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by

THESIS

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Learning to Read in the *Theaetetus*: The Recuperation of Writing in Plato's Philosophy

By
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Abstract

In my thesis, I take up the popular question of the status of writing in Plato's dialogues, but from a fresh perspective. Instead of approaching the question of writing head-on, I attend to the philosophical message about reading presented by two dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and the *Theaetetus*. My thesis offers interpretations of two individual dialogues whose emphasis on writing and reading as both literary themes and philosophical problems ensure that the overall meanings of these dialogues cannot be reached without attention to this subject.

Although I examine the dialogues in isolation, believing that the setting and characters unique to each dialogue hold the key to understanding the discursive arguments presented therein, some features nevertheless emerge as common to both the *Phaedrus* and the *Theaetetus*. Specifically, each dialogue explores the virtues of a radically generous, and perhaps even reverent, style of reading. In the *Phaedrus*, this style of reading serves Socrates' interpretations of traditional myth. I argue that this is an ironic gesture on the part of Plato, who strives to show that Socrates' own method of interpretation, if it is applied to written texts, would be an adequate response to the criticisms of writing espoused by Socrates. The *Theaetetus* shows this method of interpretation in its application to a philosophical text — the *Truth* of Protagoras. I argue that as Socrates and Theaetetus attempt to interpret this book, Socrates educates

Theaetetus in his characteristic method of generous interpretation, and that Socrates' discursive arguments against Protagoras' relativism are buttressed by his display of this hermeneutic method.

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Introduction

The status of writing in Plato's thought holds interest among scholars for many reasons. For one, Plato's criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* appear to be contravened by his prolific literary output. If philosophy is as resistant to writing as these Platonic texts claim, why did Plato produce so much philosophical writing? Secondly, the question of how readers should interpret Plato's writings in light of their dialogue form is of the highest importance to both Classicists and Ancient Philosophers. While the interpretation of a philosophical treatise need do nothing more than follow the text's argument, readers of Plato's dialogues are tasked with something much more difficult and uncertain: how are we to understand the thought of Plato, a writer who never speaks in his own voice?

One observation that scholars have frequently made bears on both the problem of Plato's self-contradictory written condemnations of writing and the question of how the dialogues should be interpreted: perhaps the dialogue form was Plato's answer to the criticisms of writing expressed in his works. Under this assumption, we have an answer to the first problem and a hint as to the second. To the first we can say that the failures of writing enumerated by Plato apply to some forms of written philosophy, but not to the philosophical dialogue. To the second we can say that Plato's views may at times differ sharply from those expressed by the characters in his dialogues, and caution must be taken before a speech made by Plato's Socrates, for instance, can be attributed to Plato himself.

The following two chapters begin with this observation and then work outward from it to develop interpretations of the *Phaedrus* (Chapter 1) and the *Theaetetus* (Chapter 2). In each case, the interpretation presented is not a comprehensive reading of the dialogue, but rather a reading that goes just as far as the dialogue's involvement with the question of writing as a philosophical topic will allow. Each chapter follows the methodological principle that, due to the great variance among Plato's dialogues in terms of setting, dramatic date, characters, etc., even a highly accurate reading of a single dialogue cannot give the final word of Plato's teaching or position on any particular topic. One consequence of this principle is that what holds true in the *Phaedrus*, for example, may be false or simply irrelevant in the *Theaetetus*. Therefore, no attempt is made in what follows to establish *the* Platonic view on writing, nor even to harmonize the positions of these two dialogues on the topic. Instead, only internal evidence is used in interpreting the *Phaedrus,* and so too for the *Theaetetus*. Moreover, the views of writing and reading attributed to Plato in these interpretations do not exclude other Platonic views that may be expressed in other dialogues.

Nevertheless, the view of writing that I have found in the *Phaedrus* is largely consistent with, and even supportive of, the one I have found in the *Theaetetus*. Although I do not believe that any of the arguments I make in these two chapters depend on a particular chronology of the composition or publication of the dialogues, I do contend that the reader of the *Theaetetus* may come to a better understanding of that dialogue's contribution to the discussion of writing after a close examination of the same topic in the *Phaedrus,* which I provide in Chapter 1. The central feature shared by the interpretations I give of both these dialogues is their emphasis not only on the literary theme or

philosophical problem of writing, but also on reading. It is likely that Plato's thoughts on the status of writing cannot be fully understood until some account has been taken of how he thought philosophical literature, including his own, should be read.

I argue that the correct practice of reading is a central concern in both the *Phaedrus* and the first half of the *Theaetetus*, and that both dialogues show the virtue of a method of reading that offers a radical (and yet never dogmatic) reverence to the author whose thought is being interpreted by the reader. Although this general point stands prominently in both dialogues, the exact purport differs from one to the other. In the *Phaedrus*, I argue, Plato shows Socrates and Phaedrus in the process of interpreting traditional myth. My interpretation of the dialogue holds that Plato ironically portrays Socrates as an ideal reader of traditional myth who nevertheless does not see the possibility that his reverent habits of reading may be applied to written texts. This irony is Plato's response to the Socratic criticisms of writing. The same generous method of interpretation that Socrates extends to traditional myth would, when applied to written philosophy, save it from Socrates' rebuke.

In Chapter 2, I argue that the *Theaetetus* treats the topic of reading along broadly similar lines, but that in this dialogue, in contrast to the *Phaedrus*, the generous method of reading is shown in action in its application to written philosophy as Socrates and Theaetetus attempt to work out the meaning of Protagoras' *Truth*. I argue that in this dialogue as well, Plato makes a consistent and discernable point, although perhaps a subtle one, about the virtues of generous reading. Moreover, I argue that the favorable presentation of this style of reading is crucial for the discursive content of the dialogue. The relativism of Protagoras requires, and at the same time excludes, the sort of

sympathetic and generous reading that Socrates gives his text throughout the first half of the dialogue.

Chapter 1: Plato's Response to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*

The final section of Plato's *Phaedrus* is famous for its critique of written philosophy (274b-277a). Socrates concludes his conversation with Phaedrus by detailing the failings of written philosophy and highlighting the superiority of oral discourse. The critique unfolds in two stages; in the first, Socrates recounts an "Egyptian" myth in which the ancient god Thamuz presents objections to the proliferation of the newly invented technology of writing, and in the second Socrates poses objections of his own to certain uses of letters, especially among philosophers.[1] I argue here that the second stage constitutes an interpretation of the first, and that Plato — by having Socrates demonstrate a certain method of interpretation through his exegesis of the myth — illuminates the positive and productive possibilities of the philosophical text.[2] Nonetheless, Plato cautions, the critiques of Thamuz and Socrates must be taken seriously as warnings of the futilities and dangers of a literary-philosophical culture. The productive possibilities of the philosophical text are contingent on a process of interpretation similar in key ways to the one Socrates exercises on the myth of Theuth. Where this correct form of interpretation is lacking, the criticisms of writing expressed by Thamuz and Socrates prevail.

Some scholars have distinguished between these two stages, separating the criticisms of writing attributed to the Egyptian God Thamuz from those Socrates gives

[1] Rabbas 2010 argues that the critique of writing in this dialogue primarily concerns written speeches intended to persuade audiences regarding specific ethical or political matters. While I do not deny that this is the context out of which the discussion of writing grows, Socrates' concluding critique of writing has shifted its focus from the political uses of writing to the philosophical. Comments made at 276c and following have clear applicability to philosophical topics and activities, but appear foreign to the context of deliberative oratory. This is also the position of Yunis 2011: 224: "S. makes no attempt to consider writing and orality comprehensively, but focuses specifically on the transmission of knowledge or wisdom."
[2] Previous scholars have noticed that the Egyptian myth is a story that demands Socrates' interpretation: Burger 1978: 115.

sua voce.[3] Others conflate the two stages, attributing all criticisms to Socrates.[4] To insist on the relevance of the distinction between the criticisms of Thamuz and those of Socrates is not to split hairs, because the *Phaedrus* explicitly raises the question of how myth should be treated by the philosopher, both in this specific section of the dialogue and elsewhere.[5] The mythical critiques are thus marked and separated from the contemporary Socratic critiques. To assume that there is no difference between the notions expressed mythically and those expressed non-mythically would therefore be inattentive to one of the dialogue's most prominent and persistent problems.

In light of this distinction, the question arises what exactly is the relationship between the objections to writing made by Thamuz in the myth told by Socrates and the objections made by Socrates himself. In what follows, I try to work out the relationship between the two sets of criticisms, identifying points of convergence and divergence between them. Using the results of this analysis, I argue that the second set of objections (Socrates' own) is an attempt to interpret the first set (those of Thamuz). The sense in which I claim that Socrates "interprets" the Egyptian myth is crucial for my reading of this section of the dialogue, since this process of interpretation is the *sine qua non* for the possibility of philosophical literature to transcend the difficulties copiously ascribed to its use by Thamuz and Socrates. Much of the scholarship on the *Phaedrus* seeks the dialogue's teaching regarding the active role in communication: the proper types of

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[3] Griswold 1986: 207; Benardete 1991: 189.
[4] Hyland 1968; Zwicky 1997.
[5] At 229b-230a, Socrates and Phaedrus discuss whether their current location is the same spot from which legend has it that Oreithuia was whisked off by Boreas. Socrates says the exact spot is somewhat farther on, but rejects Phaedrus' interest in the facticity of myth. He proposes that instead of fact-checking the factual details of traditional stories, one should investigate his own nature in accordance with the Delphic oracle. Discussions of myth in the *Phaedrus* are included in Morgan 2000: 210-241, Trabattoni 2012, Zwicky 1997, and Gottfried 1993. Studies on myth in Plato generally are Morgan 2000 and Brisson 2000; see further Brisson 2004: 15-28 on Plato's "attitude toward myth."

rhetoric and writing, etc. Asmis, for example, explains the unity of the *Phaedrus* in terms of *psychagogia.*[6] This chapter attempts to balance out this emphasis on the active role in philosophical communication by calling attention to the fact that the success of an act of rhetoric or writing depends on an act of listening or reading. It is one of this chapter's primary contentions that Plato sees promising prospects for written philosophy — but only on the condition that this writing is received by the right type of interpretive reading.

Stated briefly, I argue that Socrates' method of interpretation consists in treating traditional myth as a source of wisdom relevant to contemporary concerns and, afterwards, clarifying the meaning of the myth's latent wisdom and fleshing it out in contemporary terms. The example of this method of interpretation discussed below is Socrates' interpretation of the myth of Thamuz. Socrates attempts to clarify the insights of this myth, and then to link them to cultural practices familiar to Phaedrus — drinking parties and gardening practices, for instance, which are absent in the myth itself — so as to intensify their meaning for him.

I moreover argue that this method of interpretation that Plato has Socrates employ in developing Thamuz' criticisms ironically undermines both sets of criticisms by showing in action the very method by which philosophical *logoi* may be liberated from the supposedly oppressive confines of their textual form. Socrates is not aware that his interpretive method constitutes a redemptive possibility for reading and writing. This fact is shown by Plato through his art of authorship, with his characters unawares.[7]

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[6] Asmis 1986.

[7] A recent and interesting discussion on a way of reading the Platonic dialogues that would distinguish sharply between the beliefs of Socrates and those of Plato can be found in Ferrari 2015. Griswold 2002: 87 similarly points to dramatic irony — in which "the author communicates to his or her audience over the heads, as it were, of the characters in the drama" — as one type of irony in the dialogues. Nehamas 1998: 41-45 details a "Platonic irony" in which the author of the dialogues exposes hypocrisy in their readers who condemn Socrates' interlocutors despite sharing in their faults. Finally, Rosen 1968: xxv states that

This study will not yield comprehensive or hard-and-fast answers to the question of Plato's "doctrine" regarding written philosophy. The Platonic dialogues (and letters) address the topic of writing in diverse contexts and with diverse content. No attempt is made in this analysis to harmonize the various notes struck in these diverse discussions. What I do hope to achieve is to establish a new starting point from which to approach the question of writing in the *Phaedrus*.[8] This starting point will be sensitive to certain questions that Plato himself raises in writing the *Phaedrus* and treats throughout the dialogue. Among the most important are the questions of how the extra-logical aspects of a *logos* should influence its interpretation. That is, can the source of a *logos* be used to discredit it? Is a *logos* with a long tradition superior to a novel one? How can a written *logos* combine wisdom and *techne*? And, finally, how do these various factors influence the act of interpretation?[9] I hope to show that these questions lie at the heart of this section of the *Phaedrus,* and that the answers suggested therein are crucial to understanding Plato's great ironic gesture of launching a powerful condemnation of written philosophy in a work of philosophical literature.

"Platonic irony means that every statement in a dialogue must be understood in terms of its dramatic context." While I am in complete agreement with Rosen, I see the possibility that Plato may have used each of these modes of irony, and I take no stand here on which is most characteristic of his corpus. My claim is limited to the *Phaedrus*, in which I believe Plato ascribes to his character Socrates a certain negative view of writing which he, Plato, undercuts through the display of a manner of reading which should allay the concerns of Socrates.

[8] Chapter 2 of this thesis will, however, apply the framework for understanding the question of writing in the *Phaedrus* developed in Chapter 1 to another dialogue. I argue that this is justified by the similar way in which the issue of textual interpretation is raised in the two dialogues, but I stop short of claiming either that this is the final word on writing and reading for Plato or that the two dialogues announce the very same message regarding these questions. As a single example of the many salient differences between the treatment of reading in *Phaedrus* and the *Theaetetus,* it should be noted that in the *Phaedrus* Socrates seems skeptical of a generous and immanent hermeneutics of the text (despite himself applying one to traditional myth), while in the *Theaetetus* he seems to instruct Theaetetus in this same art.

[9] The tantalizing prospect of something both wise and technical is adumbrated at 273b, where Socrates ironically credits the legendary rhetorical theorist Tisias with having discovered something σοφὸν ἅμα καὶ τεχνικόν ("at once wise and technical").

Chapter Overview

My argument proceeds in four steps. I begin by identifying the main contentions made by Thamuz and Socrates about writing, seeking to show that Socrates "interprets" the myth, by recognizing the wisdom within it and attempting to transfer it to his (and Phaedrus') own context. Socrates attempts to accomplish this by separating the core of the myth's spirit and thought from the contingent trappings of its situation and adapting this core to present circumstances, language, and social realities. These are the shared aims of the chapter's first two sections: "An 'Egyptian' Myth" and "A Socratic Exegesis."

The chapter's third section, "The Source of a *Logos*" steps back from its investigation of Socrates' art of interpretation to consider Plato's authorial purpose in presenting such an art of reading in a dialogue that questions the value of writing. This section identifies a tension between the Thamuzian and the Socratic position on the relevance of the source of a *logos*, and argues that this tension, irresolvable by recourse to any of the dialogue's "official doctrines" was constructed to alert the reader to the importance of the question on which Thamuz and Socrates disagree. The *Logoi* we investigate all appear to come from a particular type of source. How that source is construed by the interpreter has important influences on the resulting interpretation.

The chapter's fourth section "Time and Space Influence" offers an original interpretation of what the *Phaedrus* has to say about the role of space and time in writing, philosophical communication, and understanding and contrasts two attitudes of interpretation displayed in the dialogue: one by Socrates (which we have argued provides the possibility for the philosophical text to be a useful thing) and one by Phaedrus.

The fifth and final section of the chapter “Literature as a Storehouse of Wisdom” ties together threads from the previous four and offers some concluding support for my central thesis, which is that Plato, through his display of Socrates’ method of interpreting traditional myth, gestures toward optimistic vistas for the role of literature in philosophy. However, this section also argues that Plato was sensitive to the risk of traditionalism in Socrates’ method, a trend in reading that poses as great a danger to the viability of philosophical literature as does an unnecessarily critical hermeneutics. I respond to this problem by referring the prevalent scholarly opinion that Plato’s dialogues were written in a manner specifically and meticulously crafted to avert this danger.

I. An Egyptian Myth

I begin by stating and analyzing Socrates’ “Egyptian myth,” with which the *Phaedrus’* criticism of writing begins. Because many detailed points of language from the myth will be of interest to this chapter, it deserves to be quoted in full (274c-275b):[10]

> [Σωκράτης.] Ἤκουσα τοίνυν περὶ Ναύκρατιν τῆς Αἰγύπτου γενέσθαι τῶν ἐκεῖ παλαιῶν τινα θεῶν οὗ καὶ τὸ ὄρνεον ἱερὸν ὃ δὴ καλοῦσιν ἶβιν: αὐτῷ δὲ ὄνομα τῷ δαίμονι εἶναι Θεύθ. τοῦτον δὴ πρῶτον ἀριθμόν τε καὶ λογισμὸν εὑρεῖν καὶ γεωμετρίαν καὶ ἀστρονομίαν, ἔτι δὲ πεττείας τε καὶ κυβείας, καὶ δὴ καὶ γράμματα. βασιλέως δ’ αὖ τότε ὄντος Αἰγύπτου ὅλης Θαμοῦ περὶ τὴν μεγάλην πόλιν τοῦ ἄνω τόπου ἣν οἱ Ἕλληνες Αἰγυπτίας Θήβας καλοῦσι, καὶ τὸν θεὸν Ἄμμωνα, παρὰ τοῦτον ἐλθὼν ὁ Θεὺθ τὰς τέχνας ἐπέδειξεν, καὶ ἔφη δεῖν διαδοθῆναι τοῖς ἄλλοις Αἰγυπτίοις. ὁ δὲ ἤρετο ἥντινα ἑκάστη ἔχοι ὠφελίαν, διεξιόντος δέ, ὅτι καλῶς ἢ μὴ καλῶς δοκοῖ λέγειν, τὸ μὲν ἔψεγεν, τὸ δ’ ἐπῄνει. πολλὰ μὲν δὴ περὶ ἑκάστης τῆς τέχνης ἐπ’ ἀμφότερα Θαμοῦν τῷ Θεὺθ λέγεται ἀποφήνασθαι, ἃ λόγος πολὺς ἂν εἴη διελθεῖν· ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς γράμμασιν ἦν, “τοῦτο δέ, ὦ βασιλεῦ, τὸ μάθημα,” ἔφη ὁ Θεύθ, “σοφωτέρους Αἰγυπτίους καὶ μνημονικωτέρους παρέξει· μνήμης τε γὰρ καὶ σοφίας φάρμακον ηὑρέθη.” ὁ δ’ εἶπεν· “ὦ τεχνικώτατε Θεύθ, ἄλλος μὲν τεκεῖν δυνατὸς τὰ τέχνης, ἄλλος δὲ κρῖναι τίν’ ἔχει μοῖραν βλάβης τε καὶ ὠφελείας τοῖς μέλλουσι χρῆσθαι· καὶ νῦν σύ, πατὴρ ὢν γραμμάτων, δι’ εὔνοιαν τοὐναντίον εἶπες ἢ δύναται. τοῦτο γὰρ τῶν μαθόντων λήθην μὲν ἐν ψυχαῖς παρέξει μνήμης ἀμελετησίᾳ, ἅτε διὰ πίστιν γραφῆς ἔξωθεν

[10] Here and elsewhere I have followed Burnet’s 1903 OCT text of the *Phaedrus*. Translations are my own.

> ὑπ᾽ ἀλλοτρίων τύπων, οὐκ ἔνδοθεν αὐτοὺς ὑφ᾽ αὑτῶν ἀναμιμνῃσκομένους· οὔκουν μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον ηὗρες. σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν πορίζεις· πολυήκοοι γάρ σοι γενόμενοι ἄνευ διδαχῆς πολυγνώμονες εἶναι δόξουσιν, ἀγνώμονες ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλῆθος ὄντες καὶ χαλεποὶ συνεῖναι, δοξόσοφοι γεγονότες ἀντὶ σοφῶν.”
>
> [Socrates:] I heard, then, that there was in Naukratis, in Egypt, one of the old gods there, whose holy bird was the one they call the ibis and Theuth was this deity's name. And that he first discovered number and calculation and geometry and astronomy but also checkers and dice and finally letters. But the king of all of Egypt then, which surrounded the great city above the place which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes, was Thamuz and they call the god Ammon. After approaching this god, Theuth displayed his inventions, and he said that they needed to be given to the other Egyptians. But Thamuz asked what sort of benefit each had, and with Theuth going through them, Thamuz said what seemed to him good and what didn't, and he blamed some inventions and praised others. Thamuz is said to have declared many things concerning each invention on both sides to Theuth, which it would require a long speech to recount. But when he got up to letters, Theuth said “This, king, will make the Egyptians wiser and more capable of memory; for a drug of memory and wisdom has been discovered.” But Thamuz said, “Theuth so very technical, one man is able to create technological things, but another is able to judge what share of harm and help they have for those who will use them; and now you, since you are the father of letters, say the opposite of their potential on account of partiality. For they will produce forgetfulness in the souls of their learners due to negligence of their memories, since they are reminded because of their trust in writing by outside strokes from other people, not by themselves from inside; therefore, you have found not a drug of memory, but of reminding. And you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not a true wisdom. For becoming well read without instruction, they will think that they are learned, despite being unlearned for the most part, and difficult to associate with, having turned into apparently clever men rather than wise ones.

