

# A GIFT FROM THE GODS: SOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE IN PLATO'S LATE DIALOGUES

Daniel LARKIN

**ABSTRACT:** While much attention has been paid to the role of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates within Plato's early and middle period dialogues, this paper examines Plato's late period works and argues that despite the drastic changes in methodology found in dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Philebus*, Plato still acknowledges, and emphasizes, the role played by divine inspiration in regard to Socratic knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** Socrates, Late Dialogues, Divine Inspiration, *daimonion*

As Plato transitioned into his late period, the character of Socrates no longer consistently resides at center-stage of the dialogues. In dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, for example, we find in his place the Eleatic Stranger, an individual who utilizes a new methodology, i.e., collection and division, in his efforts towards the acquisition of definitional knowledge. Given the change in cast and methodology of the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, as well as the *Laws*<sup>1</sup>, it could be argued that Plato finally dismisses the more supernatural aspects of his earlier work<sup>2</sup>, favoring instead the

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the *Laws*, Socrates is absent entirely. Also, while the method of collection and division is not used by the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, it is, in contrast to the earlier, and even middle periods, similarly rigid and meticulous in its presentation, lacking any traces of the elenctic questioning that drives those earlier dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> As evidence to this claim, we find that throughout the early and middle period dialogues, Socrates consistently adheres to the warnings issued by his *daimonion*. Textual examples of such reliance include, but are in no way limited to: *Apology* 31c4-32a3, *Euthydemus* 272e1-3a3, and *Phaedrus* 242b-c. In addition to his *daimonion*, Socrates also consistently recognizes the legitimacy of divine inspiration in the case of certain individuals. Examples of such instances can be found in the *Apology* (22b8-c4), as well as the *Ion* (534b1-c7). And, while some scholars, Martha Nussbaum, "Commentary on Edmunds," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy* (1985) 1: 231-240, perhaps most notably, have dismissed these references to divine inspiration as instances of Socratic Irony, given the consistency of textual evidence to the contrary, such a position is, I would argue, untenable. For a comprehensive and thoroughly convincing argument that Plato took divine inspiration seriously throughout his early and middle periods, see

rigidly rational methodology prominently featured therein. Yet, while both the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, do not themselves directly appeal to the divine for assistance in their philosophical endeavors<sup>3</sup>, when we turn our attention to those dialogues of the late period where Socrates takes center stage, we are subject once more to a consistent appeal to the divine for assistance in his philosophical endeavor. Given this disparity, the question arises as to Plato's views on Socrates in this late period, in particular the role that divine inspiration plays in the case of Socratic knowledge.

To answer this question, however, requires that we address a problem that arises in Plato's late period, i.e., the varying images of Socrates. To explain, in the late dialogues, we are given multiple images of Socrates, all of which are, at least on the surface, distinctly different than the last. In the *Sophist*, for example, we are presented with the image of Socrates as the 'noble sophist,' i.e., the individual who, through the elenchus, is able to purge his interlocutors of their false beliefs.<sup>4</sup> In the *Theaetetus*, on the other hand, a dialogue that serves as the dramatic predecessor to the *Sophist*, we are presented with a slightly different image, i.e., Socrates as

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Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), as well as Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that despite the Athenian Stranger's lack of appeal to the divine for direct assistance in his own presentation of the laws, it is argued consistently throughout the laws that the gods and their supreme wisdom must serve as the foundation for the laws of men. See *Laws* 903bb-905d, 907a, 967b.

<sup>4</sup> While this is not explicitly stated to be describing Socrates in the dialogue itself, I would argue that we ought to understand the 6<sup>th</sup> definition as presented in the *Sophist* to be a description of Socrates. As we read at *Soph.* 230b3-c2, "They cross-examine someone when he thinks he is saying something though he is saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They will collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer towards others. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them."

For support of this view, see C.C.W. Taylor, "Socrates the Sophist," in *Remembering Socrates*, ed. Lindsay Judson and Vassilis Karasmanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 168. See also Dorothea Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion: The Role of Socrates in the *Philebus*," in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, ed. Christopher Gill and M.M. McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 223. Frede notes that the 6<sup>th</sup> definition "seems to represent something like Plato's last word on Socrates."

midwife. Here, Socrates is able to assist in the delivery of wisdom from within the mind of his interlocutor. And, while this may seem similar to the 'noble sophist' as described in the *Sophist*, given the more positive capacity exhibited by the expertise of mental midwifery, such an image of Socrates appears markedly different from the strictly purgative Socrates of the *Sophist*. Finally, in the *Philebus*, we are yet again presented with a seemingly distinct Socrates, one who takes up the method of collection and division as his weapon of choice in the search for the definition of the good life. As before, this new image of Socrates seems to be set apart from his fellow late period Socratic counterparts, most notably in his apparent acceptance of the superiority of the method of collection and division over his traditional elenctic approach.

