Socrates in the *Theaetetus*


According to the most widely accepted chronology, the *Theaetetus* is the last dialogue in which Plato assigns the principal role to a Socrates who has explicit reference to the historical figure. The dramatic date of the main discussion is 399 BCE, as Socrates indicates in his final words about having to respond to Meletus’ indictment against him. In the ‘midwifery’ speech Socrates defends his philosophical mission in ways that unmistakably recall the *Apology*. He presents himself there as a ‘know nothing’ figure, and he maintains this posture throughout his attempts to elicit a valid definition of knowledge from Theaetetus. (Yet, in the so-called ‘digression’ [172d-177c] Socrates distinguishes the philosopher from the man of affairs by numerous allusions to doctrines enunciated in earlier dialogues, especially *Phaedo* and *Republic*.) In his handling of the young Theaetetus Socrates is both exceptionally benign and exceptionally creative. Why, after presenting so attractive an image of Socrates, does Plato relegate him to being a mere bystander in the conversations of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*? To elucidate this very complex question, I advance two main proposals.

First, we should suppose, contra Vlastos and many others, that all of Plato’s Socrates up to and including that of the *Theaetetus* are intended to refer to the man who was tried and executed in 399 BCE—not, or not necessarily, to his actual words or thoughts, but to what he stood for, a life totally committed to philosophy. Everything that Plato wrote, up to this time, is intended in large
measure to explain the motivations and convictions of the man he takes the real Socrates to have been.

Second, we should suppose that from the time he composed the *Parmenides* (probably a short time before the *Theaetetus*) Plato had become aware that his Socrates figure, notwithstanding its many-sidedness, could not entirely encapsulate the paradigm philosopher. However, Plato does not yet let go of Socrates. Having let Parmenides in the dialogue of that name instruct the 'very young' Socrates, he gives us a mature Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. This Socrates is literally 'out of place' (*atopos*), outside his civic haunts, and bursting with ideas he can scarcely control. Plato is on the way to saying farewell to Socrates. The *Theaetetus*, renewing and extending the *Apology*, is the farewell proper. Reading the dialogue in the light of its sequel, the *Sophist*, we learn that the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* instantiates the elenchus (the 'sophistry of golden lineage'); by purging the false conceit of knowledge (as he does for the young Theaetetus), Socrates is the essential beginning of any philosophical education. Yet, for positive progress in understanding knowledge, non-Socratic methods are needed—the methods of collection and division, a new theory of Forms, and elucidation of the structure of true and false sentences. The Eleatic Stranger, who delivers these doctrines, extends the concept of the paradigm philosopher beyond anything hitherto attributed to Socrates.

The role of Socrates in the *Philebus* (doubtless a still later dialogue) may seem to present a problem for these proposals, but the *Philebus* Socrates is no existential figure with an identity in time and place. I am not claiming that the introduction of the Eleatic Stranger was intended to supplant every use of Socrates for good and all. My point is rather that Plato's way of presenting Socrates in the *Theaetetus* is both his final compliment to the *real man* (a final apology as it were) and his indication that philosophy has to move beyond the Socratic paradigm he has set himself up to now. This reading of the dialogue, though novel in its details, accords well with points that are regularly made—the reminiscence of an early Socrates, the foreshadowing of issues
resolved in the *Sophist*, and the restriction to the 'digression' of everything associated with a doctrinal Socrates.

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