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Socrates and Protagoras against the Sophists in Plato's *Theaetetus*

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Theaetetus is Plato's masterful dialogue on the question "what is knowledge" and rightfully holds the preeminent place among classic discussions of epistemology. *Theaetetus* is also the home of arguably the greatest of Plato's many educational metaphors, the educator as midwife. The midwife metaphor eloquently articulates educational insights which remain influential to this day—specifically that ideas may be drawn out of young minds by asking the right questions. Curiously, though the midwife metaphor is often cited in relation to the contemporary use of the "Socratic method" in elementary, secondary, higher and, especially, legal education, educational philosophers have tended to neglect *Theaetetus* and the powerful educational metaphor therein.¹ Indeed, to my knowledge, there are only three readings of *Theaetetus* that focus primarily on the educational theme (Hansen, 1998; Kramer, 1976; Rozema, 1998).² I will comment on those interpretations of *Theaetetus* in due course as I offer a reading of *Theaetetus* along its educational theme. I argue that the dialogue offers the contrasting educational exhortations, methods, ideals and epistemological foundations of Socrates and Protagoras. Though Plato distinguishes the Protagorean educational project from the Socratic one, Plato presents both as serious, estimable educational approaches. Further, both approaches are presented as vastly superior to a general Sophistic education which lurks in the background of the dialogue.

The Overall Structure of the Dialogue

Before I offer my interpretation of *Theaetetus*, it would be useful to revisit the outline of the dialogue, paying particular attention to how educational issues are interwoven into the discussion of how knowledge should be defined. The dialogue begins with a preliminary discussion between Euclides and Terpsion, associates of Socrates from Megara.³ Euclides reports that he has just seen Theaetetus, who is near death, on his return to Athens from fighting valiantly in battle. At the dramatic date of the conversation between Terpsion and Euclides, Socrates is dead. But Euclides says that Socrates had recounted to him a conversation Socrates had with Theaetetus which impressed him tremendously. Euclides had taken notes and recorded it – even returning to Socrates to correct the account of the discussion. While

¹ This neglect has been lamented by Beck, who discusses Socratic midwifery in an article, "Plato's views of teaching" (1985).

² David Sedley's fine *The Midwife of Platonism* integrates the midwife metaphor into a reading of the dialogue, but he does so in a treatment, primarily, of the epistemological theme. Other prominent scholars such as John McDowell (1973) and Myles Burnyeat (1990) have failed to see much of a connection of the metaphor to the remainder of the dialogue. Burnyeat does not overlook the metaphor; in fact, he offers a stimulating study of it elsewhere (1977).

³ As several scholars have noted, Euclides and Terpsion are noted as present at Socrates' death in Plato's *Phaedo* (59c).

Terpsion and Euclides rest, Euclides has his slave read his account of the discussion to them, which is the main text of the dialogue *Theaetetus*.

This prelude has already identified the educational theme. Euclides recalls what a talented young man Theaetetus was, and recalls that Socrates had “expressed great admiration for his nature” and that “there was every necessity that he become renowned if he reached maturity” (142d).⁴ Socrates, though Plato has him explicitly deny that he is a teacher in his *Apology* (19d), is clearly up to his usual business of talking to young men and testing their intellectual mettle. Socrates’ educational authority is established from the outset, as not only does Socrates partake in these educational interactions with young men, he correctly surmises which of them will make their mark—Theaetetus ultimately does so both in mathematical studies and on the battlefield. Socrates must therefore be exceptionally good at identifying an exceptional soul.

Following the prelude, the dialogue is a discussion among Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus, a young man whose intellect and character receive the highest praise from his teacher Theodorus (143e-144b and 145b). The beginning of the dialogue proper further emphasizes the importance of the educational theme. In Athens, Socrates meets Theodorus, who has a good reputation for “geometry as well as for everything else” (143e). Theodorus and Socrates are both educators – people who associate with young men and compare notes on their best and brightest. The interaction between Theodorus and Socrates is notable for the general goodwill between the two of them. Education of the young is a serious business, and these two men give it the attention it deserves.⁵

As Theodorus and Socrates speak, Theaetetus and some of his friends approach. Thus, two teachers⁶ and several students are present. Once Socrates is ready to see if Theaetetus is able to live up to Theodorus’ praise, he quickly turns the discussion to the question, “what is knowledge?” The dialogue features four attempts to define knowledge. Theaetetus first attempts to define knowledge by listing the types of subjects about which one may have knowledge (e.g., geometry and astronomy). This attempt is quickly shown to refer to types of knowledge rather than providing a definition of knowledge itself. Theaetetus grows frustrated when his initial suggestion fails and Socrates takes an *apparent* break from the discussion of knowledge to tell Theaetetus that his frustration is an intellectual pain of labor. Socrates says

⁴ All translations from *Theaetetus* are those of Seth Benardete (1984).

