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Philosophy in the *Theaetetus*

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Abstract: In this essay I consider the relation between three portraits of the philosopher found in Plato: Socrates the intellectual midwife of the *Theaetetus*, the philosopher of Socrates' digression in the *Theaetetus* (hereafter also called 'the pre-eminent philosopher'), and the expert in the science of dialectic (*hē dialektikē*) of *Republic* VI–VII. A particular aim of this essay is to show exactly how Socrates the intellectual midwife differs from the philosopher of the digression. This essay further shows that the philosopher of Socrates' digression is not straightforwardly identifiable with the expert of *dialektikē*. What is Plato's reason for not presenting a uniform philosopher, a uniform conception of philosophy? Philosophy, according to Plato, is not to be identified with just one art or science. In fact, in the *Theaetetus* Plato shows us that there exist various *philosophoi* corresponding to various disciplines or branches of *philosophia*, all of which come together under one general aim: the pursuit of wisdom and virtuous betterment.

1 Opening Remarks on Socrates the Intellectual Midwife and the Pre-eminent Philosopher

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates the intellectual midwife attends to young men. More precisely, he applies all possible tests in order to determine whether a young mind is being delivered of a 'phantom' (εἶδωλον) or a 'fertile birth' (γόνιμὸν τε καὶ ἀληθές) (cf. 150b7–c4). He delivers offspring in conjunction with divine help (150d9–e1). He can bring on or stop the pangs of labour of those that associate with him; he chants incantations in order to bring forth a belief from the mind of those he supervises in order to see if it is tenable or not (151a7–10, 157d1 f.). He also engages in match-making (151b1–7). And yet, he claims to be 'barren' (ἄγονός) of wisdom (150c4).

It may be difficult to square Socrates' disavowal of wisdom with his declared expertise in intellectual midwifery.

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But I do [have this art of midwifery], believe me. Only don't give me away to the rest of the world, will you? You see, my friend, it is a secret that I have this art (τὸν τὴν ἔχον τῆν τέχνην). That is not one of the things you hear people saying about me, because they don't know; but they do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties. You must have heard that, surely? (149a6–10)¹

To clarify, Socrates' disavowal of wisdom or knowledge² in the *Theaetetus*, just as in other dialogues (e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Charmides*), is a disavowal of positive wisdom regarding specific questions (e.g., whether knowledge is perception). The midwife personally does not know whether knowledge is, or is not, perception. Notwithstanding, [1]: Socrates is capable of refuting a belief.³ Given [1], Socrates demonstrates that he is proficient in his elenctic art, which is a sort of second order expertise. His art cannot give him any positive certainty on any first order claims, although it can give him negative certainty that certain first order claims are either false or inconsistent with some common belief. Somewhat more formulaically put, Socrates knows that a given thesis, say 'that x is F ', is untenable, for, beyond the original thesis, he has elicited from his interlocutor a set of additional, mutually held beliefs, say $\{p, q\}$, which entails a counter-thesis to the interlocutor's original thesis.⁴

Moreover, [2]: Socrates has the capacity to help an individual articulate his beliefs and in turn approve them if they survive the examination.⁵ Given [2], his midwifery allows him to give some limited approval to answers that he tries to refute but which stand up to his scrutiny. This explains how he is capable of praising beliefs that are qualified as 'true' without implying that he knows that they are true. Of course, there is no example in the *Theaetetus* to support [2]; no belief is ultimately considered true, none of Theaetetus' 'infants' survive. Yet the account of Socratic midwifery allows us to posit [2] inferentially. Hence, notwithstanding Socrates' voiced denial of wisdom, the preceding exposition of Socrates'

¹ Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the *Theaetetus* are taken from Cooper 1997. The Greek is taken from Duke et al. 1995.

² *Sophia* and *epistēmē* are explicitly equated at 145d11–e7.

³ 'Refuting', with regard to the Socratic elenchus in general, can mean proving that A 's belief, x , is false, cf. Vlastos 1983 and 1991. Alternatively, it could mean showing that A 's belief x is inconsistent with his other mutually held beliefs, cf. Benson 2000 and 2011. There is no need to argue for one meaning over the other in this essay; that we grant 'that x is F ' is at minimum shown to be untenable by Socrates suffices.

⁴ This rough formula is based on Vlastos 1991, 266.

⁵ It is outside the scope of this essay to thoroughly compare the account of Socrates the midwife, as hereby established by [1] and [2], with any account of the elenctic Socrates as found particularly in the Socratic dialogues. For such comparisons, see Burnyeat 1977 and Sedley 2004. See also Vlastos 1991, 266.

proficiency in his elenctic art, coupled with the closing remarks of the dialogue (210b4–d4),⁶ leave us with little doubt that the intellectual midwife is adept at pointing out that all of *Theaetetus*' beliefs regarding Knowledge as such are at minimum untenable. We leave the *Theaetetus*, then, with the settled depiction of Socrates *qua* expert in the art of intellectual midwifery.

Now, in the *Theaetetus* Plato also writes at length about a 'pre-eminent' (*koruphaios*, cf. 173c6–174a1) philosopher. And the way he has Socrates speak of this philosopher leads us to believe that the latter is not just an ideal projected by Socrates. He is, instead, a philosopher living in the same world as Socrates and his interlocutors.⁷ When we compare the account of Socrates the intellectual midwife with that of the philosopher of Socrates' digression, we are left to ponder what the exact connection is between these two active and, as I shall now argue, distinct types of philosophers. With whom is Socrates now sharing the spotlight?

