

---

*The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus* by  
David Sedley

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. Pp. x + 201. ISBN 0-19-926703-0.  
Cloth \$60.00

---

*Reviewed by*  
Ronald Polansky  
Duquesne University  
polansky@duq.edu

As we might expect, this book displays impressive sophistication and learning. David Sedley acknowledges that there is already a good variety of secondary literature on Plato's *Theaetetus*, but his aim is 'to provide a corrective historical lens through which to read the dialogue' [v]. On this reading, Plato is tracing how his own positions have Socratic inspiration. When Plato writes the *Theaetetus* toward the end of his middle period, according to Sedley, Plato has already gone beyond Socrates of the early dialogues and will continue to do so in later dialogues; but the *Theaetetus* provides an opportunity to show how Socrates is the 'midwife' of all this further enrichment of Platonism:

By developing this implicit portrayal of Socrates as the midwife of Platonism, Plato aims to demonstrate, if not the identity, at any rate the profound continuity, between, on the one hand, his revered master's historical contribution and, on the other, the Platonist truth. [8]

This theme of the Socrates of the early dialogues giving birth to the later Platonism dominates the treatment of the *Theaetetus*. It is used to explain 'why the dialogue so often takes a circuitous route' [13]. This review calls into question Sedley's case that Socrates of the early dialogues differs from later Platonism and that the later Plato supposes that he has arrived at truth surpassing the early dialogues, or that we should seek such explanations as Sedley proposes for what may appear to be the 'circuitous route' of the dialogue. Despite my doubts about Sedley's interpretive strategy, those interested in the dialogue will certainly profit from many of Sedley's insightful detailed analyses of particular arguments of the text. An especially impressive example is the treatment of the argument about flux in

© 2005 Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

All rights reserved

ISSN 1549-4497 (online)

ISSN 1549-4470 (print)

ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)

*Aestimatio* 2 (2005) 127-134

*Theaet.* 179c–183c [89–99]. Though his analyses are generally put in service of the main theme, many of Sedley’s points can be separated from this theme and employed in alternative interpretations.

While Sedley holds that the main speaker in most Platonic dialogues speaks for Plato, this is not the case for the *Theaetetus* [6–7]. Here Plato has reverted to depicting the historical or semi-historical Socrates, so that a distinction opens between the speaker [Socrates] and the author [Plato]. Sedley says,

The author is a Plato who has by this date developed a major metaphysical doctrine of obvious relevance to some of the dialogue’s central concerns; yet his speaker, Socrates, is to all appearances almost entirely innocent of that Platonic metaphysics. [7]

The Socrates depicted in Plato’s early dialogues, and recreated in the *Theaetetus*, is ‘an open-minded critic and inquirer’ [9] who lacks the theory of Forms that emerges in Plato’s middle dialogues as well as the physics presented in the *Timaeus*. For Sedley, Socrates of the early dialogues is largely a moral thinker, as Gregory Vlastos suggested [18]. Yet Sedley removes the punch from Vlastos’ contention that Socrates and Plato differ as much from each other as from any third philosopher one might name [see Vlastos 1991, 46]: Sedley has the Socrates of the early period of Plato’s authorship serving as midwife for the later Platonic thought in metaphysics, physics, and psychology, on the ground that further reflection upon Socrates’ efforts and what these efforts entail leads more or less directly to Plato’s positions. Frequently, therefore, Sedley points out that something introduced into the *Theaetetus* appears there because it is characteristic of Socrates, even if Plato has good reason to deny it or modify it; or that something is introduced which goes beyond Socrates’ understanding in order to indicate to the seasoned reader how Plato’s own positions have supplemented Socrates’ more limited stance.

Given Sedley’s interpretative interest, the key concern of the dialogue seems not so much the announced question, ‘What is knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*)?’, but rather, ‘How do Socrates’ inquiries connect with more satisfactory Platonic answers?’ But does Plato really have such answers and, in particular, does he claim to know what knowledge is? Sedley holds that the midwife’s task ‘is not to hand the right answer to one’s interlocutors’, since the interlocutor has to work out

the answer to the central question of the dialogue, yet ‘it by no means follows that Plato himself does not know it’ [11]. Presumably, then, we should find in the mature Plato a clear account of knowledge. In fact we do not: Sedley himself refers to ‘a definition [of knowledge] which Plato nowhere formulates in the dialogues, but leaves to his readers to work on’ [11], and asserts that

the Platonist path that lies ahead (i.e., beyond the early dialogues) is one on which knowledge—although nowhere formally defined—will be recognized as a state of mind that differs far too radically from true judgement to be defined as a species of it. [179]

Thus, Sedley concedes that Plato nowhere defines knowledge, though the recognition that knowledge differs from true opinion and has entirely different objects supposedly lies beyond Socrates’ ken. But if the mere acceptance of Forms and objects of knowledge beyond sensible objects does not provide a ready account of knowledge, why need we suppose that Plato knows what knowledge is or that the introduction of the Forms into the *Theaetetus* will facilitate defining what knowledge is? And is there any reason to assume that we shall arrive at an understanding of knowledge through any simple formula or definition, as Sedley seems to suggest?