⁵ The opening exchange between Socrates and Theodorus in which Socrates asks about the up-and-coming youth of Athens closely resembles Socrates’ comments in the opening of Plato’s *Charmides*, in which Socrates returns to Athens from battle at Potidaea and asks “about the present state of philosophy and about the young men, whether there were any who had become distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both” (trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague in Plato, 1997, 153d).

⁶ I will call Socrates a teacher in this paper. Socrates is clearly doing something educational, and hence the title is appropriate, despite the fact that Plato sought to distinguish him from the professional class of teachers of his day. David Hansen (1988) is surely right, however, that *Theaetetus* can be read as a meditation of what it means to be a teacher.

that he can recognize these pains because he is a midwife of the soul. Socrates then describes in some detail (over three Stephanus pages) the sense in which he is a midwife of the soul: He identifies pregnant young men, helps deliver their brain-children, tests those brain-children of their worthiness (killing many), and matches young men to suitable teachers.

Encouraged by Socrates' tale of his educational expertise and the appropriateness of his own frustration as pains of labor, Theaetetus continues the conversation and a second definition of knowledge is considered, that knowledge is perception. Much time is dedicated to refuting this claim (151d-186e) before Socrates leads the group to the conclusion that perception cannot adequately account for all knowledge. The educational theme permeates this definition of knowledge as Socrates claims that Theaetetus offers a Protagorean-Heraclitean answer to the question. Protagoras is dead at the time of Socrates' conversation with Theaetetus. Yet Socrates tries to articulate Protagoras' position as strongly as possible and thereby introduces him into the discussion as a quasi-independent character who prods and chides the interlocutors while defending his view. By bringing Protagoras into the conversation, there are now three teachers in the dialogue and Protagoras and Socrates' ideas of teaching and learning are implicitly compared. In the midst of the refutation of the idea that knowledge is perception, a digression occurs in which the life of the philosopher and the life of the orator/lawyer are compared. I shall argue later that this digression serves to address the types of lives to which three respective educations, the Socratic, the Protagorean, and the Sophistic, lead.

Theaetetus then proposes a third definition, that knowledge is true belief. True belief is shown to be an insufficient definition of knowledge as it ultimately does not bridge the gap between believing correctly and knowing. Theaetetus refines his definition of knowledge. He tells Socrates that knowledge is true belief with a *logos*. The word *logos* appears several times in the dialogue with a wide range of meanings, ranging from conversation, discussion, speech, statement or discourse to an argument, account, theory, explanation or definition.⁷ To test this final definition, Socrates and Theaetetus must decide what sort of *logos* would be appropriate to accompany true belief. Three versions of *logos* are considered (as a statement, as the elements of the object, and as a differentiating feature of the thing). After this third sense of *logos* is rejected, Socrates tells Theaetetus that he (Theaetetus) is better off for having undertaken this inquiry and goes off to meet the indictment of Meletus. The dialogue ends *aporetically* and is unsuccessful, insofar as the interlocutors are unable to define knowledge.

The Educators in *Theaetetus*: Socrates, Protagoras, Theodorus, and the Sophists

⁷ See Myles Burnyeat's discussion of the wide array of uses of the term *logos* with respect to *Theaetetus* (1990, p. 134).