Yet, despite these seemingly disparate depictions of Socrates, I would argue that we ought to see these varying images as one and the same character, with each depiction highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of Plato's mentor as he has now come to see him. And, while this position will be argued in full in the pages to follow, it is important to note here at the outset that, regardless of the differences in methodology utilized by the varying depictions, there arises a common thread that carries through these late period Socratic dialogues, i.e., Socrates' unwavering appeal and adherence to his divine voice. Given this consistency despite all else, it is my position that Plato maintains his continued belief regarding the influence of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates.

### **Divine Inspiration in the Late Dialogues**

#### The Divine and the Statesman in the *Statesman*

Given the many changes that arise in Plato's late period, before turning our attention to Socrates in particular, it is necessary to first establish that Plato's recognition of the validity of divine inspiration is not limited to a nostalgic portrait of his mentor. To do so, we look first to two dialogues of Plato's late period that do not feature Socrates as its protagonist, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.

Looking first to the *Statesman*, we find that, according to the Eleatic Stranger, the role of the divine is of significant importance to what Plato will regard as the true ruler.<sup>5</sup> As the stranger explains, in order to establish stability, the rulers must

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<sup>5</sup> In this argument I follow closely that of Stephan Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets in Plato's Dialogues," in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destree and F.G. Hermann (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 119-120.

Daniel Larkin

possess the ability to reconcile seemingly incompatible individuals under their rule.<sup>6</sup> As an example, the Stranger notes that, if not properly handled, a conflict will inevitably arise between those individuals who are more inclined towards the virtue of courage and those who favor a more moderate approach. While both courage and moderation are virtues to be praised, given the disparity between the two, the course of favored action between individuals occupying the opposing worldviews will quite often be in conflict. Thus, to avoid this potential confrontation, the ruler must possess the ability to ‘interweave’ the two together to create a harmony that is conducive to each individual, as well as the society at large.

In response to the question posed in the dialogue by Young Socrates as to how the ruler is able to peacefully mix these two dichotomous individuals together, the Stranger explains that the ruler has two options: (1) through creating a mortal bond between the two, i.e., by uniting them through marriage,<sup>7</sup> and (2) by “fitting together that part of their soul that is eternal with a divine bond.”<sup>8</sup> To elaborate on precisely what is meant by the forging of a “divine bond,” the stranger explains as follows:

I call divine, when it comes to be in souls, that opinion about what is fine and good, and the opposite of these, *which is really true and guaranteed*; it belongs to the class of the more human...Then we do recognize that it belongs to the statesman and the good legislator alone to be capable of bringing this thing about, by means of the music that belongs to the art of kingship, in those that had their correct share of education.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the statesman possesses the ability to instill within the citizenry the correct opinions on matters of the Good, Beauty, Justice, etc., which, in turn, will prevent them from veering off into the extreme form of whatever virtue they may naturally favor. So, for instance, lacking in such guidance, the courageous individual will, through unchecked aggression, eventually become more of a beast than a man.<sup>10</sup> As such, it is the responsibility of the true statesman to introduce the courageous individual to ideas that properly highlight the benefit of a more moderate approach in certain instances, to educate him in such a way as to instill a

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<sup>6</sup> *Pol.* 308d-309c.

<sup>7</sup> *Pol.* 310b2-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Pol.* 309c1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Pol.* 309c4-d5.

<sup>10</sup> *Pol.* 309e1-4.

balance in his soul.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note, however, that the Statesman is not claimed to possess the *knowledge* of these things, but rather, merely the correct *opinions*. Thus, we are provided the image of the divinely inspired individual who, while lacking knowledge of their own, is in possession of *correct* opinions, i.e., they have access to truth.<sup>12</sup> Further, given the sincerity of this description, not to mention the pivotal role this divinely gifted skill of interweaving plays for the stranger in the final definition of the true statesman, that Plato would ironically attribute this ability to divine provenance seems distinctly improbable.<sup>13</sup>

### Divine Inspiration in the *Laws*

In addition to the role of the divine in the *Statesman*, we also find instances within the *Laws* wherein the Athenian Stranger<sup>14</sup> specifically refers to divine inspiration.

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<sup>11</sup> While there are indeed differences between the *Republic* and the *Laws*, I would contend that the two texts are, in fact, surprisingly similar, a point which can be seen here in the stated importance that the soul, and the balancing thereof, plays in the establishment of justice in the polis. For more on the similarities between the *Laws* and *Republic*, see Daniel Larkin, "Paint Him? I Hardly Know Him: Reconciling Plato's Aesthetics in the *Laws* and *Republic* Book X," Paper presented at the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Conference, New York, NY, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> See Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets," 120. Büttner adds that such an image of the true statesman, i.e., one that, through a connection to the divine is in possession of correct opinions, and, as such, is able to properly guide his subjects in matters of ethics and morality, is consistent with earlier depictions of the divine ruler, most notably in the *Meno* 98e7-99d.

<sup>13</sup> Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets," 120.