Two points of clarification are immediately in order. Firstly, I maintain that the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is still some version of the inquisitor also found in dialogues like the *Euthyphro*, *Ion* and *Laches*. He is still, essentially, identified by his use of elenchus.⁸ Accordingly, a major aim of this essay is to show just how Socrates' elenctic philosophy differs from the sort of philosophy described by Socrates during his digression in the *Theaetetus*. Secondly, the claim that Socrates and the philosopher of the digression are not identical is not novel. Melissa Lane, for example, observes that the intellectual midwife and the philosopher of the digression are distinct figures based especially on their diverse civic roles:

Si l'indifférence du philosophe [sc. the philosopher of the digression] aux soucis ordinaires de la vie publique n'interdit pas en principe quelque espèce de rôle civique alternatif, la teneur de la description de cette indifférence n'invite guère à ce genre de pensée. Socrate, le "taon" d'Athènes, ne cadre pas avec ce modèle, même s'il est également distinct des "hommes pratiques" que la Digression dénigre. Ce portrait du philosophe n'est pas, quoi qu'il puisse être par ailleurs, un portrait de Socrate.⁹

⁶ I return to this passage below.

⁷ Theodorus wants to hear what Socrates has to say about philosophers at present (173c). The subsequent description of the *koruphaios* would have been more or less familiar from what people (not just the characters within the dialogue) thought of 'Pre-Socratics' like Thales, Anaxagoras, and Empedocles. Indeed, even if Plato fabricated the Thales story (174a4–b1), he evidently assumes that the reader will latch onto a familiar type of intellectual found within *poiesis* at that time (cf. Aristophanes' *Clouds*, as well as Plato's *Phaedrus* 270a).

⁸ Sedley 2004, 34, whilst identifying ten essential features of Socrates the midwife, notes that 'refutation [i.e., elenchus] is actually the most important of [Socrates'] maieutic skills (150b9–c3).'

⁹ Lane 2005, 331.

I wish to add to Lane's observations. More precisely, I want to show that there is more than a difference in civic duties between the two intellectuals to account for.¹⁰ Let us now turn to examine the pre-eminent philosopher. The account of this philosopher runs roughly from 172c to 177c. This philosopher (I) focuses his energy on theoretical activity (e.g., mathematics, astronomy, and morality), where (I*) said activity concerns particularly the nature of things, and where (I**), most generally, the nature or 'whole' of some thing (i.e., some being) refers to the model of something, irrespective of any instantiation.¹¹ In other words, the nature or whole of something roughly refers to what we may call an abstract universal (e.g., the Polyhedron as such, Justice as such, etc.).¹² (II) He rejects deriving most knowledge from what is immediately perceivable (literally, 'nearby' (ἐγγύς, 174a2). (III) He seeks to become as godlike as possible, to engage in virtuous activity with knowledge (*phronēsis*) of the virtues. (IV) His pursuit of knowledge, especially his pursuit of the virtues, is the only sort of 'genuine wisdom and goodness' a human can obtain; his profession is the most valuable. (V) Seeking to become most godlike, his accounts of the divine and daemonic aspire to be truthful above all. He has no tolerance for those ignorant of the truth, whose own orations and stories are patently false. Above all, (I)-(V) are supported by (VI) leisure.

This philosopher is notably distinguished from his conventional counterpart, the typical man of the courtroom and political forum, as one who is said to have only his corporeal self in the city. Far from worrying about presenting orations to his fellow citizens, his mind has departed to deliberate on the nature of things in the abstract. Hence Socrates' otherwise curious claim: that the pre-eminent phi-

10 Lane's 2005 argument differentiating Socrates and the philosopher of the digression is certainly more nuanced. All the same, she focuses on the different civic roles ascribed to Socrates and the philosopher of the digression. Above I maintain that there are more numerous differences between the two characters that we must bring to the foreground. Incidentally, some scholars have questioned Socrates' (Plato's) endorsement of the account of the philosopher during the digression of the *Theaetetus*. See, e.g., Peterson 2011, Ch. 3, and Rue 1993, 71–100. See Labriola 2015 for a critique of Peterson's thesis. A critique of Rue's thesis is found in Lännström 2011. As should be clear, I side with the majority of scholars who do not question the philosophical legitimacy of the philosopher of the digression.

11 'The question he [sc. the philosopher] asks is. What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings?' (174b4 f.)

12 Cf. *Rep.*, VII 525a3–531e1 on the sort of mathematics Plato probably has in mind in the digression of the *Theaetetus*. See Burnyeat 1990, 37–9, for a general presentation of both the pro and contra reading of Plato's 'theory of Forms' allusion during the digression. I do not feel the need to commit myself to one reading or another. For what concerns me most here is not so much understanding the exact nature of these entities, but rather noting that such entities are objects of inquiry that Socrates the intellectual midwife does not investigate primarily for his own intellectual enrichment (see below).

losopher 'knows not even that he knows not' (οὐδ' ὄτι οὐκ οἶδεν, οἶδεν, 173e1). What Socrates is saying here is that the philosopher as such, so indifferent to the affairs and assemblies of mortals, of what is in keeping with a non-divine and accordingly non-knowledge based standard, finds all talk on such things frivolous.¹³

Accordingly, I agree with Lane (see quotation above) on the point that the philosopher of the digression is given no typical political role. In an environment that ridicules the philosopher when confronted with the task of speaking before the Assembly or law court, the pre-eminent philosopher is not to be identified as any sort of conventional politician. However, whilst the pre-eminent philosopher as such does not engage in the conventional political affairs of the *polis*, this does not prevent him from engaging in virtuous activity. Here I submit that Plato must recognize a sort of alternative 'political' function for this philosopher. 'Political' in the sense described by Socrates in the *Gorgias* (521d6–522a7): 'to practice politics' (πρότριεν τὰ πολιτικά, 521d7 f.) is to philosophically engage with certain people, ultimately for the sake of morally bettering them.¹⁴ To be clear, I suggest that the pre-eminent philosopher as such is committed to morally instruct certain other people; that part of what it means to be the pre-eminent philosopher is to seek to positively adjust the character of certain other people via engaging in philosophical inquiry with them.

