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Measuring Humans against Gods: on the Digression of Plato's *Theaetetus*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/agph-2019-1001>

Abstract: The digression of Plato's *Theaetetus* (172c2–177c2) is as celebrated as it is controversial. A particularly knotty question has been what status we should ascribe to the ideal of philosophy it presents, an ideal centered on the conception that true virtue consists in assimilating oneself as much as possible to god. For the ideal may seem difficult to reconcile with a Socratic conception of philosophy, and several scholars have accordingly suggested that it should be read as ironic and directed only at the dramatic character Theodorus. When interpreted with due attention to its dramatic context, however, the digression reveals that the ideal of godlikeness, while being directed at Theodorus, is essentially Socratic. The function of the passage is to introduce a contemplative aspect of the life of philosophy into the dialogue that contrasts radically with the political-practical orientation characteristic of Protagoras, an aspect Socrates is able to isolate as such precisely because he is conversing with the mathematician Theodorus.

1 Introduction

In the middle of Plato's *Theaetetus* (172c2–177c2), in a passage commonly referred to as a digression, Socrates sets forth the ideal that man should assimilate to god as far as possible. While the passage is much celebrated, the interpretation of the ideal is controversial. Some scholars have suggested that the ideal is a caricature that is radically at odds with a Socratic ideal of philosophy (e. g. Rue 1993). Others have emphasized that ancient Platonists saw this ideal as pivotal to Platonic philosophy and have suggested that the digression is central to Plato's exploration of an ideal that came to dominate his later thought (e. g. Sedley 1999). Another matter of controversy is whether the ideal is otherworldly and sets philosophy at odds with the life of action (e. g. Annas 1999) or is connected to the practical life

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(e.g. Mahoney 2004). This latter controversy is commonly discussed in connection with the question whether or not the ideal is compatible with the conception of philosophy expressed in the *Republic* (e.g. McPherran 2010).

This article presents a detailed interpretation of the digression with the goal of defending four interconnected claims: (1) There is no radical opposition between the philosopher depicted in the passage and Socrates; (2) the passage does not point to an ideal of contemplation that stands in opposition to the life of action, it rather highlights a different conflict, that between the philosophical and the political life (what the difference between the life of action and the political life is, and why it is important to emphasize, will be spelled out below); (3) the main message of the passage parallels that of the central books of the *Republic*; (4) the fact that Socrates describes the philosophical life as being in conflict with the political life in the *Theaetetus* – often seen as contrasting with the picture emerging from the *Republic* – results from a difference between Theodorus and Glaucon: whereas Glaucon's political ambition makes it necessary for Socrates to introduce the highest aspect of philosophy as directly relevant to political rule, gradually explaining how and why it is radically at odds with the political life as it is commonly practiced, Theodorus' lack of concern for politics enables Socrates to present this aspect entirely on its own terms.

This study thus challenges a number of recent readings of the digression of the *Theaetetus*. At the same time, it challenges a longstanding picture of Socrates as an exclusively ethical thinker and the manner in which Plato is often understood as a political thinker. The aim of the study is thus both to contribute to the interpretation of the passage and to raise questions about the way we conceive of Plato's relation to Socrates and of the political dimension of Platonic philosophy.

Five sections follow this introduction. Section 2 locates the article within the recent literature on the digression. Section 3 criticizes some of the premises on which the larger part of the current discussion of the passage rests. Section 4 proceeds to discuss the context of the digression and the character of Theodorus. Section 5 interprets the first part of the digression (173c7–176a4) in detail. The final section interprets the second part of the digression (176a5–177c5).

2 The Digression of the *Theaetetus* in the Secondary Literature

Ancient Platonists saw the ideal of godlikeness found in dialogues such as the *Theaetetus* and the *Timaeus* as expounding the ethical aim specific to Platonic philosophy.¹ Thus, even though they did not turn the passage into an object of interpretation, the ideal of godlikeness became a significant influence on subsequent interpretations of Plato's philosophy (Burnyeat 1990, 35).

In more recent scholarship, however, the purpose of the passage has become a matter of controversy. In general, in the 19th and 20th century the passage was neglected in the majority of interpretations of the *Theaetetus*, which treated the dialogue as a precursor to modern epistemological treatises.² As a consequence of this way of reading the *Theaetetus*, however, it came to be regarded as a puzzle why Plato chose to include the passage in the dialogue at all. If the subject proper of the dialogue is knowledge, why should Plato choose to include a long digression on the philosophical life, as contrasted with the political life?

At the beginning of the 20th century, most scholars sought to explain the inclusion of the passage biographically. Accordingly, the digression was not read as a part of the argument of the *Theaetetus* itself, but rather as a personal comment on recent political events.³ Subsequent writers have either chosen to ignore the passage as irrelevant to the overall argument of the dialogue,⁴ regarded it as a digression setting forth doctrines central to Plato's philosophy that cannot be discussed in detail in the *Theaetetus*,⁵ or sought to explain the passage as resulting from the dramatic interplay of the characters of the dialogue.⁶ More recently, the passage has regained attention in discussions of Platonic ethics.⁷

1 See e.g. Alcinoos' *Didaskalikos*, ch. 2 and 28, and Plotinus' *Ennead* I.2.1. Dillon 1993, 55, observes that "'likeness to God' [...] is the agreed characterization of the *telos* [...] for all Platonists from at least Eudorus on". For some discussion, see Dillon 1996, 122f., and van Kooten 2008, 141–58.

2 Rue 1993, 71, observes that, since there "is so little apparent connection between the digression and the main body of the dialogue [...] it has been almost universally ignored or dismissed in studies of the *Theaetetus*".

3 A good survey of such older, biographically oriented interpretations can be found in Åkesson 1933, 12–58.

4 McDowell 1973, 174. Other examples are listed in Howland 1998, 297f., and Sedley 2004, 63 n. 13.

5 See Cornford 1935, 83, and Burnyeat 1990, 33f.

6 See Friedländer 1960, 153–156, Rue 1993, Howland 1998, and Stern 2008.

7 Set off by Sedley 1999 and Annas 1999.

Modern scholars also disagree to whom the ideal of godlikeness is to be ascribed. It has been suggested that the ideal is incompatible with Socratic philosophy and that the philosopher Socrates describes as seeking to assimilate to god is a “caricature rather than an idealized portrait” (Rue 1993, 72), meant to reflect the views of Theodorus, Socrates’ interlocutor in the digression.⁸ Others see the ideal as expressing Plato’s rather than Socrates’ conception of the philosophical life, so that Socrates points beyond himself to a Platonic ideal of philosophy (Sedley 2004, 67–71 and 81; and – more emphatically – McPherran 2010, 76–79). It is further a matter of dispute whether the ideal is directed toward contemplation to the exclusion of any interest in the world of human action (see Rue 1993, 82 and 86; Annas 1999, 55), or whether some connection can be made between “the other place” (*ekeise*; 176a9), to which Socrates says we should flee, and human affairs (see Mahoney 2004; Armstrong 2004; Giannopoulou 2011 and Lännström 2011).

Like much recent work on the digression, this study takes a cue from the fact that earlier Platonists regarded the passage as integral to Plato’s overall conception of philosophy. It thus seeks to rehabilitate the ideal as central for the understanding of Platonic ethics. In contrast to most other such attempts, however, the study inscribes itself into the tradition of dramatically oriented readings of Plato stemming from Paul Friedländer and argues that the interplay between Socrates and Theodorus is a key to understanding the significance of the passage. But in opposition to other such readings of the *Theaetetus*, most of which tend to see the ideal as ironic (e. g. Rue 1993; Howland 1998; Mintz 2011), the study contends that this interplay suggests that we should take the ideal of philosophy found in the passage seriously.⁹ The study finally differs from most recent interpretations by arguing that the ideal of godlikeness is essentially Socratic.

