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Plato's Styles and Characters

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Plato's Styles and Characters

Between Literature and Philosophy

Edited by
Gabriele Cornelli

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Debra Nails[1]

Five Platonic Characters

The study of Plato is a veritable battlefield for multiple academic disciplines and popular discourses. Most notably, the continental and Anglo-American approaches to Plato have diverged over the past decade: reading different journals, assigning different translations, and hiring like-minded colleagues. Yet, for at least a decade, it has been a mere caricature of analytic philosophy to say that its method is to rip arguments out of their contexts in Plato's dialogues in order to represent them in propositional logic and assess their soundness. The corresponding caricature of the continental approach to Plato has become equally inappropriate: to say that Plato's philosophical dialectic is subordinate to a Heideggerian hermeneutic, the sensitive interpretation of dialogues read as wholes. I would like to preserve the rigor of the analytic approach while defending the view that Plato's literary craft was not mere window-dressing for schoolboys.

Plato's singular contribution, his achievement beyond pre-Socratic, sophistic, literary, and rhetorical precedents, was his doubly open-ended philosophical method, leading him to criticize most effectively even the beliefs he may have cherished most deeply. *Aporia* is one open end, well known to all; the other – and, to my mind, even more admirable – is Plato's refusal to allow even his most well-established starting points to be insulated from criticism. His dialogues are occasions to philosophize further, not dogmatic treatises.[2] Whatever views he held, however he expressed them, he requires us to perform our own intellectual labors and to reach our own conclusions by the best arguments we can muster. In that endeavor, we are well-advised to use whatever techniques are available to us, logical or literary. Within what Ruby Blondell has called the "insoluble paradox of our place at the crossroads of particularity and abstraction" (2002: 303), the collective effort to establish Plato's overarching view of human nature has diminished our regard for the particular human beings he features in his dialogues. My project here is to reestablish the importance of taking Plato's characterizations seriously on grounds that they are sometimes crucial to understanding what Plato is arguing.

1 I am grateful for the friendship and the comments of our community in Brasília 2012, and for the support the IPS and UNESCO provided.

2 This is the theme for which I argued in Nails 1995.

Appreciating the characters' individual roles within familial, social, and religious structures could deepen our understanding of some philosophical issues – human nature, epistemology, or justice and education in the polis. We have long used Athenian history and law to explain aspects of the dialogues that would otherwise be obscure.[3] All too often, however, we have contented ourselves with a phrase or two handed down from the nineteenth century about persons – a time when little was known and the texts were being established. Thanks primarily to classicists' early adoption of computer databases, we now know much more about Plato's characters than the old footnotes suggested, so the possibilities for understanding have been considerably extended.[4]

No one discusses the *Charmides* without mentioning Critias's future leadership of the Thirty, or the *Republic* without noting that Glaucon and Adeimantus are Plato's brothers. Some of Plato's dialogues, the *Laches* for example, assume a high level of familiarity with then-recent past events and the reputations of the persons represented – some of whom were still alive and active in Athens when Plato was writing his dialogues. I will focus on five actual people, two men and three women, whose lives and later reputations among Plato's audiences may be more important to understanding Plato's text than has previously been realized – but I have not selected the famous ones. What I hope to show is that the range of plausible interpretations of the texts, and the range of understandings of Plato's milieu, and perhaps that of Socrates as well, can be reduced and focused if a character had a career and a reputation in Athens already known to Plato's audience; discernible personalities matter to our interpretations, or so I shall attempt to establish.

I. Meno

Meno of Thessaly, son of Alexidemus,[5] became a mercenary general under the command of Cyrus. We meet him in Plato's dialogue when he is visiting Athens in late 402 as the guest of Anytus before he leaves on the military campaign that Xenophon will immortalize in the *Anabasis*. Meno was vicious. Xenophon is

3 E. g. especially *Theaetetus, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito,* and *Phaedo*.

4 The caveat is that we cannot confidently assume that what Plato's audience believed about a character is what happened to survive into our own time. We have before us a partial, fragmented record of ancient prosopography, so we cannot afford to be complaisant about the information that we have.

5 Apart from his appearance in Plato's *Meno*, Meno appears in Xenophon's *Anabasis* 1.2.6 – 3.1, fragments 27 – 28 of Ctesias, and in Diodorus Siculus 14.19.8 – 9, 14.27. 2 – 3.

pleased to list his vices with examples (greed, betrayal, hunger for power, deceit, malice, selfishness); he wasted the lives of his men, and he participated in their injustices, plundering the countryside. Xenophon counts Meno as having deserved the Persians' torture of him for a year before finally executing him by torture (*Anabasis* 2.6.21–29). Plato presents none of Xenophon's facts because, of course, none of this had happened yet in 402. What Plato's audience can surmise decades later is that – for all the talk of virtue – Meno was not made a better man by his conversation with Socrates. Meno is one of Socrates's tragic failures. Because Meno's malevolent behavior was still ahead of him, however, commentators in the philosophical traditions have had little to say about Meno's character, which is a mistake from the perspective I am taking here.