The definition of knowledge as perception, offered by Theaetetus and shown by Socrates to be based on the Protagorean position that man is the measure of all things, is ultimately refuted. A relativistic epistemology ultimately undercuts *any* positive definitions of knowledge and hence is self-refuting. Based on the refutation of Protagoras, it is tempting to read *Theaetetus* as a Platonic statement about the unsoundness of Protagorean and, by extension, all Sophistic education as opposed to the value of Socratic education. Indeed, this is the position that Scott Kramer has taken (1976). Kramer argues that *Theaetetus* features Socratic versus Sophistic education; drawing on the digression about the life of the philosopher, Kramer claims that Theodorus and Protagoras are stand-ins for the Sophists, who are harshly rebuked by Plato as offering an education which leads to an inferior life.

Kramer's view is not without reason. Throughout his corpus, Plato tends to treat the Sophists with disdain. He ridicules them for claiming to impart virtue and other things which they do not fully understand, fraudulently accepting fees for said teaching, and disregarding the truth in favor of winning debates, among other things. Plato could be read as spending much of his life defending Socrates from the charges of the Athenian court and the Athenian public by distinguishing Socrates from the Sophists. One could reasonably argue that Plato agrees with Aristophanes' depiction of a sophist as a dangerous, quasi-insane, crook in *Clouds*, with the caveat that it is not Socrates but rather the Sophists who are justly ridiculed.

But before one decides whether Plato lumps Protagoras together with the other Sophists, one must consider how Protagoras is actually depicted in *Theaetetus*.⁸ Protagoras is introduced as a friend of Theodorus at 161b and references to this friendship appear throughout the discussion of knowledge as perception (162a, 168c, 168e-169a, 170c, 171c, 183b). At 179a, Socrates calls Protagoras Theodorus' teacher (*didaskalon*). The relationship between Protagoras and Theodorus, however, does not place them both within the realm of Sophistic educators, as Kramer claims (p. 391). Rather, it must be recalled from the introduction that Theodorus and Socrates have a relationship as well (143d ff.). Thus, Theodorus should be viewed as a gifted and well-regarded geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music teacher of young men (145c-d) – the very young men who soon will be leaving Theodorus in favor of associating with other men who will teach them how to live the good, honorable, or profitable life in the city. Theodorus is playing the role of educational matchmaker, a role so important that Socrates insists later in the dialogue that it is among the chief tasks of the true midwife (149d-150a). As a matchmaker, Theodorus must come to appreciate that Socratic education will lead to one type of life, Protagorean to another, and Sophistic to yet another. Theodorus does not well understand the difference among them. He hesitates to defend his friend Protagoras from Socrates and he fears Socrates' questions (165ab and 169ab). Unlike Protagoras and

⁸ A fuller discussion of Plato's view of Protagoras would also require a reading of Plato's *Protagoras*, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present paper. At present, I should note briefly that I believe Plato shows Protagoras similar deference in that dialogue as he does in *Theaetetus*.

Socrates, he prefers stories to philosophical discussions (177c) and, overall, he proves himself to be the sort of teacher who merely prepares young men for the next stage in their education.⁹ He does seem to understand, however, that there is a difference between Protagoras and Socrates on the one hand, and the Sophists on the other. Theodorus tells Socrates that members of the Ephesian circle (who accept Heraclitean doctrines that everything is in flux) escape philosophical discussion by playing games with words: “if you ask any of them anything, they send off shots as if they were drawing up enigmatic shaftlets from a quiver, and if you seek to get an account (*logos*) of this, as to what he has said, you’ll be struck by another freshly altered name.” Socrates then suggests to Theodorus that their contentious responses are probably only responses toward outsiders – surely among their students they discuss these matters calmly. Theodorus responds strongly, “What do you mean, pupils? You extraordinary being! For this sort there’s not another who becomes the pupil of an other” (180a-c). Theodorus’ point that there are no teachers and pupils in the Ephesian circle is exaggerated. There are surely those who teach and those who learn these doctrines. His joke that there are no teachers and pupils among them demonstrates that he understands the difference between those who educate to beguile and gain victory – Sophists – versus others such as Socrates and Protagoras who converse for nobler reasons. But since Theodorus only distinguishes Protagoras and Socrates from the Sophists and not from each other, Theodorus himself, as much as Theaetetus and his young friends, must come to understand the difference between them. In short, Theodorus must become a better matchmaker and the young men present must come to understand the stakes of their upcoming educational choices.