Another important issue in the *Theaetetus*, regarding which Sedley indicates that Plato has the truth and Socrates does not, is false judgment. Sedley thinks that the whole section on false belief [*Theaet.* 187a–200d] ‘turns out to contribute nothing to the definitional question at issue’ [13], but that it appears because Plato wishes to contrast dialectical argument with sophistry and to show ‘that Socrates had an understanding of cognitive psychology which went most of the way towards a solution’, the ‘definitive solution in the *Sophist*’ [119]. We might object immediately that false opinion needs to be considered at length in the *Theaetetus* not just because the sophist Protagoras depicted in the dialogue hides behind its denial, but because false opinion is really the contrary of knowledge; and that as much as the *Sophist* needs to consider both being and non-being, the *Theaetetus*’ investigation of knowledge should extend to its contrary, ignorance. And does Plato actually get any further with false judgment in the *Sophist* than in the *Theaetetus*? The *Sophist* clarifies how false statement is possible when what is other than the case is

asserted; but it really does little beyond the *Theaetetus* to clarify why such false statement should be believed by anyone. Plato cannot in fact explain why anyone should be led by deceptive appearances to believe something untrue, i.e., to speak the untrue to himself in his own soul as the truth.

I have called into question Sedley's view that Plato possesses the truth about some key issues in the *Theaetetus* which he withholds so that he can display Socrates floundering fruitfully. Now we may also question that Socrates of any of the dialogues should be supposed naïve and 'primitive' [29]. Andrea Nightingale [1995, esp. 10–11] argues compellingly that Plato invents philosophy in opposition to other literary genres. In accord with this view, we find that nowhere in the dialogues is it suggested that any of the Presocratics with the exception of Parmenides is a philosopher. Apparently, for Plato, to be a philosopher one must accept some version of Forms, the only fully adequate sort of cause. It is Aristotle who seemingly invents the history of philosophy in which philosophy begins perhaps with Thales and continues through the Presocratics to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle himself; and thus acknowledges as philosophers thinkers who in their search for causes and principles have not embraced the Forms. Now if this account of Plato is plausible and accords with the dialogues, is it not likely that Plato intends to present Socrates as the best conceivable human being, as a full-fledged philosopher, in order to surpass any of the competing figures from Greek literature and to provide the ultimate paradigm for the philosophical way of life? If so, would it still be appropriate to have Socrates miss crucial points which are clear to Platonist readers? And if he is a philosopher, will Socrates not have to entertain a theory of Forms?

Yet Sedley rejects the claim that Plato depicts Socrates as the supreme human and as always having a theory of Forms. Sedley rather desperately urges, 'there is no reason why even the reference to investigating "justice itself and likewise injustice" (in *Theaetetus* 175c) should necessarily imply a Platonic metaphysics' [73]; and he similarly explains away such usages in early dialogues, e.g., *Prot.* 330d8–e1. He takes the *Parmenides* to be 'the same kind of dramatic game' as the *Theaetetus*: 'the creation of a Socrates who cannot be straightforwardly identified as Plato's mouthpiece', but 'a dumbed-down version of the "Socrates" who had been Plato's middle-period spokesman' [17]. But should we not read the *Parmenides* as Plato's

account of how the paradigmatic human, the Socrates depicted in almost the whole of Plato's corpus, becomes what he is? In the *Parmenides*, Plato shows the young, brilliant Socrates still struggling with a theory of Forms that has too many difficulties to help him with his dialectical inquiries. It is the 'exercise' provided by Parmenides for the young Socrates, we are to understand, that suitably prepares him to be the Socrates capable of doing the divine labor of cross-examining others which we find in the other dialogues in which he participates. Though this is most likely inaccurate historically, it depicts the case in Plato's fictive literary world; and the exercise as presented is intended to have similar impact upon Plato's readers. Sedley proposes instead that we assume the position of Plato's contemporaries who are supposedly reading the dialogues as soon as they appear and catch on to Plato's intention to present an 'autobiography' of his own development; yet Sedley admits that

although such a progression, from the semi-historical Socrates to a Socrates who voices Plato's current thinking, may not have been evident to later generations of Platonists reading the Platonic corpus as a unity, it was presumably obvious to Plato's contemporary readers. [10: cf. 17]

Does Sedley hereby offer us a likely literary task for Plato in the *Theaetetus*?