The *Meno* – and in this I follow Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* §26 – is not about virtue, excellence, *aretê*. It is about learning, inquiring by a method capable of leading one to valid inferences from true premises, to knowledge. In particular, the dialogue emphasizes learning as different from the transfer of information. Gorgias tried but failed to transfer information to Meno. Information-transfer can produce true beliefs, but it cannot produce knowledge and it is not a method practiced by Socrates, who adjusted his techniques to fit his interlocutors. Leibniz, a sensitive reader of Plato's dialogues, made light of those who took Plato's remarks on anamnesis literally, those who believed that Socratic priests and priestesses were conjuring immortal souls in possession of all knowledge. For Leibniz, anamnesis is learning, learning by inference from what is already known – familiar from Sherlock Holmes. Leibniz loved Plato's "beautiful experiment" with Meno's intelligent slave.[6] While the slave proves capable of learning, Meno does not. That contrast (and nothing about virtue) is the take-home message of Plato's *Meno*.

By my lights, what Plato does make explicit in the dialogue should be enough to put anyone on guard. And against what should we be defending ourselves? Against the view that the point of the dialogue is to identify the nature of virtue. Consider some of what Plato does tell us: (i) Aristippus is Meno's lover (*Meno* 70b) although, by Athenian standards, Meno is already too old to be a beloved; and it transpires that he still has more than one lover (76b).[7] (ii) If we can judge a man by the company he keeps, as Socrates says we might (95d–e) then we could also note that Meno's Athenian host, Anytus (90b), though a democrat when we meet him with Meno, had been an early supporter of the Thirty and had

6 'Boy' is a misnomer; Meno was not taking children on campaign with him, and elderly slaves —as in other cultures—were nevertheless called 'boy'.

7 Xenophon adds that Meno also had a bearded beloved, Tharypus (*Anabasis* 2.6.28)—a further and double breach of convention.

even earlier invented a new way to bribe juries.[8] Later, he will be one of Socrates's three accusers.[9] (iii) Meno has trouble remembering and repeating what he is supposed to have learned from Gorgias. (iv) Socrates has to remind Meno that Meno's account of virtue as the ability to rule over people requires the modifier 'justly and not unjustly' (73d). (v) Socrates tells Meno, "you are forever giving orders in a discussion, as spoiled people do, who behave like tyrants as long as they are young" (76b). (vi) Plato's Socrates alludes to Meno's future failure to become better when he predicts, "you would agree, if you did not have to go away before the mysteries as you told me yesterday, but could remain and be initiated" (76e).[10]

In short, had we been a part of Plato's ancient audience, we would not seek to understand virtue by reading the *Meno* any more than we would now seek to understand virtue by reading a dialogue between some contemporary villain – Bashar al-Assad or George Bush – and a philosopher like Socrates.

II. Theaetetus

My second example of a misunderstood Platonic character whose actual biography can aid our understanding is the Athenian Theaetetus of Sunium, son of Euphronius, one of the great mathematicians of the ancient world,[11] though as ugly as Meno was beautiful. In this case, the received view of Theaetetus has had a misleading effect on the history of mathematics as well as on Platonic scholarship.

For most of the twentieth century, it has been thought that Theaetetus studied and taught mathematics in Plato's Academy and was Plato's associate there for nearly twenty years until his death in the Corinthian battle of 369,[12] and that Plato wrote the *Theaetetus* as a memorial to him when he died. I will explain in a moment why that poignant story is not possible, but I want first to say why we should care. In the twentieth century, cemented through the influence of Gregory Vlastos, major mathematical discoveries in the West were moved forward – into Plato's mature lifetime rather than that of Socrates; hence it was necessary to keep Theaetetus alive into the period that we have come to think of as Plato's

8 Pseudo-Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 27.5 and 34.3.

9 Socrates implicitly disparages Anytus by praising his father (90a–b) and then pointing out that such praiseworthy men are unable to bring up praiseworthy sons (93d–94c).

10 Translations of *Meno* are those of Grube as revised by Cooper.

11 Biographical material is adapted from Nails 2002.

12 Burnyeat 1990: 3. Translations of *Theaetetus* are from this edition of the dialogue.

maturity. According to Vlastos,[13] Plato discovered and was significantly changed by mathematics after writing his Socratic dialogues; the encounter with the mathematics of his associate, Theaetetus, marked a philosophical turning point for Plato's so-called theory of forms.

In fact, as argued in David Fowler's monumental *The Mathematics of Plato's Academy*, the claim makes no historical or biographical sense. When Theaetetus actually died, in 391, there was not yet an Academy of Plato. Plato learned mathematics as the other Athenian youths of his era did – and the mathematics he learned had already been established before and during the lifetime of Socrates. So much for a brief sketch of matters, the details of which I will now fill in on three fronts: evidence for the death of Theaetetus, the flawed account of the history of ancient mathematics, and the modern philosophical counterpart to that flawed ancient mathematical story. Along the way, one can see how Plato's dialogue has been interpreted and reinterpreted to fit such external constraints.

We know exactly when the Theaetetus takes place: in the months immediately preceding Socrates's death, at which time Theaetetus is *meirakion*, but on the young side, for he is not fully grown (155b); and Socrates says to the geometry master, Theodorus, "Look at the company then. They are all children but you" (168d). We also know that the dramatic frame of the dialogue, with Euclides and Terpsion, explicitly depicts Theaetetus's impending death. Plato tells us so.