Theodorus cannot actually refer students to Protagoras since, at the time of the dialogue, Protagoras is dead (169a). But Plato’s readers are also told that Socrates is dead in the wider dramatic context of *Theaetetus* which includes the prelude (142c). Thus there are two elements of Plato’s treatment of Socrates and Protagoras. First, since both are dead at the time that Plato composed the dialogue, Plato is seeking to define and defend their legacies. Second, there is a sense in which Plato is defining and defending not only the individuals but the general Socratic and Protagorean approaches to education.¹⁰

I claim that there is a sense in which Plato is defending the legacy of Protagoras because Protagoras, despite being refuted, comes off very well in the dialogue. Protagoras cares for the state of his students’ souls; “in education,” Protagoras says, “one has to effect a change from another condition to the better. But the physician effects a change by drugs, the sophist by speeches [*logois*]” (167a). Though he acknowledges that he takes fees from his students (167d),

⁹ It is probably no coincidence that the philosopher’s curriculum outlined in Book VII of the *Republic* includes geometry as a preparatory step to dialectic.

¹⁰ Platonism might be argued to be the Socratic legacy, if one acknowledges the strong differences in the methods of the late dialogues as opposed to Plato’s earlier Socratic dialogues (see Sedley 2005). Regarding the Protagorean legacy, it is difficult to speculate who Plato understood as its heirs. Isocrates, Plato’s rival, may be a target and Beck has suggested that a challenge to Isocrates inheres in *Theaetetus* (1985, p. 120).

he is not portrayed as duping his students or peddling false wares. Further, although he uses speeches, Protagoras says that he is comfortable with the question and answer method as well. After reiterating a stronger defense of the “man is the measure” doctrine, Protagoras respectfully asks of Socrates, “If you can dispute [my argument] from the beginning, then go ahead and range a counterspeech against it and dispute it; or if you want to do it through questions, do it through questions, for this in no case must be avoided, but anyone of sense must pursue it *most of all*” (167d, my emphasis). Socrates clearly preferred question and answer and in the Socratic dialogues Socrates is most often seen using it.¹¹ But the Protagoras of *Theaetetus* also prefers question and answer “most of all.” Hence, readers are left to conclude that, in terms of pedagogical methods, Protagoras and Socrates may not be so different.

If Plato’s readers had not yet recognized that Socrates’ resurrected Protagoras is earnest, fair, and philosophical in his approach to the discussion, Protagoras articulates a detailed statement about how to pursue inquiries justly, as “conversation” (*dialegomenos*) rather than “competition” (*agônizomai*):

to be unjust in a situation of this sort is to fail to separate, whenever one’s engagements are of this kind, competition and conversation, and in the former be playful and trip up one’s opponent to the extent that one is capable of it, but in conversation be in earnest put one’s interlocutor on his feet again, pointing out to him only the slip-ups in which he had been led astray by himself and his former associations. For if you act in this way, those who spend their time with you will blame themselves for their own confusion and perplexity, and they won’t blame you, and they’ll pursue and love you; *they’ll hate themselves and flee from themselves into philosophy* in order that, once they’ve become different, they may be rid of who they were before. But if, just as the many do, you do the contrary of this, the contrary will befall you and instead of as philosophers you’ll reveal your associates as loathers of this business whenever they become older. If you obey me then—and this was stated even before—if not in a spirit of enmity or contention, but with gracious condescension in thought, you will truly examine what we’re saying. (167e-168a, my emphasis)

I quoted this passage at length because it exemplifies the deference shown to Protagoras in *Theaetetus*. If Protagoras were merely a Sophist like the others, one would expect the above passage to be part of Socrates’ reprimand of him for aiming at reputation over truth and turning the young against philosophy. But that is not the case. Protagoras, with Socrates, comes to the defense of philosophy and serious investigation of philosophical matters. *Protagoras is the one who exhorts those present to philosophy*. Education, for Protagoras, is not

¹¹ *Clitophon* is a notable exception. On Socratic exhortations to philosophy see David Corey (2005).

a scheme, casually concocted to defraud gullible, ambitious young men. It is rather of upmost importance to the city (167c) and the individual. Throughout the dialogue, Protagoras rebukes Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus for failing to do the conversation justice by avoiding difficult matters (162de, 166a, 166c-d, 168b-c) and Socrates rebukes himself and his interlocutors as well (e.g., 164d-165a). Of course, it is Socrates who is constructing Protagoras' position; since he does so quite strongly, he shows that he too pursues the inquiry in the right way and for the right reasons. Protagoras and Socrates are enmeshed in a philosophical discussion notable for its goodwill and its thoroughness. Protagoras and Socrates both come off as superb intellects and compelling potential teachers.