The evidence Sedley presents for Socrates' limitations in the early Platonic dialogues is principally Aristotle's account of Socrates in *Meta.* 13.4 [10]. What this text is purported to show is that Aristotle's account of the historical Socrates is taken largely from Plato's early dialogues and that Aristotle 'make[s] a sharp philosophical distinction between Plato's Socratic dialogues and those representing his mature work' [15]. But is this so? In *Meta.* 13.4, Aristotle prepares to discuss the Ideas without yet viewing them as Form-Numbers and, therefore, he provides a brief account of the origin of the theory of Forms. As he sees it, this theory arose from combining the Heraclitean vision that sensible things are ceaselessly flowing, and so are unsuitable as objects of knowledge, with the quest by Socrates for universal definitions of moral virtues. To Socrates is attributed only inductive arguments and universal definitions, and it is asserted that Socrates did not make universals or definitions separate whereas some later thinkers did [see *Meta.* 1078b12–32]. Does Aristotle's brief

account of Socrates describe the historical Socrates or the Socrates to be found in Plato's early dialogues? It is much more likely to present the historical Socrates than Sedley's. After all, Aristotle sees Platonism as emerging from the confluence of Heracliteanism and Socrates rather than merely from Socrates. And Sedley seems to be in something of a question-begging position. Socrates is purely a moral thinker, as confirmed by the early dialogues and Aristotle's testimony. In the *Theaetetus*, the semi-historical Socrates re-emerges; yet, when Socrates of the *Theaetetus* deals with what look like non-moral issues such as the self-refutation of Protagorean relativism, Sedley resorts to the suggestion that Socrates can refute anything [61–62] and to a resemblance to arguments in the *Euthydemus*. Thus, the claim that Socrates is a limited moral thinker turns out to mean just that the theory of Forms is not made explicit; but this assumes that, if he possesses such a theory, Socrates has to introduce it prominently.

Regarding the mathematics in *Theaetetus* 147c–148d, Sedley asserts that it is

Plato, the author, who is in control here, and his speaker Socrates, in expressing approval for the mathematical paradigm, is unaware of the deeper philosophical significance which Platonically alert readers will be expected to spot. [28]

But the 'philosophical significance' is, for Sedley, that it prefigures the mathematical education in the *Republic*. But surely, it is more pertinent to view the incommensurability of lengths and surds as suggesting the incommensurability of opinion and knowledge. Any Socratic awareness of mathematical incommensurability, however, risks exploding Socrates' assumed obliviousness to such matters.

Sedley clearly has a more nuanced than usual chronological interpretation of Plato. According to this interpretation, Plato on occasion, as in the *Theaetetus*, deliberately reverts to the Socrates of old rather than, as many chronological interpreters have supposed, eagerly and impulsively spilling his guts regarding his latest philosophical innovations so that one could trace a step-by-step progression in Plato's thinking. And Sedley allows that Plato sometimes juxtaposes within the same text the semi-historical Socrates with the later Plato, as in the *Meno* and *Republic*. But if Sedley is so subtle regarding Platonic possibilities, why need we assume that Socrates in the early dialogues, were he to have had thoughts about a theory

of Forms or physics, would need to spell them out? Would being explicit about the Forms be so clearly relevant to the early dialogues as they stand? Might the context and the interlocutor addressed be sufficient to explain what Socrates says, or refrains from saying, in any dialogue rather than a lack of sophistication?

Sedley takes Socrates, in accord with the barrenness of midwifery, to lack doctrines, except those that connect with his very midwifery, such as the view that thought is silent internal dialogue [see 129–130, 109]. Consequently, it turns out that Plato and, hence, the Socrates whom Plato uses as ‘a mouthpiece for his own Platonic doctrines’ [9], have many doctrines. But this seems to misunderstand the *Theaetetus*’ account of barrenness and thought. Socrates declares himself barren in wisdom and opinion, but hardly barren in thought. Thought is not the same as belief or opinion. In *Theaet.* 189e–190a, Socrates treats opinion as the termination of thought, what one says to oneself internally when one ceases to have doubt. On this account of opinion, it is questionable whether Plato’s Socrates has any opinions at all though he is filled with thought.

The ultimate support for Sedley’s sort of interpretation, then, is not special evidence for Platonic chronology but just what additional light this interpretation sheds on the *Theaetetus*. Sedley points particularly to his account of the Digression at *Theaet.* 172a–177c for confirmation of the value of his approach [see vi]. I will examine but one exemplary part of this account of the Digression.

Sedley announces ‘the rarely noticed fact that in the *Theaetetus* piety is putting in a reappearance after a mysterious absence’ [82]. This absence was noticeable earlier, when

in book IV of the *Republic* Plato reduces Socrates’ fivefold set of cardinal virtues to four, quietly dropping piety from the standard list. Its equally sudden reappearance is among the most significant Socratic features of the Digression. [82]

But the other books of the *Republic* mention several more moral virtues [see, e.g., 368b8, 402c, 490c, and 615b]. Is it not plausible that in *Republic* 4 Socrates pares the list to four virtues in order to distribute them by process of elimination to three parts of city and soul rather than for the sort of reason suggested by Sedley?

I reaffirm that Sedley offers a quite sophisticated treatment of Plato and the *Theaetetus* in a very engaging manner. As I have

argued, however, his interpretive framework is questionable and may not advance our understanding of the dialogues. Yet his work offers many helpful interpretations of detailed arguments of the *Theaetetus* and of other dialogues that are separable from his global strategy for reading the dialogues. Those who approach Plato differently can well entertain and profit by the various points that he makes.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Nightingale, A. 1995. *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*. Cambridge.
- Vlastos, G. 1991. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca, NY.