Our first task is to characterize precisely what Thamuz has to say about writing. But it should first be noted that his criticism of writing is not generated in a vacuum, but is supported by a narrative structure of its own, complete with details of setting and character that may be of importance in the interpretation of the myth. For one, Theuth's criticism of writing is necessarily hypothetical. At the time Thamuz shares his negative opinion of letters with Theuth, these letters have not yet been proliferated among humans. Therefore, the consequences of literacy that Thamuz envisions are theoretical likelihoods

rather than empirical facts.[11] This context of Theuth's "primary orality"[12] contrasts with the situation of Socrates, who had some empirical knowledge about the consequences of literacy in Greece, but it contrasts even more with the situation of Plato,[13] in whose generation the uses of writing and reading among the Greeks increased dramatically.[14]

Having established the speculative nature of Theuth's criticisms, we now turn to those criticisms themselves. What are the specific concerns that lead Thamuz to his negative opinion of writing? His argument begins with a general point: one who is skilled in discovering new inventions is not necessarily qualified to judge their effects: ὦ τεχνικώτατε Θεύθ, ἄλλος μὲν τεκεῖν δυνατὸς τὰ τέχνης, ἄλλος δὲ κρῖναι τίν' ἔχει μοῖραν βλάβης τε καὶ ὠφελείας τοῖς μέλλουσι χρῆσθαι, ("Theuth so very technical, one man is able to create technological things, but another is able to judge what share of harm and help they have for those who will use them" [274e]).

Thamuz begins his response to Theuth addressing him in the vocative along with the adjective τεχνικώτατε ("so very technical"). This adjective and the ability to produce arts to which it refers contrasts sharply with the domain of judgment that Thamuz reserves for himself — the ability to discern what is harmful or beneficial for human beings. As Thamuz sees it, he himself is the expert on human matters, despite all the technical expertise of Theuth. This is a division picked up by Socrates in his

[11] Derrida 1981: 76 discusses the suitability of orality to a king-god such as Thamuz. A contrary position is taken by Smith 2002. Rosen 1987: 56 takes Derrida to task for lacking a sensitivity to "theological difference." Indeed, Thamuz is a king-god, but Plato goes out of his way to develop a character greater than this simple designation. I attempt below to articulate some aspects of this character, including Thamuz' pretensions to a knowledge of human nature.
[12] The term comes from Ong 1982 and refers to cultures completely untouched by writing and literacy. Insofar as divine worlds can be described by anthropological categories, this is the situation of Thamuz when letters are presented to him for the first time. Socrates, by contrast, despite his personal reluctance and antipathy for writing, does not launch his critiques from a position of primary orality.
[13] Nails 2002: 314 estimates the dramatic date of the dialogue at 418-416 BC. Regardless of the exact date of composition, then, the dialogue is written at least a generation after the events it represents would have occurred, and uses of writing in Athens have been multiplying all the while.
[14] Yunis 2003: 5; Thomas 1992: 13-14; Robb 1994: 21, 125.

interpretation of the myth, and of interest also to Plato in the composition of the dialogue. The question is whether writing, with a sort of technological tunnel vision, has developed to serve its own interests and to prove its own cleverness and in doing so has lost sight of human nature and its benefit. Socrates seems to ally himself with Thamuz as a student of human nature and to associate Theuth with Phaedrus, whose infatuation with technology and cleverness leads to neglect of what is useful and harmful for humans.[15] Plato, on the other hand, shows that it is the use to which writing is put, rather than the bare technology itself, that will determine benefit or harm for its users.

Thamuz' opening statement, then, assigns knowledge of technical matters to Theuth and knowledge of human matters to Thamuz. But it gives another reason why Theuth is unqualified to judge the effects of his invention: the creator may be biased toward his own discoveries as a father is to his child. The notion of personal bias, be it authorial, paternal, or cultural looms large in this section of the dialogue. It will be argued later that a certain type of bias is a necessary ingredient, in Plato's view, for the redemption of the philosophical text.[16] Thamuz uses the word εὔνοια ("partiality") to express his concern about paternal bias. This question of the role of partiality in reading and interpretation is a critical one for this section of the dialogue. I have translated the word to mean "partiality," since this is the purport of Thamuz' statement. But another

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[15] See 238a-238b, where Socrates correctly guesses that Phaedrus has listened many times (πολλάκις) to Lysias' speech, and then, when merely listening has proven insufficient, takes the book to continue his activity. The technology of writing appears dangerous as an unreflective repetition of the same.

[16] Thamuz' observation of the role of paternal bias is just one example of the more general fact that expectations and interests structure our experience (especially our reading experiences) and, at least to some degree, determine their result. It is true that as the father of letters, Theuth's interest predisposes him to hold a positive opinion about them. However, Thamuz' analysis of bias is not keen enough to see his own, or at least not to reveal it. Readers of the dialogue must ask what conditions have predisposed Thamuz to hold a negative opinion of writing, and whether his critical impulse is in the end preferable to the paternal bias he condemns.

possible meaning is "goodwill." I argue below that Plato proposes a manner of reading which maintains goodwill without devolving into partiality.

Having called attention to the problem of bias in Theuth's judgment of his own discoveries, Thamuz voices his first concern: memory will be damaged by writing. The benefit of writing that Theuth claims will help memory consists only in awareness-in-an-instant of facts, but according to Thamuz, this is not remembering but being reminded. Remembering depends on a faculty whereby insight is generated from inside. Writing provides a shortcut to a simulacrum of these insights, but it does not exercise the faculty of memory itself, since it depends on external artifacts. Writing, Thamuz warns, will therefore replace memory and lead to its atrophy through neglect. So the first division on which Thamuz' critique depends is that of internal/external.

The critique proceeds with the help of another division: appearance/reality. Thamuz worries that literature will allow voracious readers to pose as wise men, although their reading will not constitute true wisdom.[17] The specific negative effect of this named by Thamuz is that these wise-appearing men will be difficult to be with. The verb συνεῖναι meaning "to be with" is standard for the teacher-student relationship.[18] Thamuz worries that writing will damage the social future of pedagogy by alienating teachers from students. The latter will not see the need for the former, thinking themselves already to have become wise from books. Thamuz voices a concern that was surely on the mind of many fifth-century Athenians. Robb directly links the decline of συνουσία as the predominant paideutic system in fifth-century Athens to the increase in the use of

[17] Dean-Jones 2003 explains a similar phenomenon in the medical field. The rise of medical texts led to self-educated charlatans posing as experts trained in medical practice by teachers.
[18] See, for instance, LSJ 1996: 1705, s.v. συνέιμι, definition II.3, and cf. Plato *Apology* 25e*, Theatetus* 151a, 168a, etc. For discussions of the use of this word by Plato to denote pedagogical relationships, see also Robb 1993 and Sayre 1995: 220-222.

educational texts.[19] Once the knowledge on which "the culture's major institutions depend" has been committed to text, there is, anthropologically speaking, no need for pedagogic συνουσία.[20] I argue here that Plato, but not his Socrates, foresees the possibility of a συνουσία capable of surviving the transfer of cultural knowledge from psychic to textual storage-spaces and from oral to literary means of transmission; the intimacy of the relationship can be maintained as long as readers view time-tested books as sources of wisdom and instruction differing little from human mentors. However, for a generation of readers who have grown hubristic about their own ability to self-educate through the text — a generation I take to be represented by Phaedrus in this dialogue — συνουσία will truly have died away.[21]

The foregoing can be summed up as one procedural point about who can and cannot evaluate, and two hypothetical consequences of writing, each of which depends on a division. The procedural point is that a creator cannot judge his work objectively due to his paternal bias. It should be noted that this issue will be developed by Socrates in a different direction; a teacher is able to evaluate the needs of a student, while a text, impartial as it may be toward its reader, says only the same thing to everyone.

The first consequence is that writing will weaken memory, since true memory depends on an internal process, but writing replaces this process with reliance on the external. The second consequence is that writing will threaten teacher-student pedagogy by fostering apparent wisdom while doing nothing to promote real wisdom.

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[19] Robb 1993: 82-83.
[20] Robb 1993: 83.
[21] Again see 238a-238b, where Phaedrus is said to have left behind hearing Lysias for reading his text. This is a case of the technology of writing replacing συνουσία.

II. A Socratic Exegesis

So much for the content of Socrates' Egyptian myth. Socrates follows this myth with a new set of criticisms of writing presented as his own. Intervening between Thamuz' critique and Socrates' is a brief digression on myth to which we will return later. Socrates' critique of writing is similar to Thamuz', but it omits some points made by Thamuz, supplies some points that the myth lacks, and differs in its overall emphasis. I propose that the relationship of the original myth (274c-275b) to Socrates' additions to it (275c-277a) is that of text to interpretation. Socrates assumes that there is truth in the myth because of its traditional status,[22] and he undertakes to clarify the main points of the myth and to transfer their meaning to his current time and place. This method of interpretation, I argue, is Plato's attempt to articulate the conditions under which philosophical literature may avoid the problems enumerated by Thamuz and Socrates.

Socrates begins with what appears to be a paraphrase of Thamuz' first negative consequence of writing — the deterioration of memory — even though he does not mention this particular consequence explicitly. Instead, he remarks that a written speech can do nothing other than remind the one who already knows about the things the speech concerns (275c):

> [Σωκράτης·] οὐκοῦν ὁ τέχνην οἰόμενος ἐν γράμμασι καταλιπεῖν, καὶ αὖ ὁ παραδεχόμενος ὥς τι σαφὲς καὶ βέβαιον ἐκ γραμμάτων ἐσόμενον, πολλῆς ἂν εὐηθείας γέμοι καὶ τῷ ὄντι τὴν Ἄμμωνος μαντείαν ἀγνοοῖ, πλέον τι οἰόμενος εἶναι λόγους γεγραμμένους τοῦ τὸν εἰδότα ὑπομνῆσαι περὶ ὧν ἂν ᾖ τὰ γεγραμμένα.
>
> [Socrates:] Then whoever thinks he can leave behind an art in writing, and on the other side whoever supposes that there will be something clear and stable from writing, would be foolish with lots of simple-mindedness, and really would be

[22] Regardless of whether the myths actually do belong to cultural traditions or are invented *ad hoc*, it is their presentation as traditional myths in the dialogue, and not their real historical origins in Plato's mind, that determine Socrates' hermeneutical approach to them in the *Phaedrus*.

> ignorant of Ammon's prophecy, if he thinks that written speeches can do anything more than remind the knower about the things the writing concerns.

Instead of following Thamuz in focusing on the external/internal division and drawing on its basis a distinction between memory and reminding, Socrates seems to focus on an inherent defect in writing as a tool of communication: writing is made out to be a murky medium in which no τέχνη can be left behind by the writer and from which nothing σαφὲς καὶ βεβαίον ("clear and lasting") can be extracted by the reader (275c). Thus, Socrates takes the original point of Thamuz, which deals with the effects of writing on memory, and then develops it into an original point determined by his own interest in writing as a philosopher. The precise content of the critique is changed, but the general spirit and purpose of the Thamuz' anxiety about the effects of writing on memory are preserved in Socrates' lamentation of the difficulties writing poses for communication, and his continued attention to the relation between writing and memory.[23]

Next come a pair of original additions to the discussion. Writing is compared to painting, because the letters of the former appear to speak knowingly, just as the animals of the former appear to be alive (275d-e).

> Δεινὸν γάρ που, ὦ Φαῖδρε, τοῦτ' ἔχει γραφή, καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὅμοιον ζωγραφίᾳ. καὶ γὰρ τὰ ἐκείνης ἔκγονα ἕστηκε μὲν ὡς ζῶντα, ἐὰν δ' ἀνέρῃ τι, σεμνῶς πάνυ σιγᾷ. ταὐτὸν δὲ καὶ οἱ λόγοι· δόξαις μὲν ἂν ὥς τι φρονοῦντας αὐτοὺς λέγειν, ἐὰν δέ τι ἔρῃ τῶν λεγομένων βουλόμενος μαθεῖν, ἕν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταὐτὸν ἀεί. ὅταν δὲ ἅπαξ γραφῇ, κυλινδεῖται μὲν πανταχοῦ πᾶς λόγος ὁμοίως παρὰ τοῖς ἐπαΐουσιν, ὡς δ' αὔτως παρ' οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει, καὶ οὐκ ἐπίσταται λέγειν οἷς δεῖ γε καὶ μή. πλημμελούμενος δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ λοιδορηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς ἀεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ· αὐτὸς γὰρ οὔτ' ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὑτῷ.
>
> For I suppose, Phaedrus, that writing has this terrible quality, and that it is truly similar to painting. For the figures of this art stand as though they are living, but if someone asks a question, they are silent with great seriousness. And speeches are

[23] Benardete 1991: 189-190 comments on the fact that while written words may be murky as Socrates claims, they are plagued by the same difficulties when spoken. Smith 2002 goes so far as to stress the greater clarity of written discourse.

> the same way. You would think that they say something as if they know about it, but if you ask a question about the things they say, wishing to learn, they always say only the same one thing. And whenever it is written once, the whole speech whirl about everywhere, equally among those in the know and among those the speech does not concern at all, and it does not know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is wronged and unjustly rebuked, it always lacks the help of its father. For the speech itself is able neither to defend nor to help itself.

If these letters are questioned, the letters will say the same thing always — ἕν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταὐτὸν ἀεί (this point will be discussed further below). Secondly, the product of writing does not know how to discern its proper audience. It speaks alike to the people to whom it is fitting to speak, and to the others.[24] Furthermore, it cannot defend itself, and when it is wronged it requires the assistance of its father (275e).

Then the subject changes from a direct criticism of writing to a comparison between writing and speech. The vehicle for this comparison is the language of lineage and descent. The spoken word is the legitimate brother of the bastard written word (276a).

> [ΣΩ·] Τί δ'; ἄλλον ὁρῶμεν λόγον τούτου ἀδελφὸν γνήσιον, τῷ τρόπῳ τε γίγνεται, καὶ ὅσῳ ἀμείνων καὶ δυνατώτερος τούτου φύεται;
> [ΦΑΙ.] Τίνα τοῦτον καὶ πῶς λέγεις γιγνόμενον;
> [ΣΩ.] Ὃς μετ' ἐπιστήμης γράφεται ἐν τῇ τοῦ μανθάνοντος ψυχῇ, δυνατὸς μὲν ἀμῦναι ἑαυτῷ, ἐπιστήμων δὲ λέγειν τε καὶ σιγᾶν πρὸς οὓς δεῖ.
> [ΦΑΙ.] Τὸν τοῦ εἰδότος λόγον λέγεις ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον, οὗ ὁ γεγραμμένος εἴδωλον ἄν τι λέγοιτο δικαίως.
>
> [So:] What then? Do we see another speech — the legitimate brother of this one, how it is generated, and how much better and more potent it is than this?
> [Phae:] What is this, and how do you say it is generated?
> [So:] The speech written with knowledge in the soul of the learner, both able to defend itself and knowledgeable of how to speak and be silent to the right people.
> [Phae:] You must mean the speech of the knower, living and ensouled, of which the written speech could rightly be called an image.

[24] Zwicky's 1997 response to this line of argument echoes Benardete's 1991 observation that while written language is murky spoken language is hardly any better. She points out that Socrates, the oral-committed antitype of the writer, "was so bad at choosing his own audience that he ended up dead" (33).

This is the harshest language Socrates uses in his criticism of writing. Again, Socrates' development, expansion, and inflection of points originally made by Thamuz, all done without modifying the spirit or underlying core of the original, can all be observed in this case. Where Thamuz was harshest on with Theuth, the former criticized the latter of a paternal bias that clouded his vision. Socrates takes this as his cue for a number of similarly harsh comments on fatherhood, lineage, and the written word.

What follows is a parable about a farmer (276b-276d). An intelligent farmer (ὁ νοῦν ἔχων γεωργός) will not plant his most coveted seeds in quick-working soil, expectant of quick gratification. Instead he will plant these seeds in long-working but deep-nourishing soil, reserving the quick-working soil for the use of pleasure and festivals and the long-working soil for his serious business (ἐφ' οἷς δὲ ἐσπούδακεν). But the man with pieces of knowledge (ἐπιστήμας, 276c) about the just, good, and beautiful is certainly even more intelligent than any farmer, so he likewise will not entrust these pieces of knowledge to writing, but if he writes it will be for the sake of play and as a reminder for himself in case his old age approaches forgetfulness, and for those who follow in the same path. Writing should therefore be done for the sake of play rather than serious business, but it is a worthy pastime when compared to other sorts, such as drinking parties (276b-d).

But writing without knowledge, while better than drinking parties, is still inferior to dialectical practices which include knowledge, Socrates reminds Phaedrus. Speeches implanted with knowledge in a suitable soul are able to help their planter, and they produce offspring of their own, from which other speeches come to be in other people, capable of immortality. And the possession of these speeches is the greatest happiness

possible in human life (276e-277a). This legitimate offspring is set up in opposition to, writing, its illegitimate sibling (276a).[25]

Lebeck's reading of the *Phaedrus* uses the language of plant-growth, which is shared between this section of the dialogue and the description of the growth of wings in the lover from Socrates' palinode (251c-251d) as justification for reading the two sections together.[26] The striking result of this pairing is the realization that εὐδαιμονία attends both the possessor of the "true Eros" and the possessor of the "true Logos" (the former is mentioned at 253c and 256d, the latter at 277a). Earlier in the dialogue, then, happiness has been connected to *eros*. When happiness is mentioned alongside *logos*, especially as the latter has just been the subject of a torrent of metaphorical language involving sexual reproduction, one is naturally led to wonder whether, in Plato's view, a proper engagement with *logos* must be erotic. This question will be taken up in section five of this chapter.

Socrates' critique of writing can be summarized thus: writing is a murky medium in which clear communication is not possible. It appears intelligent, but is not, and does not respond intelligently to questions. It cannot defend itself. It is not selective in whom it speaks to. It is inferior on several counts to spoken discourse — it is playful while the other is serious, bastard where the other is legitimate, indiscriminate where the other is selective, quick-working and impermanent where the other is fruitful, self-reproducing, and immortal.

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[25] The difference between legitimate and illegitimate speeches is operative too in the *Theaetetus'* image of Socrates as midwife (149a-151d). In the *Phaedrus*, knowledge and the presence of the author are what separate legitimate from illegitimate speeches. In the *Theaetetus*, the art of dialectical questioning is required to test for the legitimacy of a *logos*.

[26] Lebeck 1972: 287-288.

There are, of course, many areas of overlap shared between Thamuz' critique of writing and Socrates'. Notable in each is the relationship of writing to memory. Thamuz, responding to Theuth's advertisement of writing as a μνήμης φάρμακον ("drug of memory"), insists that writing will actually damage μνήμη while promoting its shortcut version, ὑπομνήσις ("reminding"). The latter term, consisting of a compound of the former with the prefix ὑπο-, seems to be a weakened or defective variant of the latter. Meanings of ὑπομνήσις such as "suggest" and "mention," indicate a power related to memory, but one that is weaker and less direct than the faculty proper, not to mention external (ἔξωθεν) whereas memory works from within (ἔνδοθεν), to return to the division of Thamuz.[27] Socrates follows up on Thamuz' language of memory by claiming that writing does nothing other than remind one who already knows about the things which the writing concerns (ὑπομνῆσαι, 274e), and by further claiming that ὑπομνήματα, or reminders, are the proper form for philosophical writing to take. The language Socrates uses to express his own thoughts on writing, and the spirit in which he does so, is therefore derivative of — and interpretive of — the language and spirit of the first set of criticisms given.

Socrates' critique also echoes that of Thamuz by questioning the effect of writing on philosophical pedagogy, but this aspect of Thamuz' critique is imitated less directly by Socrates than the μνήμη/ὑπομνήσις division. While the Egyptian case against the usefulness of writing uses discourse to question its impact on philosophical pedagogy, Plato repeats the point through action by showing the dynamics of the pedagogical relationship of Socrates to Phaedrus. Thamuz predicts the deterioration of the teacher-student relationship as a result of writing. The *Phaedrus* opens with a depiction of its

[27] LSJ 1996 s.v. ὑπομνήσις 1 and 2.

titular character engrossed to an unhealthy degree in the literal words of Lysias' speech (228a-c).[28] Phaedrus is thus an example of the πολυήκοοι who has become χαλεπὸν συνεῖναι (275a-b). Thinking wrongly that he has become wise from his readings, the difficulty Phaedrus presents as a philosophical pupil is evident in two ways. First, Socrates is unable to connect with Phaedrus at the beginning of the dialogue through dialectic. In order to communicate with his student, Socrates must descend to Phaedrus' level of interest — which is limited to oratory — by performing a pair of speeches, one of which Socrates proceeds to disavow in full.

It is only after connecting with Phaedrus on the latter's own level that Socrates is able to engage in true dialectic with him. Had Phaedrus not been distracted by his own grammatophilia, Socrates could have engaged philosophically with Phaedrus from the very beginning. On a darker note, Phaedrus proves too difficult for Socrates' συνουσία with him to have a positive effect, even by the dialogue's end. After two critiques of writing, each of which emphasized the distinction between internal and external recollection and the superiority of the former, Phaedrus still asks Socrates to "remind" him of what the two have discussed.[29] Socrates needs not repeat Thamuz' second consequence of writing — the spoiling of the potential philosophical pupil — because the very conversation in which he could have done so serves as an example of that same consequence. Perhaps this is not a conscious act of interpretation on the part of Socrates, but an authorial maneuver by Plato, who always seems to match Socrates with un-

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[28] Phaedrus' characterization by Plato as a valetudinarian (227a) adds irony to this rather literal interpretation of an idiom along the lines of English's "unhealthy obsession." Character analyses of Phaedrus are found in Griswold 1986: 21-25 and Ferrari 1987: 4-9.
[29] *Phdr.* 277b. See the discussion at Zwicky 1997: 28 and Hyland 2008: 118.

philosophic or even anti-philosophic interlocutors.[30] Nevertheless, Socrates' criticism of writing, through acting out the socio-pedagogical dangers it poses to philosophers, continues this interpretation of Thamuz' critique by developing it and appropriating it to his own personal situation — that is, his conversation with Phaedrus.