There is no doubt either that Theaetetus was a very great mathematician whose work was codified in Euclid's *Elements* but, as often happens with known individuals from the ancient world, other mathematical discoveries whose authors were unknown were later ascribed to the known Theaetetus. The first scholium to book 13 of Euclid states, for example, that Theaetetus added the octahedron and icosahedron to the Pythagoreans' cube, pyramid and dodecahedron for the total of five regular solids (*Timaeus* 54d–55c). He was also credited with the two means of *Timaeus* (31b–32b), the mean of *Parmenides* (154b–d), incommensurability (*Meno, Theaetetus*), rational and irrational cube roots (*Theaetetus* 148b) and continuous quantities. The provenance of these attributions is uncertain. Understandably, the question began to be asked whether Theaetetus could have accomplished it all by 391, in less than a decade following Socrates's death.

In the 1910s, modern classical scholars began to suppose that he could not (Caveing 1996). They found a later battle in Corinth, a famous one in 369, and attached Theaetetus's death to that one, giving him twenty-two more years to

13 Vlastos 1991 is a consolidation of his views, but they had been appearing in lectures and articles by then since the 1970s.

move mathematics forward. The suggestion was immediately and eagerly accepted, reinforcing a second important catalyst for re-dating the death of Theaetetus. Namely, from the eighteenth century, philosophers had a strong desire to make the *Theaetetus* the threshold for Plato's abandonment of forms as he "developed" and turned to the issues introduced in the *Statesman* and *Sophist*, dialogues with dramatic dates after the *Theaetetus* and with an overlap of characters.

I pause to note, though this is not the place to argue, that the *Theaetetus* does not abandon the forms. Forms are discussed there (185c–186d) as objects of knowledge – not of the senses – naming "being and not being, likeness and unlikeness, same and different; also one, and any other number applied to them...beautiful and ugly, good and bad...hardness...softness."[14] They are what is stable against Heraclitean flux.

Nevertheless, this direction of Platonic interpretation was comfortably supported by the claim that the mathematics of the *Theaetetus* is derived from Plato's time, not Socrates' – a claim based on the false premise that Theaetetus died in 369. The fact is that Theodorus, who was a rough contemporary of Socrates, made his discoveries by about 440, when both the concept and theorem necessary to prove similar rectangles by the method of anthyphairesis were available to him (Artmann 1994: 22). Neglecting that detail, historians of mathematics were swayed by a desire to locate and date ancient mathematical developments within the Academy itself; Fowler (1999: 360) says Theaetetus's death in 369 was "generally regarded as one fixed point, perhaps the only secure fixed point, in the shifting sands of the incommensurability issue" – yet he himself rightly doubted its truth. The year 369 for the death of Theaetetus raises four problems, explicit in Thesleff 1990: 149–50, that are together insuperable: (i) Athens was not mustering 46-year-old academics for hoplite combat in 369, (ii) Theaetetus's skillful soldiering (142b–c) was far more likely to have been exhibited when he was of military age, 24, than at 46. (iii) Euclides's 30-kilometer walk, from which he has just returned as the dialogue's frame begins, is more likely for a man of 59 than for a man of 81. (iv) The remark of Socrates that seems so prescient to Euclides and Terpsion, the query whether Theaetetus will live to grow up (142c–d), is appropriately applied to a man who dies before reaching 30, but not for one who reaches 46. Theaetetus died in 391, and the mathematics that fascinated Plato had already been established.

14 As John McDowell points out in the notes to his 1973 translation of *Theaetetus*, it is no good supposing that when Socrates reneges (183c) on his promise to discuss Parmenides (181a–b), he is merely postponing the discussion to the *Sophist*. The discussion of Parmenides in that dialogue is on a different subject.

Both the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus* are dialogues illustrating geometrical proof by the diagrammatic method. Our earliest texts use the term διάγραμμα for 'diagram' and 'proof' interchangeably, and both Plato and Aristotle continue that practice. While Socrates in the *Republic* distinguishes the methods of geometers from those of dialecticians, if I am right that the failing was in the practice – not the subject matter – then we are warranted in gathering the techniques of the mathematicians under the umbrella term 'dialectical method' – our most promising means of achieving such "pieces of knowledge"[15] as are possible for mortals. I take 'dialectical method' to be a flexible term in the dialogues. It is a bootstrapping method, a piecemeal method, the various techniques of which we use when we don't already have knowledge but desire it and seek it systematically.

Some of the mathematicians' methods are used often enough to ensure that we ought to take them as components of the dialectical method. Myles Burnyeat has made much of the first: (i) the crucial relationship between definition in mathematics and philosophy.[16] Glenn Morrow has explored further similarities between the *elenchus* and the procedures of the mathematicians; (ii) Socrates insists on deductive implication, tracing the *consequences* of common opinions, even in practical matters; (iii) avoidance of contradiction; and (iv) methodical, sometimes tedious, demonstration (Morrow 1970: 319–20). Most philosophers have shied away from saying that (v) the method of hypothesis was another key way in which *Socrates's* practice was like that of the mathematicians, though it is introduced as a geometer's method.[17] The passage implies knowledge of conic sections, and philosophers have generally considered that discovery *late*, despite the evidence of Democritus.[18] That brings me to ...

A short history of mathematics in two parts: ancient and modern. Standard histories of ancient mathematics told the same tale from the Renaissance to the late twentieth century. Here is David Fowler's succinct version:

> The early Pythagoreans based their mathematics on commensurable magnitudes (or on rational numbers, or on common fractions m/n), but their discovery of the phenomenon of incommensurability (or the irrationality of the square root of 2) showed that this was inad-

15 McDowell's translation, throughout the aviary section of the *Theaetetus*, for ἐπιστῆμαι; cf. the Rowe translation of *Symposium* 207e6, reserving 'branches of knowledge' or 'sciences' for μαθήματα. See now Benson 2012.