<sup>14</sup> It has been suggested by some scholars (such as Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), and Thomas L. Pangle, "The Political Psychology of Religion in Plato's Laws," *American Political Science Review* 70, 4 (1976): 1059-77) that the Athenian Stranger represents Socrates. In support of this position, Aristotle's *Politics* 1265a is often referenced, as, transitioning from his analysis of the *Republic* to the *Laws* Aristotle writes, "Now it is true that all the discourses of Socrates possess brilliance, cleverness, originality and keenness of inquiry, but it is no doubt difficult to be right about everything." However, while this passage might be seen as Aristotle identifying Socrates as the Athenian Stranger, we find that Aristotle never explicitly states this connection. Further, later on in this same passage, Aristotle refers to the author of the *Laws* as 'the writer,' whereas in his description of the *Republic* the preceding passage, Aristotle consistently identifies Socrates by name. Additionally, given Plato's willingness to use Socrates in other late dialogues, it would seem odd that he would, in his final work, feel the need to hide Socrates behind a curtain of anonymity. In support of this position, see also Kevin M. Cherry, "Politics and Philosophy in Aristotle's Critique of Plato's Laws," in *Natural Right and Political Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert*, ed. Ann Ward and Lee Ward (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 50-66. On Cherry's

Daniel Larkin

To begin, we look to 682a, where we read:

He (Homer) composed these lines... under some sort of inspiration from God. And how true to life they are! This is because poets, as a class are divinely gifted and are inspired when they sing, so that with the help of Graces and Muses they frequently hit on how things really happen.

Here we find direct testimony regarding the ability to those divinely inspired to gain access to truth. Note, however, the Stranger is not claiming that such moments of divine revelation result in the acquisition of knowledge, a point which is once more strikingly consistent with comments regarding divine inspiration as seen in the earlier dialogues, most notably the *Apology*.<sup>15</sup> Yet, while the divinely inspired may lack *knowledge* insofar as he cannot provide an account for that which is gifted to him, he nevertheless stumbles upon the truth, an occurrence that arises with such consistency that it cannot be reduced to mere coincidence or luck.

Interestingly, that Plato takes such moments of actual inspiration seriously is made clear in another passage found later in the *Laws*, one that serves as a *warning of the potential dangers* that arise from adhering to the revelations as given by the gods. We read at 719c:

When a poet takes his seat on the tripod of the muse, he cannot control his thoughts. He is like a fountain where the water is allowed to gush forth unchecked. His art is the art of representation, and when he represents men with contrasting characters he is often obliged to contradict himself, and he does not know which of the opposing speeches contains the truth. But for the legislator this is impossible, he must not let his law say two different things on the same subject.

From this section we might glean a number of important points. First, while the passage does indicate that the inspired poet cannot determine which of his gifted revelations contains the truth, we do find the Stranger indirectly noting that the truth *is revealed*. The problem, then, is not the source of the revelation, nor the potential veracity of such revelation, but rather the inspired individual's lack of understanding. In other words, we are once again given evidence that Plato, through the Athenian Stranger, recognizes that the truth can be, and is, revealed through moments of divine inspiration. Second, it is admittedly true that this passage is presented with an admonitory tone, warning us that the legislator cannot rely on divine inspiration in matters of law, as the contradictory accounts that so often

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view, "What (Aristotle) finds most praiseworthy about the Socratic dialogues—their searching, or zetetic character—seems to be wholly absent from the *Laws*."

<sup>15</sup> *Ap.* 22c1-3.

accompany revelation would be detrimental to the consistency required for a stable constitution. However, while this warning clearly indicates a hesitancy to rely upon divinely inspired revelation for matters of law, it does not condemn such revelation as chicanery, but rather, once more indicates a sincere belief in its legitimacy, albeit one that should be approached with caution.

### Images of Socrates in the Late Dialogues

With the evidence from the *Statesman* and the *Laws* now established, we can proceed on to our analysis of Socrates and the role of divine inspiration in Plato's late dialogues. As noted above, while he is often silent, or even absent, from many of the later dialogues, he is very much present in others. This is most apparent in the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue which dramatically precedes the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, and in the *Philebus*, an oddly 'Socratic' dialogue wherein Socrates, though similar in many ways to the Socrates of the early period,<sup>16</sup> often substitutes the elenchos for the new method of division. In addition to these two obvious examples, I would add a third, i.e., the image of Socrates as indirectly presented via the 6<sup>th</sup> definition of sophistry as found in the *Sophist*. And, while these three presentations of Socrates may, at first glance, strike us as three distinct representations of Socrates, I would argue that, when viewed through the lens of divine inspiration, these somewhat disparate images of Socrates are revealed as one and the same, each image providing a deeper insight into Plato's late understanding of his mentor, and the role that divine inspiration plays in his philosophical endeavors and ability.