The Digression: Two Lives and Three Educators

The most difficult part of my interpretation of *Theaetetus* lies in the fact that Plato's digression juxtaposes the life of the philosopher and the practical man.¹² The philosopher is wholly ignorant of the ways of the city, "in truth his body alone is situated in the city and resides there, but his thought, convinced that all these things are small and nothing, dishonors them in every way and flies, as Pindar puts it, 'deep down under the earth'" (173e) and he "has been truly nurtured in freedom and leisure" (175d). The practical men (orators and lawyers) are slavish, "small and not upright in their souls" and "with nothing healthy and sound in their thought" (173a-b). If the philosopher represents Socrates and the practical man represents Protagoras, then Kramer's reading (1976) is right and Socratic education leads to the good life of the philosopher and Protagorean education leads to the hurried, impoverished life of the practical man.

But the most puzzling part of the digression is that the description of the philosopher does not appear to be a particularly good description of Socrates.¹³ Some parts do bear great resemblance to Socrates (especially based on the accounts in the *Apologies* of Plato and Xenophon); philosophers appear as "laughable public speakers when they enter the courts" (172c) and "whenever he's compelled in a court or anywhere else to converse about the things at his feet and things before his eyes... his lack of deportment is dreadful as he gives the impression of plain silliness" (174c). But other aspects of the philosopher do not resemble Socrates. Socrates says that philosophers "since their youth, first of all, don't know the way to the marketplace [*agora*], or where's a court, councilhouse, or anything else that's a common assembly of the city" (173c-d). As opposed to the philosopher described by Socrates, Socrates himself was always to be found in the *agora*, the marketplace, chief meeting place, and primary place of political life in the city. Plato has Socrates say in the *Apology* that he will use the same language in his defence as "I am accustomed to use in the marketplace [*agora*] by the bankers' tables, where many of you have heard me" (trans. G.M.A Grube in Plato, 1997; 17a). Xenophon

¹² "Practical man" is the term used in the Levett translation revised by Burnyeat (1990) at 173b.

¹³ Kramer neglects to address this difficulty.

writes in his *Memoirs of Socrates*, "Socrates was always in the public eye. Early in the morning he used to make his way to the covered walks and the recreation grounds, and when the agora became busy he was there in full view; and he always spent the rest of the day where he expected to find the most company" (1990; 1.1.10). But one does not need to look outside of *Theaetetus* to realize that Socrates is different than Socrates' philosopher. In the close of the dialogue, Socrates ominously tells Theaetetus, "I have to go to the porch of the king and meet the indictment of Meletus which he's drawn up against me" (210d). Socrates clearly knows how to find his way to the "court, councilhouse" and the other political institutions of the city. The Socrates of Plato's *Apology*, which Plato connects to *Theaetetus* via the indictment preceding the trial, did not participate regularly in political affairs, but he was greatly concerned with the political life of the city (and therefore served as Athens' gadfly).

Before I attempt to make sense of the philosopher's relationship to Socrates, I want to argue that there is also a disjunction between Protagoras and the practical man. It is true that Protagoras taught his students the art of persuasion, the chief concern of the practical man. However, Socrates repeatedly mentions how the practical man is *only* concerned with practical affairs; the practical men "are always speaking in the press of time... and there's no room to have their talks about whatever they desire, but the plaintiff stands over them holding necessity and an outline that is read alongside as they speak and outside of which they must not speak" (172e). The entire discussion of "knowledge is perception" attests to the fact that Protagoras was concerned with far more than the mundane day to day legal and political affairs of the city. Protagoras, in *Theaetetus*, is beholden to no one, not to a "plaintiff," not to an "outline," nor to anything else. Protagoras had a sophisticated epistemological theory, and his elaborate discussion with Socrates in *Theaetetus*, I would argue, demonstrates for Theaetetus and his young friends that a Protagorean education entails such philosophical discussions. Further, as I already mentioned above, Protagoras was interested in improving individuals and the entire city, not merely pandering to juries and the *demos*. Finally, throughout the dialogue, Theodorus, Theaetetus and Socrates say that they must take the time to explore the discussion fully. They are not pressed for time and, in this sense, they resemble the philosophers who Socrates describes (e.g., 172c, 187d). Protagoras, however, does not have to rush off either. He remains in the dialogue *leisurely* pressing his argument. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates takes his time with the argument, but he is actually far more responsive to pressures of the practical man than is Protagoras, as he heads off to the king's porch.¹⁴ Hence, Protagoras does not clearly represent the practical man, nor would the Protagorean education necessarily lead one to become a practical man.