III. The Source of a Logos

A final similarity between the two sets of critiques — one that concerns what I call "the source of a *logos*" — must be pointed out. This notion of the source will then serve as a bridge to a discussion of "tradition" as the grounds for the possibility of literary philosophy as I believe Plato establishes in this dialogue. My method in this section contrasts with that of much recent scholarship on Plato, which often attributes contradictions in the text to poor writing or thought on Plato's part. In particular, contradictions dealing with the subject of writing in the *Phaedrus* are seen by deconstructive readers to result from the necessary ambiguities and paradoxes that arise from the irony of a written condemnation of writing.[31] Alternatively, I understand contradiction to be a powerful literary device for the raising of difficult questions and the emphatic presentation of central themes. While it is certainly possible that Plato nods here and there in his dialogues, some scholars have counted Plato among a small number of talented writers who may write beneath the surface of their text, using apparent contradictions or inconsistencies to spur the reader toward the author's intended thought.[32] It is therefore prudent to treat a given contradiction not as a mistake, but as an invitation for deeper inquiry.

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[30] Griswold 1988: 147; Griswold 2008: 215.
[31] Derrida 1981: 95; Smith 2002: 74; Ferrari 1987: 207.
[32] A small sample would include Bolotin 1987: 40; Griswold 1986: 10; Roochnik 1988: 187-189.

This final similarity between Thamuz' and Socrates' critiques does not deal with their content, but with the status of each critic as a questionable source for the opinions he espouses. Both Thamuz and Socrates speak out against writing despite a limited knowledge of the topic that each owes either to his own illiteracy (Thamuz) or his own refusal to write (Socrates).[33] Thamuz condemns writing before the invention has taken hold, and he himself has not been instructed in the art. The Egyptian god betrays his cultural bias against the written word by describing the δοξόσοφοι not as those who have read much, but as those who have *heard much* (πολυήκοοι). It is true that the adjective πολυήκοος could describe one who has "heard" other people *reading* aloud. Because reading in the ancient world was typically done aloud,[34] a reader could accurately be called a hearer of the text.[35] Nonetheless, when writing is being explicitly contrasted with speech, the conflation of "readers" and "hearers" exposes a troublesome diremption between, on the one hand, the conceptual categories and terms Thamuz applies in his critique of writing and, on the other hand, the nature of reading and writing, which is clearly foreign and inadequately grasped by these concepts and terms.[36]

Socrates famously left no written works behind, and it has been suggested that the criticism of writing Plato puts in his mouth at the end of the *Phaedrus* is meant to approximate the views he held historically.[37] Whatever the relationship between the views of the historical Socrates and those of Plato's Socrates on writing, the latter's

[33] While readers of Plato's dialogues must be cautious not to import biographical data about the historical Socrates as characteristics of the fictional character in Plato's dialogues, the Socratic refusal to leave his thoughts behind in writing is fundamental enough to the historical Socrates that it would naturally belong to any literary character based on him.
[34] Knox 1968 discusses the situations in which reading was likely done aloud, and those in which it was likely to be done silently.
[35] LSJ 1996 s.v. ἀκούω 1.4. For discussion see Svenbro 1993: 46n8.
[36] Along the same lines falls Lebeck's 1972 observation that by classifying the story as an ἀκοήν (275c), Socrates shows that it "embodies the mode of communication whose worth it sets out to establish" (286).
[37] Zwicky 1997: 21.

criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* are a plausible justification for any philosopher, including the historical Socrates, to choose to abstain from letters. Although Socrates is more familiar than Thamuz with the empirical consequences of literacy, he, like the Egyptian god, condemns writing from the outside, as one who does not personally use the new technology. Socrates' lack of familiarity with the practice of writing leads to at least one untrue claim he makes about it; Socrates posits that a piece of writing, when interrogated, says the same one thing each time (275d). This is true from the outside view, but anyone who reads frequently will attest that while the words of a text remain the same, their meaning is highly variable from one reading — and from one reader — to the next. Moreover, the results of an act of reading are highly dependent on what one expects to find in reading. Socrates displays an awareness that this truism holds for oral discourse at 260a, but he seems unwilling to extend it to written texts near the end of the dialogue (260a):

> Οὔτοι ἀπόβλητον ἔπος εἶναι δεῖ, ὦ Φαῖδρε, ὃ ἂν εἴπωσι σοφοί, ἀλλὰ σκοπεῖν μή τι λέγωσι.
>
> Then surely the speech must not be tossed aside, Phaedrus, which the wise speak, but instead one must scrutinize whether they are saying something.

This is precisely the deportment that, possessed by a reader, could save writing from the Socratic condemnation it meets at the conclusion of the dialogue. A reader who recognizes that literature may contain a sort of wisdom that can only be extracted by close investigation (σκοπεῖν) is unlikely to wrongly consider himself wise. A book approached by a reader of this sort would not be suited for the Adonis gardens of writing, but would merit the greatest care of the writer, a care which Plato is reported to have

taken in composing his own dialogues, even against the advice he has Socrates utter in the *Phaedrus*.[38]

At any rate, Socrates appears to have underestimated the impact that various interpretive strategies may have on the meaning of a text, and this is perhaps just one blind spot about writing that can be attributed to his own limited experience as a writer. Under different circumstances, the lack of experience that Thamuz and Socrates have as readers and writers might not be of great importance to their critiques. But in the "Egyptian" myth, Thamuz explicitly raises the issue of whether the source of a *logos* is a legitimate consideration in determining the validity of the *logos*, and this fact serves to accentuate the ineluctable irony present in comments on writing made by a pair of illiterates. Thamuz raises the issue of the source of a *logos* by claiming that Theuth, as the father of writing, has a distorted vision of its nature that leads to an exaggerated appraisal of its uses (275a). The issue of the source of a *logos* persists beyond the myth in which it appears. After Socrates finishes relating this myth, Phaedrus reacts by ridiculing the philo-mythic Socrates and suggesting that the myth is of no great account because of its impugnable origins:

> ΦΑΙ· Ὦ Σώκρατες, ῥᾳδίως σὺ Αἰγυπτίους καὶ ὁποδαποὺς ἐθέλῃς λόγους ποιεῖς.
>
> PHA: Socrates, how easily you make Egyptian speeches, or speeches from wherever you wish.

Socrates understands this comment as an indictment against the value of myth as such. He defends myth by maintaining that the source of a *logos* cannot be taken as a sufficient reason for rejecting the *logos* itself (275b):

[38] Harrison 1978: 104 n. 3.

> [ΣΩ·] Οἱ δέ γ', ὦ φίλε, ἐν τῷ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Δωδωναίου ἱερῷ δρυὸς λόγους ἔφησαν μαντικοὺς πρώτους γενέσθαι. Τοῖς μὲν οὖν τότε, ἅτε οὐκ οὖσι σοφοῖς ὥσπερ ὑμεῖς οἱ νέοι, ἀπέχρη δρυὸς καὶ πέτρας ἀκούειν ὑπ' εὐηθείας, εἰ μόνον ἀληθῆ λέγοιεν. σοὶ δ' ἴσως διαφέρει τίς ὁ λέγων καὶ ποδαπός. Οὐ γὰρ ἐκεῖνο μόνον σκοπεῖς, εἴτε οὕτως εἴτε ἄλλως ἔχει.
>
> [SO:] But, dear friend, those at the temple of Zeus of Dodona said that speeches from a tree were the first prophetic ones to occur. For those men of old, because they were not wise like you young men now, it was sufficient to listen even to a rock because of their simplicity, if only it told the truth. But perhaps it matters to you who the speaker is and from where. For you do not look at this alone, whether the speech is this way or another.

Plato therefore presents two mutually contradictory viewpoints in this passage concerning the relevance of the source of a *logos* in determining its validity. To justify myth as a source of truth, he has Socrates claim that the source of a *logos* is irrelevant as long as the content is true. Yet within the very myth that this line of argument was advanced to defend, he has Thamuz question the suitability of Theuth to judge his own invention due to paternal bias. Thus, Thamuz takes a position opposite to that of Socrates: *logoi* may in fact be rejected as invalid based on their source. Phaedrus therefore finds himself in a logical bind. If he agrees with Thamuz that the source of a *logos* can be used to dismiss it, then he must put no stock in what Thamuz says, since the Egyptian myth is of dubious provenance, and possibly even a spurious invention of Socrates. If he instead agrees with Socrates that the content of a *logos* cannot be dismissed simply because its source is unreliable, then he must also disagree with Socrates, who states (through Thamuz) that Theuth's defense of writing is illegitimate due to paternal bias.

The result is a subtle but powerful *aporia*. If we agree with Thamuz, then we must also disagree, and so too with Socrates. This *aporia* goes unnoticed by Phaedrus, who wishes blithely to agree with both. Although the paradoxical impasse created by Socrates'

myth is subtle, it stands out in its context as an example of a type of writing that naturally resists dogmatic appropriation by the δοξόσοφοι. Expository writing lends itself to dogmatic interpretation, but a type of writing that presents contradictory viewpoints without mediating between them, while perhaps instilling dogmatic misconceptions in some, would send another message to more sensitive readers: the characters in this discussion have hit upon an important question, but it cannot be decided on the basis of the arguments they give pro and con.[39] Refuge must be taken in supplementary evidence — from deeper inside the dialogue or from outside its bounds.

This is the move Plato makes on the question of the relevance of the source of a λόγος; the question cannot be decided on the basis of the arguments given by Socrates and Thamuz, yet it is still necessary to answer. I argue that Plato provides an illustration for how the question of the source of a *logos* can be approached in his literary depiction of the Socratic art of interpretation. Socrates' method of interpretation, which hinges on his view of myth as a source of wisdom, shows that the source of a *logos*, or more accurately, the *apparent source* of a *logos,* is a matter of consequence insofar as it determines our treatment of the *logos*. Because Socrates is willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to traditional myth as a culturally authorized source of wisdom, and by looking at it carefully to see whether it actually says something true (260a), he is able to extract the core of the spirit and thought the myth contains, and adapt it his own particular circumstances. Phaedrus, on the other hand, because he approaches myth as something to be debunked, challenged, or ridiculed, finds in it merely the occasion for caviling. These contrasting styles of interpretation are given fuller description in the subsequent section.

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[39] I therefore agree with the stance of Yunis 2003b: 211-212 that the difficulties of a Platonic text require a reader to read critically, but I do not follow him to the conclusion that this should be done "without contemplating the absent author."

IV. Time- and Space-Influence

What does the source of a *logos* have to do with writing? If we acknowledge that Socrates sees myth as a source of wisdom, containing *logoi* worthy of study and investigation, but that the younger generation of which Phaedrus is the dialogue's representative sneers at myth as a relic of a bygone era, we are well positioned to understand the anxiety that motivates Socrates' criticism of written philosophy. Socrates fears that writing, by its association with the generation of Phaedrus that is enlightened by technology but bereft of wisdom, will not be a strong enough medium to protect what is truly wise. Writing is not suited to philosophy, Socrates warns, because philosophy concerns itself with wisdom, and those who read and write are not sensitive in these matters. This is where, I believe, Plato disagrees. By putting the Socratic art of interpretation on display, Plato shows that Socrates' treatment of myth as a source of wisdom is a spirit of interpretation that is applicable to the written word. When written philosophy is approached as a source of wisdom, the criticisms of Thamuz and Socrates stand gravely weakened. In this section of this chapter, I argue that the disagreement between Socrates and Plato over whether the written text can be treated as a source of wisdom and thus attain value in the pursuit of philosophy becomes evident when one considers the roles of space and time in Socrates' critique of writing.

As mentioned above, Socrates' critique of writing includes some points that are absent from the criticisms voiced by Thamuz in the myth. The Socratic additions to the case against writing cluster around a few key themes: genealogy and descent, protection and defense, and vitality and immortality. This thematic cluster grows out of a germ from

Thamuz' critique, as the Egyptian god introduced the notion of fatherhood into the discussion when he claimed that Theuth was unqualified to judge the help or harm of writing as the father of letters (275a). Indeed, the development of these key themes seems to be Socrates' attempt to interpret Thamuz' point about the fatherhood of *logos* just as his critique of writing in general seems to be an attempt to interpret the myth.

The skeleton of the interrelationships between these themes newly introduced with Socrates' speech is roughly this: A writer or speaker is the father of his thought, which may take the form of either a written or a spoken *logos*. A father has an interest in the everlasting vitality of his progeny. The progeny will be vital for a longer duration the more capable it is of self-defense. Oral *logoi* are capable of defending themselves, but written *logoi* are not. Consequently, the father serves his own interest better by expressing his *logoi* orally rather than in writing. In what follows, I spell out these steps in greater detail and substantiate my claims that 1) the roles of time and space in Socrates' critique of writing are intimately bound up with the way that the apparent source of a *logos* influences its interpretation, and 2) Plato and Socrates disagree about the possibility that philosophical literature may be approached as a source of wisdom and thus generate interpretations that do justice to the wisdom of its content. The two claims coalesce under a certain assumption to which I believe both Socrates and Plato adhered: that only *logoi* that have stood the test of time can genuinely be approached as sources of wisdom.

In his own criticism of writing, Socrates extends Thamuz' image of the writer as the father of his text. He turns the image into a criterion for judging the effectiveness of different modes of communication. If the goal of human reproduction is immortality through the continuous creation of successive generations of offspring, then reproductive

success is gauged by the viability of the offspring it engenders. Socrates applies a similar standard to acts of communication: the written word is etched in water and is compared to a quick-blooming, but quick-fading plant that leaves no permanent mark (276b-d). The *logos* of oral discourse, on the other hand, when used in accordance with the dialectical art by a teacher who can find a fitting soul for his message and who can sow speeches μετ' ἐπιστήμης "with knowledge" (276e), will produce immortality by implanting the seeds of similar speeches in other souls, which will in turn continue to reproduce themselves for as long as the process is followed.

Thus, Socrates has constructed a way of judging philosophical writing based on its communicative efficacy, and the specific criterion he uses is duration in time. A philosophical communication that attains to immortality is perfect and ideal, and this is only done through oral discourse, not through writing. But Socrates' argument against the communicative efficacy of writing points to an alternative criterion that Socrates ignores — spatial extent. If a written work's durability in time is a virtue to its father, then surely its extent over a large spatial territory could be seen as a virtue as well. In each case, the benefit seems to be the influence of the writing on a great number of individuals. Writing that is durable over time influences a large number of generations despite influencing few individuals per generation. Writing with great spatial extent may, like the plants of the Adonis gardens, flourish and then perish quickly, but it nevertheless can reach a great number of individuals even in its short span of life.

Yet Socrates does not see the time-influence and the space-influence of a *logos* as redounding equally to the glory of its father. Instead, he demonstrates a clear privilege for durability over extent. In fact, Socrates indicates that writing's tendency to attain great

territorial scope is one of its demerits. Spreading far and wide, a written work is "tossed about everywhere" (κυλινδεῖται πανταχοῦ) equally among those who understand (τοῖς ἐπαΐουσιν) and those unsuited to it (οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει). While the primary problem raised here is that of a product of writing falling into the wrong hands, the phrase κυλινδεῖται πανταχοῦ lays down haphazard spatial extent as the condition for this result.

Although this condition is tantamount to great space-influence, which another thinker might view positively, Socrates speaks of it as a negative characteristic of writing as a medium for philosophical communication. Two negative consequences of writing's affinity for great space-influence are named: firstly, it is indiscriminate, speaking unselectively both to those who are knowledgeable and to those who have no business with it (οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει) (275e). Secondly, the written work cannot defend itself and lacks its father as a defender (275e). Because of the first consequence a written work will inevitably be mistreated. Because of the second consequence, there is no possible defense against this mistreatment. Is Socrates here again falling prey to his own practical ignorance of reading and writing?[40]

What is the danger in a written work reaching people who are not suited to it? Socrates plays this rather close to the vest. The word προσήκει, which is used to denote the class of readers who "have no business" with a given text (οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει, 275e), recalls previous discussion between Socrates and Phaedrus in which it was decided that the true rhetorician would need to have both a knowledge of the truth of his subject as well as a taxonomical knowledge of the types of human souls in order to accommodate

[40] Scholars have argued that Plato's philosophical dialogues escape the charges of Socrates against written philosophy. See especially Hyland 1968 and Zwicky 1997: 65. Relevant here as well is the notion discussed near the end of this chapter's Section III regarding the ability of the philosophical dialogue, especially in the hands of Plato, to ward off dogmatic interpretation.

his speeches to suit the latter (273d-e), and anticipates Socrates' coming praise for the one who τῇ διαλεκτικῇ τέχνῃ χρώμενος, λαβὼν ψυχὴν προσήκουσαν φυτεύῃ τε καὶ σπείρῃ μετ' ἐπιστήμης λόγους, "by using the dialectical art, having taken hold of a suitable soul, plants and sows speeches with knowledge" (276e).

If one connects the foregoing discussion of rhetoric with this critique of the space-influence of writing, therefore, Socrates seems to mean that writing which falls upon one who has no business with it will be rhetorically useless. But this is only a missed opportunity, and hardly the great harbinger of hermeneutic hell that Socrates makes the territorial expansiveness of writing out to be. This, therefore, cannot be Socrates' meaning unless failed rhetoric has strong negative consequences not mentioned in the dialogue.

Another possible danger of writing falling into the wrong hands that Socrates may have in mind is the second specific negative consequence of writing named by Thamuz — that is, the deterioration of the teacher-student relationship. It has been noted above that Socrates' silence on this matter is more powerful than any statement he could make about it, since the very conversation he is engaging in with Phaedrus demonstrates the principle Thamuz explains at the end of the Egyptian myth. If this socio-pedagogical consequence of writing is the one Socrates fears will result from the unchecked spatial extension of writing, then the speech of Lysias is the dialogue's example of a speech that has extended too far in space. This is literally true, since one copy of Lysias' speech has already made it outside the walls of Athens (227a). But what is its danger? The only two readers it has reached in this dialogue are Phaedrus and Socrates. The former is hardly a

hostile reader of Lysias. Socrates, on the other hand, can fairly be described as a somewhat hostile reader, prejudiced from the beginning against Lysias.

I therefore propose another way of understanding what Socrates fears about the prospect of written works falling into the hands of those not suited to them that can construe Phaedrus-reading-Lysias as an example of this phenomenon: Socrates understands that a *logos* will only be approached as a source of wisdom if it is approached with the hermeneutical prejudice reserved for what has stood the test of time. Traditional myth carries with it a long history of usefulness and approval. The mere existence of a myth in the present day is evidence that it has impressed each successive generation since its origin as a *logos* containing something of value. In an oral culture — which, for the most part, Greece had been until quite recently at the time of the *Phaedrus'* dramatic date — if a myth is not deemed valuable even by a single generation, then it is not preserved in the "cultural book,"[41] but left to languish in the sands of time.

At play in the same question is the opposition between *techne* and *sophia* established in the *Phaedrus* and whether the dialogue leaves open a possibility for their cooperation and coexistence. *Techne* is the broader mode of human activity of which writing is an example. This same mode of activity is accompanied by a mindset and an attitude toward truth that Socrates finds worrisome. This attitude is exemplified by the rationalist explanation of the story of the rape of Oreithuia and Phaedrus' quick dismissal of the myth of Theuth and Thamuz based on its source (229c-230a; 275b). The technical attitude, the dialogue implies, is skeptical toward traditional truths. Socrates' attitude toward traditional myth presents a stark alternative to the technical, rational skepticism of

[41] The term comes from Havelock 1963 and refers to the process of information storage in an oral culture. Because capacity for the storing of cultural information is highly limited in the absence writing technology, selective pressures are severe.

Phaedrus and the literate intelligentsia he represents. As has been previously noted, Socrates displays a nuanced attitude toward myth in the *Phaedrus*. The dialogue includes three myths, all spoken by Socrates. Along with two of these comes commentary on how myth ought to be interpreted. I argue here that this commentary is meant to be considered in relation to the interpretation of not only myth but text as well.

When the dialogue's first myth is introduced, Socrates appears to care little for intense reflection about myth. When pressed by Phaedrus to say whether he believes that the myth of Boreas' rape of Oreithuia is a true story (σὺ τοῦτο τὸ μυθολόγημα πείθει ἀληθὲς εἶναι; [229c]), Socrates replies that he does not have time (ἐμοὶ… οὐδαμῶς ἐστι σχολή [229e]) for investigating the facticity of these things, and opts instead to trust in the conventional opinion about them (πειθόμενος δὲ τῷ νομιζομένῳ περὶ αὐτῶν [230a]). While this comment appears to disparage the value of myth and even more strongly to disparage the activity of interpreting it, we must notice the myth's historical facticity is what Socrates dismisses as irrelevant to and inferior to knowledge of oneself. There is in fact no indication that he considers the myth as a whole to be a distraction from the pursuit of self-knowledge. Socrates may come to greater self-knowledge through contemplating the myth itself from an immanent and questioning but non-critical position, even if he cannot do so by debating whether the rape of Oreithuia ever actually occurred.

This distinction clarifies the sense in which Socrates views the authority of traditional myth. The authority of myth is not one that demands belief in historical fact, or even correctness on any particular point, but rather a guarantee that something worth consideration lies within. How can this be guaranteed? By the fact of the myth's tradition. If, over the course of many generations, people in each have seen fit to devote time and

energy to learning and communicating the myth, something worthwhile must lie inside it. Myth commands our trust not simply because it is old, but because it has a long and continuous record of approval. This fact is crucial to Socrates' rejection of writing in favor of oral discourse. The latter, Socrates sees, is capable of establishing authority and commanding trust, since the process of dialectic and philosophical pedagogy by which it is propagated can be seen as a stamp of approval repeated many times by many different people.