What proof is there to support the claim that the pre-eminent philosopher is, albeit subtly, ascribed the role of moral instructor in the *Theaetetus*? For the moment (more is said below), note that the philosopher's pursuit of wisdom immediately unfolds into the pursuit of knowing, for example, Justice as such. This very pursuit constitutes a virtuous act of being just. Indeed, as 'Protagoras' (via the mouthpiece of Socrates) implies in the *Theaetetus*, proper philosophical argumentation is itself a just act:

It is the height of unreasonableness that a person who professes to care for virtue (ἀρετῆς φάσκοντα ἐπιμελεῖσθαι) should be consistently unjust (ἀδικοῦντα) in discussion. I mean by injustice, in this connection, the behavior of a man who does not take care to keep controversy distinct from discussion; a man who forgets that in controversy he may play about and trip up his opponent as often as he can, but that in discussion he must be serious, he must keep on helping his opponent to his feet again, and point out to him only those of his slips which are due to himself or to the intellectual society which he has previously frequented. (167e1–168a2)¹⁵

13 Nightingale 1995, 51 f., has a similar interpretation of this passage.

14 Note that this activity is called a political art (πολιτικὴ τέχνη, 521d7) in the *Gorgias*. It is unclear whether this art would still be called *politikē technē* in later dialogues like the *Theaetetus*, particularly in light of the account of *politikē technē* in the *Statesman*.

15 Neither Socrates nor the use of *elenchus* is singled out in this passage (cf. 167d5–168a2). Accordingly, this statement is meant to apply to all proper philosophical argumentation.

Accordingly, in properly engaging in philosophical discussion with someone, the pre-eminent philosopher is performing a virtuous act with a view to bettering that person. Again, this aspect of the pre-eminent philosopher will be elaborated on below. In the interim, I wish to turn to highlight the essential differences between Socrates and the pre-eminent philosopher. I also want to show that the two philosophers, whilst distinct, complement each other.

2 Contrasting Socrates the Midwife with the Pre-eminent Philosopher

Both Socrates the midwife and the philosopher of the digression share in leisure (172d5–8). The sort of leisure that Socrates has in mind in the *Theaetetus* generally refers to a particular moment in time afforded for the purpose of philosophical inquiry – ‘It is so with us now’ (ὥστερ ἡμεῖς νῦν, 172d5 f.), just as Socrates says. However, leisure does not equate Socrates and the pre-eminent philosopher; Socrates and the philosopher of the digression use their respective free time in different ways and for different aims, apart from one general overarching aim: the pursuit of wisdom and virtuous betterment.

Note one important qualification made by Socrates regarding his art of intellectual midwifery:

And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this inquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don't know. *This is all my art can achieve – nothing more* (τοσοῦτον γάρ μόνον ἢ ἐπι τέχνη δύναται, πᾶρόν δὲ οὐδέν). I do not know of any of the things that other men know – the great and inspired men of today and yesterday. (210b11–d1)

The limits of Socratic midwifery (and so of Socrates) are unequivocally established: as an intellectual midwife, and so ‘barren’ of beliefs to be scrutinized, Socrates can do nothing more than scrutinize another's belief (or set of beliefs) and in the process temper that individual.¹⁶ When we acknowledge this limita-

¹⁶ This was already made clear earlier in the dialogue: “You are forgetting, my friend. I don't know anything about this kind of thing myself, and I don't claim any of it as my own. *I am barren of theories; my business is to attend you in your labor.*” (157c7–9). “The arguments never come from me; they always come from the person I am talking to. *And I do not know anything more than*

tion, we should immediately recognize certain acute differences between the intellectual midwife and the philosopher of the digression.

The philosopher of the digression is said to philosophize “throughout the universe, ‘in the deeps below the earth’ and ‘in the heights above the heaven’; geometrizing upon earth, measuring its surfaces, astronomizing in the heavens; tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are” (173e5–174a2). In particular, this philosopher is said to inquire into “happiness [itself] and misery [itself]” (ὄλωσ εὐδαιμονίως καὶ ἀθλιότιτος, 175c5 f.). In general, then, the pre-eminent philosopher is seeking a synoptic view (i.e., knowledge) of the cosmos. Not once does Socrates the intellectual midwife claim to be seeking this synoptic view. How could he? He has been explicitly barred from obtaining such knowledge by claiming to be incapable of ‘procreating’ (150c4 f.), i.e., producing new beliefs of his own. Socratic midwifery is fixed to take care of other individuals; Socrates cannot practice this art in the abstract and lofty heights of the universal features of nature.

But does not Socrates personally engage in theoretical activity? Does he not inquire into the nature or whole of, say, Knowledge as such in the dialogue (cf. (I), (I*), (I**) above)? Yes, but only indirectly. The closest Socrates comes to examining Knowledge as such is through the beliefs *others have* regarding it. And the most Socrates could do with those beliefs is to see if they survive a given elenchus (cf. 161b1–6, quoted at n. 16). Accordingly, if Socrates is barred from (I) [and its qualifications, (I*) and (I**)], then he fails to satisfy (II), for he will always remain personally ignorant (at least knowledge-less) of the nature of any universal. Remember all that Socrates the intellectual midwife claims to be proficient in is his elenctic art of intellectual midwifery.