### Setting the Stage for Change: Socrates as Midwife in the *Theaetetus*

In terms of chronological events within the dialogues, the *Theaetetus* is the direct predecessor to the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. And, given the *Sophist* and *Statesman* both feature the Eleatic Stranger as its protagonist, it is of note that the *Theaetetus* features Socrates front and center, leading a discussion regarding the definition of

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<sup>16</sup> See Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 215. Frede notes a number of striking similarities that are almost nostalgic in effect: (1) The dialogue begins abruptly, which recalls similar literary approaches as found in the *Meno* and *Gorgias*. (2) Socrates claims that moral mistakes are involuntary (22b). (3) The different pleasures and kinds of knowledge are afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves, which, as Frede notes, ought to remind us of the *Crito*, wherein the Laws themselves are personified.

Daniel Larkin

knowledge. Interestingly, despite its late placement in the Platonic corpus, in many ways the *Theaetetus* may strike the reader as fairly reminiscent of the earlier Socratic dialogues, for not only is the dialogue fairly elenctic in nature, but further, it ends in aporia!<sup>17</sup>

Yet, despite this familiar *mise-en-scene*, if examined closely, it becomes apparent that this familiarity is actually a forbearer of change for Plato, not only in terms of a break from the middle period,<sup>18</sup> but also as an indication of the need for new developments, i.e., the methodology found predominantly in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.<sup>19</sup> In defense of this position, let us look first to the image of Socrates we are presented with at the beginning of the dialogue: Socrates as midwife.

Typically speaking, a midwife is an individual who is instrumental in the birthing process, not only in their ability to rightly determine when a woman is pregnant, but further, and more importantly, aides in the delivery of that child. Regarding the midwifery of Socrates, however, there are some critical differences. As Socrates explains:

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<sup>17</sup> *Tht.* 210a8-b2. While the dialogue does successfully determine what knowledge is not, i.e., perception, true judgment, or an account added to true judgment, the discussion fails to find a satisfactory definition of knowledge. Also, given the contextual connection to the *Sophist* and the significant change in cast and methodology that comes with that dialogue, the methodology used by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, and its failure to achieve satisfactory results in the eyes of the interlocutors, is, I believe, of significant importance. For the contrary position, i.e., that the *Theaetetus* does end with a positive account of knowledge (or at the very least, *human* knowledge) see David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> M.F. Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 24 (1977): 7-16, argues that Plato appears to distance himself from the metaphysical commitments he introduced in his middle period, e.g., the theory of recollection, as well as, to an extent, the theory of the forms. Indeed, we see this at *Tht.* 188a, where the idea of recollection is somewhat dismissed outright. Further, and of particular interest, Burnyeat draws the distinction between the image of the barren midwife in the *Theaetetus* and that of the pregnant Socrates of the *Symposium*. In both dialogues, the imagery of pregnancy and delivery are used to explain the development of ideas, however, whereas in the *Symposium*, Socrates seems to be in possession of the wisdom himself, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* cannot make such a claim, as he admits that he is barren. I agree with Burnyeat that this revisiting of theme is not coincidental, and would add that this once more indicates that Plato is rethinking and breaking from his more positive account of the Socratic method as found in the middle period.

<sup>19</sup> Granted, the method of collection and division is utilized by Socrates in the *Philebus*. However, it is my contention that such use only further proves the point that Socrates is ill equipped to use the methodology, as his inability to utilize it properly shows.



## A Gift from the Gods: Socratic Knowledge in Plato's Late Dialogues

The difference is that I attend to men, not women, and that I watch over the labor of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth.<sup>20</sup>

In short, Socrates aids in the delivery of wisdom, guiding his interlocutors in the development of their own beliefs and ideas. Further, in line with his consistent disavowal of knowledge, Socrates admits that, similar to actual midwives' inability to have children themselves, he is himself barren of all wisdom. Thus, Socrates explains, when an interlocutor does succeed in the discovery of wisdom through their interaction, it is not *from Socrates* that this wisdom arose, but from within the interlocutor alone.<sup>21</sup>

However, while Socrates adamantly maintains that any wisdom delivered is not his own, he does insist that he plays a critical role in the discovery of truth. As evidence to this claim Socrates points to those individuals who, failing to recognize the role of Socrates in the delivery process, mistakenly believe that the truth was discovered by their work alone. By Socrates' account, these unfortunate pupils who leave his tutelage prematurely, believing themselves to be fully capable of delivering additional truths without the assistance of their former midwife, are destined to fall back into the very ignorance from which he so selflessly delivered them. As Socrates explains:

After they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what has remained in them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and by everyone else.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, based on this testimony, it is clear that Socrates believes that he plays a fundamental role in the delivery of wisdom from the minds of his interlocutors.

Yet, this certainty on the part of Socrates regarding his role in both the delivery, and rearing, of truth should strike us as perplexing. Given his admitted lack of wisdom, questions arise as to how Socrates is able to (1) exude such confidence in his ability, (2) successfully determine who is (and is not) worthy of his tutelage, and (3) successfully determine which ideas are in fact true. And, similar to the evidence found in the early dialogues regarding Socrates' seemingly inexplicable abilities, we

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<sup>20</sup> *Tht.* 150b7-c3.