One of the elements of Socrates' criticism of writing that modern readers find puzzling is his worry over the abuse or mistreatment of writing by its readers, and the inability of the written text to defend itself.[42] Various explanations of this point have been offered, some more convincing than others. It has been supposed that Socrates fears that esoteric texts, when misinterpreted, might inspire heinous acts on the part of their readers. This is certainly a danger inherent to writing, and Socrates' ultimate injunction to write complex speeches for complex souls and simple speeches for simple ones lends it credence. Nevertheless, if this is the danger that sits at the forefront of Socrates' mind, why should he not name it directly? When misreading a text inspires one to commit evil actions, this is only an abuse against the text in a metaphorical sense; it can be damaging to the reputation of the text, but in this case there is no direct assault by the reader against the written work.

What then can Socrates have in mind when he laments writing as too vulnerable a medium to protect itself against the insults of its antagonists? One way to approach the question is to ask why someone would be motivated to assault a text in the first place.

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[42] This is in contrast to the philosopher, described at 278c, who is able to come to the aid of what he has written when he encounters a refutation of it.

Luckily, the dialogue has provided, in the characters of Phaedrus and Socrates, two images of the hostile interpreter. Phaedrus evinces his critical mindset first by appealing to the rationalists who dismiss traditional myth as fiction and then by questioning the validity of the myth of Theuth and Thamuz based on its obscure and dubious provenance. Socrates, in contrast, is willing to defend traditional myth against the critical impulse of Phaedrus, but himself is highly skeptical of Lysias' written treatise on the rightful social status of the non-lover.

Something can be learned from the skepticism of each, and it is important to remember that Socrates' behavior in the dialogues need not always be endorsed by Plato. In the characters of Socrates and Phaedrus in the *Phaedrus*, Plato has provided paradigms of two antithetical interpretive strategies: the technological snobbery of Phaedrus, who scorns traditional myth,[43] and the authoritarian traditionalism of Socrates, who accepts the messages of traditional myth without argument and despises one particular written speech (Lysias') in addition to lambasting written speech in general.

Faced with these two opposing pictures of interpretive method, the reader of the *Phaedrus* is led to ask what Platonic position might lie behind the confrontation he depicts between the technological skepticism of Phaedrus and the authoritarian traditionalism of Socrates. It is a commonplace in scholarship on Plato's dialogues to assume that the Platonic position is represented by Socrates, or whoever else the main character of the dialogue happens to be. While this may be a hasty assumption in many instances, it is particularly so in the *Phaedrus,* where Plato shows by the very act of writing the dialogue that he is not in full accord with the Socratic cynicism about writing.

[43] Trabattoni 2012: 306 reads Socrates defense of the "Egyptian" myth at 275b-c as a Platonic hint toward a "the youth corrupted by sophistry or even by excessive indulgence in dialectics."

The answer must somehow "save" writing from its Socratic (and Egyptian) criticisms. I believe that Plato uses Socrates and Phaedrus to show two problematic approaches to writing (and reading), each of which rests on assumptions Plato takes to be untrue. Phaedrus is besotted with the newest technologies of his own advanced age. This is demonstrated by his fondness for the newly widespread technology of writing and his citation of the latest medical theories from the expert Acumenus (227a). For Phaedrus, authority is derived from technical expertise. An affection for technology is one thing, but Phaedrus takes the technological prowess of his age as proof of the superiority of the intellectual products of his own time over those of previous generations. This is evident in his challenging of the facticity of the myth of Oreithuia, in his initial contempt for Socrates' "Egyptian myth" about Theuth and Thamuz, and in the attitude he expresses just following the myth of the cicadas, which upholds the importance of learning not what is really just or good or beautiful (τὰ τῷ ὄντι δίκαια μανθάνειν… οὐδὲ τὰ ὄντως ἀγαθὰ ἢ καλὰ), but what seems so to whoever will make the judgment (ἀλλὰ τὰ δόξαντ' ἂν πλήθει οἵπερ δικάσουσιν) (260a). The philotechnic Phaedrus appears to reify the art of rhetoric and to mistakenly consider persuasion an end in itself rather than a tool meant to serve what is just, good, and beautiful.

This same attitude, infatuated with skill and negligent of truth is writ large in Socrates' depiction of the rhetorical theorist Tisias (273a-274a). Tisias, according to Socrates, argues that if a weak but brave man is taken to court for attacking a strong but cowardly man, then it is in the interest of each to lie. The assailant should take recourse in the unlikeliness of a smaller man attacking a larger one, and the victim should, instead of admitting the shameful truth, lie that he was attacked not by the weak man individually

but by him as part of a larger group. Gagarin (2006) compares this Platonic account of Tisias' arguments to a differing account at in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2.24.11), in which both parties lie in appeals to the likely (*to eikos*). In Aristotle's account, the weak but brave man claims that it is not likely for him to assault a strong man, while a strong man who has been accused of attacking a weak one may claim that it is not likely for him to have done so, since it would seem likely.[44] Gagarin prefers Aristotle's account for including an original and surprising argument on which Tisias could stake his claim to have invented rhetoric.[45] But Plato's account also contains a shocking argument — the strong coward who has been attacked has the truth on his side, and yet neglects it in his argument in an attempt to persuade. For Plato's Socrates, this subordination of what is true to what may be persuasive epitomizes the technical age of Lysias, Phaedrus, and Tisias, which threatens to undermine philosophy through its use of written speeches to pursue the persuasive without regard for the true.

Like Plato, Socrates sees the problem in this line of thinking exhibited by Phaedrus. A traditional *logos* is not necessarily a useless one. Even if technological advance and the skepticism that accompany it has brought to light the fiction of the traditional myths, there is nonetheless the possibility that they may continue to instruct us. Phaedrus overestimates the importance of the technological in the production of wisdom, and this prevents him from accessing the wisdom contained in traditional myth. Socrates approaches myth as a repository of old wisdom, where Phaedrus approaches it as an inferior precursor to the leading scientific theories of his day. In Socrates' noble character, Plato pens a powerful point in favor of approaching myth as something to be interpreted

[44] Gagarin 2006: 32.
[45] Gagarin 2006: 32.

sympathetically and immanently. Socrates' "charitable readings" of traditional myth have made him a knowledgeable man, a talented speech-writer, and a skilled dialectician. Phaedrus, on the other hand, holds many ill-considered opinions and displays a lack of mindfulness that discourages the reader from emulating his attitude of technological skepticism.

Despite Socrates' noble and commendable prejudice in favor of traditional myth as a source of wisdom, Plato nevertheless stops short of endorsing in full the Socratic method of interpretation and the attitude toward the written text that he has Socrates enact in the course of the dialogue. In fact, Plato appears to call the reader's attention to two unsatisfactory facets of Socrates' literary mindset. The first is an error in the opposite direction of Phaedrus' technological snobbery: Socrates does not only exhibit a general tendency to find myth a storehouse of wisdom, but in fact goes so far as to assume that each myth is authoritative and that the opinions of mythic characters should be treated as true. Just as Phaedrus trusts in the new theories of the Athenian techno-medical elite without attempting to verify them through his own understanding, Socrates grants a similar level of authority to traditional myth. This becomes clear in Socrates' response to Phaedrus' objections following the statement of the "Egyptian myth."

Phaedrus derides Socrates after the latter's "Egyptian" story, commenting in an attempt at humor how easily Socrates conjures a myth from anywhere he likes. The effect of the comment is to undermine the myth on the grounds that it is obscure and springs from a dubious source. The operative principle in Socrates' rejoinder is that one ought not to look toward whence a *logos* derives, but only to whether or not it is true. This makes good sense. What does not is what Socrates fails to do afterwards. After

establishing that he and Phaedrus ought to look to the *truth* of the myth rather than its source, Socrates simply takes the truth of the myth for granted without providing any argument on behalf of its content.[46] While it is true that the following pages of the dialogue offer some reasons for believing in the myth's primary conclusions, it has been argued here that these pages constitute a Socratic interpretation of the myth — one that begins with the assumption that it contains wisdom and then proceeds to clarify and expound its insights. If these speeches are interpretive, as they appear to be, then Socrates never offers any *argument* for the inadequacy of writing or the validity of the conclusions of the "Egyptian myth." This shows a distortion of what Plato appears to point to as the proper attitude toward traditional sources of wisdom — while it is reasonable to assume their continued relevance and that their interpretation is a useful endeavor, the opinions of the characters expressed must not always be taken as authoritative simply because of the myth's traditional status. One is tempted to extend the same line of thinking to the Platonic dialogues themselves. The sensible approach for readers, Plato may have wished to imply, is to view them as a source of wisdom without taking the words and deeds of their characters, nor even of their lead characters, as above reproach.[47]

The second flaw in the Socratic attitude toward books, to which I believe Plato calls the attention of the careful reader, is his refusal to consider that the durability of the text might approximate the effect of oral transmission in establishing tradition and

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[46] The brute force of Socrates' naked assertion of the myth's truth is captured nicely in a comment from Benardete 1991: 189 "Socrates now has so much authority over Phaedrus that he does not dare ask whether the story is true or how it could be rationalized away. Socrates accepted the official teaching of Athens about Boreas so that he could come to know himself. Phaedrus accepts the official teaching of Socrates because he does not know himself. Phaedrus is a warning of how not to read a Platonic dialogue." Whether it is Phaedrus or Socrates who is to blame, Plato sends a clear signal here about the dangers of dogmatic interpretation.

[47] This activity is encapsulated by the phrase σκοπεῖν μὴ τὶ λέγωσι "look closely whether they are saying anything" (260a).

developing positive prejudice in readers. The virtue of Socrates' attitude toward myth is that his prejudice leads to productive and insightful interpretations. This is contingent on his willingness to look for what is wise in the myths. Plato shows that the same possibility for productive prejudice can lie within books, but Socrates is not aware of this possibility, perhaps due to his inexperience as a reader and writer, and the short-lived status of the book in Greece at the time of his life.

V. Conclusion: The Book as a Storehouse of Wisdom

The position argued for in this Chapter identifies two areas where Plato seems to distance himself from the words and deeds of Socrates. In the first case, Plato responds to Socrates' assumption that literature cannot be approached as a wise source for a *logos* firstly by displaying through Socrates the very method of interpretation that, when applied to literature, would make this untrue and secondly by calling attention to Socrates' personal lack of empirical familiarity with literature, especially with its use by successive generations. In the second case, Plato, despite championing Socrates' traditionalist method of interpretation over the technological snobbery latent in the method of Phaedrus, nevertheless challenges Socrates' hermeneutics on account of its risk — dogmatism. By layering his dialogues with puzzles and inconsistencies which the "official teaching" of the dialogue cannot resolve, Plato writes in such a way to encourage that aspect of traditionalist interpretation which, because it expects to find wisdom, really does find it, while simultaneously staving off the lapses into dogmatism that may follow an excessive enthusiasm for time-tested literature.

CHAPTER 2: Measurement and Reading in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Writing has often been identified as a prominent theme in Plato's *Theaetetus*. David Halperin and Kathryn Morgan have suggested that the dialogue's opening frame, in which a character reads the main dialogue aloud from a book, emphasizes textuality in a way that is "programmatic" for the rest of the dialogue.[1] Harrison, Benardete, Tschemplik, and Howland have analyzed this frame while giving due attention to its focus on writing.[2] Especially relevant for this my argument in this chapter is Andrew Ford's observation that Plato uses the dialogue as an opportunity to comment on the practice of interpreting a philosophical fragment.[3]

Indeed, the dialogue is tinged with textuality in its vocabulary and its imagery from the opening frame to Socrates' final speech. A brief overview of this phenomenon would point to the book of the opening frame (143c), Socrates' reference to Protagoras' written work (152a, 171a, 171b),[4] the image of the human mind as something quite like a wax writing tablet (191c), the use of phonology and the Greek alphabet as a paradigm for the part-to-whole relation (163c, 202e), and the mention of Meletus' written indictment (τὴν Μελήτου γραφὴν ἥν με γέγραπται "the indictment of Meletus which he wrote against me") against Socrates with which the dialogue concludes (210d). What is the meaning behind the *Theaetetus*' preoccupation with writing, and how is it to be understood by readers of the dialogue?

Many compelling interpretations of the *Theaetetus* have been proposed on the basis of the dialogue's manifest interest in writing, but these interpretations do not always venture far beyond

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[1] Halperin 1992: 99; Morgan 2003: 103

[2] Harrison 1978; Benardete 1984: 85-87; Tschemplik 1993; Howland 1998: 39-51; Tschemplik 2008: 16-23.

[3] Ford 1994.

[4] While Socrates and his interlocutors do not engage in the full-scale interpretation of a robust work of literature in the *Theaetetus*, the human-measure thesis is treated as a text in the dialogue. Theaetetus claims that he has "read" the phrase "many times" (152a) and numerous allusions are made to the title of Protagoras' book, *Truth*. Additionally, among the important distinguishing marks of textual language from oral language are the specificity and invariance of the former. Protagoras' dictum is treated textually since it is directly quoted and, although variously interpreted, never merely paraphrased.

the short dramatic frame into one of Plato's longest and densest dialogues, leaving much that the *Theaetetus* has to say on the question of writing, reading, and their role in philosophy unaddressed. It has been suggested that the dramatic and discursive levels of a Platonic dialogue are complementary aspects meant to be read in concert, and that an interpretation of either the drama or the philosophical content of a dialogue is incomplete or unverified until it can be shown to be consonant, or at least consistent, with the message presented on the other level.[5] If we accept this principle of interpretation, a reading of the *Theaetetus* which fails to engage deeply with the dialogue's philosophical arguments will at best tell only half the story, but so will an explication of the dialogue's arguments that neglects writing, the most conspicuous literary theme of the *Theaetetus*.

Because an exhaustive treatment of the dialogue's many and diverse uses of the theme of writing would exceed the scope of this chapter, I therefore intend to present an interpretation of a single aspect of the role writing plays in the *Theaetetus*, and to ground this interpretation firmly in the dialogue's discursive content. As Andrew Ford has noted,[6] the first half of the *Theaetetus* depicts Socrates and the dialogue's eponymous character in an act of textual interpretation. I argue in this chapter that these textual investigations of the first half of the Theaetetus are intimately linked in several ways with the arguments Socrates marshals against Protagoras on the discursive level, especially the περιτροπή argument (170a-171d).

To state my thesis in brief, the first half of the *Theaetetus* presents Socrates' attempt to impress upon *Theaetetus* the value of philosophy and simultaneously to disparage the sophistic life and mode of thought, which are represented by Protagoras and his doctrines. Socrates selects the philosophical text as the site for the *agon* between Socratic philosophy and Protagorean

[5] See Klein 1965: 17.
[6] Ford 1994: 205-206.

sophistry. In both word and deed, the philosopher demonstrates to the talented young mathematician that writing is unable to preserve or communicate knowledge under the relativistic assumptions of Protagorean thought. The use of the text in philosophical communication can only be redeemed by a method of reading based on the philosophical (in the sense of anti-Protagorean and anti-sophistical) assumption that ideas may share a common measure between separate individuals.

The case Socrates builds on behalf of philosophy thus appeals to the literary inclinations of Theaetetus, who admits to having read the Protagorean text πολλάκις ("many times" 152a). Because the bright and bookish Theaetetus holds the text in high esteem, Socrates constructs an argument for the value of philosophy that champions a philosophical style of reading as superior to its sophistical alternatives. In this way, Socrates fulfills the injunction of the *Phaedrus* that an effective argument be suited to the soul of its addressee (271b-272b). Therefore, Socrates' accomplishments in the first half of the dialogue are twofold: he exposes the incompatibilities between Protagorean thought and an optimistic view of the value of reading in intellectual pursuits, and simultaneously sketches for Theaetetus a picture of philosophical reading to be followed in the future.

Chapter Overview and Key Terms

Section I of this chapter is a philological review of the term μέτρον ("measure") as it is used in the *Theaetetus* to reveal the presuppositions of Protagorean relativism and Socratic philosophy. The μέτρον figures heavily in the first half of the dialogue, and three distinct usages of the term (or, in one case, Socrates' use of a derivative, namely the denominative verb παραμετρέω[7]) emerge in the early pages of the dialogue. The μέτρον is first used as the pivotal concept in Theaetetus' geometrical proof about incommensurable magnitudes; I refer to this

[7] Smyth 1920: §866.2.

usage as the “mathematical use” of the word. Next, μέτρον acts as a key term in Protagoras’ statement that the human being is the “measure” of all things. Henceforth, I refer to this statement as the “human-measure thesis,” and describe this as the “philosophical use” of the term μέτρον. In the third usage of the word μέτρον, Socrates reformulates the human-measure thesis into an idea that is more congenial to the practice of philosophical reading explored in the dialogue; I argue that in Socrates’ usage of the word παραμετρέω, the philosophical text acts as a measure of its human reader both by eliciting the beliefs of the reader and by measuring changes in the reader’s beliefs over multiple readings of the same text. I describe the first two usages of the word in Section I.1 below, and some important differences between the two are laid out in I.2. Section I.3 describes the third usage of μέτρον.

Section I lays the foundation for Section II, as my analysis of the dialogue’s use of μέτρον and its derivatives (Section I) prepares for my interpretation of the dramatic aims of Socrates’ περιτροπή (“table-turning”) argument against Protagoras (Section II). The περιτροπή is an argument directed at Protagoras by Socrates from *Theaetetus* 170a-171d. According to Gail Fine, the argument’s nickname was first applied by Sextus Empiricus and seems to reference its attempt to depict Protagoras’ position as one doomed to self-refutation.[8] I argue that this sequence in the dialogue is not meant as a formal refutation of Protagorean doctrine, but rather as an *ad hominem* refutation of Protagoras himself, and that the περιτροπή is informed by the paradoxes that measurement and incommensurability create for Protagoras as an advocate of relativism.[9] In fact, Socrates defeats Protagoras in the περιτροπή not by identifying a logical

[8] Fine 1998: 201. Most scholars use the term περιτροπή to designate only pages 171a-171c. I use it to refer to the entire section 170a-171d, both because the smaller section is so closely tied 170a-170e in its style of argument and because I read the περιτροπή not only as the logical argument developed from 171a-171c, but as an *ad hominem* argument that culminates with the departure of Protagoras at 171d.
[9] The relativism of Protagoras is a philosophical position that Socrates glosses as “what seems so to each really is so for him” (τὸ δοκοῦν ἑκάστῳ τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι τῷ δοκοῦντι, 161c, with a similar gloss also given at 158e). This is the meaning of “Protagorean relativism” as the phrase is used in this chapter.

inconsistency in Protagoras' beliefs, but by the "metaphilosophical"[10] move of implicating him in the performative paradox of a teacher who teaches that his teachings are no more true than their contraries. Protagoras is forced into this ludicrous position because his human-measure thesis entails the incommensurability of the perceptions and beliefs of any one human with those of another.

Section II.1 explains the antiphilosophical qualities that provoke Socrates into his refutation of Protagoras, while Section II.2 advances my metaphilosophical reading of the argument. For my interpretation of the περιτροπή to stand, Socrates' arguments in that sequence of the dialogue cannot be a successful refutation of Protagorean relativism.[11] Therefore, I offer arguments against contemporary reconstructions of the argument that attempt to show its validity.

Section II concludes with a discussion of the role of writing and reading in the περιτροπή (II.3). I propose that in this argument, Socrates' use of the vocabulary of writing is meant to show how the textual status of the teachings of the dead Protagoras compound his problem of incommensurability. I argue that Protagoras' teachings entail a hermeneutical relativism (whatever a text seems to mean to each, it really does mean) under which his own exact authorial διάνοια ("underlying thought") can never be perceived or believed by anyone. But belief determines truth under Protagorean relativism, so the problem of textuality actually renders Protagoras' beliefs false.

In Section III, I describe the spirit and practice of the strategy of philosophical reading that guides Socrates and Theaetetus in interpreting the *Truth* of Protagoras. This strategy is shown as an alternative to the hermeneutics implied by Protagorean relativism. In contrast to the

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[10] This term is taken from Griswold 1988. An explanation of its meaning and role in this chapter is given in Section II.

[11] Sedley 2005 and Giannopoulou 2011 are among the most recent scholars to advance this view. Fine 1998 holds it conditionally. Further discussion of these views is included in Section II of this chapter.

relativist hermeneutics of Protagoras, Socrates' way of reading is consistent with philosophy both in its dialectical character and its openness to the possibility of a common measure shared by author and reader. Section III.1 lays out three specific techniques that belong to this Socratic style of philosophical reading. Next, Section III.2 offers an original reading of a curious passage in Socrates' discussion of the art of midwifery (150c), and explains that "productivity" is a virtue of a philosophical interpretation of a text. Finally, Section III.3 considers a few possible objections to the style of philosophical reading that I have argued is displayed in the *Theaetetus*.

I. The μέτρον and Incommensurability

In I.1, after a brief look at the circumstances that lead to the introduction of Protagoras' beliefs into the main conversation of the *Theaetetus*, I describe two uses of the term μέτρον in the early pages of the dialogue. These uses are 1) the philosophical use, which arises from a consideration of Protagoras' human-measure thesis, and 2) the mathematical use, which plays a key role in a mathematical demonstration described by Theaetetus that concerns incommensurable magnitudes. Both uses of the term betray certain epistemological presuppositions that bear on the problem of incommensurability, but these presuppositions are quite different in each case. The μέτρον of mathematics is unable to relate all magnitudes to a single, shared measure, which results in the mathematical problem of incommensurability. The philosophical μέτρον solves this problem for each individual, but in so doing transfers the problem of incommensurability to the realm of interpersonal communication, including written communication. The difference in how these two concepts of μέτρον handle the problem of incommensurability is discussed in Section I.2.