A different question: does not this account of Socrates the midwife entail that Socrates does not know the virtues and so how to act virtuously? According to this reading, he does not know the virtues, so he does not know how to act virtuously. But this should not strike the reader as especially contentious. In not a single dialogue does Socrates claim to know any of the virtues. Nonetheless, clarification regarding Socrates' exact epistemic relation to the virtues may be had by looking to the *Statesman*. There, Plato explicitly distinguishes one who really knows virtue *per se* from one who just has a true opinion of it, or at least of courage and self-control, two parts of virtue *per se* (cf. 306a12–b5, 308e4–309d5).

this small thing (ἐγὼ δὲ οὐδὲν ἐπίσταμαι πᾶρόν τῆν βροχέος): how to take an argument from someone else – someone who is wise – and give it a fair reception. So, now, I propose to try to get our answer out of Theaetetus, not to make any contribution of my own” (161b1–6). Trans. Levett's, rev. Burnyeat, with minor adjustment of my own.

Ad hoc, we can place Socrates in the latter category, as someone who may have true opinion of virtue and so act virtuously in accordance with said opinion. Knowledge of virtue and so knowledge of how to act virtuously is reserved for the genuine statesman of the *Statesman* and the philosopher as dialectician of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (keeping the two distinct).¹⁷

What about the pre-eminent philosopher of the *Theaetetus*? Does he know the virtues? I hesitate to attribute knowledge of the virtues to this philosopher. This is because throughout the digression he is reported to be *pursuing* said knowledge, he is not explicitly attributed such knowledge already (a point that I shall return to below):

The question he asks [sc. the philosopher], is, What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings? *This is what he inquires into and seeks to track down* (ἤρει τε καὶ τρυφύλιον ἔχει διερευνῶμενος). (174b3–6)¹⁸

Nonetheless, the very fact that he is said to pursue such knowledge separates him from the intellectual midwife; Socrates the midwife at best can only approximate facets (III) and (IV) of the pre-eminent philosopher. Socrates may have already gathered a series of opinions regarding the virtues, but he can never fully (i.e., with full knowledge) act virtuously for, *qua* intellectual midwife, he will never pursue positive knowledge of the virtues.

To be clear, in denying Socrates the pursuit of positive knowledge of Virtue as such, I want to rule out the possibility that Socrates can somehow pursue such knowledge by means of elenchus; that he could indirectly come to know the virtues precisely by examining others' views about them. This is because, whilst his art may be able to praise an interlocutor's belief that has withstood examination (cf. aspect [2] of his art), the most that this praising amounts to is tentative confirmation that the belief is tenable. For sure, this belief has withstood this instance of elenchus, but there is no guarantee that it will be able to withstand the next one; surviving one elenchus surely does not unconditionally confirm that the interlocutor's belief on, for example, Virtue as such is in fact knowledge of Virtue as such. Indeed, the survival of a belief after a given elenchus only encourages Socrates to further scrutinize that belief. Problematically, though, there is potentially no limit to the number of *elenchoi* needed to absolutely confirm that someone has positive knowledge of Virtue as such. Socrates may be able to affirm

¹⁷ Pace Frede 1996, 135–52, who argues the philosopher and the statesman are one and the same person.

¹⁸ Levetz's (rev. Burnyeat) translations, with minor adjustments of my own.

the tenability of a thesis and in the process rule out a multitude of unsatisfactory counter-theses, but how can he be sure that he has ruled out *all* of them?

Surely Plato must be aware of this epistemic limitation of elenchus. The pre-eminent philosopher's 'astronomizing' and 'geometrizing' (173e3–174a2), and whatever it is that we may infer qualifies his pursuit of the virtues, cannot rely on elenchus in seeking out positive knowledge of things in themselves.¹⁹ Accordingly, Socrates' art of midwifery cannot be considered the most valuable because it generally does not, indeed it cannot, directly and confidently seek out positive knowledge of things in themselves.

Furthermore, Socrates cannot be attributed aspect (V) of the pre-eminent philosopher. During the digression it is said that the pre-eminent philosopher has no concern for 'practical tasks' (e.g., cooking, orations, etc.). And the conventional man who can do such tasks, and further emphasizes said tasks' purported higher importance, is considered a slave. For he cannot, 'tune the strings of stories (λόγῳ) to the fitting praise (ὁρθῶς ὑμνῆσαι) of the life of gods and of the happy among men' (175e9–176a2). To fittingly speak of the gods is to speak truthfully of the gods. It follows that one who knows the truth of the divine should not deceive others via sensational and false accounts.²⁰ Granted, the pre-eminent philosopher may not immediately have the requisite knowledge of the divine in order to craft stories that are completely accurate.²¹ However, he is constantly pursuing such knowledge. By contrast, Socrates does not pursue such knowledge of the divine, particularly for the sake of crafting stories of the divine. Once more, his art is limited to supervise the intellectual labours of his mortal patients. Even if a given patient were pregnant with a *logos* (story) concerning the divine, Socrates' specific task here would be to determine whether his patient's *logos* is tenable.

In sum, apart from sharing in leisure, no other aspect ascribed to the philosopher of the digression can be immediately ascribed to Socrates the intellectual midwife. What is more, even the sharing in leisure calls for qualification. The

¹⁹ Let us grant that elenchus is still important when used to test the coherency of a philosopher's thesis (cf. *Rep.* VII 534b3–d1). The point here is that more is needed actually to possess knowledge of, say, the virtues.

²⁰ This reading is influenced by Socrates' remarks on storytelling of the divine in the *Republic*. Cf. *Rep.* II 377b5–385c7. Note *Rep.* X 607a3–8, where stories and *encomia* to the gods, as truthfully broadcasted by the philosopher, are the sole poetic genres allowed to remain in the city.

²¹ Socrates does not explicitly say that the pre-eminent philosopher crafts stories about gods and happy men. Yet Socrates certainly implies as much at 175e6–176a1, when, in the midst of contrasting the philosopher and the conventional man, he says that it is specifically the conventional man who cannot craft fine stories of gods and happy men.

pre-eminent philosopher and Socrates use their respective free time for different aims. The former uses his leisure pursuing positive knowledge or wisdom of universals. The latter uses his leisure seeking to temper his patient's soul via scrutinizing his beliefs (be they on the nature of universals or not) in order to see whether or not those beliefs are tenable. The two figures are certainly distinct intellectuals.

