

## Socrates as *aitia* in the *Theaetetus*

Doctrinal readings of Plato's *Theaetetus*, standard among ancient Platonists and long fashionable among modern commentators, have been largely eclipsed, as Sedley (1996) observes, by "approaches which treat the dialogue as essentially exploratory and open-ended." For more recent scholars find Plato making a fresh start on old philosophical puzzles in the *Theaetetus* (Burnyeat 1977). Plato signals this new beginning, according to this story, by using a downgraded Socrates as his main speaker. In place of the sophisticated metaphysician and epistemologist of the middle dialogues Plato uses a Socrates stripped of doctrine and resembling the *elenctic* Socrates of the early dialogues. In fact, as Long's influential reading contends, Plato's fresh start culminates in the impersonal dialectic and heavy logical machinery of the *Theaetetus*' sequel, the *Sophist*, which is so alien to Plato's Socrates that Plato was compelled to replace him with the Eleatic Stranger as main speaker. This paper seeks to turn back the clock a bit by defending versions of two theses on the *Theaetetus* popular among ancient Platonists that, if correct, again inject the dialogue with a strong draught of doctrine and block the just described developmentalist moves which have greatly impacted much of the current literature.

First, the *Theaetetus* is not merely exploratory. It offers, rather, important philosophical doctrine. Socrates utilizes, without explicitly thematizing, a very important philosophical doctrine, namely, a version of the *Meno*'s (97e2-98a8) thesis that knowledge is defined as true judgment bound down by calculation of the cause (*aitias logismos*). This definition of knowledge, the most celebrated among ancient Platonists, is supposedly missing from the *Theaetetus*, according to the Anonymous Commentator

(Sedley, 1996). This paper argues that Socrates himself uses it in accounting for his philosophical midwifery in the supposedly philosophically unimportant midwifery digression (*Tht.* 148e6-151d7). A close reading of this passage from the *Theaetetus*' midwifery digression (150c-151c) brings the *aitias logismos* to light by detailing Socrates' *aitia*-language (which also links this passage to the *Meno*'s account of it) and by showing how Socrates' actions as midwife presuppose a grasp of the *aitia*.

Second, this Socrates is not downgraded, as developmentalists have contended. This is so not only insofar as he is not without doctrine, if it is correct that he conveys the *aitias logismos* to us. As Olympiodorus emphasizes (*in Alc.* 53.9-16), Socrates also boastfully likens himself to God in the midwifery digression, claiming that he and God are the causes of his pupils' flourishing (τῆς μέντοι μαιείας ὁ θεός τε καὶ ἐγὼ αἴτιος, 150d) and the reason the latter, mistaking *themselves* for the cause, flounder when they leave him (ἐαυτοὺς αἰτιασάμενοι, 150e). Socrates not only grasps the proper definition of knowledge as true belief plus *aitias logismos*. My analysis shows that he also grasps a particular, very important *aitia* that anchors the true beliefs that guide his own and his students' actions, namely, human being itself and the human good. This is a kind of self-knowledge, perfectly consistent with middle period metaphysics and epistemology, which explains the sense in which Socrates is the *aitia* of his students' flourishing, who lack this self-knowledge.

This paper's analysis thus provides fresh insights into an important passage in the *Theaetetus* and in doing so steals two powerful bolts from the developmentalists' quiver: the alleged exploratory nature of the *Theaetetus* and the supposed downgraded status of the *Theaetetus*' Socrates that developmentalists take as a sign for the *Theaetetus* being

the locus for a new beginning in the Platonic corpus that culminates in the so-called later dialogues.

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