16 See the introduction to his translation (Hackett, 1990), and Burnyeat 2000.

17 *Meno* 86e4–87b2, where the hypothetico-deductive method is introduced, explicitly crediting the geometers.

18 Morrow (1970: 313) argues that Democritus knew that a cone holds one-third the volume of a cylinder with the same base and height.

> equate. This provoked problems in the foundation of mathematics that were not resolved before the discovery of the proportion theory that we find in Book V of Euclid's *Elements*.[19]

The story persisted – *persists* – despite the fact that many of its presuppositions did not pan out, as Fowler argues and Fernando Gouvêa seconds in his review. [20] First, the standard view was that Greek geometry was a de-arithmetized version of Babylonian arithmetized geometry. The latter seemed "more normal" to moderns in the West, but the study of books II and X of Euclid's *Elements* showed that cannot be so. The geometrical approach was independent and, as a result, incommensurability was not a foundational crisis in Greek mathematics but an interesting discovery that led to significant mathematics. Second, Greek arithmetic had no notion of common fractions as previously thought, but proceeded by parts so, for example, "one ninth of 2 is $1/6^{th} + 1/18^{th}$." Third, the Greek notion of 'proportion' (*a* is to *b* as *c* is to *d*) differed from the notion of 'ratio', and there were at least three competing definitions of 'ratio': from music theory, astronomy, and mathematics. Fourth, anthyphairesis, the method of reciprocal subtraction (similar to what is now called 'continued fractions') was of far greater importance than previously realized. Before the middle of the sixth century – that is, a hundred years before Socrates was born – architectural drawings were exact; materials were already available: not just wax tablets, but precisely planed marble slabs used in the building trades (Artmann 1994: 18).[21] Concepts too were available, though one of the matters still in some dispute is when proof was given for what was already intuited by working mathematicians – e. g., that the intersection of two straight lines yields equal angles. Where mathematicians dominate the history of their subject, proof is moved further back toward the sixth century; and Theodorus's fifth-century geometry lesson has been the locus for a library's worth of research in journals of geometry and history of science (see figures 1–3), as well as Wilbur Knorr's monograph on Theodorus's geometry lesson.

19 Fowler 1999: 356. The point is crucial to new claims that distinguish the second edition from the 1987 one.

20 My account of what is significant in Fowler 1999 is adapted from that of Gouvêa 1999.

21 Artmann discusses the sources, including *Philebus* 56b.

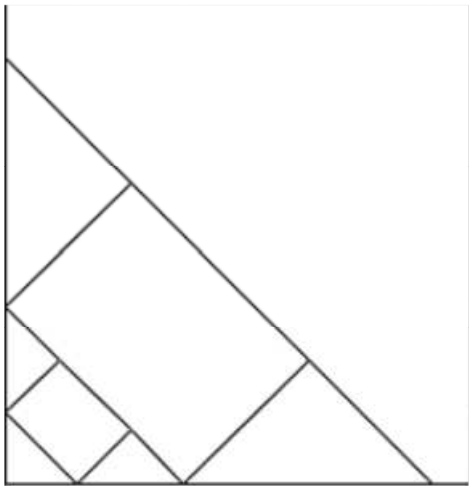

Fig. 1: Theodorus's proof by continued fractions in Theaetetus (Bindel 1962)

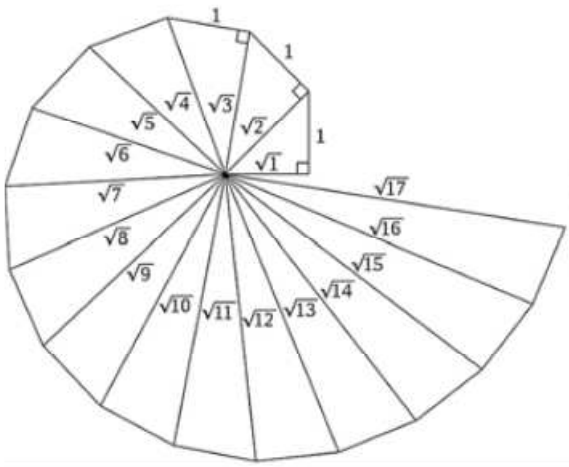

Fig. 2: Theodorus's spiral stops at step 17 to prevent the intrusion of √18 on √1 (Anderhub 1941)

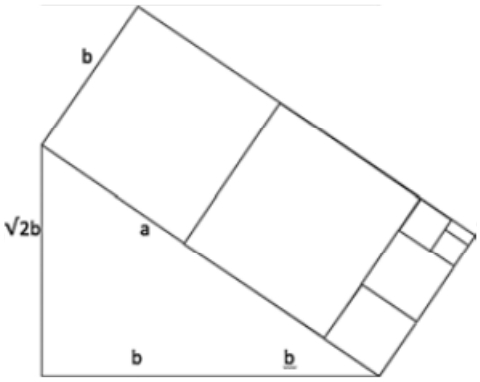

Fig. 3: Theodorus's proof by removing squares to prove similar rectangles by anthyphairesis (Artmann 1994)