3 Socrates, Ethics, and Contemplation

It is evident that the philosopher described by Socrates in the digression is in some regards at odds with the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* itself, for Plato depicts that Socrates as possessing many of the traits that the same Socrates denies the philosopher possesses (see Rue 1993, 78 f.).

Still, the uneasiness expressed by many interpreters regarding the ideal of becoming like god can hardly result from this tension alone. Socrates also presents us with ideals of philosophy that do not accurately reflect his own way of

⁸ Rue is followed by Howland 1998, 36, Mintz 2011, 663 f., and – partly – by Stern 2008, 162–182.

⁹ A notable exception is Polansky 1992.

living in other dialogues, but they have nevertheless not been regarded as similarly problematic. That the digression's depiction of the philosopher seems particularly provocative results probably just as much from the fact that it seems to conflict with features many scholars have become used to thinking of as specifically Socratic, namely the disavowal of knowledge and an unrelenting inquiry into ethico-political matters. It is commonly assumed that Socratic inquiry – at least in the so-called Socratic dialogues – is directed primarily at ethical matters and that Socrates does not possess knowledge about them (Robinson 1953, 15–17; Vlastos 1983; Rue 1993, 86 f.). By contrast, the philosopher sketched by Socrates in the digression to many readers seems uninterested in ethical questions (Annas 1999, 60), directed as he is at understanding the things “under the earth” and “over the heaven” (173e6–174a1). Since this activity also leads him to forget the affairs of the *polis*, its inhabitants, and himself as a member of the *polis* (cf. 173c9–e4), he might also seem to lack both the interest in his fellow men and the kind of self-knowledge thought characteristic of Socrates (see e. g. *Phdr.* 229e4–230a1). One interpreter has accordingly suggested that a “less Socratic philosopher” than the one depicted in the digression “would be hard to find” (Rue 1993, 78).

However, the now prevailing picture of Socrates as an exclusively moral philosopher fits poorly with the Socrates found in several of Plato's dialogues. The picture itself flows from the efforts of scholars in the 19th and early 20th century who sought to locate a “true” or “historical” Socrates, in contrast to a presumably “Platonized” Socrates found, for instance, in the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*.¹⁰ This “historical” Socrates is often isolated with the aid of various passages from Aristotle and Xenophon, according to which Socrates was exclusively preoccupied with defining ethical matters (see Aristotle *Met.* 987b1–6 and 1078b17–32; Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.1.11 and 16; Cicero *Tusc. Disp.* V.10; but see, by contrast, Xenophon *Memorabilia* 4.7–8). This hypothetical Socrates is then compared with the literary Socrates of Plato's dialogues in order to decide which dialogues are Socratic and which are not.

Whether such a procedure can succeed in leading us to a historically correct understanding of Socrates has been questioned by a growing number of scholars (e. g. Kahn 1981; Cooper 1997, xi–xii; Zuckert 2009; Burnyeat 2012, 238). However that may be, the claim advanced by Rachel Rue and others that the picture of the philosopher emerging from the digression is at odds with Socrates forces us to ask an additional question: Does this amount to the claim that this philosopher is at odds with the historical Socrates (whom Plato, according to developmental

¹⁰ See Ausland 2006, 493–510, for discussion of the different assumptions underlying this view of Socrates.

readings, only portrayed faithfully in the supposedly early dialogues) or to the claim that this philosopher is at odds with Plato's Socrates? The latter, one may reasonably argue, is a *dramatis persona* displaying Plato's understanding of what Socrates represented, an understanding that may very well come to expression in the supposedly later no less than in the supposedly early dialogues. Accordingly, Plato's Socrates would be the Socrates of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* as much as he is the Socrates of the *Charmides*.

For this reason, even granting the suggestion that a comparison of the digression's philosopher with Socrates is called for in order to understand Plato's point in writing the digression, we are entitled to insist that only a comparison with Plato's understanding of Socrates is relevant for this purpose. For if the philosopher in the digression differs significantly only from the hypothetical historical Socrates, but not from Plato's Socrates as portrayed in the dialogues, Plato's point in writing the digression can hardly have been that the reader should notice how un-Socratic this philosopher is, even though the historically minded reader might detect such a difference. In the following, the philosopher described in the digression will therefore be compared only with Plato's Socrates, which must, lacking any other criterion, be regarded as emerging from Plato's dialogues generally, not merely from a specific group of dialogues.

Before we turn to the digression itself, a further point needs to be addressed. The philosopher depicted by Socrates is commonly understood as engaged in contemplation in a manner that precludes all interest in political and ethical action (e. g. Rue 1993, 91 and 96; Annas 1999, 60 and 65; Mintz 2011, 671). And it is clearly the case that the philosopher depicted by Socrates in the digression is preoccupied with contemplating or beholding reality – although the verb *theōrein* is never used – rather than with the affairs of the *polis*. A proper interpretation of this feature requires some caution, however. There is no reason to suppose that Plato did not hold thinking and acting to be different (see e. g. *Rep.* 473a5–6, *Apo.* 32a4–5). But the awareness of such a difference is something quite other than a philosophical interpretation of that difference. In other words, we cannot take for granted that he made a distinction between contemplation and action in the way many of his modern interpreters do. Instead, passages from dialogues such as the *Phaedo* (65a9–66a8, 68b8–69c3, and 79d1–7) and the *Republic* (490a8–b7, 500b8–d3, 517d4–e1, 540a6–b1, and 592b2–5) more than suggest that Plato regarded thought that is directed at forms as necessary for true virtue and hence for virtuous action.¹¹ As Andrea Nightingale has recently argued (Nightingale

¹¹ This view also affects ancient Platonists' interpretations of the ideal of becoming as like god as possible. See Albinus, *Prologos*, 6.151.2–4, and Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, ch. 2 and 28; it is char-

2004, 133–34), the contrast we find in Plato is thus not the contrast between contemplation and action assumed by many modern readers,¹² but rather a contrast between a philosophical life, which includes both contemplation and action, and a political life that – to the extent it does not include contemplation – results in action without *phronēsis* (see *Republic* 488a2–489a2, 492b6–c9, 496b6–c3, and 517c3–4). Let us now turn to the interpretation of the digression, beginning by looking at its context and the character of Theodorus.

4 The Digression in Context and the Character of Theodorus

A striking feature of the digression is that it is addressed not to Theaetetus, the main interlocutor of the dialogue, but to his teacher Theodorus (see Benardete 1986, I.130; Rue 1993, 92; Sedley 2004, 70). The digression constitutes the middle section of a longer discussion between Socrates and Theodorus that starts at 169c8 and ends at 183c7, which effects a refutation of the Protagorean doctrine that “man is the measure of all things” (152a2–4).

This discussion between Theodorus and Socrates is preceded by a discussion between Socrates and Theaetetus (151d7–168c5), the purpose of which is to establish what Theaetetus’ first suggested definition of knowledge – that it is perception (151e1–3) – entails about perception and the things we perceive. The discussion between Theaetetus and Socrates is resumed at 183c8 and shortly thereafter reaches a conclusion at 186e12, when Theaetetus’ first definition is refuted. The structure of this part of the *Theaetetus* is thus more complex than that of the rest of the dialogue, where the discussion is carried out only between Socrates and Theaetetus, a difference worth considering.

acteristic that Alcinous, while following Aristotle in distinguishing between a *bios praktikos* and a *bios theoretikos*, at the same time states that “the active life [...] would be engaged in when circumstances demand, by practicing the transferal to human affairs of the visions of the contemplative life” (ch. 2, translation by John Dillon), a description that, as Dillon 1993, 56, points out, “embodies a verbal echo of *Republic* 6, 500d”.

12 It must be emphasized, however, that complaints against the ideal of contemplation from the point of view of human practice are not peculiar to modernity, as can be gathered from information about Euripides’ lost play *Antiope* as well as from Callicles’ remark at *Gorgias* 484c5–d2. Aristotle’s pupil Dicaearchus of Messana likewise complained that the ideal of the theoretical life estranged human beings from the life of action; for discussion, see Snell 1924, 1–3.