<sup>21</sup> *Tht.* 150d6-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Tht.* 150e2-151a.

Daniel Larkin

find that the answer to each of these questions arises through an appeal to divine inspiration.

Beginning with the first inquiry regarding the confidence exuded by Socrates regarding his own abilities, we find that, similar to statements made as early as the *Apology*,<sup>23</sup> the reason why the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* engages in such mental midwifery is that he is *compelled* by the god to do so.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Socrates notes, not only is his engagement in mental midwifery ordered by the god, but further, it is the god himself that leaves Socrates barren.<sup>25</sup> Thus, given this lack of wisdom, it cannot be the case that Socrates, in recognition of his *own* wisdom, feels obligated to instruct others. Rather, it is divine command alone that serves as the catalyst, spurring him on towards the assisting of young minds in the development of their ideas. And, given Socrates' belief in the superiority of divine wisdom to human wisdom,<sup>26</sup> a point made clear to Socrates throughout his life via the advice of his *daimonion*, the origin of Socrates' confidence regarding his role as midwife is made quite clear.

Moving now to the question of Socrates' determination of which students are worthy of his assistance, we find once more Socrates directly attributing this ability to the divine. As we read at 151a1-6:

Sometimes (those that leave) come back, wanting my company again, and ready to move heaven and earth to get it. When that happens, in some cases the divine sign that visits me forbids me to associate with them; in others, it permits me, and then they begin to make progress.

We see here, yet again, direct testimony to the involvement of the *daimonion* in the decision making process of Socrates. What is also of interest here is the similarity to the description of the *daimonion* as understood in the early dialogues, both dissuading Socrates from engaging in activities that he ought to avoid,<sup>27</sup> as well as the more positive act of permitting other action.<sup>28</sup> The point here is that we find a continued acceptance of Socratic appeal to the divine in these later dialogues, an

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<sup>23</sup> See Zina Giannopoulou, *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology* (Oxford University Press, 2013), for a critical comparison of the *Theaetetus* and *Apology*.

<sup>24</sup> *Tht.* 150c9, *Ap.* 30e, 28e, 29d.

<sup>25</sup> *Tht.* 150c8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ap.* 23a4-b2.

<sup>27</sup> For example, engaging in a life of politics. See *Ap.* 31c4-32a3

<sup>28</sup> As we find at *Ap.* 40c1, Socrates notes that the *silence* of his divine sign is to be taken as affirmation of his course of action.

acceptance that is consistent in manner and tone. In other words, if it were the case that Plato were trying to distance himself from the more fantastical aspects of Socrates' ability from the early dialogues, one might think that by the time he set out to write the *Theaetetus*, an intricately woven treatise on the nature of human knowledge, such whimsical references to the supernatural would be absent, or at the very least relegated to a significantly diminished role. However, given Socrates' consistent and unapologetic appeals to the wisdom of such divine insight, it is difficult to see how such a claim could withstand this blatant textual evidence to the contrary.

Finally, we look to the most interesting of the above concerns, i.e., how Socrates, a man who lacks all wisdom himself, is able to determine which ideas are true, and which are false. To answer this, let us look very briefly to the methodology employed by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Theaetetus* we are once more presented with a Socrates who consistently admits his own ignorance, knowing nothing of the topic at hand himself.<sup>29</sup> And, while this may not seem a remarkable point, we find that such consistent admissions of absolute ignorance are, in a way, a return to form for Socrates. To explain, while the earlier dialogues are rife with such pleas of ignorance, as Plato develops into his middle period, we find a change in the character of Socrates as well.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, in such middle period dialogues as the *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*, we find Socrates now holding a variety of metaphysical commitments, e.g., recollection, the forms, etc., that neither the Socrates of the early dialogues, nor the Socrates found in the *Theaetetus* maintain. Thus, with the image of Socrates as midwife we find Plato giving up on many of the conventions introduced in his middle period, conventions that, I would argue, were used as attempts to build upon the Socratic method, allowing for a more positive methodology, as opposed to one used merely to expose the inconsistencies in the beliefs of others.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* does not possess any wisdom of his own. Thus, he does not, and *cannot*, impregnate his interlocutors with his own ideas as sophists do,<sup>32</sup> but rather, merely assists in the delivery via the elenctic form of questioning more reminiscent of his earlier engagements.

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<sup>29</sup> *Tht.* 151c4-d1, 161b1-b4, 161e5-8, 184b.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46-49. See also, Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery."

<sup>31</sup> See also, Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery," 57.

<sup>32</sup> *Tht.* 151b.