There is a modern counterpart to the flawed ancient story. In the nineteenth century, as mathematicians explored the limits of infinite processes that defied the visual imagination, suspicion of geometrical intuition took hold. That "visual understanding actually conflicts with the truths of analysis" became dogma in the early twentieth century (Giaquinto 2007: 3–8). A host of arithmetized proofs for Theodorus's theorem appeared then – despite the clear text of the dialogue.[22]

22 Caveing (1996: 282): "...according to Vogt, 'Theodoros' lesson' was divided into two parts of which the geometrical one answers to the verb ἔγραφε [147d3], and the arithmetical one to the

Burnet in 1911 deprecated Socrates's use of a diagram in the slave's lesson, calling it "opposed to ... the process of good inquiry."[23] Heath's *History of Greek Mathematics* reflects what turns out to have been a benighted blip. The search for secure foundations for axiomatic systems spawned conflicting schools later in the twentieth century,[24] so the dogma did finally subside.[25]

Ancient philosophers, however, were *not* in the vanguard of all this activity. Scholars were under the sway of a just-so story about ancient Greek mathematics, and in the long shadow of Heath, so mathematical developments were pushed further toward the fourth century, a trend at its apex with Vlastos's view that Plato's discovery of advanced mathematics, as an adult with dialogues already written, marked a turning point. It now seems certain that it would be difficult to overemphasize the degree to which Socrates's generation was immersed in the visual and spatial thinking involved in geometrical proof. I do not mean Socrates was a mathematician, but that the evidence is great that whatever mathematical knowledge philosophers of the twentieth century attributed to Plato would as plausibly have been attributed to Socrates, an educated fifth century Athenian. The biography of Theaetetus is central to sorting out both the history of mathematics and the interpretation of Plato.

* * *

The literature on Plato's view of women flourishes, but works that evaluate the degree of Plato's feminism predominate, most of those based on explicit arguments about women in *Republic* 5,[26] with work on what women *symbolize* when encountered in Plato's dialogues taking a distant second place. In both

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verb ἀποφαίνων: on the one hand mere constructions of lines, on the other logical proofs. But, according to classical Greek syntax, if a verb in the indicative mode is accompanied with another in the participle, the two ideas are linked, and the main one is borne by the participle, while the other points out only a modality of the action. So Plato means 'Theodoros proved by means of geometrical constructions...', that is the drawing of lines is part of the proof itself."

23 Brown (1971: 204n) cites Burnet's 1911 note to *Phaedo* 73a7, with approval.

24 Giaquinto (2007: 6) notes the phases: (i) Carnap's conventionalism measured "convenience and truthfulness; there is neither need nor possibility of establishing the axioms true and the rules valid." (ii) Quine's holistic empiricism trumped conventionalism but did not distinguish math and science: "Even professional mathematicians must await the verdicts of empirical science before they can justifiably assert the truth of their mathematical beliefs." And Gödel (1964) reasserted intuitionism.

25 Diagrammatic *proofs* (not mere illustrations) have begun to reemerge: cf. Brown 1999 and 2004.

26 There is extensive (more than the usual) overlap among these articles, chapters, and books; see Bluestone 1987 and Tuana 1994.

strands, however, the actual women of Plato's dialogues are themselves effectively suppressed. I support a third approach, rare but not entirely unknown: that the women represented in Plato's dialogues should be considered in their particularity – like the men. One need not insist that Plato's fourth-century representations of fifth-century women were perfectly accurate to value their philosophically informative function; but it is worth noting that, despite an overhaul of the Athenian legal code undertaken in 410 and completed for implementation in 403/2, the situation for women under the law remained virtually unchanged in Plato's lifetime; thus women of his fourth-century family[27] were subject to the same legal restrictions as those that had affected the women of Socrates's household.[28]

III. Diotima

Diotima of Mantinea, however, is not an Athenian. She is an exception to the rule of existing *contemporaneous* evidence confirming Plato's choosing his characters from among known persons,[29] making her a magnet for attention, though primarily insofar as she is conceived as a constructed stand-in for Socrates or Plato. There is a current and widespread assumption that Diotima is the *one* named character Plato invented out of whole cloth. David Halperin's famous title, "Why is Diotima a Woman?" suppresses the premise that Diotima was fabricated by Plato. As Hayden Ausland (2000: 186n11) has shown in striking detail,[30] however, "Diotima's fictionality is a modern development."

27 Plato's mother was Perictione, daughter of Glaucon III; Potone, daughter of Ariston, was Plato's full sister. There is no record of Athenian women attending the Academy; the two women whose names are preserved, Axiothea of Phlius and Lasthenia of Mantinea, were from the Peloponnesus. Here and below, factual details derive from Nails 2002.

28 Xanthippe of course, but others possibly as well (cf. *Phaedo* 116b). For present purposes, I leave aside the ubiquitous problem that affects the building of an account of the women in Plato's dialogues: sisters, in the absence of exact dates of birth, are often silently assumed to be younger than brothers. Further, despite the typical Athenian arrangement for girls-in-their-teens to marry men-in-their-thirties (Garland 1990: 210–213), the practice of scholars is to date children in relation to fathers, thirty years apart, without much regard for a woman's actual child-bearing span.

29 Philebus is the only other.

30 Ausland cites in evidence the testimonia in *Platonis Symposium*, ed. Otto Jahn, 2nd edn., Bonn: Marcum, 1875, 16–18; F. A. Wolf, *Platons Gastmahl*, Leipzig: Schwickert, 1782, xlvi (2nd edn. [1828], lxiv); and Plato's nineteenth century prosopographer, G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Prosopographia Platonica*, Leiden: Hazenberg, 1823, 125.