Socrates begins his discussion of Theaetetus' first definition by associating it with Protagoras' measure doctrine (152a2–4) and his initial discussion with Theaetetus culminates in a defense Socrates presents on behalf of Protagoras (165e8–168c5). Interestingly, the sole stated purpose of the conversation between Socrates and Theodorus that emerges out of this discussion is to test whether Protagoras' doctrine is correct – this is as far as Theodorus is willing to join the investigation (compare 169a1–5 with 169c6–7). By contrast, Theaetetus' original definition, stripped of its Protagorean clothing, is picked up only in the subsequent discussion with Theaetetus and is quickly eliminated.¹³

Socrates thus uses Theaetetus' first suggested definition simply as a point of departure for developing a position he ascribes to Protagoras (for which Socrates himself supplies most of the material, see 152c8–e9, 155d1–e7, 157c7–d2), he then proceeds to refute this position in the discussion with Theodorus, and returns to the simpler answer Theaetetus in fact gave only when Theodorus has become convinced that Protagoras' position is untenable. This complicated structure, in particular the fact that the refutation of Protagoras is brought about in conversation with Theodorus, gains in significance once one notices two additional facts.

First, Socrates repeatedly describes Protagoras as a friend, or even teacher, of Theodorus (161b9–10, 162a4–5, 164e4–7, 171c8–9, 179a10), thus signaling a special connection between Theodorus and Protagoras. Second, in the previous part of the dialogue, Theodorus has been reluctant to participate in the discussion (146b1–4, 162a4–8, 165a8–b1). As he puts it, he is inexperienced when it comes to Socrates' manner of speaking (146b3) and from early on he disliked “naked arguments” (*psiloi logoi*; 165a1–3).¹⁴ Nevertheless, Socrates forces Theodorus into the conversation, the result being that Theodorus likens Socrates to two mythological malefactors – Sciron and Antaeus (169a9–b3). From this point onwards, Theodorus remains the sole interlocutor up to 183c7. Theodorus is thus presented as reluctant both to discuss the position of his old friend and to converse philosophically, while Socrates is presented as specifically interested in including Theodorus in the discussion.

Since the point of their joint discussion is to find out whether or not Protagoras' doctrine is sound, we have reason to believe that the digression also forms part of this project. But some commentators read the passage leading up to the

¹³ For discussion of this feature of the dialogue, see Burnyeat 1990, 52–54.

¹⁴ Many commentators emphasize this, resulting in various interpretations; Miller 2004, 4, sees Theodorus as a geometer to whom “geometry is anything but a propaedeutic to philosophy”, a view partly shared by Benardete 1986, I.89, and Howland 1998, 55–64. By contrast, Klein 1965, 28–31, suggests that in the subsequent discussion Socrates succeeds in turning Theodorus back from geometry to the “idle pursuit” of dialectic.

digression (171d9–172c1) as suggesting otherwise. Here Socrates describes the subject initiating the digression as a larger discussion (*logos*) taking them away from a lesser (172b8) and it has been suggested that this indicates that the digression does not target Protagoras' doctrine, but rather a new thesis that denies that justice and the like are by nature (*physis*) (Cornford 1935, 82–83).¹⁵ Let us therefore consider how the “larger *logos*” stands in relation to the relativism associated with Protagoras.

The preceding discussion had made manifest that whereas Protagoras' measure doctrine could be true regarding such matters as the sweet and the dry – they are as they seem to each – his *logos* would be more willing to consent that the expert is the measure concerning what is healthy and unhealthy (cf. 171d9–e8). The larger discussion Socrates mentions emerges when Socrates notes that political matters such as the beautiful and shameful, just or unjust, pious or impious are perhaps analogous to the sweet and the dry – they are to each city as they appear – but that Protagoras' account would perhaps have to concede that concerning future advantage and disadvantage, one counselor is better than another (172a1–b2). This probably refers back to an earlier point in the conversation, namely that the measure doctrine, if it rules out expert knowledge, seems to rule out Protagoras' claim to be a wise man a well (see 161c2–d1 with 166c7–167d4). Socrates now adds (172b2–6) that, concerning the beautiful, the just etc., people would claim that they do not have a being (*ousia*) of their own by nature, and he concludes that even people who do not fully proclaim the teaching of Protagoras carry on their wisdom along these lines (172b7–8). This is the claim that initiates the larger discussion.

Two considerations speak against the suggestion that the people mentioned adhere to a view radically different from that of Protagoras and “go further than Protagoras himself” (Cornford 1935, 82). First, by denying that the just and the like have their being by nature, these people would only go further than Protagoras if his position, as stated earlier in the dialogue, does not entail such a claim. But Protagoras, as interpreted by Socrates, is generally portrayed as a complete relativist (see for instance 166d1–4 with 167b1–4, see also *Cratylus* 385e4–386a4) even if he seeks to accommodate wisdom within his relativistic doctrine. And while at 167b1–7 Protagoras apparently introduces a non-relative standard – the beneficial and what is better that the sophist supposedly makes appear just to the city – what the beneficial or better is is never specified. It seems reasonable

¹⁵ This reading has recently been defended by Daniele Labriola 2012. For contrasting views see Friedländer 1960, 151–156, Åkesson 1933, 23f. and 42, Chappell 2004, 120, and Polansky 1992, 134f.

to assume that this fact is an integral part of Plato's representation of Protagoras: what Protagoras means by beneficial or better is obscure because Protagoras is not in a position to give any content to these terms. Accordingly, when compared to Protagoras, the people mentioned by Socrates are less extreme (see Sedley 2004, 64 and Burnyeat 1990, 32–33). They reject complete relativism and embrace relativism only when it comes to political matters. Any argument advanced against their position will therefore also be directed against part of Protagoras' broader position.

Second, the view attributed to these people closely parallels that of Protagoras found earlier in the dialogue (cf. in particular 167b4–c4), where he seems to accept that the expert is the measure of future benefit, while insisting that whatever a city holds as just is just for that city.¹⁶ This suggests that the people mentioned by Socrates are somehow connected with Protagoras.¹⁷

In conclusion, we can say that the digression arises out of a discussion of a weaker kind of relativism that may be held independently of Protagoras' thesis but is surely entailed by his thesis. In addition, the weaker relativism may also explain why Protagoras' thesis could appear attractive. Even if few people would accept, upon reflection, that Protagoras' thesis is true *tout court* (see 171a1–2), the idea that justice and piety are conventional is a common view (see Aristotle *EN* 1094b14–16).

If these observations are correct, the point of the digression is to make clear that Protagoras' position is untenable, not just concerning matters such as health and future advantage, but also concerning matters such as justice and the noble. And in fact, the digression revolves around exactly the nature of these matters (see 175c2 and 176b1–2).

Let us now turn to Socrates' interlocutor, Theodorus. A number of commentators have suggested that the picture of philosophy found in the digression results from the fact that it is directed at the mathematician Theodorus and that it is ironic (e. g. Rue 1993, Howland 1998, 57–64). As a matter of fact, several aspects of

¹⁶ I do not see that Protagoras, at any point in his earlier defense speech (i. e. 165e8–168c5), claims that justice is not relative, as suggested by Labriola; what he claims is that what appears and hence *is* just may be more or less beneficial. But this is compatible with the view expressed at 172b2–6. This view does not explicitly state that no city looks to an expert on moral matters, as Labriola 2012, 94, claims, but only that justice has no being by nature. In an earlier passage (167c4–6) Protagoras had agreed with this, but still claimed that he could make better or more beneficial things appear just, but not – as Labriola 2012, 99, claims – make some things appear better.

¹⁷ See Åkesson 1932, 24, and Polansky 1992, 135.

the text suggest that Plato deliberately wanted to signal the significance of Theodorus as the interlocutor in this passage.