An addendum: the reference at 177b1–7 (quoted below) to the unjust conventional man being subjected to elenchus is noteworthy if only given the fact that in the preceding account of the pre-eminent philosopher (172c3–177b7) the use of elenchus is not explicitly attributed to him. The remarks particularly at 175b4–d6, which speak of the philosopher taking on a conventional man and moving him to abandon inquiries into, say, a just or unjust action, for an examination of the Just and Unjust themselves, do not refer to the use of elenchus. Indeed, the remarks hint that the conventional man is so confused by questions regarding universals that he is incapable of coming up with any belief that would otherwise be scrutinized via elenchus. This suggests that the conventional man is as far below even Socrates' not very good interlocutors – for even the ones who lose their temper at least understand what Socrates is trying to do – as the pre-eminent philosopher is above the intellectual midwife.

Granted, the general point being made at 175b4–d6 is that the pre-eminent philosopher attempts to move the conventional man beyond instances or particulars for an inquiry into the greater whole or paradigm. Surely this is part and parcel of Socratic elenchus, broadly construed. Nevertheless, the context surrounding the move from the particular to the general in the digression of the *Theaetetus* discourages calling such a move an instance of elenchus. This is because the conventional man, prior to being drawn up to a higher level, does not have a particular thesis concerning, say, Justice as such, which in turn the philosopher seeks to scrutinize. This is confirmed by noting that even after being drawn up to ponder Justice as such, the conventional man still produces no thesis concerning it, which could subsequently be subjected to elenchus.²²

All the same, elenchus is mentioned at the close of the digression. Accordingly, it demands some attention.

²² Whilst Socrates struggles at times to get his interlocutor to abandon the pointing out of instances of, say, Piety or Justice as such, for a definition of Piety or Justice as such, he does ultimately elicit a thesis, weak though it usually is, that attempts to define Piety or Justice as such. This course of events is not hinted at in the description of the interaction between the pre-eminent philosopher and the conventional man.

{Socrates} But there is one accident to which the unjust man is liable. When it comes to giving and taking an account in a private discussion of the things he disparages; when he is willing to stand his ground like a man, for long enough, instead of running away like a coward, then, my friend, an odd thing happens. In the end the things he says do not satisfy even himself; that famous eloquence [alt. 'rhetoric' (ἡ ῥητορικὴ ἐκείνη)] of his somehow dries up, and he is left looking nothing more than a child. (177b1–7)

I suggest that Plato closes the digression with the implication that elenchus is, in the right hands, a valuable tool: it tempers, via the purgation of untenable beliefs, or praising of tenable ones, a given individual. Yet there is a hidden proviso here. Whilst the text allows us to attribute to the philosopher of the digression the use of elenchus, elenchus is not what makes him unique. Recall that what makes the pre-eminent philosopher unique is his pursuit, considered divine (176a3–e), of positive wisdom or knowledge of universals. This again brings up the contrast between the pre-eminent philosopher and Socrates the intellectual midwife. The latter does not seek *per se* to gain or provide positive wisdom or knowledge of such things.

3 Philosophers Working Together

Plato's depiction of Socratic midwifery in the *Theaetetus* is not wholly negative; it is certainly far from dismissive. Socratic midwifery is needed for the conditioning of the soul for future philosophical studies. Indeed, the intellectual midwife is the designated expert with the particular capacity to rid an individual of his untenable beliefs so as to leave him at a better investigative starting point in the future. The close of the digression (177b1–c2) openly cites the need for such an art: before even beginning to think that one can turn to inquire into, say, Justice as such, a man needs to be purged of any lingering untenable beliefs regarding what is just. The beneficial impact of undergoing examination under Socrates is also evidenced with the allusion to Theaetetus' potential intellectual advancement at the end of the dialogue (210b11–d4). Understanding what is not Knowledge as such, for example, is the sort of insight obtained via examination under Socrates that betters one's overall wisdom. Generalized, post examination with the intellectual midwife, one understands what thesis on *x* to avoid pursuing in future investigations of *x*.

What is more, the intellectual midwife's conditioning of the soul for future pursuit of wisdom concurrently provides an ethical benefit in addition to making one more temperate (note ἡμεσώτερος σωφρονωος, 210c3; taking for granted that Wisdom is a virtue (cf. *Rep.* IV 427e6–429a6)), one is virtuously better off now

knowing what investigative paths not to take in the future. Accordingly, supervision under the intellectual midwife does not just purge one of untenable beliefs; it also positively adjusts the moral character of the individual by making him both temperate and in some sense wise.

In fact, Socrates (or any other expert of intellectual midwifery for that matter)²³ is meant to work in conjunction with the pre-eminent philosopher. The former prepares the soul for the sort of inquiries conducted by the latter; the pupil must be cleansed of falsehoods regarding *x* before properly understanding what *x* is.²⁴ As I have just shown, the intellectual midwife alone could never help an aspiring philosopher obtain positive wisdom particularly of universals (e.g., of justice as such, of Man as such, and so on). I submit that Plato cites this limitation indirectly via the presentation of the pre-eminent philosopher of the digression. Indeed, what is revealed in the *Theaetetus* is that philosophy is minimally composed of two separate but equally important methodological branches. On the one hand, philosophy is the pursuit of negative wisdom and virtuous betterment via elenchus; it purges one of untenable beliefs, discourages one from pursuing misguided theses. On the other hand, philosophy is the pursuit of positive wisdom and virtuous betterment via whatever applicable method, culminating in knowledge of universals.