If Socrates is not the philosopher and Protagoras is not the practical man, what role does the digression play in the dialogue? To answer the question, the digression must be read

¹⁴ Though responsive to the city's demands, Socrates took his time and even had another conversation with *Euthyphro* on the way, according to Plato's dramatic sequence.

as part of the educational theme I have been articulating. I have argued that Socrates is educating Theaetetus, Theaetetus' young friends, and the matchmaker Theodorus about the respective differences in Socratic, Protagorean and Sophistic education. I suggest that the digression's juxtaposition of the philosopher and the practical man serves two purposes. First, it serves to persuade Theodorus and the young men that the Socratic, and by extension the philosophic, education is preferable to any other by presenting an exaggerated portrait of the philosopher to an uninitiated audience. The second purpose of the digression is a Platonic reflection about the respective ideals of Socratic and Protagorean education which are presented to prospective students with the hope of motivating them to improve their souls and their cities.

I will begin with the latter purpose. Theaetetus and his friends are young – most scholars say that Theaetetus is about sixteen years old – and they are probably soon going to pursue their next phase of study following their mathematical, musical and astronomical studies by seeking teachers who prepare them to live good lives, benefitting themselves and their city. These young men do not understand what is at stake in the vitally important decision about the next stage in their education. One type of teacher – the Sophist – will tell them that they enable their students to succeed in the public life of the city, to be favored by juries, the *demos*, and to win fame and repute. Protagoras, like the other Sophists criticized by Plato, presents the educational ideal of the practical man successful in public life to uninitiated students. Of course, Protagoras and the other Sophists would present their own portraits far more persuasively than does Socrates in the digression. However, they all primarily appeal to an ideal of successful public life.

But Plato leaves little doubt in *Theaetetus* that Protagoras' appeal to uninitiated students is only an enticement to Protagorean education. Without doubt, Protagorean education will include preparing students to speak clearly and persuasively in the public sphere; but it will necessarily take students beyond the concerns of the courts and the city to questions of the genuinely philosophical – what is knowledge? How can one improve oneself and one's city? What can one know about the existence of gods and metaphysics in general? I am arguing, in short, that Protagoras appeals to simplistic notions of success in public life in his exhortation to education but then provides his students with a genuinely philosophical education. Though this education is philosophical, it is inferior to the Socratic education in Plato's eyes. But the portrayal of Protagoras in *Theaetetus* indicates that Plato respectfully disagreed with the Protagorean education and in so doing Plato distinguished the Protagorean from the Sophistic education. The Sophists in general really did produce practical men, in Plato's eyes. They offered the ideal of the publicly successful man to prospective students and provided an education that led only to that. Protagoras offered the uninitiated the same ideal but then turned his students' souls part way towards philosophy.

Socrates presents prospective students with an entirely opposite ideal of the educated person. Instead of describing those things which are likely to appeal to young men – fame, money, power over others – Socrates presents the uninitiated with a picture of a bumbling, inept philosopher. It is from Plato's digression that we get the story of Thales who, while philosophically gazing upwards at the stars, falls into a well and is laughed at by a Thracian servant girl (174a). It is the image of the philosopher as absent-minded Thales and as someone who does not know the way to the *agora* which has most troubled scholars. But these images are serving a pedagogical purpose. Socrates presents the life of the philosopher as wholly undesirable in terms of those things which most young men value. It is only if one wants to work incredibly hard, for no financial reward and no public adoration, than one should embark on an education in search of the fruits of philosophy. Unlike Protagoras, Socrates believed the uninitiated should come to him only if they want to struggle into a life unappreciated by most. This educational ideal will turn off many students, but it may identify the few who are worthy of a Socratic education.