First, it is Theodorus who suggests to Socrates that they have leisure for the larger discussion (172c2). And when Socrates asks him whether they should return to their former discussion, it is he who urges Socrates to continue (173b7–c6). Questions concerning political matters and the contrast between the free man and the man who lives like a slave, introduced at 172a1–c1 and 172c3–d2, obviously appeal more to Theodorus than the discussion of knowledge.

Second, at the beginning of the digression, Socrates suggests that people who spend much time *en tais philosophiais* make poor rhetoricians (172c4–6). This use of philosophy in the plural¹⁸ harks back to the beginning of the dialogue where Socrates describes the mathematical disciplines taught by Theodorus as philosophical (143d2–3).¹⁹ Socrates is suggesting that Theodorus is, like himself, a philosopher.

Finally, we may note that the digression gets Theodorus excited about philosophy (see 176a2–4 and 177c3–5). In light of his previous reluctance to engage in philosophical argument, it seems reasonable to suppose that Socrates tailors the digression specifically for him.

Still, even if this is the case, what consequences this has for the way we should understand this picture depends on the way we understand Theodorus. Let us start by pointing out that it is Theodorus' praise of Theaetetus that sets off the dialogue's inquiry into knowledge. According to Socrates, Theodorus' praise (see 143e4–144b6)²⁰ involves a praise of Theaetetus' soul for its virtue and wisdom (145b1–2), and this leads Socrates to pose the questions what knowledge is and whether or not it is identical with wisdom (145d11–146a1). The focal question of the dialogue concerning knowledge thus arises out of a question about virtue and wisdom (see Sedley 2010, 67f.), and the discussion of these questions can be viewed as a testing of the soul of Theaetetus, who is supposed to possess both (see Rozema 1998; Mintz 2011, 659). Moreover, by *asking* whether knowledge is identical with wisdom or not, Socrates seems to highlight a complex connection between them, the understanding of which may elude both Theodorus and Theaetetus. Being an accomplished mathematician, Theodorus surely possesses

¹⁸ This is the only place where Plato uses *philosophia* in the plural, as is also noted by Benardete 1986, I.187.

¹⁹ See Rue 1993, 92f., and Sedley 2004, 70.

²⁰ The traits Theodorus emphasizes parallel traits of which Socrates says in the *Republic* that they are prerequisites for being taught dialectic, see Campbell 1883, *ad loc.*, Friedländer 1960, 134, Benardete 1986, I.90.

knowledge. But is this knowledge simply identical with wisdom? Both Protagoras and Socrates make strong claims about wisdom in the dialogue (compare 166d4–167c4 with 176c3–7), and neither of them identifies it with mathematical knowledge. On the other hand, Protagoras explicitly connects sophistry with education (see 167a3–4), while Socrates initially suggests that Theodorus, as an expert mathematician, is also a teacher of subjects that pertain to education, *paideia* (145a6–9).²¹

It is therefore interesting to note that the subjects Theodorus teaches are subjects that Protagoras, in the dialogue named after him, explicitly denies teaching (*Prot.* 318d7–e5). Whatever the historical significance of this may be, it makes sense that the Protagoras Plato portrays in the *Protagoras* should deny this, since he claims to teach only one thing, good counsel (*euboulia*; 318e5) or the political art (319a3–4). Mathematical disciplines have little bearing on political matters, it seems – at least if political matters are understood the way Protagoras understands them. From these observations, we are left to wonder what connection exists among mathematics, education, wisdom, and politics, and whether the digression will throw some light on it.

After these preliminary considerations, let us turn to the digression, which may be divided into two sections. The first (173c7–176a4) elaborates the difference between the philosophers and politically oriented people (172d8–9). The second (176a5–177c2) spells out the philosopher’s relation to reality, described as a flight, and why this flight leads to happiness.

5 Philosophers and Politicians (173c7–176a4)

The digression is essentially a prolonged comparison of two types of human beings, the rhetorically or politically oriented people (177b6) who “knock about in law courts and things like that from childhood on” (172c8–9) and those who have leisure and spend time in the “practices of philosophy” (*hoi en tais philosophiais diatripsantes*; 172c4–6). What sets off this comparison is Socrates’ claim that philosophically minded people have leisure and are concerned only with “finding their way” (*tyngchanein*) to what is (*to on*) in conversation (172d9), while

²¹ A few words about these subjects are in order. Geometry, astronomy, harmonics or music and the art of calculation (145a6–9, 145c7–d2) are all among the disciplines said in the *Republic* to constitute a “prelude” to dialectic (525a10–531c4, 531d6–8) and they were taught at least to some extent by certain sophists as part of the higher education suitable for free men (see *Prot.* 318e1–3; *Hipp. Min.* 366c5–e1; *Hipp. Maj.* 285b5–d5).

political people have no leisure to pursue what they want, restrained as they are by the rules of conduct in the law courts (172d9–173a1), and his further claim that this lack of freedom corrupts their souls since they are forced to think about and do evil things (173a1–b2), all the while believing that they become terribly clever and wise (*deinoi kai sophoi*; 173b2).

Defining the life devoted to wisdom and contemplation by contrasting it with the active, political life is a common feature not just of Plato's thought, but of Greek thought more generally. In Euripides' lost play *Antiope*, for instance, two brothers (Zethus and Amphion) seem to have represented these two ideals, and their dramatized confrontation is made thematic in the last part of Plato's *Gorgias* (see Nightingale 1992 and 1995, 60–92). The radical contrast between the two types of life so vividly portrayed in the digression may accordingly be regarded as serving a specific purpose, namely to highlight philosophy as a mode of life that is radically different from the life most young Athenians would find attractive, the life of politics. In what follows we shall concentrate on the depiction of this first mode of life. For that purpose, it is helpful to divide the first section of the digression (173c7–176a4) into subparts and analyze each in turn. The section consists of two sets of complementary considerations and a conclusion:

A1: The philosopher knows nothing of the city (173c9–e3), but

A2: he investigates the things in heaven and earth and the essence of man (173e3–174b7).

B1: he philosopher is laughable to people in the *polis* (174b9–175b6), but

B2: other people become laughable to him when he compels them to inquire philosophically (175b8–175d7).

C: The comparison is brought to an end (175d7–176a1).

5.1 The Philosopher's Relation to the Polis (A1)

Socrates begins the digression by stating that he is describing the “leaders of the chorus” (*koryphaioi*; 173c8) he and Theodorus are part of (173b3–4, 173c1–2). He thereby assigns the philosophers described in the digression a more prominent position than that of himself and Theodorus, a fact we shall keep in mind. He then proceeds to specify what these philosophers do *not* know: the way to the marketplace, where to find the court of justice or the council chamber, and laws or passed decrees, either spoken or written. Nor do they have any interest in ruling or care about assemblies, dinners, and merry-making with flute girls (173d4–5). Furthermore, it escapes them whether people are of good or bad descent and, Socrates finally claims, regarding all this the philosopher does not even know that he is ignorant since only his body is in the *polis*.

These claims have led commentators to see the philosopher described as radically different from Socrates and radically indifferent to his fellow citizens. Of course, Socrates knows his way to the marketplace, and the opening scene of the dialogue shows that he is familiar with the ancestry of his fellow citizens (144c5–8, see Rue 1993, 79). We should keep in mind, however, that Socrates is in any case not suggesting that he is describing himself. More importantly, the main point of Socrates' description is that the philosopher takes no part in the *political* affairs of the city, such as political clubs and parties, and does not share the concomitant interest in distinguishing those of noble lineage from those not. Socrates' description here can therefore hardly be taken as evidence for a disregard for his fellow citizens as such on the part of the philosopher; what he is indifferent to is not his fellow citizens as human beings, it is rather to the matters that politically oriented men find important – political power, political institutions, reputation. That the philosopher is also said to be ignorant about decrees, laws, and the way to the marketplace indicate that Socrates' portrait is deliberately exaggerated. A real human being could hardly be wholly ignorant of such matters.