We are rightly suspicious of arguments from silence – not only because evidence has a way of turning up unexpectedly, but because we can be quite certain that we have such a small portion of the evidence – and a smaller portion for non-Athenian individuals than for most others of the late fifth and early fourth centuries. Yet the argument from silence has been the argument of choice that Diotima is not historical. There is a slightly more nuanced argument that is almost as common. Here's the version in the introduction to the Nehamas-Woodruff translation of the *Symposium*: "Diotima in her speech makes an allusion to the view Aristophanes has just presented at the banquet... This... suggests that even if Diotima actually existed, what she is represented as saying to Socrates cannot have been composed, as Socrates claims, long before the party during which he relates it."[31] But we do not know much about what he related. There is no certainty that Plato contrived the whole speech of Aristophanes *ex nihilo*. As with the book of Zeno in the *Parmenides*, or the speech of Lysias in the *Phaedrus*, it has often been noted that Plato's change of style and manner may well reflect his brilliance as an author, or his reconstruction of an existing original, or even his embedding of an original in his own text.[32] Moreover, the possibility that the story was not original with Aristophanes or Plato should not be dismissed lightly. The claim that Diotima could not in the late 440s have alluded to a speech that Aristophanes didn't make until 416 misses a point Dover made in 1966: Aristophanes, or Plato, was dressing up a folk tale, not inventing new material. There is a very similar ancient Indian myth of the original androgyne, suggesting Indo-European beginnings. If the story was not wholly original with Aristophanes, Plato's pointing to that fact in the Symposium may have been received as a mild comeuppance to Socrates's longtime accuser.[33]

A further point about Diotima: the secure dramatic date of Agathon's victory party, 416, and Socrates's claim that Diotima put off the Athenian plague for a decade, push his acquaintance with her back before 440 – when Socrates was an unattached young man in his thirties. That he might have learned *ta erôtika* from her, as he claims in the *Symposium* (201d), is no more refuted than confirmed by any available evidence. What is vexing is the insistence with which Diotima is so often assumed to be a pure fiction, Plato's creation. If the historical

31 Nehamas and Woodruff, trr. 1989: xii, citing *Symposium* 204d–e, 212c.

32 Ledger 1989: 103–4, 117, 124–25 (Lysias's speech in the *Phaedrus*, sometimes still listed among Lysias's sextant speeches), and 166 (Zeno's scroll from the *Parmenides*).

33 After all, Aristophanes had been persistently critical of Socrates (423, ±418, 414, and 405), earning a mention in Socrates's speech before his jury. The present treatment of Diotima is a truncated version of a full article devoted to evidence for her existence and contribution (Nails 2015).

Socrates ever really mentioned learning from men and women, priests and priestesses, as Plato has him say more than once (cf. *Meno* 81a5–b1), or put names to any of them, would it be so very surprising that his young associates took note of it?

Whatever is going on with Diotima, we should not be reduced to assuming that she must be either non-existent or, *qua* stand-in for Plato, the fount of philosophical wisdom. She is represented as a mystagogue of the Eleusinian mysteries, and that gives us some idea of her role in society. Elsewhere in Plato, she would be ranked fifth among nine character types from philosopher to tyrant, right behind doctors.[34] We need to be paying more attention to what Diotima says, but not as Plato's mouthpiece.

The central roles of two foreign-born women – Diotima and Aspasia – both of whom Socrates said were his teachers – provide support for the argument that Plato viewed the intellects of women, when freed from the subjection of Athenian education and custom, as equal to those of men. Plato's *Symposium* and his *Theaetetus* introduce an epistemology that is more stable and more complex than the one attributed to Plato in the popular imagination: namely, the *Meno-Phaedo* doctrine that forms are recollected from our having apprehended them before we were born. Diotima, on the contrary, denies human immortality (212d5–7) and offers an epistemology that sounds much like physiology: human beings are capable of knowledge, just as they are capable of walking and talking. Men and women are pregnant in both body and soul, she says. Under the right stimulation, exercise for the body and *elenchus* for the psyche, limbs grow strong, vocabulary is acquired, and ideas develop. Human bodies, like those of other animals developing from infancy to old age, constantly replace their "hair or flesh or bones or blood" (207d); likewise, bits of knowledge are forgotten and must be studied anew in the course of a lifetime (208a). All desire, including intellectual curiosity, falls under her broad definition of 'erotic desire' (205b).

IV. Phaenarete

Phaenarete, wife of Sophroniscus and Chaeredemus. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato uses a woman, Socrates's midwife mother, Phaenarete, as a model in the process of intellectual development. As in the *Symposium*, one needs a guide to bring

34 *Phaedrus* 248d3–4; cf. *Republic* 9.

one's ideas to birth, and Socrates describes himself as practicing his mother's art. [35]

I want to emphasize here a contribution that our background information about Phaenarete makes to our views of Plato's social and political philosophy. Cynthia Patterson (1998: 103–105, 133–137) takes a special interest in the innovations offered in Plato's *Laws* that address existing Athenian problems with inheritance of property, marriage, and adultery. As she details, the laws of inheritance proposed in the Platonic *Laws* are a significant improvement for women over the actual laws of Athens. Plato's revisions may owe something to the experience of the widows we find in the dialogues: Xanthippe, Aspasia, and Phaenarete. The experience of his own twice-widowed mother, Perictione, may also have had an effect, for she faced even fewer choices at the death of Plato's father, Ariston, than did Phaenarete when Sophroniscus died.