Yet, despite his lack of wisdom, we recall that, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates *does* claim that he is able to determine which ideas are worthy and which should be discarded. Since such determination cannot be the result of his own wisdom (as he admits none of his own), I would once more suggest that, on the view of Socrates, this inexplicable ability is made possible, at least in part, by divine assistance, a claim which, again, is admitted to by Socrates himself.<sup>33</sup> This claim is supported by a number of factors: (1) As noted above, in his description of his own ability, Socrates consistently refers to divine influence as a major component of his craft. (2) The image of Socrates as midwife that we are presented with in the *Theaetetus* is quite similar to the Socrates of the early dialogues, i.e., an individual who, unlike the more protreptic figure of the middle dialogues, is able to properly guide his interlocutor away from false beliefs without admitting any wisdom of his own, yet, is effectively guided by his divine sign. And, (3) given Plato's acceptance of divine inspiration as a plausible source of assistance in these earlier works,<sup>34</sup> when we consider the nostalgic portrayal of Socrates found in the *Theaetetus*, it stands to reason that we ought take Socrates (and thus Plato) at his word regarding the role of the divine in the case of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*.

#### Evidence from the *Philebus*

Yet, while the *Theaetetus* might provide us with an image of Socrates as reliant upon divine inspiration, the image of the midwife is not the only version of Socrates we are given in the late period. Indeed, in what would seem to be a directly contradictory image to the classically elenctic Socrates of the *Theaetetus*, we find in the *Philebus* a Socrates that seems to do away with the elenchos altogether in favor of the method of collection and division! Yet, despite these disparate appearances, I would argue that the evidence in the *Philebus* only lends additional support to my position. My reasons are as follows: (1) Socrates is not especially adept in his deployment of the method of division, a lack of expertise which I will argue only helps prove my position that Plato does not consider Socrates to be a philosopher in the unqualified sense at this later stage of Plato's development. (2) While Socrates does indeed use the new method of collection and division, to aid in his progress he consistently appeals to, and relies upon, divine assistance. Thus, while the Socrates of the *Philebus*, insofar as he discards the elenchos in favor of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Tht.* 150d7-e2. See also Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery," 60-61. Burnyeat here points to such a possibility, though he does not strongly commit.

<sup>34</sup> See n. 2

method of collection and division, may, *prima facie*, appear to be in direct opposition to the image of Socrates as depicted in the 6<sup>th</sup> definition of the *Sophist* (let alone the midwife of the *Theaetetus*), I would argue that upon closer examination, the seemingly different images of Socrates we are given are not as disparate as they might first appear.

### Socrates and the Method of Division

It is widely accepted that the *Philebus* should be counted amongst Plato's latest dialogues.<sup>35</sup> Given the dialogue's placement in the corpus, and, considering the diminished role of Socrates in the late period, the question arises as to why Plato would choose Socrates as his protagonist. In answer to this question, some scholars have suggested that perhaps the reemergence of Socrates is owed to the ethical nature of the discussion at hand.<sup>36</sup> Yet, while I do agree that the earlier dialogues do *primarily* focus on more practical matters, such concerns are not entirely absent in the late period, especially when taking the overall project of the *Laws* into consideration.<sup>37</sup> If the sole reason for Socrates' resurrection was simply on account of the topic's connection to more traditionally Socratic themes, then it seems odd to render him silent or absent entirely from other dialogues which feature similar connections to earlier dialogues.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Leonard Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and G.R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), cited in Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 214.

<sup>36</sup> R.A.H. Waterfield, "The Place of the 'Philebus' in Plato's Dialogues", *Phronesis* 25, no. 3 (1980): 270-305.

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that Socrates' general interest in matters pertaining to ethics does not preclude his interest in other, more theoretical fields of inquiry. For example, there is evidence to suggest that Socrates, as early as the *Euthyphro*, was very much concerned with epistemological issues, as well as matters of methodology. It is perhaps too long of an argument to make in full here, however, I will point out that we need think only of Socrates' response to Euthyphro's first attempt to define piety. On Socrates' view, Euthyphro's first attempt fails to capture the definition of piety itself, as it is merely an example of an action that might be considered pious. Indeed, given Socrates' attention to acquiring the proper definition, one that satisfies the definitional requirements stipulated by Socrates, it is not altogether clear that we can entirely divorce the epistemological from the moral in these early dialogues.

<sup>38</sup> See Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 215. On Frede's view, not only would Socrates, on these grounds, be qualified to lead the discussion regarding the ideal state as found in the *Laws*, but similarly, in the *Timaeus* 19b-20c, Socrates would appear qualified and willing to discuss the ideal state, and yet, passes this duty on to Timaeus and Critias.

Daniel Larkin

Given the implausibility of the above suggestion, I would argue that there must exist other reasons as to Plato's selection of Socrates in the *Philebus*. And, in this vein, I agree with Dorothea Frede's claim that Plato's use of Socrates in the *Philebus* was, at least in part, to distinguish Socrates from the master dialectician.<sup>39</sup> To quickly recap, while Socrates does indeed discuss the 'divine method' of division, and further, uses it throughout the dialogue to determine the proper ranking of goods,<sup>40</sup> the dialogue ends with Protarchus noting to Socrates that the task is not complete, and that Socrates should continue on to finish what he started.<sup>41</sup> And, while this incomplete result is fairly common (if not expected) for a 'Socratic' dialogue, when compared to the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, two dialogues that feature the same method of collection and division, we find the conclusions to be strikingly different, as both dialogues end with a clear agreement that a definition has been reached by the Eleatic Stranger. Looking first to the *Sophist* 268c7-268d, we find the following exchange to close out the dialogue:

VISITOR: Shall we weave his name together from start to finish and tie it up the way we did before?