What about the philosopher's ignorance of his own ignorance? Does it imply that he lacks self-knowledge, a prerequisite for virtue according to Socratic standards?²² Hardly. What Plato's Socrates generally sees as the opposite of self-knowledge is the delusion that one knows what one does not, in particular that one knows really important matters (cf. *Apo.* 21d4–8 and 22d6–8; *Symp.* 204a3–7). But the philosopher in the digression does not believe he knows what he does not, and the matters of which he is ignorant are hardly counted among the greatest by Plato's Socrates. Moreover, as we shall see, the philosopher's ignorance of these matters results from an interest in questions that are Socratic in character. The philosopher's ignorance, we may therefore suggest, is not wholly unrelated to Socrates' avowed ignorance.

5.2 The Philosopher's Relation to Nature (A2)

As a counterpoint to the previous part, Socrates next (173e3–174b1) explains that the mind (*dianoia*) of the philosopher, while it disregards all the matters mentioned above, “flies everywhere”. More precisely Socrates claims that the philosopher's mind, in accordance with a saying of Pindar, flies “underneath the earth” – which, Socrates states, means that it measures, geometrically, planes – and “over the heaven”, i. e. it pursues astronomy. In other words, it pursues two of

²² This is suggested by Stern 2008, 165, and McPherran 2010, 79 f.

the disciplines taught by Theodorus (cf. 145a6–9). And while doing so, it searches in every way for every nature of each whole of the things that are (*pasan pantēi physin ereunōmenē tōn ontōn hekastou holou*; 173e6–174a1) while not lowering itself to the things nearby (*eis tōn engys ouden hautēn synkathieisa*; 174a1–2).

At first sight, this may look rather un-Socratic, especially if one thinks along the lines of Cicero and Aristotle, according to which Socrates is first and foremost a thinker engaged in practical ethics. Interpreters arguing for an ironical reading of the digression (e. g. Rue, 1993, 77) suggest that a similar picture emerges from *Socrates' Defense*, where Socrates denies knowing anything about the studies of what is under the earth and in the heavens (see *Apo.* 18b7–8 and 19b5–d7). But in his defense speech, Plato's Socrates also states that he is very far from dishonoring knowledge about such matters (19c6–8). Moreover, if one assumes that Plato's Socrates emerges from all the dialogues in which he is a character, rather than from the supposedly early dialogues, it is worth emphasizing that in the *Phaed.*, a dialogue that dramatically speaking takes place shortly after his defense speech, Socrates openly admits that in his youth he was very desirous of the wisdom called inquiry into nature (*peri physeōs historian*; *Phaed.* 96a6–7). It should further be emphasized that while he goes on to sketch his disappointment with this kind of inquiry and the resulting “flight into *logoi*” in which he investigates the truth about beings in accounts (99d4–6), the procedure of this flight is still directed at nature, namely the nature of *all* the things that are (and not merely ethical matters, see e. g. 100b5–7 and 103c10–e7). It may accordingly be regarded as an alternative to the earlier kind of inquiry, where the *manner* of inquiry, but not the *objects* of inquiry, has changed (see *Phaed.* 95e10–96a1, 99c8–d2, 101c3, and 103e2–104b4). Thus, even if Socrates may here be said to describe a break with the so-called pre-Socratic tradition, this break is first and foremost methodological.²³

The inquiry into the nature of something (*Tht.* 174a1) said by Socrates to characterize the philosophers can therefore hardly be regarded as un-Socratic. Nor should the mentioning of mathematical disciplines used in this inquiry lead us to doubt the sincerity of what is to follow. After all, Socrates describes mathematical disciplines as a prelude to dialectic in the *Republic*. Moreover, the character in the Platonic corpus most explicitly depicted as doubting the importance of mathematics is Protagoras (cf. *Prot.* 318d7–e5), who is set up as the main antagonist in the first half of the *Theaetetus*. The further fact that Socrates also points to

²³ See Burger 1999, 2, who remarks: “In describing [his new *methodos*, the “second sailing”], Socrates says nothing, as Aristotle would lead us to expect, about busying himself with “ethical things,” while neglecting nature as a whole.”

the importance of measuring and calculating for reasoning in general in other dialogues (e.g. *Phlb.* 55e1–3, 57b5–d8, *Prot.* 357a5–c1, *Euthyd.* 290b7–c6) suggests that he is very far from sharing Protagoras' sentiments – even if many of his modern admirers are not.

But what about the fact that the philosopher is said not to lower his mind to the things nearby? According to Rachel Rue, the expression “the things nearby” (*ta engys*, 174a2) “also has the technical meaning ‘particulars’, as opposed to universals” (Rue 1993, 80). Consequently, she states that the philosopher Socrates describes is “concentrated on the task of discovering the nature of the whole” while “he has no time for the particulars” (Rue 1993, 82), and further that this contrasts radically with Socrates, who “has great interest in the people around him” (Rue 1993, 86).²⁴ In Rue's view, the goal of the philosopher of the digression is “not the reform of the human world”, and moreover, this is “from a Socratic point of view [...] a defect” (Rue 1993, 87).

The expression “the things nearby” should, however, be interpreted in the light of its immediate context and regarded in connection with the second half of the description of the philosopher (174a4–b7), which explains what the philosopher's inquiry into nature amounts to. Let us start with the latter. In 174a4–b7, Socrates likens the philosopher's ignorance of the *polis* with the event of Thales falling into a well while gazing at the stars, stating that all philosophers are as laughable as Thales. He then adds a new dimension to his previous description: the philosopher is ignorant not only of the political or social dimension of life. He is even unaware of his next-door neighbor, and not only of what he is doing, for he is all but unaware whether he is a human being at all. In contrast, Socrates claims, the philosopher is preoccupied with the question whatever man is (*ti pot' estin anthrōpos*; 174b4) and what, differing from the rest, it befits a nature of this kind to do and suffer (*ti tēi toiautēi physei prosēkei diaphoron tōn allōn poiein ē paschein*; 174b4–5).

Rachel Rue sees this description as a simple caricature resulting from the fact that Socrates is accommodating it to Theodorus (Rue 1993, 92f.). But even granted that the description is exaggerated and directed at Theodorus, the question remains what the purpose of this is. Furthermore, the understanding of Socrates that fuels Rue's criticism of the philosopher of the digression, although it is shared by many scholars, is highly problematic.

The notion that Socrates would regard inquiry that does not aim to reform the human world as defective turns Socrates into a precursor of Francis Bacon

²⁴ See also Cornford 1935, 88, who states that the “tone of this digression [...] is far removed from the humanity of Socrates”.

and thus involves a questionable modernization of Socrates. The fact that Plato's Socrates elsewhere claims that virtuous action and philosophical insight are intimately connected (see page 6 above) does not imply that he regards thinking that does not reform the world as pointless. On the one hand, not all thinking pertains to action, and on the other, one may very well act virtuously without reforming the society of which one is part. It is true that ontological insight, broadly understood, is described as a foundation for ordering society in the *Republic* (500b8–d9). But even in this work, political reform is described neither as a necessary effect nor as the main goal of this kind of insight, a fact underlined by Socrates' suggestion that the philosophers must be compelled to return to the cave to rule (*Rep.* 519c8–d9, see also 496a11–e3). These observations suggest that according to Plato, virtuous action and political reform are two distinct things. When we interpret Plato, it is therefore prudent to disregard the opposition between contemplation and action many modern interpreters take for granted (see Nightingale 2004, 117, and 133f.), since, according to Plato, the important contrast is between the philosophical and the political life as this is commonly understood, not between the active and the contemplative life. The philosopher surely engages in virtuous action. The question is whether the philosopher can engage in *political* action without the loss of philosophical integrity.

