popularly considered philosophers, there remain two participants in the dialogue: Theaetetus himself, and Theodorus. Since both are interlocutors, we can lump them together and simply discuss Theaetetus and his role in the inquiry. In the dialogue Theaetetus proposes four definitions of knowledge. First, he claims that knowledge is knowledge of a craft. Next he proposes knowledge is perception, the Protagorean view. Third, he suggests that knowledge is true belief. And, finally, he claims that it is true belief with an account. These hypotheses are crucial for directing the dialogue, so it is not unreasonable to ask whether Theaetetus might fill the role of the philosopher.

Theaetetus matches the profile of the philosopher of the digression in a number of ways. For one, Theaetetus is intellectually open in the way that the philosopher must be. He is willing to follow Socrates wherever his questions lead, and does not seem overly attached to any of the definitions of knowledge he provides. He also seems intensely interested in the kinds of questions the philosopher cares about, notably accepting Socrates' demand for a complete definition more readily than most interlocutors[1], even demonstrating the concept with his own mathematical experience. So it is clear that Theaetetus has the ability to begin philosophical inquiry in the proper manner, something Socrates either can not or will not do.

While Theaetetus' intellectual openness serves him well in dialogue with Socrates, these qualities would become an obstacle in many other circumstances. Theaetetus is, in a word, naive. This means that he does not easily fill the other half of the philosopher's role since like the sophists, he lacks the ability to separate truth from falsehood. In his case, this is not a methodological problem but one of inexperience, but the fault stands. This naivety does not just apply to larger theories like the kind Theaetetus is responsible for proposing, but for the more granular arguments as well. It is never Theaetetus who retracts an argument for fear of sophistry or other fault, but always Socrates. Through simple inexperience, Theaetetus does not have tools to evaluate arguments in the same way that Socrates can. Theaetetus can begin philosophical inquiry, excelling at "wondering," but he cannot finish one.

Part 5: The Dialectic

If all of the characters in the dialogue, even the ones not actually present, are not philosophers, where does that leave us? One option would be to say that just as the *Theaetetus* presents us with no ultimate answer to the question of knowledge, Plato provides us with no actual depiction of the philosopher he describes, thus his purpose in discussing it in the Digression becomes unclear, especially given its context. The Digression comes immediately after a discussion with Theodorus in which Socrates is very concerned with proper argument and one in which the nature of wisdom is a prime element. If no one in the dialogue can fulfill the requirements of a wise man, a philosopher, then how could they meaningfully comment on wisdom and knowledge itself? If no one can reliably discuss the primary subject of the dialogue, then the whole project seems pointless! Fortunately,

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[1] Compare Theaetetus' acceptance and understanding at 147d to Euthyphro's reluctant and almost sarcastic reaction at *Euthyphro,* 6e.

there is an aspect of the dialogue with all of the characteristics of the philosopher: the *dialectic* between Socrates and Theaetetus.

The dynamic between Socrates and Theaetetus is similar to what we see in many of Plato's dialogueues: Socrates asks a definitional question ("What is knowledge?"), his interlocutor proposes an answer ("Knowledge is perception."), and finally Socrates, employing his signature technique of *elenchus*, rips as many holes in the new theory as is required for his interlocutor to reject their own answers. This pattern runs particularly smoothly between Socrates and Theaetetus, primarily due to Theaetetus' aforementioned pliancy. Returning to the description of the philosopher pulled from the Digression, it becomes clear that we can combine the strengths of both Socrates and Theaetetus while they are involved in dialogue. The philosophical process begins when Theaetetus proposes a new thesis. It continues when Socrates helps Theaetetus understand fully the complete meaning and consequences of what he has proposed. Finally, it ends when Socrates comes to a judgment of the validity of whatever theory Theaetetus has produced. Crucially, this combined process provides the wonder necessary for the philosopher while still maintaining the skeptical edge required to determine true from false. Furthermore, since both Socrates and Theaetetus are willing to switch theses, go on tangents, and fully explore every aspect of their theories, their combined efforts are as intellectually open and free in discussion as the philosopher must be. Finally, since Theaetetus allows Socrates to propose the questions he must answer, the subject of their inquiry is whatever Socrates is normally interested in, namely questions of being; the dialogue is aimed at answering the same questions the philosopher of the digression is interested in.

If we accept that the "philosopher" – or perhaps the philosophical process of the *Theaetetus* – is found in the interaction between Socrates and Theaetetus, this naturally raises the question of why the Digression describes the philosopher as a single person while Plato presents the character as two. Why could this dialogue not include one person, perhaps Socrates, with all the powers of the philosopher educating another or simply explaining their theories? One possible reason is to show the power of the process of dialectic itself. The *Theaetetus* is notable for just how much work is done, and on how many different subjects. By the end of the dialogue, we have received a workable theory of perception, discussed the process and consequences of changing physical objects, learned the nature of philosophers, examined the difference between perception and thought, seen a theory of memory which later appears in Aristotle, and created a definition of what it means to have an account (Scheiter, 2012). Especially for a dialogue in which the primary question is never answered, this is an impressive amount of productive work.

The sheer quantity of topics, in particular, has a focus on philosophical method. Theaetetus is in many ways the ideal interlocutor for Socrates, and is more willing than most. Very few Platonic dialogueues either cover as much ground or have interlocutors as enthusiastic, even though they almost all end in the same lack of an answer; the only exception is *The Republic*, which has even more breadth than the *Theaetetus*. *The Republic* features willing and promising interlocutors in Adamantus and Glaucon, and has a lengthy tangent defining philosophy and philosophers.

The purpose of the Digression is then to identify when philosophy becomes truly effective. Instead of just stripping prominent Athenians of their false beliefs it produces real, positive work even when failing to answer the initial question. The clarifications, explorations, and tangents required of an actual dialogue would be much harder to properly represent without two characters to help readers distinguish the capabilities.

The second question this depiction raises is the possibility of doing philosophy on one's own,

especially as it is often conceived in its modern form. If two radically different capabilities, one of naive wonder and the other detached skepticism, are required for the most effective philosophical inquiry, should anyone bother asking questions alone as the philosopher of the Digression appears to do? The answer lies in the dialogue's fundamental nature as artificial, written work. Just as Plato wrote the dialogue as a simulated conversation guided by an individual with full control over the participants, individual philosophers can perform an interior "self-dialogue". A philosopher might begin by hypothesizing with no limit, but retreat to a more labor-intensive, skeptical mode of thought when evaluating their ideas. Support for the possibility of this mode of thought is also provided by Socrates' description of thought as "Talk that the soul conducts with itself about whatever it is investigating" (189e6,7) which is itself a dialectical process. Therefore, what the *Theaetetus* provides is a method and model for refining our own interior dialogue into a proper philosophical tool.

In conclusion, though none of the individuals in the *Theaetetus* can completely fill the definition of the philosopher provided by the digression, they all (except Protagoras and the other Sophists, which is fitting since they only appear in depictions by other characters) share certain capabilities of the philosopher and, as such, the combined efforts of Socrates and Theaetetus can follow the same process as a "true" philosopher working alone. Additionally this explains the incredible breadth of the dialogue as an exploration of the capabilities of a philosopher, and discloses the pedagogical core of the work as it teaches readers to be better philosophers, whether alone or in dialogue.

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