THEAETETUS: Of Course.

VISITOR: Imitation of the contrary-speech producing, insincere and unknowing sort, of the appearance making kind of copy making, the word juggling part of production that's marked off as human and not divine. Anyone who says the sophist is of this 'blood and family' will be saying, it seems, the complete truth.

THEAETETUS: Absolutely.

Further, a definitive conclusion of this sort is echoed in the *Statesman* as well, for, at the end of the *Statesman*, following the final recap of their efforts towards defining the statesman, Socrates himself responds as follows at 311c4-7: "Another most excellent portrait, visitor, this one that you have *completed* for us, of the man who possesses the art of kingship: the statesman."<sup>42</sup>

We find then a striking contrast between the three dialogues: While all three dialogues feature the method of division, only those wherein it is the Eleatic stranger leading the discussion does the discussion conclude definitively. On the other hand, in the *Philebus*, where it is Socrates, not the Stranger, using the method of division,

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<sup>39</sup> See Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 229-232.

<sup>40</sup> *Phil* 66a-d.

<sup>41</sup> *Phil.* 67b.

<sup>42</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

we are left wanting, as the dialogue ends in incompleteness. Given this inconclusiveness, I would once more state that this is precisely the point, i.e., that Plato, through his use of Socrates in this way, is demonstrating the need for a mastery of this new method if one is to achieve definitive results. And, given his affinity for Socrates, and the skill exhibited by Socrates throughout Plato's corpus, that Socrates would be shown to be inefficient is perhaps that most compelling way for Plato to emphasize this point.

### The Role of Divine Inspiration in the *Philebus*

Yet, while it is true that Socrates ultimately fails to bring about the definitive conclusion presented in other late dialogues, I would argue that we are not to take this failure as an indication that Plato has lost faith in the methodology or ability of his mentor. In fact, I would suggest that, similar to the depictions of Socrates we are given in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is presented as a reflection of Plato's mature understanding of his teacher, one which, as with those other depictions already described, once more prominently features an attention to the role of divine inspiration in the methodology of Socrates.

To begin, it should be noted that, despite his failure to properly execute the method of division, Socrates is still able to proceed quite far into the discussion. This ability to do so despite his lack of expertise is particularly interesting, especially when we consider Socrates' consistent appeal to the divine throughout the dialogue: (1) The method itself is called, by Socrates, the "divine method" (18b6), (2) there is a prayer for divine assistance to help establish the fourfold division of all being (25b), (3) Socrates consistently refers to the difference between the human and divine mind (22c), and (4) Socrates appeals to the differences between the divine and human ideal condition (33b).<sup>43</sup> In this evidence we see, once again, that Socrates, even when utilizing the new, rigid method of division, does not waver from his appreciation of divine assistance.

Yet, while this attention to divine influence should be of no surprise at this point in the case of Socrates, we are presented with one extraordinary piece of textual evidence that demands our attention. Following his praiseful description of the divine method of division, we find, now faced with a potential roadblock in their discussion, Socrates, abandoning the method of division, proclaims that they

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<sup>43</sup> Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," n. 36. It should be added that points (3) and (4), while not directly related to divine assistance, do reinforce the idea that Socrates would take seriously the wisdom of the divine over human wisdom.

need not be concerned, as, “some memory has come to my mind *that one of the gods seems to have sent me to help us.*”<sup>44</sup> This single line is of exceptional importance as, in striking contrast to the apotroptic messages of the *daimonion* in which Socrates was warned against a particular course of action, here, in the *Philebus*, we are given textual evidence wherein Socrates is claiming to have received a *positive* message directly from the gods. And, in the context of the dialogue, this revelation bestowed upon Socrates, i.e., that neither pleasure nor knowledge is the good, but rather a third thing which is superior to both, is instrumental for the remainder of the discussion.

Granted, one could argue that such a direct appeal to the divine ought to be taken as an ironic gesture. However, given the staggering amount of evidence that has been presented against such a claim, evidence that is found throughout the entire Platonic corpus, such a claim seems, to me, to be particularly unfounded. Thus, instead of approaching this problem from a skeptic’s perspective, I suggest that we take this moment of positive divine influence with the utmost sincerity, as doing so would provide us insight into how we are to understand Socrates in Plato’s later dialogues. To explain, as we have seen, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is presented as not entirely skilled regarding the method of division. And yet, he is able to continue the discussion significantly further than would be expected for someone lacking in expertise. And, while this lack in ability would have crippled other individuals, Socrates, through the direct assistance of the gods, is able to proceed onward.