Phaenarete was married first to him, then to Chaeredemus, making Patrocles – whom Socrates mentions in the *Euthydemus* (297e) – his half brother. The career of Patrocles shows up in the records altogether later, indicating a rather wide gap, about twenty years, between the two sons of Phaenarete. That gap makes it unlikely that Sophroniscus left a will, bequeathing Phaenarete to someone else, as was his right. Our best evidence is that Socrates had already come of age when his father died. If so, Phaenarete was in a position unique within the Athenian legal code, allowed to choose whether to return to her father's household (or that of his heirs), or to remain in the house of Sophroniscus under the tutelage of her son Socrates. If Socrates had been a minor when his father died, Phaenarete would have been under the tutelage of Sophroniscus's nearest male relative, under well-defined regulations about degrees of kinship (Patterson 1998: 70–106). He would have had the power to give her in marriage, to marry her himself if eligible (i.e., if he was unmarried, or if he was married but childless and preferred to divorce his existing wife). Whatever Phaenarete chose, her dowry went with her to provide for her maintenance. [36]

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35 *Theaetetus* 149a. Plato's Socrates demonstrates some familiarity with the range of the midwife's knowledge, including the use of drugs (*pharmakeia*) and incantations for easing and causing pain, inducing birth, aborting the fetus, and cutting the umbilical cord. It should be noted that, in a society where infanticide was permissible for five days after birth, prohibitions on abortion would have made little sense. Until an infant was publicly acknowledged by its father in the *amphidromia* ritual that admitted the infant to the household (*oikos*), it had no status under law. Cf. Garland 1990: 93–4.

36 See Harrison 1998: 1.38; MacDowell 1978: 88–9.

V. Unnamed of Athens

The unnamed Athenian first wife of Pericles then married Hipponicus.

It has long been the practice of translators and commentators to provide a sentence or thumbnail sketch of Plato's characters. Christopher Taylor's translation of Protagoras provides seven excellent sketches of famous characters from the dialogue, but there are no sketches of the other thirteen named characters. Another problem with the hallowed thumbnail sketch is that it does not show a character's relations to other people – but unrealistically presents persons as tiny "atomic careers." The Protagoras features three foreign sophists plus Protagoras's best student.[37] The conclave of sophists is so promising that three visitors have come into the Athenian urban area, the *astu*, from outlying demes across the Hymettos mountains.[38]

I want to concentrate on the other Athenians, those who live in or close to the walled center of the city. Host Callias is famous for paying a great deal of money to sophists; his house is in the Alopece deme, just southeast of the wall; so he and Socrates, as well as at least Hermogenes, and Callias's father, Hipponicus II,[39] are fellow demesmen, giving them special obligations to one another.[40] The others live within a three-mile radius. But there are closer and more interesting connections than precinct and proximity. It is not just failure to take seriously Plato's depiction of social life and relationships that has been at work in our not being able to fill in the missing social and political pieces of Socrates's life and those of his close associates. A longstanding obstacle has been that women have been ciphers to scholars, often not appearing on stemmata at all, though connections can be difficult to recognize or downright misleading without them. The stemma at figure 4, though very heavily abridged, illustrates some relations that are not normally noticed.

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37 Protagoras of Abdera, Hippias of Elis, and Prodicus of Ceos; Protagoras's student is Antimoerus of Mende.

38 Philippides I is from Paeania, Phaedrus is from Myrrhinous, and Andron is from Gargettos. We do not yet know the demes for Agathon, though the presence of women in his house in Plato's *Symposium* makes an urban deme likely, or for Adeimantus, son of Cepis (a hanger-on of Alcibiades, making Scambonidae better than a mere guess).

39 It is interesting to note that Hipponicus II (d. ≤422) appears to have passed householder responsibilities on to his adult son, very like Cephalus with respect to Polemarchus in *Republic* 1.

40 On the demesman relation, see, for example, Plato *Laches* 180b–d (cf. 187d–e), *Apology* 33e, *Phaedo* 115c3; Aristophanes *Clouds* 1206–1210, 1322, *Ecclesiazusae* 1023–1024, 1114–1115, *Acharnians* 333, *Knights* 319–320, *Plutus* 253–254; and Lysias 16.14, 27.12.

The heavy arrow points to "unnamed" of Athens who was the wife of Pericles, then of Hipponicus II, though we do not know her name. She ties together the entire extended family. Without Plato's comment at *Protagoras* 315a1 that she is *homomêtrios*, we could not know that Callias's two maternal half-brothers are the sons of Pericles, both present in the dialogue. Callias's paternal half-brother is Socrates's frequent companion, Hermogenes, also present. Alcibiades – also present – is still Pericles's ward at the time of the dialogue, but he will later marry Callias's sister, Hipparete. Plato's own family is implicated too because Callias marries the daughter of Glaucon, Plato's great-granduncle.