I.1 Two uses of "μέτρον": The Philosophical and the Mathematical

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates leads the talented young mathematician Theaetetus and his teacher Theodorus on a quest for the true definition of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).[12] Approximately the first half of the dialogue is devoted to an examination of Theaetetus' first proposed definition of this term: ὥς γε νυνὶ φαίνεται, οὐκ ἄλλο τί ἐστιν ἐπιστήμη ἢ αἴσθησις, "as it seems to me now at any rate, knowledge is nothing other than perception" (*Tht*. 151e).[13]

As soon as Theaetetus offers this definition, Socrates quickly explains that Theaetetus' answer to the age-old question of knowledge is not entirely original. In fact, Socrates claims, Theaetetus' definition simply rewords an opinion popularized by the sophist Protagoras in his book *Truth*:[14]

> Κινδυνεύεις μέντοι λόγον οὐ φαῦλον εἰρηκέναι περὶ ἐπιστήμης, ἀλλ' ὃν ἔλεγε Πρωταγόρας. τρόπον δε τινα ἄλλον εἴρηκε τὰ αὐτὰ ταῦτα. Φησὶ γάρ που "πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον" ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, "τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν."
>
> In fact you have probably stated an account of knowledge that is not trivial, but rather the one which Protagoras also said, although he said these same things in another manner. For he says somewhere that "The measure of all things" is man, "of those which are that they are, and of those which are not that they are not."
>
> (*Tht*. 152a)

Charles Kahn (1973) includes in his syntactic study of the verb εἶναι an account of the same Protagorean formula quoted by Socrates. Kahn classifies both the participles (ὄντων and μὴ ὄντων) as "veridical" uses of εἶναι. He means that their purpose is neither to assert the bare existence of something (this is the "existential" use in Kahn's terminology) nor to link a subject to a predicate (the "copula" use), but to assert that something really is so. Following this

[12] Socrates meets Theaetetus and his teacher Theodorus at a gymnasium in Athens in the Spring of 399 BCE. During their discussion, Socrates conjures Protagoras to join in as the fourth interlocutor. See Nails 2002: 320-321 for additional details of prosopography and dramatic setting.
[13] All citations of Plato's *Theaetetus* are taken from the 1995 OCT edition of Duke, Hicken, Nicoll, Robinson, and Strachan. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
[14] The *Truth* is now lost to us, and although little is known about its contents, the book probably began by stating the human-measure thesis. For discussion, see Lee 2005: 12.

designation, Kahn translates Protagoras' sentence: "Man measures what is so, (determining) that it is so."[15]

Thus, the basic sense of this Protagorean doctrine is this: each ἄνθρωπος acts as an ontological and veridical measuring stick,[16] determining what is true by his or her perceptions and beliefs.[17] Socrates quickly turns to an example to fill out the meaning of the human-measure thesis, and the significance of the claim that each man is a μέτρον (152b-152c). Sometimes a wind blows, making one person cold, but not another. Protagoras would propose of this situation, according to Socrates, that the wind *is* cold to the one who feels that it is, but not cold to the one who does not feel that it is cold. So what a person perceives is true for that person (152c). Every human, as the measuring stick of what is true determines what really is cold (or not) simply by perceiving that it is (or not). It follows that perception is infallible, and error impossible (152c).

Scholars disagree on key issues regarding the meaning of the human-measure thesis, some of which will be discussed in this chapter. I table these controversial details for the time being, however, and focus instead on Protagoras' usage of μέτρον to denote a veridical measuring stick of the sort described above. This use of the term will be referred to as the "philosophical" use in order to distinguish it from other uses of the word that occur in the *Theaetetus*.

Among these other uses of μέτρον is what I term the "mathematical use." The notion of the μέτρον makes its debut in the dialogue through its role in a mathematical problem concerning incommensurability that helps Theaetetus better understand the sort of answer Socrates has in mind when he asks for a definition of knowledge. Theaetetus learns quickly that his first attempt

[15] Kahn 1973: 367.
[16] LSJ 1996 s.v. μέτρον 1. *measure, rule*.
[17] The exact scope of the claim is a matter of some controversy, which the second section of this chapter will discuss. The human-measure thesis is at least broad enough to cover all perceptions. Socrates gives Protagoras trouble later in the dialogue (170a-171d) when he extends it to cover the truth of beliefs as well. See Lee 2005: 45 for discussion.

to define the term was unacceptable to Socrates because it named the various types of knowledge, such as that of the shoemaker and the baker, without identifying the common characteristics that unite them under the term "knowledge" (146c-147c).[18] Although this first attempt at a definition fails, Theaetetus has recently thought up a mathematical demonstration that models perfectly the sort of definition Socrates is seeking.

Instead of just a list of the instances of knowledge, Theaetetus realizes, Socrates expects a definition after the same fashion as the definitions that Theaetetus himself has just devised for the solution of a geometrical problem that he had been working on before Socrates' arrival (147c-148e). A full understanding of the meaning of the mathematical use of μέτρον requires an explanation of this geometrical problem. The problem concerns the incommensurability of certain geometrical lines.[19] There is no common measure, for instance, between the side of a square with an area of three units and a line whose length is one unit. Theodorus, who instructs Theaetetus in geometry and related arts at the gymnasium, has been performing special, individualized demonstrations for many such lines (the side of a three-foot square, the side of a five-foot square, all the way up to the side of a seventeen-foot square) that each is incommensurable with the foot-long line.

Theodorus works these problems out one-by-one because he lacks a general proof inclusive of all lines that are incommensurable with the foot-long line. This proof is impossible unless a classification of number has been made that distinguishes between the lines that are commensurable with the foot-long line and those that are not.[20] This is the crucial step that

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[18] Scholars have generally treated this as a preliminary attempt to the actual first definition proposed by Theaetetus, which comes a few pages later.
[19] Commensurability and incommensurability are defined in Book X, Definition I of Euclid's *Elements*: σύμμετρα μεγέθη λέγεται τὰ τῷ αὐτῷ μέτρῳ μετρούμενα, ἀσύμμετρα δέ, ὧν μηδὲν ἐνδέχεται κοινὸν μέτρον γενέσθαι ("Those magnitudes are said to be *commensurable* which are measured by the same measure, and those *incommensurable* which cannot have any common measure." Translated by Heath 1926; emphasis in original).
[20] Sachs 2004: 23, fn. 5.

Theaetetus provides. At 147e, Theaetetus recounts for Socrates how he divided all number into two classes—he designates "square numbers" (τετράγωνόν τε καὶ ἰσόπλευρον) as those that come into being by an equal times an equal and "oblong numbers" (προμήκη ἀριθμὸν) as those that can only be produced by a greater times a lesser or a lesser times a greater. Theaetetus then calls the side of a square with an area equal to a square number a "length" (μῆκος) and the side of a square with the area of an oblong number a "surd" (δύναμις). Lengths are commensurable with the foot-long line while surds are not, and a single proof can demonstrate this for all cases. This proof is contained in Euclid's *Elements*, Book X, Proposition 9, and it is generally believed that Theaetetus discovered it.[21] At the heart of this geometrical problem lies the problem of incommensurability, and the strange and somewhat disconcerting fact that the ratios between certain lines are fundamentally indeterminable. For these geometrical lines, the relationship to a μέτρον represents their ability to be known. Commensurable lines, those that share a μέτρον, can be put into an exact ratio with one another. In contrast, the ratio between incommensurable lines can only be approximated, and can never be expressed with complete accuracy. The mathematical μέτρον is therefore a valuable epistemic tool for the mathematician, but one whose applicability is naturally and necessarily limited to certain magnitudes to the exclusion of others.

In conclusion, both the philosophical and mathematical use of the word μέτρον play a large role in the *Theaetetus* and have important epistemological implications. The philosophical concept of the μέτρον glorifies human perception (or thought) as an ontological and veridical measuring stick, while the mathematical μέτρον allows the exact quantitative relations of phenomena to be known, but only in certain cases. Beyond these similarities, however, a number of important differences persist between these two uses of the term. These differences are discussed in the following section.

[21] Heath 1926: 3.

I.2 Two differences between the mathematical and philosophical μέτρα

The philosophical μέτρον of Protagoras' human-measure thesis encompasses a somewhat different range of functions from the μέτρον of the mathematicians. It retains the mathematical function of serving as a common element that can be used as the basis of comparison between two things (although in philosophy they are appearances,[22] while in mathematics they are magnitudes). But the μέτρον of the human-measure thesis takes on the additional role of an ontological and veridical standard. Under the human-measure thesis, the μέτρον is not only the grounds for relational reasoning between two entities, but also the touchstone and guarantor of being and truth for an individual appearance or proposition. Something may be said to be or to be true if it is "measured" so by a human acting as its μέτρον.

In contrast to the philosophical μέτρον, the μέτρον of mathematics is ontologically and veridically neutral; it does not share in the confirmatory function of the philosophical μέτρον by acting as a touchstone or guarantor of being or truth.[23] In mathematics, when two magnitudes are recognized as incommensurable, the compatibility of one of the two with a given μέτρον (the unit length) does not imply a higher ontological or veridical status for the measurable magnitude in comparison to its incommensurable counterpart.[24] One of the magnitudes is more easily

[22] I have chosen this term since it seems to straddle the (often unnecessary) division between sensory perceptions and proposition beliefs. A perception and a belief can both be said to "appear to" someone. This is in fact a pivotal ambiguity of the περιτροπή argument (discussed below), which begins with the following summary of the human-measure thesis: "doesn't he say that what appears to each also is for the one to whom it appears?" (τὸ δοκοῦν ἑκάστῳ τοῦτο καὶ εἶναί φησί που ᾧ δοκεῖ; 170a). In the conversation that precedes this moment in the dialogue, these "appearances" have been exemplified by sensory perceptions. The περιτροπή extends the scope of the "appearances" to include opinions.
[23] Heath 1926: 1 quotes from the first *scholion* of Book X of Euclid's *Elements*: "[The Pythagoreans] (showed that) all magnitudes can be rational [ῥητά] and all irrational [ἄλογα] in a relative sense [ὡς πρός τι]."
[24] David 2001: 18 also sees this neutrality of the mathematical μέτρον at work in Theaetetus' proof about incommensurables, and he makes the bold and intriguing suggestion that this same neutrality regarding two sets, when one is traditionally privileged over the other, is the paradigm for Plato's solution of the problem of non-being in the *Sophist* (257b), which involves reconceiving non-being as simply other than being rather than its opposite. But at least for a human reasoner, the two situations are quite different. There is little temptation to privilege one set of

measured and used in calculation, but the two are equally real.[25] Thus, the function of the μέτρον as a veridical measuring stick is proper to the philosophical use of the term, but is excluded by the mathematical use, while the μέτρον's function as a grounds for comparison between separate entities is common to both the philosophical and the mathematical uses.

A second difference between the mathematical and philosophical uses of μέτρον is that the philosophical use erases or ignores the limitation that μέτρον faces in the world of mathematics. As Theaetetus' proof about incommensurable magnitudes illustrates, the μέτρον is a valuable epistemic tool, but it faces the necessary limitation of being unable to place certain incommensurable magnitudes in exact ratio. In contrast, when an individual ἄνθρωπος — Theodorus, for instance — is taken as the μέτρον of the things that are and are not, the problem of incommensurability vanishes. Conformity to the singular μέτρον of Theodorus is necessary for existence and veridicality. Anything that cannot be measured by Theodorus-as-*metron* is thrown out from the beginning as an object of thought or inquiry. As a result, anything that can be thought or perceived by Theodorus is commensurable with all the rest, and the problem of incommensurability is never encountered.

But while the human-measure thesis appears to eliminate the problem of incommensurability, it has the actual effect of increasing it substantially. Although the human-measure thesis does force all appearances into a state of mutual commensurability through their relation to a common μέτρον, this commensurability only holds for the internal thoughts and perceptions of a single ἄνθρωπος.[26] Since each ἄνθρωπος differs from all the rest, each acts

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mutually commensurable lengths over another set, because the selection of the unit will determine which set will have members that can be measured, and the selection of the unit is in most cases arbitrary or conventional. There is a clear human interest, however, in privileging being over non-being.

[25] This ontological equality likely stems from the knowledge that commensurability is always to an arbitrarily chosen unit. It is a contingent property that is subject to change whenever a new unit is selected.

[26] Woodruff 1999: 302 mentions the possibility that the human-measure thesis refers to the species rather than the individual. But Plato demonstrates his awareness of the species interpretation of the human-measure thesis, and

differently as a μέτρον (166d). Consequently, the thoughts and perceptions of different individuals do not share a common measure. For me, then, all my own appearances are commensurable; each appearance, opinion, or perception will be intelligible in terms of all the others.[27] But this commensurability ends as soon as another ἄνθρωπος is acknowledged by the first. The thoughts and perceptions of the one do not share a common measure with those of the other, and there is no common ground for a discussion that includes the opinions or perceptions of both perceivers. This lack of a μέτρον for measuring common perception between different people is precisely the Protagorean problem that Socrates will exploit in his *ad hominem* argument against Protagoras (170a-171d), discussed in Section II of this chapter.

This problem of incommensurability which plagues Protagorean relativism is not tantamount to its incomprehensibility or logical failure. On strictly logical grounds, the human-measure thesis remains a viable philosophical position even considering this unfortunate consequence of interpersonal incommensurability. However, the position does seem extremely unattractive when viewed in this light, and, furthermore, it implicates Protagoras in a performative paradox. As Socrates shows in the περιτροπή argument, the human-measure thesis may very well be true for Protagoras, but it is merely a personal truth, and one that calls into question Protagoras' attempts to teach it to others.

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represents it as a watered-down version of Protagoras' precise position: καὶ ὅσοι γε δὴ μὴ παντάπασι τὸν Πρωταγόρου λόγον λέγουσιν, ὧδέ πως τὴν σοφίαν ἄγουσι, "and those who assert the *logos* of Protagoras not quite entirely consider wisdom to be something like this" (172b).

[27] This is so, at any rate, when the human-measure thesis is considered on its own terms. The "secret doctrine" of flux, a metaphysics to which the human-measure thesis is later tied, implies that since the self is in constant flux and does not endure as a single thing through time, there is no commensurability of appearances even for a single individual. If a mathematical measure constantly changes in length, the magnitudes for which it can act as a measure will not be commensurable with one another.

I.3 Measurement in Perception and the Dialectic of Philosophical Reading

According to the Protagorean human-measure thesis, each human measures his or her perceptions: a human is the measure of all things, of those which are that they are, and of those which are not that they are not. Whatever seems true to each person really is true for him or her. Each perception, then, is an act of measuring by which the perceiver measures whatever he or she sees, hears, thinks, etc. against his or her own internal μέτρον. However, this picture is complicated by a curious choice of words that Socrates makes twice in a short passage (154b). I argue here that this passage indicates that perceptions — particularly the perceptions of texts[28] — are not only measured by but also are measures of their human perceivers. This passage purports to explain the mechanical details of the theory of perception to which the human-measure thesis is tied:

> Οὐκοῦν εἰ μὲν ᾧ παραμετρούμεθα ἢ οὗ ἐφαπτόμεθα μέγα ἢ λευκὸν ἢ θερμὸν ἦν, οὐκ ἄν ποτε ἄλλῳ προσπεσὸν ἄλλο ἂν ἐγεγόνει, αὐτὸ γε μηδὲν μεταβάλλον· εἰ δὲ αὖ τὸ παραμετρούμενον ἢ ἐφαπτόμενον ἕκαστον ἦν τούτων, οὐκ ἂν αὖ ἄλλου προσελθόντος ἤ τι παθόντος αὐτὸ μηδὲν παθὸν ἄλλο ἂν ἐγένετο.
>
> Then if that which we measure ourselves against, or which we touch, were large or white or hot, it would never become anything different when it ran into someone else, at least if it doesn't undergo any change; and if, in turn, the thing doing the measuring or the thing doing the touching were each of those things (i.e., large, white, or hot), then it in its turn would not become different when something else approached it or was affected by it, if it weren't itself affected.
>
> (*Tht.* 154b)

If a human is the measure of all things, then he or she appears to be the one who actively measures (the grammatical subject of παραμετρέω ["to measure"][29] and therefore the measurer),

[28] Ford 1994: 216 points out that the interpretation of Protagoras' text is itself an example of perception from which knowledge may or may not result.

[29] LSJ 1996 s.v. παραμετρέω lists two broad meaning groups (I and II) for the verb with the first divided into three senses (1, 2, and 3). Sense 1 of meaning group I is the sense used in the passage quoted above, "measure one thing by another," or "compare." Sense 2 "measure by a standard," or "supply a standard of measurement for" differs little from the first. Sense 3 "adjust expenditure," "measure out," "cause to be measured out," and especially "supply according to specific measurements" appears to differ from the previous two in referring to an action in which

and his or her perceptions would appear to be the objects of this measurement. Contrary to this common-sense interpretation of the human-measure thesis, that the human-as-measure is the measurer of all things, παραμετρούμεθα in this passage appears in the middle voice rather than the active. The middle participle παραμετρούμενον then appears with an active sense, restoring the human measurer (or the human's sensory faculty) to a purely active role. The implication is that the human observer not only measures an external object in the act of perception, but also measures himself or herself by means of the object being perceived.

Both uses of the verb in the passage quoted above are uses of the middle voice form of the verb, both of which mean "compare oneself with another thing," with the complement of the comparison appearing in the dative case. Thus, the complement, ᾧ παραμετρούμεθα of 154b can be taken to mean either "that by which we measure ourselves" or "that to which we compare ourselves," and it refers to the object of perception, which, in the act of reading, is a text. Similarly, τὸ παραμετρούμενον could be acceptably rendered by the LSJ 1996's "that which makes the comparison" or "the thing doing the measuring." In either case, τὸ παραμετρούμενον refers to the human perceiver, or to the sensory faculty of that human. In the case of reading, this human is a reader and the faculty in question is whatever combination of sight and intellection is involved in the act of reading.

The middle voice form of παραμετρέω in the passage above, which makes a perceiving human not only the *measurer*, but also *the thing measured*, points to a way of interpreting the human-measure thesis which stands far from what Protagoras surely meant, yet lends the statement much more use and credibility for Socrates in his project of educating Theaetetus in the ways of philosophical reading. Socrates' novel use of the verb and the new meaning that it

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measurement is a means to an end rather than the end itself. The second meaning group means to "measure a distance past," or "pass by" and requires an *accusativus loci*.

twists out of the human-measure thesis carry important implications for the dialogue's reflections on the relationship of reader to a text. To wit, Socrates' use of the verb implies that the text acts as a measure of its human reader both by forcing the reader to confront beliefs which may not have been previously articulated and by tracking the changes in belief of a reader over the course of multiple readings.

But in order to understand the Socratic purpose behind this usage of the verb meaning "to measure (oneself)," it is necessary to situate this passage in the context of its surrounding arguments. Theaetetus responds to the speech of Socrates quoted above (155b-c) with one of the dialogue's many instances of a simple, but not insignificant question: "What sort of things do you mean, Socrates?"[30] Socrates' answer to the question of what he means directs the dialogue toward the issue of relational change, the discussion of which will shed light on the relationship between text and reader. Socrates assures Theaetetus that he will soon learn the meaning of Socrates' enigmatic speech from a "small example" (σμικρὸν λαβὲ παράδειγμα, 154c). The example is a problem of language: If six dice are compared to four, they are *more*, but when they are compared to twelve, they are *fewer*. How can the six dice change from more to fewer without undergoing any change or decrease? The same problem is restated using Socrates himself as the subject of a second example.[31] Socrates has stopped growing, but Theaetetus has not. In the course of a year, Socrates may go from being taller than Theaetetus to being shorter (than him), without having undergone any change in his own height. In the end, Socrates is what he was not

[30] This question and variants of it appear in these passages at least: 146d, 152d, 164d, 188d, 189c, and 191b. In a dialogue that has much to say about interpretation, the dramatic scene intermittently reminds the reader of the gulf between ῥήματα ("words") and διάνοια ("meaning") and the ubiquitous possibility of misinterpretation. Such an inquisitive interlocutor as Theaetetus recalls one of the demerits assigned to writing in the *Phaedrus*, that a text cannot answer questions. But as Hyland 1968: 41 notes, the dialogue form does allow for some questions to be raised and addressed. Perhaps in no other Platonic dialogue than the *Theaetetus* is this function of his literary form more evident.

[31] Roochnik 2002: 44-46 gives a fuller treatment of Socrates' habit in the dialogue of using himself and *Theaetetus* as examples of the philosophical ideas being discussed. The effect is to "continually place the phenomenon of self-recognition before our eyes, and [demand] that we wonder about it" (46).

before (namely, shorter), but he has not *become* that way. There was no internal process of change in Socrates that produced this result (155c).

After laying out the first of these examples but before detailing the second, Socrates leads Theaetetus in establishing a few principles that seem true to the two of them despite the problems of relational change they have mentioned: (1.) Nothing could ever become greater or less, either in bulk or in number, as long as it is equal to itself. (2.) Whatever is neither added to nor subtracted from itself? could never increase or decrease, but would always be equal to itself. (3.) It is impossible for that which was not before to be afterward without having come to be and becoming (154e-155b).