Reflecting on the relationship between the intellectual midwife and the pre-eminent philosophers prompts me to qualify something mentioned in passing earlier: the pre-eminent philosopher is not an educator of the conventional man. Indeed, he has no hope of succeeding unless Socrates or some elenctic figure like him has gone before. This is because there is no good motivation to identify the elenctic figure mentioned at the close of the digression (177b1–7) with the pre-eminent philosopher. Note that the reference to elenchus at 177b comes as a postscript: the contrast between the godlike conception of *eudaimonia* (a good life being one of virtue) and its contrary wretchedness culminates at 176e3–177a8. By contrast, the episode starting at 175b4 (cf. 175b4–d6) shows the pre-eminent

²³ Nothing in the text outright excludes others from becoming intellectual midwives. Compare Socrates' remarks in the *Phaedo* (78a1–9), where he urges Simmias and Cebes to search for other philosophers like Socrates (i.e., other elenctic experts, removers of unfounded fears (i.e., beliefs)).

²⁴ Interestingly, a similar educative process is suggested during the account of the elenctic expert in the *Sophist*: "The people who cleanse the soul, my young friend, likewise think the soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does know, and nothing more." (230c7–d4, cf. also 226a1–231b1)

Surely in the *Sophist* one of the reasons why Plato has the Eleatic Visitor describe the elenctic expert as a sophist is to show how such a philosopher might be confused with one. Cf. Solana 2013 and literature therein.

philosopher not kindly trying to educate the conventional man, but proving that the conventional man is just as embarrassed when a fish out of water as the pre-eminent philosopher is when a fish out of his water.

Further reflection elicits a related point: the negativity of elenchus reinforces the idea that man is not the measure, something which clearly conflicts with Protagoras' *homo mensura* (central to the discussion leading up to the digression). By itself this negativity could leave us with the archaic notion that man, not being a god, is unable to access true knowledge full stop. However, the digression emphasizes what is only presupposed in the *Republic*: certain humans *can* have access to the whole truth (i) if initially cleansed of their falsehoods as well as their self-conceit of knowledge, and (ii) if they accept that the same rigour that can be brought to mathematical studies can also be applied to, in particular, ethical universals (i.e., Justice as such, Temperance as such, etc.). With (i) and (ii) satisfied, the individual's ensuing detachment from conventional interests is promoted as the way forward for ethics *after* elenctic therapy, that is to say after Socrates and his ilk have done their job. This is where the pre-eminent philosopher comes in as moral instructor: he may not be capable of helping the conventional man, but that alone does not rule out his task of assisting those amongst men who have satisfied (i) and (ii) to grab hold of genuine knowledge and concurrently better themselves as moral agents.²⁵

4 Is the Pre-eminent Philosopher an Expert of Dialektikē?

In this final section, I compare the account of the pre-eminent philosopher of the *Theaetetus* with that of the topmost philosopher of the *Republic*, the expert of *dialektikē*. I show that, whilst the pre-eminent philosopher is not a fully-fledged expert of *dialektikē*, he can fittingly be described as someone in pursuit of (what in the *Republic* is cast as) the highest philosophical knowledge. To conclude this essay, I offer an explanation as to why Plato in the *Theaetetus* refrains from highlighting the science *par excellence* of the *Republic*.

²⁵ In all this there is a clear similarity with the *Republic*, one that bypasses the question whether the digression recognizes 'Platonic Forms' as metaphysical entities (cf. n. 12). Indeed, the language of 173a6–174b7 and 175b8–c8 simply relates a concern with universals regardless of the metaphysics. For sure, the pre-eminent philosopher of the *Theaetetus* is looking for changeless truths, but this underdetermines the metaphysics of 'Platonic Forms'.

A brief summary of the *Republic's* top science is in order. In Book VI, whilst rounding out his account of the divided line, which relates a conception of hierarchical levels of comprehension and their corresponding objects as found across an intelligible plane and a visible one, Socrates says that it is strictly via the power (*dynamis*) or science (*epistēmē*) of dialectic (the two terms are used interchangeably) that understanding is obtained of first principles (511b3–e5). Upon comprehending the ultimate first principle, the Form of the Good, the dialectician (unnamed as such in the text) turns around and, guided by nothing sensible and no longer reliant on hypotheses, continues his studies making use of 'only forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms' (ἀλλ' εἶδεν αὐτοῖς δι' αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτά, καὶ τελευτᾷ εἰς εἶδη, 511c1f.). It is specifically *hē dialektikē* that fully comprehends the intelligible plane of reality (cf. 509d1–4), which we later find out to be the realm in which certain intelligible objects exist, particularly 'the happiest' or 'best' (τὸ εὐδαιμονότατον, 526e3 f., τοῦ ἀρίστου, 532c5) amongst those which are (τοῦ ὄντος, 526e4, ἐν τοῖς οὐσι, 532c5), that is the Good as such.

The ensuing remarks on *dialektikē* in Book VII relate a fairly detailed account of what is cast as the unique science of principally the Good. Yet we may infer that, dealing with just Forms (511b7–c2), above all the Good, Just and Fine (cf. 532c3–d1, 534b3–7, 540a4–b7), it is the sole *epistēmē* of Forms. Whilst the exact method employed by *dialektikē* is left somewhat vague (533a1–4),²⁶ what is made clear is that only this science "systematically (ὁδῶ) attempts to grasp with respect to each thing itself what the being of it is, for all the other crafts (ἀλλ' αἱ [...] ἄλλαι πᾶσαι τέχναι) are concerned with human opinions and desires, with growing or construction, or with the care of growing or constructed things' (533b3–6). *Hē dialektikē* is the last and topmost science to be mastered by the philosopher-kings-in-training (534e2–535a1). The subordinate sciences, particularly certain mathematical ones, at best have an approximate grasp of the true nature of whatever they set their sights on (533b3–535a1).