The point I am attempting to convey here is that, in the *Philebus*, we are given insight into Plato’s understanding of his mentor. To explain, as I have argued, as Plato progressed into his late period, his conception of philosophy has evolved. As such, he has come to realize that Socrates can no longer qualify as the embodiment of what the philosopher ought be in an unqualified sense. In short, Plato came to realize that the Socratic method, while useful for tearing down fallacious arguments and exposing inconsistencies in the beliefs of others, is unable to achieve the sort of definitional knowledge he desired. And yet, despite this inability, Socrates does *seem* to know things, i.e., his opinions and instincts always seem to be inexplicably pointed towards the truth. To account for this then, what we find in these late dialogues are images of Socrates wherein the role played by divine inspiration is placed front and center. Here in the *Philebus* we see evidence of Socrates, unable to push forward in the discussion, *directly assisted by the gods*. Whereas others would have faltered, or given up, Socrates, through divine revelation is able to continue.

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<sup>44</sup> *Phil.* 20b3-4. Italics added for emphasis.



And, it should be noted, that this revelation occurs must be seen as positive in the eyes of Plato. In other words, while it is true that Socrates must rely on divine assistance to proceed in the discussion, such assistance does not diminish the results of the discussion, especially when one considers the reverence shown by Plato to the wisdom of the gods.

Yet, while Plato does, in the case of Socrates, hold such divine revelation in high esteem, it is my view that he recognizes the limitations and potential pitfalls of reliance upon those few fortunate individuals lucky enough to be so inspired. Indeed, we might glean insight into this view when we consider the ending of the *Philebus*, wherein we recall that, despite Socrates being able to rank the various types of goods, Protarchus reminds him that his task is incomplete. To explain, we recall that in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, an emphasis was placed on maintaining the proper divisions all the way through to the conclusion. In other words, the method of division is so effective because each division can be traced back and explained to any who would inquire. In the *Philebus*, however, we recall that the initial idea that spawned the discussion, i.e., that neither pleasure or knowledge alone was the good, was *given* to Socrates by divine inspiration. As such, this wisdom is not possessed by Socrates, and is thus unexplainable. No account can be given, and so, the division cannot be considered complete. Thus, while *Socrates*, via his divine connection, is able to proceed further in the discussion than the uninspired many, and, while this can be positive given the possibilities such inspiration provide,<sup>45</sup> Plato recognizes the need for a methodology that does not rely on the assistance of the divine, hence his development of the method of division.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, despite the limitations that may be related to reliance upon divine inspiration in matters of philosophy, it is quite clear that, in the case of Socrates, Plato still recognizes its value. Indeed, when we look to the three major images of Socrates presented in the late dialogues, we find that, despite surface discrepancies, the common link between them is their reliance upon and reverence for the divine. As

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<sup>45</sup> See *Phaedrus* 243e-245b. In Socrates' Second Speech, Philosophy is described as a form of madness. See also Francisco Gonzales, "The Hermeneutics of Madness," in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destree and F.G. Hermann (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Additionally, we are left without the precise ratios between pleasure and knowledge.

Daniel Larkin

such, we find cause to take seriously the role of the divine in the case of Socrates in Plato's late dialogues.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The objection might be raised here that we ought to understand the dialogues in a more skeptical light, especially given the more aporetic nature of the majority of the so-called Socratic dialogues. In this view, my position, which depends on seeing Plato (and by extension, the character of Socrates) as holding firm convictions regarding theological beliefs, arises as problematic. In response to this critique, however, we might look to the *Laws*, wherein we find evidence to support the contrary position, i.e., that Plato, especially in these late dialogues, does in fact posit such convictions sincerely.

To begin, we find a concerted effort on the part of the Stranger throughout the *Laws* to prove that the gods do exist, and that, their supreme wisdom and control over the universe should serve as the basis from which the laws of men be established. See *Laws* 903bb-905d, 907a, 967b. See also Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets". Büttner calls attention to *Laws* 811c, wherein, in defense of the legitimization of the constitution thus far constructed, the Stranger notes that their discussion has "not been conducted without a certain breath of the gods." As Büttner argues, considering the context here, it seems unlikely that we are to take this claim ironically. See also Christopher Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

Yet, this position is perhaps made most clearly in those instances wherein the Athenian Stranger is describing the various punishments to be levied upon those individuals who *dishonor* the gods, whether that offense arise as atheism, theft from a temple, or even the practicing of improper rituals, should be subjected to capital punishment. And, the strictest of these punishments is reserved for the atheist, as such an individual "...deserves to die for his sins not once or twice, but many times..." (*Laws* 908e2-3) Further, this condemnation for atheism should not be taken lightly, for, while there are other offenses Plato believes deserving of capital punishment aside from those pertaining to impiety, e.g., premeditated murder (871d), wounding a family member with the intention of murder (877b7-9), and waging a private war without the backing of the state (955c), that the punishment for atheism should be more severe than the punishment for violent charges is quite telling. Given the severity and consistency of this evidence, we have cause to take such references to the divine as sincere, especially in the late Platonic dialogues.

I would like to thank Hal Thorsrud for his insightful comments which raised this issue to my attention.