A further problem with Rue's interpretation is that the claim that *ta engys* is equivalent to a technical term for particulars is untenable. In the present context, *ta engys* does not refer to "things" in general, but to matters people are pressed to talk effectively about in a political context (174c2–3), to what ordinary men find important in life such as parties and flute girls (173d4–6), and to what his fellow men are doing (174b2–4). Such matters are what are "closest" to the concerns of most people and this may explain why Socrates terms them "the things nearby". This suggestion is further supported by the fact that Socrates claims that the mind of the philosopher is outside the *polis*, not that the philosopher disregards sensible things in general – or whatever else one might mean by "particulars". Rue's further claim that the philosopher has no interest in his fellow men could at first sight seem to find support in Socrates' suggestion that the philosopher knows so little about his next-door neighbor that it almost escapes him whether he is a human being at all. As we shall see, however, it is more reasonable to see this as a deliberate exaggeration on Socrates' part, since later (175b8–d2) he portrays the philosopher as engaged in philosophical discussion with others.

Let us therefore look at what Socrates says more positively about the philosopher in 174b4–6. While the philosopher disregards life in the *polis*, he seeks to understand what man is and what it befits (*prosekein*) such a nature to do and to suffer in contrast to the rest. The philosopher's interest in man, we could say, is thereby described as primarily ontological or eidetic: what man is, not whether this

or that living creature is a human being, is what matters philosophically. The verb *prosēkein*, which, when used impersonally means “it is fitting” or “it befits”, at the same time shows that this inquiry is not “neutral”, but is also a normative inquiry. We shall return to the significance of this below. At this point, we may suggest that it is appropriate that Socrates spells out the difference between these two perspectives on man to Theodorus; being a mathematician, he should be well prepared to understand the purely eidetic investigation sketched by Socrates (cf. *Rep.* 510d5–511a2). When Socrates asks Theodorus whether he understands the description of the philosopher’s activity, Theodorus emphatically asserts that *he*, at any rate (*egōge*), does (174b8) – perhaps implying that others might not.

5.3 The Laughable Figure of the Philosopher (B1)

Socrates next offers the second pair of complementary considerations outlined above. The first consideration (174b9–175b6) spells out in greater detail the philosopher’s laughable appearance. He does not know how to reproach others since he knows nothing evil about anyone and thereby gains a reputation of being good for nothing (174c6–8). Conversely, he laughs at his fellow men when they praise kings or tyrants, for he sees these as herdsmen, but holds the human herd to be more difficult to tend to than other herd animals and consequently believes that such rulers turn out uneducated (*apaideutoi*) through lack of leisure (174d3–e2). The philosopher is also regarded as silly (*lērōdēs*; 174d3) because he finds insignificant what others regard as a great amount of land, but the reason is that he is accustomed to think of the entire earth (174e2–e5). Finally, while others praise ancestry and family, he believes that this is a result of short-sightedness and lack of education (*apaideusia*), since we all have countless ancestors. The philosopher finds it laughable when people are unable to figure this out (*logizesthai*; 174e5–175b4).

While the passage again depicts the philosopher as detached from ordinary human concerns, it is clear that it is first and foremost from the political domain that he is detached – in particular, it is the vanity and hostile reproaches connected with political or forensic procedures that he distances himself from (see Cornford 1935, 85). The main point of the passage is, then, that the philosopher appears foolish to others because he is unable to reproach other people, a fact that suggests that other men, according to Socrates, have the habit of pursuing political affairs by slandering their opponents and dragging them to court. A further point is that the philosopher, when laughing at his fellow men, appears silly to them because his laughter results from his disregard for wealth and family, suggesting that ordinary men see these as being of prime importance. Rather than

ridiculing the described philosopher, Socrates, while ostensibly explaining why the philosopher looks laughable, thus turns the tables and displays the concerns of the *polis* as ridiculous.

The digression thereby parallels the simile of the cave in the *Republic* closely (see Cornford 1935, 89). Like the philosopher of the digression, the prisoner who has escaped the cave and has become (ontologically) educated is said to appear laughable when he returns from “above” (517a2), especially if he is forced “in courts and elsewhere to contest about the shadows of the just [...] and to dispute about the way these things are understood by men who have never seen justice itself” (517d4–e1, transl. by A. Bloom). Moreover, the digression also, like the cave simile (*Rep.* 514a1), revolves around the question who is educated and who is not (174d8, 175a1, 175b3). This places the digression firmly within the overall discussion of the *Theaetetus*, centered as it is on knowledge, wisdom, and education. The digression may be a digression from the narrower discussion of Protagoras’ position, but it is hardly a digression from the pivotal discussion of the dialogue as a whole.

5.4 The Comical Figure of the Law Court Speaker (B2)

Socrates next describes a reversal in roles that takes place when the philosopher manages to “draw someone up” (*helkein anō*; 175b8)²⁵ to a philosophical inquiry. When this happens, the situation is reversed. Now it is the man of small soul (175d1), i. e. the one who spends his life learning to maneuver in law courts (cf. 173a1–3), who appears ridiculous. But he does not appear so in public and to the uneducated, but rather to those who have been brought up in a manner contrary to slaves (175d2–7), i. e. to those who are free and have leisure (cf. 172c8–d2, 175d8–e1). The politically adept man appears comical to such men because he is unable to follow the examination of “justice and injustice themselves, what each of the pair is and in what respect they differ from everything else or from each other” (175c2–3) and of “kingship, as well as human happiness in its entirety and misery, what sort the pair of them is and in what way it is fitting for a human being by nature to get hold of the one of them and get away from the other” (175c5–8).

If we look at Socrates’ description of the two types of life in the light of the interplay between Socrates and Theodorus, we may suggest that a certain rhetori-

²⁵ As noted by Friedländer 1960, 152, Socrates uses the same verb in the *Republic* at 515e5 to describe what an unspecified someone does in order to force the prisoner of the cave to move out of the cave.

cal strategy lies behind it. Theodorus is a friend of Protagoras, a man that, according to Theodorus, claims to be an expert on forensic rhetoric (see 178e3–8). Still, Theodorus is not comfortable with Protagoras’ “abstract arguments” (165a1–3), just as he claims to be unaccustomed to Socratic dialectic (146b3). This might suggest that he sees no radical difference between the two. But now Socrates offers him a picture according to which Protagoras’ teaching cripples the souls of his pupils, or at least reinforces the crippling effect resulting from a preoccupation with forensic rhetoric (173a1–5), whereas the central concern of philosophical inquiry – to clarify the nature of justice and injustice, kingship and happiness – is what should occupy a free man. Furthermore, Socrates indicates that such inquiry is somehow related to mathematics.

Since Theodorus heartily approves of Socrates’ description, it seems fair to say that Socrates, in the digression, induces Theodorus to appreciate philosophical inquiry: the free man, the kind of man with which Theodorus identifies himself (cf. 172c2), is the philosophical man, a man who inquires ontologically into the nature of things.

But if Socrates is trying to persuade Theodorus rhetorically, how should we regard the description of philosophical inquiry he employs in this effort? Is it a reflection of Theodorus’ exaggeratedly theoretical or mathematical attitude, an attitude contrasting to that of Socrates, as interpreters agreeing with Rachel Rue claim? Hardly. The use of “beseem” (*prosēkein*) at 175c7, which echoes 174b5, again suggests that the investigation Socrates describes is normative in character. The additional fact that Socrates states that the philosopher investigates “justice and injustice themselves, what each of the pair is and in what respect they differ (*diapherein*) from everything else” (175c2–3) links Socrates’ description with passages in the *Phaedrus* and the *Sophist* discussing the power characteristic of dialectic to determine something by differentiating it from what it is not (*Phaedr.* 265d3–266b1, *Soph.* 253d1–e2), a way of investigating of which Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* that he is a lover (*Phaedr.* 266b3–7). The philosophical inquiry sketched here by Socrates can thus only be regarded as un-Socratic if one regards the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* as un-Socratic.²⁶

26 Most commentators following the by now traditional chronological ordering of the dialogues certainly do see the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* as un-Socratic, among other things because he introduces a method supposedly characteristic of the later Plato. But the considerations advanced above on page 5f. should be kept in mind: while it may be true that the method advanced by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* differs from that of the *historical* Socrates, it is still advanced by *Plato’s* Socrates. Consequently, even if one holds that the philosopher in the digression stands apart from the *historical* Socrates since he pursues philosophy in a manner resembling the method of division, it does not follow that he thereby differs from Plato’s Socrates.