I argue that there exists a fundamental epistemic difference between the fully-fledged expert of *dialektikē* of the *Republic* and the pre-eminent philosopher of the *Theaetetus*. This difference should ultimately dissuade us from equating them. Unlike the fully-fledged expert of *dialektikē*, the pre-eminent philosopher of the *Theaetetus* is shown still in pursuit of certain knowledge.

²⁶ An account of this method is abandoned. Note that it is due to both Glaucon's and Socrates' epistemic limitations that a thorough account of the science *par excellence* cannot be given. Socrates' professed limitation at 533a1–6 echoes what he has already said at 506d5–507a5: that he has at most an opinion regarding the precise nature of the Good as such. I shall not delve any further into Socrates' epistemic limitations as evidenced in the *Republic*.

The question he asks [sc. the philosopher] is, What is Man? What actions and passions properly belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings? *This is what he inquires into and seeks to track down* (ἤτηται τε καὶ τριτάτων ἔχει διερευνώμενος). (174b3–6)

This is not to say that the pre-eminent philosopher is completely without some knowledge:

[The philosopher] spurns them and pursues its winged way, as Pindar says, throughout the universe, 'in the deeps beneath the earth' and geometrizing (γεωμετροῦσα) its surfaces, 'in the heights above heaven', astronomizing (ἀστρονομουῖσα) and searching (ἐρευνουμένη) by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, never condescending to what lies near at hand. (173e4–174a2)²⁷

Surely talk of 'geometrizing' and 'astronomizing' suggests the exercising of possessed knowledge. However, note what is also said: "searching (ἐρευνουμένη) by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are". This must indicate seeking a certain type of knowledge that the pre-eminent philosopher does not have already.

What type of knowledge exactly? Presumably it is knowledge of a certain set of entities that are, like the mathematical concepts this philosopher may already have possession of, universal by nature. As has already been mentioned, I hesitate to say anything more substantial about the exact nature of any universal hinted at in the *Theaetetus*. Nevertheless, let us assume for the sake of argument that the 'whole' of each thing is one of those special universals, those famous 'Platonic Forms'. Let us also assume for the sake of argument that Platonic Forms are the ultimate objects of knowledge for the philosopher according to Plato. The fact remains that the pre-eminent philosopher of the *Theaetetus* does not have knowledge of such entities. For sure, the fully-fledged expert of *dialektikē* is not cast as omniscient; his philosophizing does not come to a halt at the age of 50 (cf. *Rep.* VII 540a4–b7). Nevertheless, what is made clear in the *Republic* is that by the age of 50 this philosopher has reached certain insights into Forms, above all the Good as such. There is no indication in the *Theaetetus* that the pre-eminent philosopher has reached that same level of insight. In fact, the explicit reference to the pre-eminent philosopher's mathematical investigations suggests that he has yet to reach the supra-mathematical summit of the *Republic's* divided line.

But not matching up with the accomplished philosopher of the middle books of the *Republic* does not mean that the pre-eminent philosopher does not come across as an aspiring expert of *dialektikē*. Indeed, traits (I)–(VI) of the pre-eminent

²⁷ Levett's translation, my italics, with a minor adjustment on my part.

nent philosopher can practically be ascribed to someone seeking to master *dialektikē*. The latter implicitly has leisure to engage in theoretical activity, where said activity concerns the nature of universals. He too aims for a synoptic view of the cosmos (cf. *Rep.* VII 537b8–c8). Further, like the pre-eminent philosopher, the expert of *dialektikē* rejects deriving most knowledge from what is immediately at hand, that is subject to change. Accordingly, this aspiring expert of *dialektikē* also seeks to remove himself, as much as he possibly can, from any conventional concerns. Instead, he focuses on what is in essence divine. In doing so, he seeks to become as godlike as possible via virtuous activity (cp. *Thr.* 176a5–b2, *Rep.* X 613a4–b1). Additionally, given his closer approximation to what is divine, in comparison to that of a non-dialectician, it is safe to surmise that the aspiring expert's account of what is divine would be more accurate. In general, then, there is enough space in the *Theaetetus* to identify the pre-eminent philosopher as an aspiring expert of *dialektikē*. To be clear, what this means is that the former is in pursuit of insights regarding the essences of all things – “searching by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, never condescending to what lies near at hand.” In the process, he seeks alongside his investigative partners to become as godlike as is humanly possible via virtuous activity.

Granted, the description of the pre-eminent philosopher as an aspiring expert of *dialektikē* is conjecture; there is no explicit mention of grasping or employing *dialektikē* in the *Theaetetus*. All the same, the passage at *Theaetetus* 173e3–174a2 (quoted above) may help in part to explain why Plato refrains from casting the pre-eminent philosopher as a supreme ‘*dialektikos*’: whilst laudable, this philosopher still comes up short in comparison to the fully-fledged dialectician highlighted in the middle books of the *Republic*.

Of course, Plato's use of ‘*dialektikos*’ does not only extend to the expert of *dialektikē* of *Republic* VI–VII (cf. *Cra.* 390c3–d6; *Euthd.* 290b7–c6).²⁸ So perhaps a safer conjecture would be that refraining from using ‘*dialektikos*’ particularly in the digression of the *Theaetetus* is meant to dissuade the reader from directly associating the pre-eminent philosopher with any referent of ‘*dialektikos*’ found in Plato. Indeed, opting for the distinguished yet non-discipline-specific appellation ‘*koruphaios*’, or even broader ‘*philosophos*’ (cf. 173c8, 175e1), is surely less discriminatory than ‘*dialektikos*’, let alone ‘expert of *dialektikē*’. ‘*Philosophos*’, in particular, connects the pre-eminent philosopher more closely to a vast array of intellectuals, Socrates and his interlocutors included (a point I return to below).