These three principles are introduced as common-sense beliefs that deserve to be articulated independent of and prior to an analysis of the problems of relational change that are being examined. They are primary and, to the interlocutors at least, uncontroversial, and a proposition will be plausible only insofar as it harmonizes with these principles. Yet the three agreed-upon notions seem "to fight among themselves in the soul" when the problems of relational change are being discussed (ταῦτα δὴ, οἴομαι, ὁμολογήματα τρία μάχεται αὐτὰ αὑτοῖς ἐν τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ψυχῇ, ὅταν τὰ περὶ τῶν ἀστραγάλων λέγωμεν; 155b). The crux of these problems is that the relational nature of qualities such as "more" and "taller" is being misconstrued. Without additional context, the sentence "Socrates becomes shorter" means that Socrates at a later point in time is shorter than Socrates at an earlier point in time, and that in between these two points a process of decrease in height took place.

However, in the context of Socrates' second example of relational change, the meaning of "Socrates becomes shorter" is that Socrates at an earlier point in time was taller than Theaetetus, but at a later point in time was shorter than Theaetetus. Without the context that

Theaetetus is the μέτρον by which Socrates' height is being measured, the μέτρον is assumed to be Socrates' own height. Within the specific context of his example, however, Theaetetus acts as the μέτρον against which Socrates is measured. So, when Socrates passes from the condition of being taller than Theaetetus to the condition of being shorter than him, even though Socrates himself does not decrease in height, the reason is that a relative change in height has been effected between Socrates and his μέτρον (Theaetetus) by virtue of a change in the height of the latter.

In short, these problems of thought exemplified by the dice, or by Socrates who is taller and then shorter without changing in height, illustrate the idea of *relational change*—namely, that something may appear to be different when the circumstances around it change, even if that thing does not undergo a process of change itself.

It is difficult to consider this idea of relational change in the *Theaetetus* without being reminded of the dialogue's habit of showing how the meanings of words change for the speakers and hearers along with the progress of the discussion. The words retain their original form throughout, but as arguments developed to help explain and justify these words are upheld or defeated, the significance and esteem of the words themselves are subject to abrupt vacillation. The clearest example of this pattern is found at 162c-d, where Theaetetus sums up how the development of the conversation has cast an entirely new light on the human-measure thesis:

> ἡνίκα γὰρ διῇμεν ὃν τρόπον λέγοιεν τὸ δοκοῦν ἑκάστῳ τοῦτο καὶ εἶναι τῷ δοκοῦντι, πάνυ μοι εὖ ἐφαίνετο λέγεσθαι· νῦν δὲ τοὐναντίον τάχα μεταπέπτωκεν.
>
> For while we were going through how they say that what seems so to each this also is for the one to whom it seems so, it appeared to me to be entirely well said: but now quickly the opposite has fallen out.
>
> (*Tht.* 162c-d)

This sudden change in the reception of the argument was in fact prefigured even when Theaetetus expressed his approval of it:[32]

> Ἀλλ' ἔμοιγε, ἐπειδὴ σοῦ ἀκούω οὕτω διεξιόντος, θαυμασίως φαίνεται ὡς ἔχειν λόγον καὶ ὑποληπτέον ᾗπερ διελήλυθας.
>
> Well for me, whenever I hear you go through it like this, it seems to possess reason wonderfully, and it needs to be understood in the very same way you have gone through it.
>
> (*Tht*. 157d)

The language of Theaetetus' approval, although made eager and emphatic by the verbal adjective showing obligation (ὑποληπτέον: "it *needs* to be understood"), is in fact quite cautious and even suggestive of (the possibility of) a pending reversal. It is modified by a restrictive temporal clause ("*whenever* I hear you go through it like this [but perhaps only at these times]") and uses the subjective and impermanent language of "seeming." Theaetetus is thoroughly, but not lastingly, convinced of what he has heard, and this difference shows in the language he uses to express his agreement.

In this comment from Theaetetus, the human-measure thesis, or more precisely, the statement that "whatever seems so for each is so for him" (τὸ δοκοῦν ἑκάστῳ, τοῦτο καὶ ἔστιν, 161c), which is understood between Socrates and Theaetetus to be the logical equivalent of the human-measure thesis, is revealed as a μέτρον itself insofar as it has measured the philosophical development of Theaetetus. The opinions of Theaetetus change as the dialogue progresses, and the human-measure thesis, while repeating the same thing always as Socrates was very aware that words must inevitably do, measures the progress of the discussion and the changing views of Theaetetus (cf. *Phaedrus* 275d).[33] Just as the six dice change from more to less while staying the same in number, the human-measure thesis has changed from plausible to implausible while

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[32] Note that this passage corresponds to 162c, where Theaetetus recants his approval with the νῦν δὲ conjunction.
[33] At this point in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that a text ἕν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταὐτὸν ἀεί, "always signifies only the same one thing."

always repeating the same words. The doctrine's shift in favor is due to the shifting significance of its words, from what seems at first a promising prospective solution to the problem of knowledge, to a questionable thesis in light of recently advanced arguments.

This is the dialectic of philosophical reading, wherein a text is first measured by a human interpreter, who then, in a reversal of roles, becomes swept up in a process of self-interpretation (ᾧ παραμετρούμεθα, *Tht.* 154b) as the reader returns to the text to learn from it another time. This pattern is especially applicable to a reader of Theaetetus' ilk, who will read the same text many times (152a). Like the dice that are more and then less without becoming so, a text at one time says things that strike us as true, but at another time no longer seems to speak to us without undergoing any change in itself. The change has instead occurred in the reader. More will be said later in the chapter about the character of philosophical reading, but a description of the various uses of the concept of μέτρον in the *Theaetetus* would be incomplete without mention of the dialectic of philosophical reading, in which human and text alternate as μέτρον.

The dialectic of philosophical reading in which a reader uses the text as a measure of himself or herself is evident in this passage dealing with relational change in another way as well. Socrates and Theaetetus, in attempting to interpret the text of Protagoras, have articulated and affirmed three principles of reasoning in which they have full confidence. But these principles were not passively read from the text; instead, Socrates and Theaetetus were stimulated by their reading of the text to recognize these principles. The text introduced problems that forced its readers to articulate their confusion and the reasons for it. Thus, the Protagorean text helps clarify the beliefs held by Socrates and Theaetetus and in doing so demonstrates the power of a text to act as the measure of its human reader, bringing his or her beliefs to light.

In Section I, I have tried to show that the *Theaetetus* is concerned on many levels with the issue of incommensurability. The dialogue also explicitly thematizes both a philosophical and a mathematical usage of the term μέτρον, and the tension between these two uses of the term brings out problematic aspects of the relationship between Protagorean thought and incommensurability. I have also identified a peculiar use of a verb related to μέτρον (παραμετρέω), and suggested that Socrates manipulates the voice of the verb by changing from active to passive. In so doing, he is able to twist out of the human-measure thesis a dialectical picture more suitable to the practice of philosophical reading: the image of the text—or the understanding of a text—as a μέτρον by which changes in one's self can be observed. The idea that a careful reading of a text leads to a twofold interpretation, of both text and reader, is confirmed by other aspects of the dialogue that are discussed in III.2 of this chapter. Next, I continue to look into Plato's extended discussion of the μέτρον, appealing to this term and the related concept of incommensurability as the foundation of one of Socrates' most intriguing arguments against Protagoras, the περιτροπή, or "table-turning" argument.

II. A Metaphilosophical Reading of the περιτροπή

Having proposed in Section I that the *Theaetetus* exposes incommensurability as a problem in the thought of Protagoras, I now turn to the area of the dialogue in which Socrates explicitly exploits the vulnerability that results from this problem of incommensurability on the dialogue's discursive level. In II.1 and II.2, I argue that Socrates' περιτροπή is not intended as a conclusive refutation of Protagoras' human-measure thesis, but as an *ad hominem* argument intended to show that Protagoras himself is made to look ridiculous as a consequence of his own views. The argument calls attention to the fact that if there is no common measure shared between individual humans, then Protagoras' ideas are at best true for him alone, and his

teaching them is a futile endeavor. In Section II.3, I further argue that Plato, through the use of the vocabulary of writing in this section of the dialogue, provides the outline of a complementary argument to the περιτροπή that explores the problems that incommensurability and textuality pose for Protagoras as a dead writer whose views live on only through his writings and other people's interpretations of them.

My proposal that the περιτροπή should be seen as targeting Protagoras rather than his beliefs solves another potential problem of the dialogue: a reader of the *Theaetetus* unfamiliar with Plato's style might find Socrates' arguments against Protagoras too numerous to be convincing.[34] Is the Socratic position overdetermined, betraying its own weakness by launching so many different assaults on Protagoras' beliefs, when any one of them, if successful, would be sufficient to refute those beliefs?[35] On the contrary, Socrates' argument against Protagoras is not overdetermined, because the preliminary objections (all those coming before 170a) are all propaedeutic to the περιτροπή (170a-171d) and the subsequent argument from expertise (177b-179b), and only the latter of these directly targets the relativist beliefs of Protagoras.

This section of the chapter focuses on the περιτροπή or "table-turning" argument, deployed by Socrates from 170a-d. I argue that many scholars have missed the point of this passage, reading it either as a successful or failed attempt to logically refute Protagorean relativism. I propose instead that the περιτροπή is the climax of a "metaphilosophical"[36] encounter between Socrates and (the imagined) Protagoras, staged by Socrates for the benefit of

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[34] Chappell 2004 enumerates twelve objections to Theaetetus' first definition of knowledge, which is taken as the logical equivalent of Protagoras' human-measure thesis.

[35] Hyland 2004: 85-92 makes an excellent case for the possibility that Plato's dialogues were simply not intended to be conclusive philosophical arguments, but rather "invitations to philosophy." This may seem to contradict my position (articulated in the previous chapter) that the argument from expertise (177b-179b) constitutes a successful refutation of Protagorean relativism, but even Hyland's position allows for Plato to have planted the seeds for a successful philosophical argument. These arguments are only successful in potential, and must be cultivated by readers of the dialogues to reach their full blossom.

[36] This term is taken from Griswold 1988, and it is discussed in the following paragraph.

Theaetetus' philosophical education. Accordingly, I claim that the argument is not Plato's attempt to expose logical shortcomings in Protagoras' beliefs, but rather his depiction of Socrates fighting tooth and nail to impress the value of philosophy on a talented young mind.

In his essay "Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," Charles Griswold argues that many of the conversations found in Plato's dialogues are not philosophical, but pre-philosophical.[37] Philosophy is a level of human discourse, and although it is defined in part by its subject matter, certain fundamental axioms must be agreed upon for philosophical thought or discourse to take place. But many of the characters in Plato's dialogues reject these basic axioms, the foundations of philosophical thought. When Socrates runs up against a Callicles (*Grg*. 481c ff.) or a Thrasymachus (*Rep*. 336a-357a, 498c-d), for instance, his effort is not expended on "object-level philosophy," that is, the consideration of philosophical questions in a philosophical manner, but on a defense of philosophy itself and of philosophical discourse.[38] Because Socrates' interlocutors often reject the foundations of philosophical inquiry, Socrates cannot use the philosophers' toolkit in these confrontations without begging the question. Instead, he must meet his opponents-in-argument on a pre-philosophical level.[39] On this level of discourse, it is action and deed that rule the day.[40] Since λόγος is what is on trial in a metaphilosophical tilt, rational discussion must be held in abeyance.

The intent and effect of the περιτροπή argument is to demonstrate in deed as much as in argument how Protagoras' relativism limits the validity of his ideas to his own world—which like everyone else's private world is incommensurable with all the rest—and works directly

[37] Griswold 1988.
[38] In fact, Griswold 1988: 156-157 implies that Socrates goes looking for this type of interlocutor: "Socrates cannot 'justify' or 'demonstrate' his own activity except by coming across or finding someone who is *not* already persuaded by its possibility and worth" (emphasis in original).
[39] Griswold 1988: 149.
[40] The paradigmatic example of Griswold 1988: 158-160 is Socrates' demonstration with the slave boy in the *Meno*. Socrates does not merely explain to Meno that recollection is possible, but shows him in deed that his paradox about learning cannot be airtight.

against his purposes as an educator of and influence upon talented youths like Theaetetus. As I argued in Section I.2 above, Protagoras' philosophical concept of μέτρον, which takes each human as an ontological and veridical measuring stick, eliminates the problem of incommensurable appearances for a single individual. But it does so by making each human a unique μέτρον, such that no appearances are shared as common ground between different subjects. Socrates capitalizes on this weakness of the Protagorean position in the περιτροπή by drawing out the absurd and unseemly consequence that Protagoras cannot rationally argue on its behalf, since it is merely a personal belief with no claim to intersubjective truth. In this way, Socrates forces Protagoras to cede the project of Theaetetus' intellectual and moral education to Socrates after a quick and final retreat (171d).

The *Theaetetus* is a dialogue on knowledge, but the question of knowledge leads quickly to a discussion of the philosophy of Protagoras, and it is on this issue that the conversation dwells for much of the dialogue. The *Theaetetus*, then, features a debate between Socrates and Protagoras that flits about between a philosophical and a pre-philosophical grounding. The broad outline of the argument is this: Socrates and Protagoras engage mostly on pre-philosophical terms before the performative refutation of Protagoras by Socrates occurs at 171d. From that point on, having won the day for philosophy and having justified its axioms through Protagoras' abandonment of his position, Socrates continues to critique Protagorean relativism, but now with a wider leash to use the tools of philosophy and dialectic.

As a result, the *Theaetetus* contains a two-pronged approach to anti-relativist argumentation. The first argument occurs largely in the dialogue's dramatic register, and culminates in the decisive deed of Protagoras' abandonment of the argument and his own position, which results from the isolating and disgraceful conclusion that his theory can be true

only for him (171d). The second argument occurs largely on the discursive level, making liberal use of philosophical presuppositions that the radical relativist would deny. This two-pronged approach against anti-philosophical thought was also recognized by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* (Γ.5, 1009^{a}16-22). Here, Aristotle states that there are two lines of argumentation that may be used to support the principle of non-contradiction, one for the genuine thinker who has lost his way and become confused (this would describe Theaetetus in his eponymous dialogue) and another for the eristic arguer (Protagoras, presumably).[41] The *Theaetetus* shows dramatically why the two modes of argument are necessary, and vividly illustrates the type of character to whom each mode responds.

II.1 The Anti-Philosophical Nature of Protagorean Relativism

If Plato's dialogues are "invitations to philosophize,"[42] whose primary purpose is to depict Socratic attempts to justify philosophy before his often anti-philosophical interlocutors, how are we meant to read the drama of the *Theaetetus*?[43] This understanding of the purpose of the dialogues is advocated by Drew Hyland (2004). Hyland argues on the grounds of literary

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[41] The Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* does not deny the principle of non-contradiction, although the question did surround the historical Protagoras (cf. Woodruff 1999: 302). The question of what distinguishes philosophy from sophistry or other anti-philosophical intellectual practices is a difficult issue discussed by Griswold 1988, Nehamas 1990, and McCoy 2009. I do not attempt to answer it here, but it is clear that Protagoras' beliefs, by entailing interpersonal incommensurability, are anti-philosophical in undermining the value of philosophical dialogue, which must be central to Plato's conception of philosophy, whatever it may be exactly.

[42] Hyland 2004: 91. This idea, along with ideas about Plato's "metaphilosophical purposes" developed by Griswold 1988, is central to my interpretation of the περιτροπή in this section. That argument is not Plato's critique of Protagoras' human-measure thesis, but Socrates' refutation of Protagoras the man.

[43] Klein 1965: 27-31 presents an interpretation of the *Theaetetus* that sees philosophical import in dramatic developments, and is largely consistent with and perhaps even supportive of the program in Griswold 1988 of metaphilosophical interpretation. Klein argues that Protagoras is refuted in deed by Socrates' successful luring of Theodorus into a philosophical discussion, since it was Protagoras (through Socrates) who cautioned that if Socrates were unfair in argument, he would chase people away from philosophy. Klein's reading identifies an important dramatic elenchus of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, but I think the significance is even greater than Klein realizes. The *Theaetetus* ends with Socrates' departing to face an indictment that will ultimately lead to his execution (210d). In the absence of Socrates, Theodorus will continue as Theaetetus' mentor. If Theaetetus is to have a future in philosophy, Socrates must leave his mentor better disposed to a life for which he displays a strong antipathy (164e). The reading of the dialogue's drama in Blondell 2002 is sensitive to Socrates' desire to reproduce himself in Theaetetus.

form that the main purpose of the dialogues is not to express Plato's philosophical positions, but to show portraits of Socratic philosophy. One pose Socrates often strikes in these portraits is the metaphilosophical advocate of philosophy. Socrates speaks in the *Theaetetus* with the mathematicians Theaetetus and Theodorus, and he discourses at length with the deceased Protagoras by impersonating the sophist himself. Is there a metaphilosophical clash between Socrates and the mathematicians, or between Socrates and Protagoras, or both?

To answer this question, we must find a presence in the dialogue that threatens philosophy as it is conceived by Plato's Socrates. The evidence that this anti-philosophical presence cannot be mathematics is twofold. To begin with, the first sentence spoken by Socrates in the dialogue (Εἰ μὲν τῶν ἐν Κυρήνῃ μᾶλλον ἐκηδόμην, ὦ Θεόδωρε, τὰ ἐκεῖ ἄν σε καὶ περὶ ἐκείνων ἀνηρώτων, εἴ τινες αὐτόθι περὶ γεωμετρίαν ἤ τινα ἄλλην φιλοσοφίαν εἰσὶ τῶν νεῶν ἐπιμέλειαν ποιούμενοι, "If I cared more about the people of Cyrene, Theodorus, I would question you about the situation and the people there, whether any of the young men there are doing work concerning geometry or some other philosophy" [*Tht*. 143d]) considers geometry as a type of philosophy, and one that Socrates esteems greatly at that. Additionally, the use of mathematics as an idealized model for philosophical knowledge indicates that there is no inherent opposition between philosophy and the science of geometry practiced by Theaetetus and Theodorus (148d).

Therefore, mathematics and philosophy are not enemies in this dialogue, but the situation in the *Theaetetus* is more complicated than this. Indeed, the two mathematicians have different relationships to their art, to knowledge, and to philosophy. Theaetetus is young, bright, impressionable, and highly responsive to Socrates. Theodorus, on the other hand, is reluctant to philosophize, an older man who is set in his ways and loathe to renounce his old choice to turn away from "bare words" (ψιλοὶ λόγοι, 165a). Thus, the metaphilosophical drama of the

Theaetetus is built around Socrates' attempts to educate Theaetetus, who is already sympathetic to his philosophical manner of thinking, but it is also built around Socrates' attempts to increase Theodorus' sympathy for philosophy.[44] Perhaps Socrates knows that Theaetetus will only be able to flourish in philosophy if his mentor, Theodorus, is not opposed to this practice.[45] On the whole, then, philosophy is not opposed to geometry, but Theodorus has some anti-philosophical inclinations that must be mollified in order for Theaetetus to develop his philosophical potential in the absence of Socrates, who faces trial and eventual execution.[46]

The twin opponents of Socrates on the metaphilosophical level, then, are Theodorus, who expresses disdain for philosophy (165a) and Protagoras, whom Socrates detects as an intellectual influence on Theaetetus (152a) and whose ideas preclude certain basic assumptions of philosophy as it is conceived by Plato, especially the notion that philosophical dialogue is powerless to lead discussants toward intersubjective truths. An examination of Protagoras' beliefs, especially as they are expressed in the *Theaetetus*, help to clarify what is at stake in the metaphilosophical confrontation between Socrates and Protagoras and why Plato found Protagoras' teachings to be a threat to his view of philosophy. In keeping with this study's focus on writing, we must also ask what the specific implications of Protagoras' beliefs and doctrines are for the interpretation of texts, and how Protagoras' hermeneutics might pose a threat to

[44] Socrates praises Theaetetus' solution to the problem of powers, and encourages him to apply the same manner of thinking to the question of knowledge (148d).

[45] Howland 1998: 70-71 fittingly refers to Theodorus and Protagoras as "trustees of the soul" of Theaetetus. An early exchange between Socrates and Theodorus reveals that Theaetetus' financial trustees have squandered away his inheritance (144d).

[46] Νῦν μὲν οὖν ἀπαντητέον μοι εἰς τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως στοὰν ἐπὶ τὴν Μελήτου γραφὴν, ἥν με γέγραπται, "Now then, I need to appear at the King's Stoa regarding the indictment of Meletus, which he has written against me" (210d). Harrison 1978: 119 connects this use of γέγραπται to the appearance of the same word in the dialogue's narrative frame 143a, where it is used by Eucleides to describe his composition of the book from which the main action of the *Theaetetus* is read aloud. Harrison accordingly argues that the *Theaetetus* emphasizes writing to highlight the *aporia* and failure of the dialogue's conclusion and to indicate that the dialogue itself may be an indictment of Socrates. This conclusion seems hasty to me, but Harrison nevertheless raises a worthwhile question in the link between the themes that bookend the *Theaetetus*: writing and the execution of Socrates.

philosophical literature. This latter question is taken up in Sections II.3 of this chapter and expounded upon in Section III.