5.5 Socrates' Conclusion to the Comparison (C)

Socrates sums up his description of the two types of life at 175d7–176a1. Two points are worth noting. First, Socrates states that the man who knows how to perform all the services connected with flattery (175e3–4) does not know “how to sing hymns in the right way to the life of gods and of happy men by getting the things he says into harmony” (175e7–176a1). This suggests that the philosophers do know how this should be done and the last part of the digression may be regarded as elaborating how they perform this hymn. Second, Socrates explicitly states that the man described as being nurtured in freedom and leisure is the one Theodorus calls a philosopher (175e1), a claim echoed in Theodorus' statement that there would be more peace and less evil in the world if Socrates could persuade (*peithein*) everybody of what he says as he has persuaded him (176a2–4). The mention of persuasion confirms the suggestion that the digression has an important rhetorical aspect. By presenting the philosopher in the way he has, Socrates has made the philosophic life appear attractive to the mathematician. We still have to consider what implications this has for the way we should understand the digression.

5.6 Theodorus and the Philosopher in the Digression

Many of the speeches of Plato's Socrates are protreptic in character; as examples of rhetoric they are intended to direct Socrates' interlocutors toward the philosophical life (cf. *Phaedr.* 261a7–8 and 257b1–6) through images, arguments, or analogies designed to appeal to them. And as we have seen, the picture of philosophy emerging from the digression, focused as it is on contemplation, seems partly tailored to Theodorus. But such a strategy is not unique to the *Theaetetus*. In the *Phaedrus*, philosophy is presented as the ultimate foundation for rhetoric (see 259e4–6, 260e5–261a5, 262c1–3, 269e4–270c2) to the rhetorically oriented Phaedrus (228a5–c5), in the *Republic* the philosopher is presented as the ultimate ruler to the politically oriented Glaucon and Adeimantus. I do not mean to suggest that Socrates thereby simply transforms philosophy into whatever fits the situation. What he seems to do is rather to highlight certain aspects of philosophy while downplaying others, taking the perspective of his interlocutor into consideration.

But this feature of the digression can hardly be claimed to distort the picture of philosophy radically. The *Republic*, for instance, places contemplative activity at the very center of its description of the philosopher (500b8–c7, 509b5–9, 511b5–6). And while the *Republic* suggests a more direct connection between the

contemplative activity of the philosopher and political rule than the digression does, the *Republic* still suggests that the political life as traditionally understood in Athens stands in possible conflict with the life of philosophy (cf. 473e5–474a4). It is this conflict that stands at the center of the digression.

This does not mean that the philosopher of the digression does not differ from Plato's Socrates at all. First, Plato depicts Socrates as posing his questions concerning justice, friendship, and the like to others and as pursuing their implications in conversation with them, while the philosopher of the digression may at first appear to conduct his inquiry in relative solitude. Nevertheless, this philosopher is occupied with the same kind of inquiry as Socrates, and he is even said to force other people into conversation about them through questioning (see 175b8–d2). While the philosopher of the digression thus may appear less interested in his fellow men than Socrates, he shares Socrates' interest in engaging other people in discussions concerning the matters that Socrates finds most important. Second, Socrates begins the conversation in the *Theaetetus* by pointing out that he is a good patriot: he cares more for Athens than for Cyrene (143d1–e3). The philosopher in the digression, in contrast, does not seem to identify himself as part of any society in particular, to the point that he is almost oblivious of society as such. Socrates' emphasis of his connection to his city, however, can plausibly be regarded as intended to evoke the circumstances of his upcoming trial, which certainly underscores the likelihood of conflict between the philosophical and the political life.

To sum up, I suggest that the digression presents us with the highest level of philosophical inquiry – contemplation of reality – and that the philosopher presented here is an image Socrates invents and presents to Theodorus: an image that borrows certain of Socrates' own features while obliterating others. In the process, the philosopher of the digression becomes a more “universal” philosopher, so to speak. But this does not entail that philosophy as depicted in the digression has no link to the political or ethical domain or that it stands in direct opposition to Socrates.

Finally, the import of the fact that Theodorus is a mathematician rather than a politically active man, in contrast to many of Socrates' other interlocutors, is, I suggest, the following: Socrates is able to present the contemplative dimension of philosophy on its own terms, without first having to legitimize it as a means to something else, for instance political rule or rhetoric.

6 Anthropological Paradigms

In the final part of the digression, Socrates raises the comparison of the two types of life to a new level by embedding it into a more general anthropological discussion. The two opposed ways of life are now seen against the wider background of man's relation to the divine and the godless, and thereby come to function as existential extremes exemplifying possibilities of human nature. Man is a being standing in between the divine and the godless who is able to move in the direction of either, and the two lives depicted by Socrates are exemplars of such movements.

The shift to a more general anthropological level is initiated by Socrates' claim that it is not possible to abolish evils since there by necessity must be something opposite to the good, and the further claim that these evils cannot be situated among gods but rather by necessity "haunt mortal nature and this region here" (176a5–8). Therefore, Socrates suggests, one ought to flee from here – that is the mortal region, which evils haunt by necessity – to a "there" (176a8–9).

These two places – "here", the mortal region, and "there", presumably a divine region – function as ontological-topological correlates to the two types of life described, and it is crucial that we do not take them in too literal a manner, as if Socrates' point was that we should flee the earthly life for the sake of some kind of afterlife. The places mentioned are not physical, but represent standards for the soul, a suggestion supported by the description of the flight from "here" to "there" (176a9–b2): it is "to become like god as far as it is possible", but this means to "become just and pious accompanied by prudence" (*dikaion kai hosion meta phronēseōs genesthai*). The "flight" is psychic: the activity of becoming virtuous.

The described flight nevertheless raises some questions. How should we understand god? And what can Socrates mean by "just" and "pious" in the present passage? The claim that we become like god through virtues has troubled ancient as well as some modern readers. Thus Plotinus, drawing on book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see 1178b10–18), asks how the god to which we assimilate can have virtues (*Enn* I.2.1), whereas Rachel Rue states: "Justice and piety are not properly attributes of gods, or at least not of Greek gods" (Rue 1993, 89).

It should be borne in mind, however, that we are not told anything specific about god in the *Theaetetus* except for the fact that (a) god (*theos*) is in no way unjust but is as just as it is possible to be (176b8–c1) and that the divine pattern (*theion paradeigma*) established among the things that are, is most happy or blessed (176e3–4), in contrast to the godless, which is most wretched. Both descriptions are used as bases for claiming that no one is more like the god than the one who is as just as possible (176c1–2). In contrast, those who think they

are truly clever because of their mastery of rhetoric become unhappy by likening themselves to the godless through unjust actions (176e4–177a3). God, the godlike, and the godless are in the present context considered only from the perspective of man's assimilation to the divine and the godless. Put differently, the notions of god and the godless function as paradigms of types of life to which men can look, as standards Socrates holds up as alternatives to that of Protagoras, who claims that man is the measure (cf. *Laws* 716c). From these more general considerations, let us take a closer look at what the ideal of godlikeness implies.