Just as Protagoras uses an appeal to prospective students' baser educational aims to lead them, secondarily, towards a philosophical life, Socrates appeals primarily to the noblest ideal to educate students and, secondarily, into a public life. For the philosopher in the digression is not the true philosopher educated Socratically. Once initiated, Socratic students will come to appreciate that Thales was no bumbling fool. Rather, it is the Thracian servant who is the fool¹⁵ for failing to understand that the astronomer Thales intentionally climbed down into the well so that its opening could serve as a fixed observation point against which an astronomer could chart the movement of the stars.¹⁶ And the clueless philosopher who cannot find his way to the *agora* will be understood to the initiated as someone who knows his way to the *agora* well, but elects not to partake in political showmanship once there. Possibly, as Plato suggests in his *Gorgias*, the Socratic philosopher knows how to practice the true political art (521d).

Epistemology and Education

For those offering an interpretation of the educational theme in *Theaetetus* as a whole, the question of the centrality of the epistemological theme must be examined. David Rozema's fine pursuit of the educational theme leads him to argue that the question "what is knowledge" is merely incidental to the central issue of Theaetetus' *moral* education at the hands of Socrates (1998; see especially pages 210, 211, and 219).¹⁷ On my reading of the dialogue, the theme of epistemology has a far more important stake in the juxtaposition of the three types of

¹⁵ She is referred to as uneducated (*apaideutô*) at 175d.

¹⁶ This intriguing point on how to read the Thales anecdote is made by Katja Vogt, who draws on what she admits are difficult to find German sources (2003, p. 123 and n2)

¹⁷ Hansen (1988) reads the dialogue in a similar manner, rendering the theme of epistemology incidental, though, unlike Rozema, he does not explicitly say that he is doing so.

education. Plato is suggesting that the young men present and Theodorus must come to understand that an epistemological theory provides the foundation for any enterprise of teaching and learning.

Protagoras, with his relativistic position that man is the measure of all things, cannot provide a sound foundation upon which he can articulate how he makes his students better. But Plato's respect for Protagoras' position becomes clearer to the reader throughout the dialogue.¹⁸ Though Socrates (and Plato) show that the Protagorean theory of knowledge is problematic, Socrates is unable to present any alternative. Socrates repeatedly insists that he is barren of his own ideas. A Sophistic education, one presumes, in its concerted effort to take students' fees quickly and get them into the courts and assemblies persuading others, never even takes the time to ask the educationally fundamental question of epistemology. Plato suggests that Socrates' testing of the offspring of others at least clears away inconsistent theories and is therefore preferable to Protagoras'. But Plato seems to suggest that neither is wholly satisfactory. Protagoras is wrong but Socrates is not right, and that is why the dialogue ends *aporetically*.¹⁹

Conclusion

At stake in *Theaetetus* is one group of young men, among whom is one extraordinarily promising student, and perhaps more importantly their teacher, a gifted educator who also serves as matchmaker. *Theaetetus*, I have suggested, can be read as an exhortation to philosophy from Socrates and one of Plato's most compelling portraits of Socrates as a teacher. But Plato also demonstrates admiration for a great Sophist and intellectual who also makes a reasonable claim to benefit the young men. As A. A. Long suggests, *Theaetetus* can be read as yet another of Plato's apologies for Socrates (1998). If my reading is right, he is also writing an apology of sorts for a great teacher and thinker with whom he disagrees. Protagoras in *Theaetetus* is a sincere and brilliant intellectual and is wholly devoted to the task of benefitting the young. He is a Sophist, but the sort of Sophist worthy of a towering presence in a dialogue in which Plato attempts to make sense of his own teacher, Socrates.

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¹⁸ A. A. Long notes that in Plato's refutation of Protagoras, "Plato has never been as careful as he is here in handling a thesis he intends to refute" (1998; 127).

¹⁹ For this reason, I find David Sedley's (2004) reading of the dialogue persuasive. Sedley argues that *Theaetetus* is a late testament to Plato's own philosophical development at the hands of Socrates. Socrates left Plato on the verge of Platonism just as the *aporetic* ending of the dialogue leaves Theaetetus on the verge of Platonism.

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