Socrates' comment at 162a demonstrates the threat that relativism poses to philosophy. In concluding a lengthy criticism of the human-measure thesis, Socrates propounds the following rhetorical question:

> τὸ γὰρ ἐπισκοπεῖν καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖν ἐλέγχειν τὰς ἀλλήλων φαντασίας τε καὶ δόξας, ὀρθὰς ἑκάστου οὔσας, οὐ μακρὰ μὲν καὶ διωλύγιος φλυαρία, εἰ ἀληθὴς ἡ Ἀλήθεια Πρωταγόρου ἀλλὰ μὴ παίζουσα ἐκ τοῦ ἀδύτου τῆς βίβλου ἐφθέγξατο;
>
> For to inspect and to take it in hand to refute the appearances and opinions of each other, if those of each are correct, is that not a large and shrill form of nonsense if the *Truth* of Protagoras is a true thing which he declared from the inner sanctum of his book, rather than a joking one?
>
> (*Tht*. 162a)

The effect of Protagoras' doctrines is to discourage (by implicitly declaring these things futile) communication in general debate about opinions and principles of thought and belief specifically.[47] And yet this discouragement is wholly at odds with philosophy as Socrates appears to conceive it, for two reasons. The first anti-philosophic quality of Protagorean relativism is that Socratic philosophy is based in conversation, and the motivation behind conversing with someone is the belief that something can be learned, taught, or better understood.

But perhaps more important in the context of the *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates has explicitly encouraged Theaetetus to use philosophical problems as a starting point for articulating his own most basic beliefs, is that whenever what seems to be the case really is so, there is no impetus even for an individual to reflect on his or her basic presuppositions about the world, such as those articulated by Socrates and Theaetetus in response to the dice example (154c-d; see section I.3 above). If we follow Protagoras, we renounce our practice of articulating principles of

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[47] Lee 2005: 25-26 posits that *Antilogiai* ("Opposing Arguments") may have been an alternate title of Protagoras' *Truth*. This title would indicate a blatantly sophistic bent in the writings and teachings of Protagoras.

belief and interpretation, and we wind up believing whatever "seems" true *prima facie* no matter how outrageous it may be. But the outrageousness of our beliefs is just one costly result among others, since failing to look for deeply held beliefs causes self-knowledge to suffer.

Finally, the point of greatest humiliation for Protagoras in this refutation is that he is a sophist who professes to teach the *Truth* to young men. But his authority as a teacher is undermined by his own doctrines, which imply that his students are no less wise than he.[48] Moreover, at the end of the περιτροπή he is caught in a performative contradiction. It is revealed that Protagoras' truth is his alone and cannot be taught or defended in the face of a contrary opinion. But he has been attempting to persuade present company of the value of his views with rational argument for much of the dialogue. This explains why Protagoras' final action in the dialogue is to "run off" (ἀποτρέχων, 171d) after what seems a very half-hearted rejoinder (171d).

II.2 The περιτροπή

At 170a, Socrates initiates an argument against Protagoras. In my view, this argument is not intended to disprove the human-measure thesis, but to force the man who holds it, Protagoras,

[48] Woodruff 1999: 308 counters that a Protagorean response would be to separate knowledge from teaching, directing the latter toward advantage instead of truth. This would not, however, help Protagoras save face in the case of the human-measure thesis, which is an abstract doctrine of no obvious practical value. An old anecdote variously assigned either to Protagoras and a pupil named Eualthus or to Corax and Tisias, the putative pioneers of the rhetorical art, demonstrates that the sophists' attempts at practical education was beset by a paradox of its own. Gagarin 2007: 33 summarizes the events thus: "The story is that when Tisias went to study with Corax, he promised to pay the fee if he won his first case. Then when Tisias had learned his lessons, Corax asked for his fee but Tisias refused. They went to court and Corax argued that he should receive the fee whether he won or lost the case: if he won because he had won, and if he lost, then according to the terms of the agreement (because Tisias would have won his first case). In response, Tisias 'used the same argument, altering nothing.' Whether he won or lost, he argued, he should not have to pay: if he won because he had won, and if he lost, then according to the terms of the agreement (because he would have lost his first case)."

into a position of impotence and social irrelevance.[49] Indeed, it is no coincidence that this argument has been labeled *ad hominem* at least twice.[50]

The περιτροπή is thus a metaphilosophical argument that causes Protagoras, an opponent to philosophy, to abdicate the discussion so that a philosophical refutation of his views may commence. Cornford does not explain why he sees the argument as *ad hominem*. Lee's reasoning, which I find persuasive, is that the περιτροπή forces Protagoras to revise the universal scope of his original claim, and that the argument is thus not a decisive refutation. However, Lee's analysis pays little attention to the dramatic context of the *Theaetetus*. I argue that the *ad hominem* aspect of the argument functions not just to force Protagoras to revise his previous formulations of his doctrines, but also to undermine him so thoroughly that he loses all weight as an intellectual and moral authority in the struggle to win Theaetetus and Theodorus over to his way of life and thought.[51]

In the following discussion of the περιτροπή, I first summarize the argument as it appears in the text.[52] I then review cases for and against two important and related questions surrounding modern scholarship on this passage—first whether Protagoras is better characterized as an "infallibilist"[53] or a "relativist about truth," and, second, whether Socrates' argument defeats the

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[49] I, therefore, disagree with the comment in Chappell 2004: 112 that the argument "does not prove what it is meant to prove" but does succeed in making a different point "equally worth making." This interpretation still hinges on the inveterate assumption that all of Socrates' speeches are intended to be rigorous philosophical arguments. Sensitivity to dramatic elements in the dialogues and to the "metaphilosophical level" explored by Griswold 1988 cast serious suspicion on this assumption.
[50] Cornford 1935: 80; Lee 2005: 56.
[51] On the περιτροπή argument in general, see Chappell 2006.
[52] Useful reconstructions of the argument appear in Sedley 2004: 57-62, Lee 2005: 51-54, and especially Fine 1998: 210, 217, 224-225. I find Sedley's version disagreeable for reasons that are discussed below. Fine and Lee are both clear and accurate, with Fine's being the more exhaustive. Syllogistic reconstructions of this sort often excise important material from the Platonic passage they attempt to distill. But when the validity of an argument needs to be assessed, they are often more suitable than paraphrases of the sort I supply.
[53] The term "infallibilist" (or "infallibilism") comes from Fine 1998, and was coined to denote the position of someone who believes that all beliefs are true *simpliciter*. This is in contrast to a position referred to as "relativism about truth," which holds that all beliefs are true for the people who hold them. Lee 2005: 30-34 offers a thorough

human-measure thesis. In support of my reading of the argument as metaphilosophical in nature and as a powerful display of the undesirability of Protagoras' position on intersubjective incommensurability, I argue that Protagoras is committed neither to infallibilism nor to relativism about truth, and that, on strictly logical grounds, the περιτροπή is not a conclusive refutation of the human-measure thesis.

The argument runs thus (170a-170b): all people esteem knowledge-based expertise, contrary to Protagoras' denial of expertise and false opinion. They demonstrate this belief in their actions; on the battlefield, for example, soldiers follow the lead of their general because of his training and knowledge. Those who believe in knowledge-based expertise also believe in its opposite, false opinion. So all people believe that humans sometimes have true belief based in knowledge and expertise, but at other times have false opinion.[54] Given the prevalence of the belief that people sometimes have false opinions (a claim I will refer to in brief as "PSHFO"), it follows that some people must have false opinions. Because if PSHFO is true, then some people have false opinions by virtue of the content of PSHFO. But if PSHFO is false, then PSHFO must nonetheless still be true, because those who believe in PSHFO itself do so falsely. In either case, some people must have false opinions, which contradicts the Protagorean dictum that whatever seems so is so for the person to whom it seems, the corollary of which is that there is no false opinion.

Socrates next proceeds to direct this same line of argument against the human-measure thesis itself (170c-171c). If all other humans believe that the human-measure thesis is false, Socrates claims, then Protagoras himself is compelled to agree, since he acknowledges that their

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and descriptive explanation of how these two positions differ. The term is synonymous with one meaning of *subjectivism*, but has the disadvantage of carrying other meanings as well; see Giannopoulou 2011: 76; Lee 2005: 31.

[54] As Lee 2005: 33-34 notes, "Our ancient sources are unanimous in representing Protagoras as rejecting the possibility of error."

beliefs are true. By conceding the contrary of his own thesis, Protagoras is committed to the belief that his own belief is false. Thus, no one besides Protagoras believes in the human-measure thesis, and, in fact, Protagoras himself cannot really hold the belief either, since its very thesis forces him to acknowledge the truth of all beliefs. Since, therefore, no one believes the *Truth* of Protagoras, it is true for no one.

This last conclusion is surrounded by controversy. Much of the disagreement among scholars stems from Socrates' omission of the relativizing qualifiers (phrases such as *for him*, etc.) that are sometimes appended to beliefs expressed in the Protagorean epistemological framework, but are omitted at a crucial step in the argument (171b). It does not appear that Socrates' argument succeeds, because Protagoras could easily counter that he is only forced to concede that the contrary of his thesis is true *for those who believe it*, and that his own human-measure thesis, and not its contrary, is what continues to be true *for him*.[55] In omitting the qualifiers that delimit for whom the human-measure thesis is or is not true, Socrates appears to have blundered badly and to have built a fallacious argument that Protagoras could easily sidestep by insisting that the truth of the human-measure thesis is relative to each individual. In this case, the truth of Protagoras' thesis for Protagoras would be secure, regardless of the beliefs of others.

However, this objection assumes that Protagoras is a "relativist about truth," despite at least some evidence to the contrary. The περιτροπή, therefore, opens up questions about the precise nature of Protagorean relativism, and these answers are often indexed to certain answers to the question of the success of the περιτροπή as a refutation of the human-measure thesis.[56]

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[55] Bostock 1988: 90 concisely pins the success of the entire argument on the matter: "This conclusion only seems to follow if we carelessly omit the qualifications 'true *for so-and-so*.'"
[56] Woodruff 1999: 302-304 lists four solutions to the issues of Protagorean relativism regarding truth, each with roots in ancient sources. The first is the Aristotelian tack, which represents Protagoras as a denier of the principle of

Most recent commentators on the passage would agree that if Protagoras is a relativist about truth, then Socrates' argument fails as a refutation of the human-measure thesis, but if he is an infallibilist, the argument succeeds.[57] The reason for this is that if Protagoras is willing to relativize truth, then Socrates' omission of relativizing qualifiers at 171b from phrases like τὴν αὑτοῦ ἂν ψευδῆ συγχωροῖ, "he would agree that his own (belief) is false" renders his argument fallacious, because Protagoras would only go so far as to agree that his belief is false *for those who think it is false*. On the other hand, if Protagoras means to espouse that all beliefs are true *simpliciter*, then he lacks recourse to the defensive maneuver of relativizing the truth of the belief that the human-measure thesis is false to those who think so. The truth of their belief is true *simpliciter*, and Protagoras is then driven by Socrates to self-refutation.

Many commentators on this passage simply assume that relativism about truth is a saving move available to Protagoras in the face of Socrates' arguments, and that the arguments fail since Protagoras would be sure to accept the gambit of relativizing truth. In the eyes of these readers, the argument fails as a refutation of the human-measure thesis.[58] Gail Fine (1998) argues the

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non-contradiction. But Lee 2005: 64-72 argues convincingly that this passage from the *Metaphysics* was not meant as a representation of Protagoras' actual position, but as a response of which he could avail himself in the face of Plato's περιτροπή. This position has no modern exponents, and if Lee is correct, Aristotle was incorrectly thought to subscribe to it. The second Protagorean path laid out by Woodruff 1999: 303 is the one taken by Sedley 2004, which "denies that one speaker can really contradict another." If this position is correct, then the περιτροπή can be construed as a valid refutation of the human-measure thesis. Under this reading of Protagoras, truths are relative to private worlds, and no one can have full access to the beliefs of another. Second-order opinions are thus impossible, and it would be nonsensical to suggest that Protagoras could ever agree that the human-measure thesis is true *for others.* Problems with this position as it is advanced by Sedley will be discussed below. The third reading of Protagoras' position vis-à-vis truth is represented by Fine 1998, who believes that Protagoras is an infallibilist and that his human-measure thesis is successfully refuted by the περιτροπή, since infallibilism is ill-equipped to explain conflicting second-order beliefs (i.e. beliefs about beliefs), although it can successfully accommodate conflict in perceptual appearances. The fourth possibility, and the one that Woodruff seems to favor of the historical Protagoras, is that "there is one truth for all of us, but that it is complex enough to support our different views of it" (Woodruff 1999: 303). However, Woodruff submits that the Protagoras of the *Theaetetus* must be committed to either the second or third of the four possibilities (304). Woodruff's scheme does not leave room for Lee's reading, which states that Protagoras' position on truth is prior to the consideration of second-order beliefs.

[57] This is the explicit position of Fine 1998: 234 and Lee 2005: 57. Others would likely agree, but strongly prefer either relativism about truth or a logical equivalent of infallibilism to the exclusion of considering the implications of the περιτροπή for the alternative.

[58] See, for instance, Vlastos 1956: xiv; McDowell 1971: 171; Bostock 1988: 89-90; Chappell 2004: 113.

opposite position, that Protagoras is consistently portrayed by Plato as an infallibilist, and that the περιτροπή is therefore a successful refutation of his position.[59] David Sedley (2004) also argues for the success of the argument against the Protagorean position, by utilizing an axiom he terms the "single relativization hypothesis."[60] Mi-Kyoung Lee (2005) holds a unique position: she thinks Protagoras subscribes to a position that could be called "relativism of fact" and that is prior to the alternatives of infallibilism and relativism about truth.[61] I believe that Lee's characterization of Protagoras' relativism is truest to the *Theaetetus* and makes the best sense of the περιτροπή; only if we ascribe to Protagoras a position like relativism of fact is Socrates' argument redeemed as neither a conclusive refutation (as it is for those who attribute infallibilism) nor a facile sophistry (as it is for those who attribute relativism about truth).

For my metaphilosophical reading of the περιτροπή to hold up, two things must be true of it. (1.) It must fall short as a rigorous refutation of the human-measure thesis, and (2.) it must expose an unsavory aspect of Protagorean thought which is inconsistent with philosophy as conceived by Plato. Regarding (1.), I will show the shortcomings of Sedley's interpretation of the argument by which the περιτροπή successfully refutes the human-measure thesis.[62] My

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[59] Fine 1996 adduces strong evidence in favor of infallibilism. Most notably, if Protagoras is an infallibilist, then he requires the metaphysics of flux introduced by the Secret Doctrine to avoid violating the principle of non-contradiction. Under a traditional object-property metaphysics, contrary perceptions such as a wind that is cold for Socrates but hot for Theaetetus quickly devolve into contradiction (assuming that the wind felt by each is the same). But if the wind that is perceived is different for each perceiver, changing from one thing to another as a function of the fact-sets unique to each, then contradiction can be avoided. If, however, Protagoras is a relativist about truth, then he has no need for this metaphysics, since contradictory perceptions can simply be relativized to perceivers without alteration to the common sense notion of the perceptible object. Yet Plato ties Protagoras to the metaphysics of flux to strengthen and explain his position, indicating infallibilism. Chappell 2004 and Lee 2005 both argue against Fine's reading in some respects.

[60] Sedley 2004: 57-62. Sedley 2004: 57 acknowledges Burnyeat 1976 as the inspiration behind his own reading: "My main innovation is to try to show how the text itself can deliver the key insight…which Burnyeat has already supplied."

[61] Lee 2005: 45.

[62] Fine 1998 also argues for the validity of the argument on the condition that Protagoras is taken to be an infallibilist. Fine is right in this claim, but she also believes that Protagoras is portrayed by Plato as an infallibilist. Lee's 2005 reading that Protagoras is neither an infallibilist nor a relativist about truth because he has not been made to confront the problem of second-order beliefs depicts a more subtle and probably more accurate position for

answer to (2.) has already received much discussion in this chapter. The point of the περιτροπή is to highlight the problems of interpersonal incommensurability that follow from Protagorean relativism.

David Sedley's interpretation of the περιτροπή, which makes the argument come out valid, hangs on two key moves. The first is to establish the "single-relativization assumption," and the second is to read the dative τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ instead of the vocative ὦ Πρωταγόρα at 170c.[63] The single-relativization assumption states: "No truth is, or could be, hierarchically relativized to *two or more* subjects. That is, there are no truths of the form 'For X, such-and-such is the case for Y.'"[64] Sedley's Protagoras believes that since the world of each individual is private to him, Y's world is "outside of X's experience, and therefore not a subject of truth for X."[65]

On Sedley's reading, the function of the dative at 170c (τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ) is to relativize the argument to Protagoras. Socrates is not stating what is true generally, but what is true in the private world of the sophist. In other words, a premise such as "many people believe there are false beliefs" then has the force of "*For Protagoras,* there are many who believe there to be false beliefs."[66] In Sedley's view, then, there is therefore no recourse for Protagoras to relativize the truth claims reached in this argument a second time, for they are already relative to him and further relativization would violate the single-relativization assumption. Socrates' argument

Protagoras. I therefore agree with Fine's understanding of how the argument functions, but contest the notion that it is meant as a conclusive refutation of the human-measure thesis.

[63] Sedley 2004: 57-58. There is manuscript support for both readings, but Sedley acknowledges that his reading is "contrary to all the modern editions" (58).

[64] Sedley 2004: 58. Emphasis in the original.

[65] Sedley 2004: 59.

[66] Sedley 2004: 57, 59.

appears to be strengthened by this reading, since any contradictions reached are now fatal to the argument, with the "defensive move"[67] of relativizing them away having been taken off the table.

But is Sedley correct to assume single relativization? In fact, his assumption simply reverses the move made by the majority of commentators, who assume that relativization is the obvious Protagorean response to the περιτροπή.[68] In fact, both groups might overlook the point of the argument, which is simply to raise the thorny issue of double-relativization—an issue that Protagoras has not had to encounter previously in the dialogue.[69] Single-relativization cannot be assumed just as Protagoras' willingness to relativize truth cannot be assumed. Either position would only be declared in response to the περιτροπή, but Plato represents Protagoras as choosing to run off rather than commit to either position (171d).

More to the point, Sedley's reading of the dative τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ at 170c and his conclusion that its purpose is to relativize the argument to Protagoras leads to a problem for his understanding of private worlds. If Protagoras' world is private to him and outside the experience of others, Socrates could not construct a syllogism that is true *for Protagoras*, since Socrates has no experience of the sophist's private world. Sedley is not consistent on intersubjectivity, since he allows for the construction of a syllogism by one person that is true for another (as Sedley believes Socrates does for Protagoras) but he does not allow Protagoras to relativize the truth of the human-measure thesis to each individual.

So far in Section II, I have attempted to show that Socrates' περιτροπή argument is *ad hominem* and metaphilosophical rather than a formal refutation of his views, and that its success

[67] Sedley 2004: 59.
[68] See my discussion earlier in this section.
[69] The issue only arises at the level of second-order beliefs. Contradiction can always be avoided in the case of conflicting perceptions by relativizing each perception to different fact-sets, but if Y believes that X's belief is false, the conflict cannot be resolved in the same manner. See Ambuel 2015: 80-81; Lee 2005: 51. Thus, the observation of Sedley 2004: 58 that the single-relativization assumption is "never stated but seems to be unfailingly observed" is not due to Protagoras' awareness of and aversion to double-relativization, but rather to the fact that he has not been made to confront the problem at all until this section of the dialogue.

depends on the problem of incommensurability that a relativist like Protagoras faces, namely, the erasure of a common measure of appearances (including thoughts) capable of bridging the gap between unique humans-as-measures. To support this reading, I have argued against interpretations of the argument that take it to be a successful philosophical refutation of Protagoras' human-measure thesis. In what follows, I return to the topic of writing, first identifying its subtle role in the argument discussed above (II.3), and then attempting to articulate the spirit and strategies of a Socratic art of philosophical reading from which Protagoras would benefit, but which his human-measure thesis precludes (III).

II.3 How is writing related to the περιτροπή?

Continuing one of the dialogue's predominant themes, the question of writing, the περιτροπή points out a troublesome aspect of Protagoras' human-measure doctrine and the metaphysics of flux that subtends it. According to the metaphysics of the Secret Doctrine, which has been connected to the thought of Protagoras (152c-152e),[70] all appearances are instantaneous representations of things so fleeting that they must be said to "become" rather than to "be." Combining this metaphysics with the human-measure doctrine, one arrives at the conclusion that perceptions are of fleeting objects-in-an-instant, no two of them alike for any two subjects, and that all these perceptions are equally valid. The elaboration of Protagoras' doctrines and of associated doctrines such as the theory of flux has recently expanded this theory to include not only perceptions, but also judgments. Among other things, this theory puts γράμματα in a very vulnerable ontological position, more vulnerable even than the one assigned to literature at the end of the *Phaedrus*.

[70] On Protagoras' "secret teaching," see *Tht*. 152c10 (τοῖς δὲ μαθηταῖς ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔλεγεν), and see the discussions by Lee 2000 and Sørensen 2016.

Plato brings this text-weakening metaphysics home to roost in the περιτροπή with repeated puns on the title of Protagoras' *Truth* and by referring at key points to the written form of Protagoras' thought and the difficulties that presents for him uniquely. There is a double meaning behind Socrates' conclusion that "The *Truth* of Protagoras would be true for no one" (οὐδενὶ ἂν εἴη ἡ Πρωταγόρου Ἀλήθεια ἀληθής, 171c). If the objects are subject to a flux so pervasive that no two people ever perceive the same one, how can a text have the same meaning for any two people, including its author? The περιτροπή argument turns on the Protagorean notion that only something believed may be true. Plato adds to the surface-level argument of this section of the dialogue a subtle complementary argument; with Protagoras dead and his thought preserved only in writing (the living memory of his followers, such as Theodorus, is shown to be inadequate by his weak command and half-hearted defense of Protagoras' teachings), there is no one left to believe in the *Truth* as Protagoras conceived it. Even if a sympathetic reader happens upon Protagoras' book, the metaphysics of flux requires that this reader will have a different interpretation of Protagoras' writings and a different understanding of the human-measure thesis than Protagoras himself did. So, ever since the time of Protagoras' death it has been true that the *Truth* of Protagoras could be true for no one other than Protagoras himself.