²⁸ Perhaps the remarks in the *Cratylus* and *Euthydemus* make some sort of allusion to the top dialectician of the *Republic*. Cf. Kahn 1996, Ch. 10. Yet neither dialogue openly equates the *dialektikos* with the expert of *dialektikē* of *Republic* VI–VII.

Accordingly, Plato casts the pre-eminent philosopher as first and foremost a generic intellectual, a theoretician who includes or combines mathematics, physics, and inquiries into moral truths.

We may still ask why Plato refrains from praising *dialektikē* in the *Theaetetus*, especially if this science is to be recognized as the zenith of human knowledge? My answer, already mentioned in passing above, is that by refraining from equating the philosopher of the digression with the fully-fledged expert of *dialektikē*, and thereby discouraging the interpolation of *dialektikē* in the course of the dialogue, Plato focuses our attention more generally on the idea that *philosophia* represents any intellectual and ethical endeavour, a spirit so to speak and corresponding activity of truth-seeking; that there are various types of philosophers, all of whom are rightly identified as philosophers in light of their pursuit of the truth and concurrent strive for virtuous betterment.

What further proof is there to show that Plato is endorsing this conception of philosophy in the *Theaetetus*? Apart from promoting the investigations of the pre-eminent philosopher, Socrates openly calls geometry, amongst other disciplines, a philosophy:

If Cyrene were first in my affections, Theodorus, I should be asking you how things are there, and whether any of your young people are taking up geometry or any other type of philosophy (περὶ γεωμετρίας ἢ τινὰ ἄλλαν φιλοσοφίαν). (143d1–3)²⁹

Geometry *qua* philosophy, or more generally a science used by philosophers, is often cited in Plato. The pre-eminent philosopher of the digression in the *Theaetetus* is familiar with geometry. The philosopher-king of *Kallipolis* must know geometry as a prelude to the science of dialectic in the *Republic*. Timaeus in his eponymous dialogue clearly demonstrates a mastery of geometry. In the *Philebus*, Socrates speaks of “the geometry and calculations practiced by philosophers” (κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν γεωμετρίας τε καὶ λογισμῶν καταμελετωμένων, 56e8–57a1). Moreover, in the *Epinomis*, geometry is recognized as an essential study for those slated to be in the Nocturnal Council.³⁰

Furthermore, in the *Theaetetus* we have Socrates consider Theaetetus an aspiring philosopher, not because of the latter's grasp of a specific science, but rather because of his natural intellectual curiosity.³¹

²⁹ Trans. Levet, rev. Burnyeat, with slight adjustment on my part.

³⁰ Even if spurious, this patently ‘academic’ opus shows the importance of geometry amongst those intellectuals close to Plato.

³¹ Thereby confirming Theodorus' account of Theaetetus' philosophical character (cf. *Thr.*, 143e1–144b6). Socrates gives a harmonious account of those with a right philosophical nature in *Republic* VI, 503b3–c7.

It seems that Theodorus is not poorly guessing your nature. For this is indeed an experience characteristic of a philosopher (μέλα γὰρ φιλοσόφου τοῦτο τὸ πάθος), wondering: this is the beginning of philosophy, nowhere else. (155a1–4, my translation)

There is also the generalized account of proper philosophical argumentation put in the mouth of Protagoras: if Socrates, though surely this applies to anyone using whatever applicable method, avoids the argumentative style of professional controversialists and instead pursues the truth of the matter,

those who associate with you will blame themselves for their confusion and their difficulties, not you. They will seek your company, and think of you as their friend; but they will loathe themselves, and seek refuge from themselves in philosophy (εἰς φιλοσοφίαν) in the hope that they may thereby become different people and be rid forever of the men that they once were. (168a2–7, cf. also 167d5–168b2)

Ultimately, the point I want to stress is that there is no evidence in the *Theaetetus* that Plato identifies philosophy with a specific discipline. This is roughly the reason why *dialektikē* is not singled out in the *Theaetetus*: the science *par excellence* takes backseat to the greater assortment of disciplines that make up the whole of *philosophia*. This reading of philosophy in the *Theaetetus* harmonizes with what most scholars take to be a central aim of the dialogue: to honour the historical Theaetetus, a revered mathematician.³² It may well have seemed backhanded of Plato from this point of view to emphasize that what Theaetetus (both the young character in the dialogue and the actual mathematician) concentrated on was, whilst important, only a *propaedeutic* to Plato's most important science. Instead, Plato may well be dwelling more positively on the affinities between pure mathematics and that science of “the nature of the whole among the things that are”.

Incidentally, this reading of philosophy in the *Theaetetus* agrees with the description in the *Philebus* of the harmonizing ‘philosophical’ sciences (56d1–57e2): any science is a *bona fide* insight into reality when in the hands of a genuine truth seeker. That the sciences differ from each other in their respective proximity to reality is beside the point here. Plato need not always pit the sciences against each other. Indeed, the harmonization of the various disciplines that compose philosophy is what is more positively evidenced in the *Theaetetus*.³³

³² See Knorr 1975, Ch. XIII, for an account of the historical Theaetetus’ mathematical work. See as well Pappus’ remarks (in Burnyeat 1978, 507) on the historical Theaetetus. However, see Burnyeat 1978, 512 n. 88, for certain critiques of Knorr’s claims, particularly with regard to his treatment of the character Theaetetus in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

³³ I would like to thank the editors of the *Archiv*, as well as the anonymous referees acting on the journal’s behalf, for their insightful and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Tht. *Theaetetus*
Cra. *Cratylus*
Euthd. *Euthydemus*
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