Godlikeness, according to Socrates, is acquired through virtue. But most people, he further claims, assert that the reason one should flee wickedness and pursue virtue is that one should appear good and not bad (176b5–6), an opinion he claims amounts to idle talk of old women (176b6–7). This opinion resembles the “common view” set out by the brothers Adeimantus and Glaucon in book two of the *Republic* (cf. 358a4–6, 362e6–263a5), and the ideal of becoming like god thus comes to occupy the same place as the notion of being truly virtuous, in contrast to merely seeming to be so, expressed in dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

The view Socrates presents in contrast to the view of the many is as follows: (1) A god is just in the highest possible degree so that (2) no one is more like the god than the one who is as just as is possible. Furthermore, (3) the true cleverness (*deinotēs*)²⁷ of a man, as well as his nothingness and unmanliness (*anandria*), is concerned with these matters, since (*gar*) (4) recognition (*gnōsis*) of this (probably 1, 2 and 3) is wisdom and true virtue, whereas ignorance of it is folly and manifest vice. (5) All the other kinds of apparent cleverness and wisdom are vulgar when they occur in the exercise of political power, and sordidly common (*banausoi*) when occurring in the arts.

According to Socrates, wisdom and virtue thus depend on the recognition that god, as what is essentially just, is a paradigm for the truly clever man, whereas the ignorance of this is folly or lack of learning (*amathia*) and vice. We should further note that the view sketched here by Socrates must be seen as intimately connected with the main question of the dialogue – what is knowledge – since knowledge is initially identified with wisdom (cf. 145e6–7), and the question concerning knowledge arises out of Theodorus' praising of the virtue and wisdom of Theaetetus (cf. 145b1–2).

²⁷ *Deinotēs* is difficult to capture with a single English expression, but it connotes the “brute force” of reasoning and cleverness, often with negative connotations; the one who is *deinos legein* is “terribly clever” at speaking (cf. also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a23–29). That it need not carry negative connotations is clear from the present passage.

Socrates further elaborates the contrast between apparent and real wisdom by stating that one should never concede to those who commit unjust acts that they are clever because of their cunning (*panourgia*), but should tell them the truth, that they are what they do not believe themselves to be, i. e. wretched. By committing unjust acts they liken themselves to the godless pattern and come to live a life resembling that of the most wretched pattern (176b7–177a3). By contrast, we gather, those who assimilate themselves to god live a most happy life.

Let us now look at the virtues by which we, according to Socrates, become godlike. We become godlike by being just and pious with prudence.²⁸ That Plato has Socrates mention these two particular virtues is perhaps only natural given the fact that it was questions concerning the beautiful, the just, and the pious things that initially set off the digression (cf. 172a1–2). It should further be noted that “pious” and “just”, when mentioned together, commonly function as two coordinate halves of a single whole and thus as a universalizing doublet. According to LSJ, *hosion* in this constellation means “sanctioned by divine law” while *dikaion* means “sanctioned by human law”, and together they thus pertain to correct conduct as a whole, in general (justice) and toward the divine (piety).

If this is the way the expression should be understood, Socrates’ claim is that to become godlike is to live a life in accordance with conduct sanctioned by human as well as divine standards, and with prudence. Since the philosopher of the digression is preoccupied with the question what it befits a being of such a nature as man to do and to suffer (174b4–5), we may further suggest that Socrates’ sketched ideal of becoming like god is the answer to this question. If this is correct, neither the philosopher of the digression nor the ideal of godlikeness is at odds with Plato’s Socrates. Both in conjunction rather express the heart of Socratic philosophy as understood by Plato, a kind of philosophy that can claim to be a “service to the god” (*Apo.* 30a6–7) by inducing people to take care of the soul (cf. 29e1–3).²⁹ The digression could further be seen to contain an answer to the accusation that Socrates is about to face, that he is corrupting the youth and does not acknowledge the gods of the city, an accusation the reader has been reminded of at the beginning of the dialogue (cf. *Tht.* 142c6 and 210d2–4 with *Apo.* 24b8–c1 and *Euthphr.* 2c3–3b4): the philosopher is the one who acts justly, not according to a specific interpretation of justice in a given city, but according to true justice, and also the one who truly honors the gods, perhaps not the gods of the city, but the god that is a paradigm for man.

²⁸ The qualification “with prudence” should be emphasized; as Sedley 2004, 75, comments *meta phronēseōs* is Plato’s “standard marker for authentic, because intellectualized, virtues”.

²⁹ Cf. John Burnet’s note to *Euthyphro* 13d10 in Burnet 1924.

Concluding remarks

I have argued that the digression is essentially Socratic and that its main point is to highlight the importance of choosing the right life. As Callicles puts it in the *Gorgias*, Socrates is always saying the same things, to which Socrates adds that it is about the same things too (490e9–11). We may add that in the digression he states it with special eloquence. The importance of the digression, however, is not simply that it expresses a basic Platonic-Socratic teaching about the just life, but that it does so in the middle of a dialogue inquiring into the nature of knowledge (cf. *Tht.* 145d7–e7). The digression thereby comes to serve an important function in the dialogue by illustrating that the question what knowledge is cannot be discussed in isolation from the larger perspective of the life of the one pursuing knowledge.

Moreover, when Socrates contrasts the philosophical life with the political life, he points to the relevance of the mathematical disciplines Theodorus teaches to the former. He thereby implicitly connects the question what knowledge is with a question concerning education, since an important aspect of the digression is that it opposes the education one may receive from Protagoras, helpful for surviving in politics, with the education one may receive from Theodorus, which will aid the philosopher in investigating the totality of the things that are. By highlighting the difference between Theodorus and Protagoras as educators, Socrates simultaneously makes clear that the investigation of knowledge and its connection to wisdom should be able to account for the difference between rhetorical, political skill and true knowledge, and the difference these make, respectively, in a human life. Thereby, the overall question of the *Theaetetus* is also inscribed into the “drama of souls” known from other Platonic dialogues.

In conclusion, we may say that for Plato, the question concerning knowledge cannot be isolated from the questions what wisdom, virtue, and the good life are. As the digression also makes clear, these questions in their turn cannot be isolated from the question what man is. The digression is not a digression from the subject of the dialogue, only from the more limited discussion of the expert’s ability to predict future benefit surrounding the digression.

The digression further shows that we should not underestimate the dramatic interplay of the *dramatis personae* in the *Theaetetus*. A convincing interpretation of the dialogue has to take the different roles assigned by Plato to Theodorus and Theaetetus in the dramatic exchange with Socrates into account. It must likewise guard against the danger – based on a preconceived understanding of philosophy that regards it as opposed to mathematics – of rejecting their contributions to the conversation too easily. Plato presents important aspects of the life that is philosophy by means of images, myths or stories and the like, a fact that dialogues

such as the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo* make clear. The digression can be read as such an image, intended to present a central feature of philosophy to an interlocutor who is inclined to find what could be called its ethical dimension attractive, even if he finds the technical discussions about the nature of knowledge more difficult to follow.

The political man, on the other hand, would probably find the account of philosophy and the ideal of godlikeness incredible (cf. 177a3–8). The only way to make such people aware of the shortcomings of their way of life, Socrates suggests, is to force them to give an account, i. e. to force them into a Socratic conversation. That Theodorus accepts what Socrates tells him without entering into such a conversation need not, however, speak against Theodorus or the message of the digression: as Socrates puts it elsewhere (*Phaedr.* 245c1–2), the proof will not convince those who are clever – or think they are clever, we might add – but those who are wise.³⁰

LSJ Liddell, H./Scott, R./Jones, H. S., (with the assistance of R. McKenzie and with the co-operation of many scholars) 1940. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Tenth edition. Oxford.

<i>Apo.</i>	Apology
<i>Euthphr.</i>	Euthyphro
<i>Euthyd.</i>	Euthydemus
<i>Tht.</i>	Theaetetus
<i>Prot.</i>	Protagoras
<i>Phlb.</i>	Philebus
<i>Rep.</i>	Republic
<i>Phaed.</i>	Phaedo
<i>Phaedr.</i>	Phaedrus
<i>Tusc. Disp.</i>	Cicero's Tusculan Disputations

30 I wish to thank Hayden W. Ausland, Vivil Valvik Haraldsen, and David Sedley for reading earlier versions of the article; their many fruitful suggestions helped improve the final manuscript significantly. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for the *Archiv der Geschichte der Philosophie* whose critical observations helped me clarify many points.

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