By adding this unnamed woman to the picture, we can see that this is no arbitrary collection of visitors to the house of Callias, listening to sophists; this is the extended family of Pericles himself, visible as soon as the characters' familial relations are plotted on the page. The dialogue is set at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, not long before Pericles's death and that of his sister and two eldest sons; and it makes the discussions in Plato's *Protagoras* of democracy, relativism, and education all the more pointed. For a modern parallel, think of the difference between a story of a conversation among high school students about prospective universities, and the story that the Kennedy clan once met in Hyannis Port to decide which university they would all attend and support.

* * *

We should not, of course, conclude too much from the historical facts Plato chose to allude to in his dialogues, but those facts show at least what he noticed and mentioned; and – together with his proposals for changes in inheritance laws – suggest that he *noticed* the conditions of women in Athens that made it so very unlikely that their intellects could be developed appropriately in the absence of training and education equal to men's. To return to my initial claim, it behooves us to pay attention to the people of Plato's dialogues as particular individuals, and in far greater depth than I can manage here. The fact that Plato's dialogues present us with specific individuals in conversation is something that we should take seriously. Platonic specificity is the unalterable basic condition of not only the dialogues but Plato's conduct of philosophy. We cannot reach the universal except by way of particulars; there is no unmediated apprehension of Platonic forms. So, although arguments can be addressed independently of the text, those arguments are not the dialogues – stripped of their context, they are not only no longer what Plato wrote, but no longer representative of how he does philosophy. I am not merely making the semantic point that 'dialogues' are, almost by definition, words plus context. Rather, I am saying

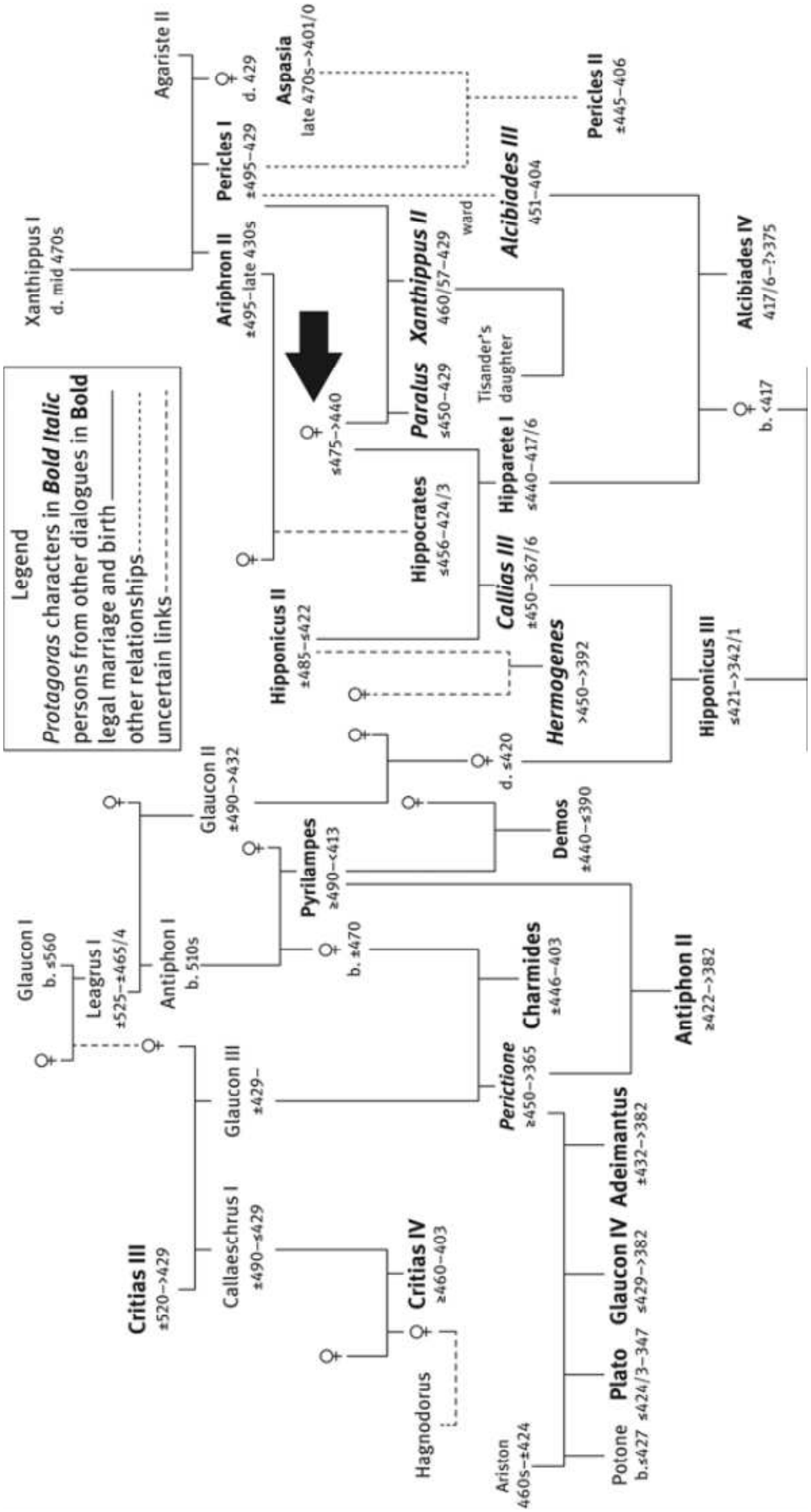

Fig. 4: Plato, Protagoras, abridged stemmata

that Plato's dialogues are irreducibly an interplay between particular and universal that we fail to confront to our peril.

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