This point is emphasized not only by Socrates' puns on the title of the book, but also at 171a when Socrates chooses the verb ἔγραψεν for the phrase "what he wrote" over equally plausible alternatives such as "what he said" (ἔλεγε) or "what he taught" (ἐδίδαξε). Plato deliberately emphasizes the problem of textual interpretation that a metaphysics of flux creates for Protagoras and the implications of this problem for the prospects that anyone will ever believe in Protagoras' *Truth*. Again at 171b, Socrates uses the phrase ἐξ ὧν γέγραφεν ("out of the things which he wrote"), emphasizing that it was what Protagoras left behind in writing that

determines current beliefs about his thought. The perfect tense of γέγραφεν is well chosen in that it indicates the effect of Protagoras' past actions (writing) on the present time in which they are interpreted. This would not be a problem if not for the damning combination of a metaphysics of flux, which guarantees that no two people can experience or believe exactly the same thing, with the Protagorean position that truth is determined by belief. These two positions guarantee that after the death of Protagoras, there can be no one to believe in his version of the *Truth*, and it must therefore be false.

This paradoxical position of Protagoras, that he wishes his book to be the only thing resistant to flux, also reflects the central flaw of his philosophical position more broadly. Protagoras wants the individual human to be the measure of truth, but he also wants this very doctrine to be the only exception to itself. Plato hints strongly at the irony that infuses this position when Protagoras says,

> ἐγὼ γάρ φημι μὲν τὴν Ἀλήθειαν ἔχειν ὡς γέγραφα· μέτρον γὰρ ἕκαστον ἡμῶν εἶναι τῶν τε ὄντων καὶ μή, μυρίον μέντοι διαφέρειν ἕτερον ἑτέρου αὐτῷ τούτῳ, ὅτι τῷ μὲν ἄλλα ἔστι τε καὶ φαίνεται, τῷ δὲ ἄλλα.[71]
>
> I claim that the *Truth* remains as I have written it, for each of us is a measure of the things that are and those that are not, but each thing differs from every other one in myriad ways by this very thing, that for one person some things are and appear, whereas for another person, others things do.
>
> (*Tht*. 166d)

In two sentences, the paradox of Protagoras' position is shown in microcosm by its implications for hermeneutics: just as Protagoras' only universal assertion, that man is the measure of all things, is undercut by its own content, so too his desire for a stable and uniform text with a single and invariant meaning is undercut by the content of the meaning he hopes it will have for everyone: namely, that nothing has the same meaning for everyone!

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[71] The text printed here differs from that of Duke *et al.* in capitalizing "Ἀλήθειαν."

Section III below outlines the prescriptions for a method of philosophical reading that Socrates imparts to Theaetetus throughout the dialogue, especially in his examination of Protagoras' doctrines. Ironies abound for Protagoras with respect to this method of philosophical reading, and Plato makes liberal use of them throughout the dialogue. The central irony is that this philosophical reading, which is defined by a spirit of generosity to the author whom it wishes to interpret, would solve the problems that Protagoras' own relativist hermeneutics create for the validity of his doctrines.

Indeed, Protagoras requires a hermeneutic method like the one Socrates practices, but his own beliefs militate against such a method. Protagoras complains to Socrates at 166c, "When talking about a pig or a baboon, you are not only acting like a pig yourself, but you also persuade those listening to do this to my writings, which is to act improperly" (ὗς δὲ δὴ καὶ κυνοκεφάλους λέγων οὐ μόνον αὐτὸς ὑνεῖς, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ακούοντας τοῦτο δρᾶν εἰς τὰ συγγράμματά μου ἀναπείθεις, οὐ καλῶς ποιῶν).

Protagoras makes what seems a very reasonable request: that his writings be treated with respect, rather than bombarded with sophistical or unconsidered objections. It has already been noted that Protagoras has an interest in having his texts interpreted correctly: if his doctrine is to remain "true," then by his own standard of truth, this doctrine (in its exact specifications) must be believed by someone, and this requires a correct interpretation of Protagoras' writings. A correct interpretation follows from the desire to understand the author's διάνοια or *vouloir-dire*, but the reader who seeks this understanding is doomed from the start if each man is his own measure and none are mutually commensurable. However, the more basic impulse behind Protagoras' desire for his writings not to be read in a porcine manner is the basic intention to influence others with one's own ideas. That Protagoras has this desire himself is evident:

Socrates mocks him for declaring his truth "from the inner sanctum" (ἐκ τοῦ ἀδύτου, 162a) of his book as though it were something deep and sacred. While urging Socrates not to make light in a serious matter, Protagoras overlooks the playful nature to which the limitations of writing relegate written philosophy.

But if Protagoras' thoughts are to receive any of the serious study that he hopes for from his readers, these readers will have to approach his texts with the assumption that something can be learned from them, and this assumption is wholly opposed to Protagorean doctrine. If each man is the measure of all things, then he has nothing to learn from any other. And if expertise is equal among all people, a book entitled *Truth* should properly be titled *Truth for Protagoras*, which would be a book of interest to no one but Protagoras himself. Socrates' barb at 162a is again relevant. There is no reason to examine the opinions of others and try to refute them if each one is necessarily correct. And when the motivation to examine other people's opinions has been done away with, the possibility that some great thinkers may influence the ideas of others follows right behind.

III. A Strategy of Philosophical Reading

Section II.3 above describes the hermeneutic relativism that follows from Protagoras' human-measure thesis, and argues that this view of reading undermines the human-measure thesis itself. Section III proposes an alternative manner of reading displayed in the *Theaetetus,* one that can be reconstructed by attending to the spirit and techniques with which Socrates approaches the task of interpreting what Protagoras has left behind in writing. There is a palpable irony in this, since this manner of philosophical reading conflicts with the human-measure thesis, and yet would free the human-measure thesis of the hermeneutic relativism it entails.

Socrates repeatedly disavows that he has any knowledge of his own in the *Theaetetus*, and insists that he is acting only as a midwife to the philosophical pregnancy of Theaetetus (149b, 161a). But what Socrates lacks in positive philosophical doctrine is made up for with a method of interpretation which is distinct in both spirit and technique. Socrates demonstrates this hermeneutic method not only in practice, as he leads Theaetetus in an application of his method toward a text of Protagoras, but also by explicit, didactic discussion of its ways and manner. If the aporetic *Theaetetus* does not portray the indoctrination of the young mathematician into any specific philosophical beliefs, the dialogue may instead represent the education of its titular character in the ways of philosophical reading.[72] This education in the art of philosophical reading is difficult to describe because it is more natural and practical than studied and theoretical. It comes in the form of *ad hoc* advice rather than invariant general principles. Nevertheless, I attempt in this section of the chapter to analyze and describe the method of interpretation espoused and enacted by Socrates in the *Theaetetus* by identifying as far as possible the method's aim, the spirit that governs the method, and the specific techniques that the method includes.

The primary aim of Socrates' hermeneutical project, in my view, is to understand a text. In the *Theaetetus,* particularly the dialogue's first half, that text is the *Truth* of Protagoras.[73]

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[72] The analysis of the περιτροπή (Section II above) argues that Socrates wins a metaphilosophical victory over Protagoras (and perhaps Theodorus) for the role of Theaetetus' mentor. Blondell 2002: 252 points out that Theaetetus is one of the few interlocutors Plato pairs with Socrates who "can not only benefit personally from Socratic testing, but enable Socrates to be productive without formally departing from an elenctic structure." While philosophical education is attempted by Socrates in many dialogues, there is a strong case to be made that he succeeds in this instance.

[73] Ford 1994 believes that the theme of interpretation in the dialogue limits itself to the interpretation of philosophical fragments. While it is true that the interlocutors do not engage with the text of the *Truth* beyond the quotation of the human-measure thesis, the defining characteristics of Socrates' hermeneutic method are adaptable to a greater diversity of literary items. Theaetetus claims to have read the human-measure thesis "many times" (πολλάκις), which leaves open the strong possibility that he is conversant in the *Truth* as a whole and not simply its κεφάλαιον (152a). Moreover, Socrates develops the small quotation into a sweeping metaphysical theory, so that while the human-measure thesis remains the focus of the interpretation, the project has taken on the task of interpreting a vast array of thoughts.

While this aim of understanding would seem to be the obvious goal of any interpretive enterprise, the word "understanding" is itself variably understood, and the understanding that Socrates pursues is by no means conventional. Socrates never declares that "understanding" is his aim, but he and Theaetetus are heavily invested in the project of figuring out what Protagoras "means" by his human-measure thesis. The answer to the question "what does this mean?" is what I refer to as the aim of understanding.[74] This notion of understanding, the aim of Socrates' hermeneutic practices, is best described through a catalogue of the techniques used in service of it throughout the dialogue.

III.I Philosophical Reading: Three Techniques

The first of these techniques is the immersion of the interpreter's mind into the thoughts that surround and support the text.[75] The human-measure thesis is the simple statement that "man is the measure of all things" (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, 152a).[76] Nevertheless, Socrates will not be satisfied with understanding and attacking the bare doctrine in isolation from

[74] This question, or a variant of it, is found in these passages: 146d, 152d, 164d, 188d, 189c, and 191b.

[75] Ford 1994 describes Socrates' development of the "secret doctrine" and the theory of flux (which states that nothing is "one" due to the universality of co-present opposites such as *large* and *small*) as allegorical interpretations of the human-measure thesis. But the tenuous logical relationship between the theory of flux and the human-measure thesis does not seem to support the idea that flux is represented as the meaning of the doctrine itself. Instead, Socrates is giving Theaetetus a crash course in the very broad metaphysical notions under which the human-measure thesis took on its original significance. Even if the human-measure thesis does not entail the theory of flux, it does suggest that the properties of sensible phenomena are not stable or objective and do not strictly belong to those sensibles themselves, but only in specific instances of their being perceived by a subject. This leads to several questions about the nature of reality that anyone would consider significant, but that are not immediately raised by the human-measure thesis itself. The philosophies that surround the doctrine, those of flux and "phenomenal subjectivism," help explain what is at stake in an inquiry into the human-measure thesis.

[76] It is for Socrates, at any rate, who summarizes the meaning of the human-measure thesis in just one more sentence not too much longer than the dictum itself at 152a. While analyses of the human-measure thesis by Chappell 2004 and Bostock 1988 show that even a pithy and straightforward phrase may contain many possible internal meanings, Socrates' method of reading instead attempts to handle this sort of ambiguity by an outward turn away from the internal ambiguities of the words themselves and into the intellectual culture that produced them. See Chappell 2004: 57-58; Bostock 1988: 41-44.

a larger system of philosophy, which provides support and context for it.[77] Through his constant attempts to reconstruct the thought of Protagoras and the vast secret tradition of flux, Socrates makes clear that nothing short of a full immersion in the Protagorean philosophy from which the human-measure thesis was generated will suffice as preparation for a criticism of the theory.[78] From this a first inference about Socrates' hermeneutics can be derived: understanding a text requires more than a superficial understanding of the obvious signification of its words. To understand a text is also to understand the philosophy that undergirds it and the author who produced it. Already the rift between this method of reading and the relativist hermeneutics of the human-measure thesis becomes clear. Whereas the hermeneutics of Protagoras accepts any reading as true whether it is well or poorly informed, the Socratic method of philosophical reading prizes awareness of the author's intellectual milieu as an extra-human μέτρον capable of judging the value of an interpretation.

The pursuit of hermeneutic understanding, according to Socrates, is thus promoted by the broad but intensive orientation of the reader in the philosophy of the author. This is the first technique of Socrates' hermeneutic method. But acquainting oneself with the basic tenets and ideas of an impersonal philosophical school or movement occludes the individual author of the

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[77] The nature of Plato's corpus, which comprises discrete dialogues that are heavily determined by unique characters and dramatic settings, urges against adopting this exact strategy in the reading of Plato himself. Griswold 1986: 15-16 and Gill 2002 contain persuasive arguments for treating each dialogue on its own terms without excessive reference to others. This is not to say that one dialogue might not provide help in interpreting another, as I have found the *Phaedrus* helpful in developing my interpretation of the *Theaetetus* here. However, a topic-level inquiry (into "Plato's epistemology," for instance) that treats the entire corpus rather than the dialogue as an organic unit, would be likely to elide important differences in dramatic setting between the dialogues and thereby fail to come to a firm answer of Plato's "views" on knowledge. For readers of Plato, a strong knowledge of classical Athens might be the best analogue to Socrates' immersing of Theaetetus into the doctrine of flux to aid in their reading of Protagoras.
[78] Fine 1996 explains how the "secret doctrine" saves the human-measure thesis from obvious self-contradiction.

text himself.[79] Thus, the second technique of Socrates' philosophical art of reading, the technique of sympathetic impersonation, restores the individual author to a place of prominence.

On multiple occasions, Socrates, not content merely to imagine the *arguments* that Protagoras or his advocate might deploy in defense or clarification of his positions, tries to hit upon the very words Protagoras might use, and even to envision the details of his physical appearance and bodily movements (171d). At least three times in the dialogue, Socrates turns into an actor, using direct speech to vocalize the viewpoints of Protagoras specifically (165e), a speaker who may be either Protagoras himself or τις ἄλλος ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ ("someone else [speaking] in his defense"), or a generic speaker representing proponents of the belief that whatever seems so is true to the one for whom it seems (158e). By taking on the character of Protagoras like an actor in a drama, Socrates shows that before he is willing to subject the human-measure thesis to a critical examination, he is first determined to reach an appreciation of Protagoras' thought in all its original nuance and force.[80] The aim is to come as close as possible to understanding Protagoras' ideas in precisely the same manner as the deceased philosopher himself conceived them.

From 166a-168c, Socrates delivers the dialogue's longest speech, consistently maintaining the character of Protagoras for its entire duration. Even Theodorus, a student of Protagoras who remains mostly loyal to his teacher, lauds this performance by assuring Socrates that he "assisted [Protagoras] altogether youthfully" (πάνυ γὰρ νεανικῶς τῷ ἀνδρὶ βεβοήθηκας,

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[79] This point is especially true in the case of Socrates' education of Theaetetus about those who join Protagoras by advancing his "secret doctrine" in their own writings. The philosophies of relativism and flux are found not just in Protagoras, Heraclitus, and their philosophical kindred, but in sources spanning the leading figures in every genre of literature (152e-153d).

[80] Zwicky 1997 suggests such notion as "address" and "dialogue with the dead" as solutions to the problem that the absence of the author poses for textual interpretation, as discussed in the final pages of the *Phaedrus*. Zwicky's reading of the *Phaedrus* — a deeply insightful and persuasive one —focuses only on the importance of these practices for the writer of philosophy. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates literally paves the way for dialogue with the dead by calling Protagoras back from the grave to participate in a defense of his writings.

168c). This extended speech on behalf (and in the character) of Protagoras exhibits and clarifies the spirit of Socrates' hermeneutic strategy. This spirit is distinguished by a thoroughgoing generosity to the author.[81] In both form and content, the exercise reveals that its aim is to reconnect the interpreters with Protagoras himself, starting out from his written words, but refusing to stop with them. Through the mouth of the actor Socrates, Protagoras issues a reminder that if a critic of his theory refutes a surrogate Protagoras, as Socrates has just done multiple times (163b, 164d, 165d) with Theaetetus standing in for the philosopher, then Protagoras himself has not been refuted. If the surrogate and Protagoras would answer differently, a refutation of the latter cannot be effected through discourse with the former. Socrates is intent on refuting Protagoras *ipse* rather than a strawman version of his arguments, an inadequate stand-in for the philosopher, or the words in isolation of the man.[82]

The absence of the author (especially in the case of the dead Protagoras) does impose limitations on the technique of sympathetic impersonation. These limitations are encountered at 171d, where Socrates finally demands an inward turn so that the discussants can develop their own thoughts and opinions. But it is important that this occurs only after an exhaustive and elaborate process of re-animation, by which the thoughts represented by the text are made far more vivid than a less zealous and generous method of reading would have allowed. Protagoras' precise thoughts have certainly not been restored to their original form with perfect exactness. But, what is more important, they have been strengthened, respected, and given the benefit of the

[81] This spirit of generosity and its manifestation in the technique of sympathetic impersonation should be distinguished from the philosophical "principle of charity." While both spring from a desire to bring out the best in a text, Socrates' method of reading is not so strictly utilitarian as readings built on the principle of charity. The technique of sympathetic impersonation in Socrates' method of philosophical reading is based in sympathy and the effort to reanimate the author himself. Perhaps the method's tacit assumption is that the strongest reading of a text will only result from a reading which follows this humanizing approach.

[82] Compare *Tht.* 154d, where Socrates alludes to Euripides' *Hippolytus* in distinguishing between the refutation of a "tongue" and a "mind" (cf. *Hipp*. 611-612 with discussion at Barrett 1964: 273-274). Socrates is less interested in refuting the words of Protagoras than in refuting the mind of the man who spoke them.

doubt. Socrates' reanimation of Protagoras may not have conclusively recovered the author's thoughts, but it has made certain that Socrates is neither tilting at windmills nor flicking over strawmen.

Following immersion in the author's intellectual milieu and sympathetic impersonation of the author, the third technique of Socrates' method of philosophical reading is the assumption that the author to be interpreted was wise. "It is likely that a wise man is not being foolish, so let's follow him" (Εἰκὸς μέντοι σοφὸν ἄνδρα μὴ ληρεῖν· ἐπακολουθήσωμεν οὖν αὐτῷ), Socrates says to Theaetetus at 152b. "It is very likely then since he is older that he is wiser than us" (εἰκὸς γε ἄρα ἐκεῖνον πρεσβύτερον ὄντα σοφώτερον ἡμῶν εἶναι), he repeats at 171d. At 157d, Socrates explains to Theaetetus that he has been "serving up each of the wise things to be tasted" (παρατίθημι ἑκάστων τῶν σοφῶν ἀπογεύεσθαι) as part of his midwife's work. The *Theaetetus* demonstrates in clear terms that Socrates is no follower or worshipper of Protagoras. Nevertheless, he fashions himself in his capacity as a reader and interpreter into a role of subordination to and admiration of the author and interpretee, Protagoras. His generous and earnest hermeneutic spirit reveals an obligation that the philosophical reader owes to the wise author: the obligation to give the author the benefit of the doubt when interpreting his written work or the tradition that his writings have inspired. This is done by recognizing that if the argument seems silly or obviously mistaken, the interpreter must look deeper and try to imagine how the author would defend his ideas if he were present.

The assumption of a wise author leads to the strategy of generous reading, and this strategy ensures that the consequent interpretation will be valuable in two ways: first, that one's interpretation will be maximally productive, and second, that if the text must be criticized or refuted, this refutation will be legitimate, fair, and convincing, unlike a refutation based on an

inferior understanding of the original text. It is unclear on exactly what basis Socrates prefers the hermeneutics of generosity. Nevertheless, I argue here that Socrates' hermeneutic spirit is validated by its consequences, which include an interpretation that is more productive than one guided by an ungenerous reading and a refutation that is more convincing than those produced by shallower, less generous methods. Alternatively, it may be a matter of principle that a great philosopher such as Protagoras deserves an adequate defender of his "orphan" writings.[83] This is intimated by Socrates' comment at *Tht.* 164e: ἀλλὰ δὴ αὐτοὶ κινδυνεύσομεν τοῦ δικαίου ἕνεκ' αὐτῷ βοηθεῖν, "But we ourselves will probably have to help [the orphan] for the sake of what is just."

III.2 Productivity as a Hermeneutic Virtue

The first of these two virtues of a generous reading must be clarified. What does it mean to say that one interpretation of a text is more or less productive than another? The productivity of an interpretation is largely determined by the degree to which the interpretation succeeds in bringing the interpreter's own thoughts to light. Section I.3 above argued that the purpose of the dice paradox at 154a was to suggest that the text may act as the measure of a reader's intellectual development by staying constant itself each time a reader returns to re-visit its words. This is one example of a larger trend in the *Theaetetus* of Socrates and Theaetetus examining external matters intently before ultimately turning back to reflect on themselves. Scholarship on the dialogue has made ample note of this pattern, although the language used to express it has

[83] See Phaedrus 275e for the criticism of writing as existing beyond the creative act of its author, such that it comes to be "orphaned" of its father who could defend it against critics.

varied.[84] It would, therefore, be harmonious with the dialogue's tendency to promote a hermeneutic turn to the self to suggest that a successful and revealing self-interpretation is one of the benefits of a generous interpretive method.

In terming this benefit the "productivity" of an interpretation, I have taken my cue from Socrates' speech at 150c, which uses the word γόνιμον in a very prominent place in Socrates' explanation of his art of intellectual midwifery: μέγιστον δὲ τοῦτ' ἔνι τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ τέχνῃ, βασανίζειν δυνατὸν εἶναι παντὶ τρόπῳ πότερον εἴδωλον καὶ ψεῦδος ἀποτίκτει τοῦ νέου ἡ διάνοια ἢ <u>γόνιμον</u> τε καὶ ἀληθές, "This is the greatest thing in my art, the ability to examine whether the thought born of the young man is in every way an image and false or whether it is <u>productive</u> and true" (150c).

Even though it is not immediately clear what the midwife's most important function is, this passage in 150c has generated a surprisingly sparse amount of commentary. This is even more surprising given the emphasis Socrates places on it ("the greatest thing in my art"). Translations show considerable variance in their rendering of γόνιμον and thus in their understanding of this passage. Published translations of γόνιμον include "genuine," "fruitful," "noble," "generated," and "viable."[85] The "genuine" of Fowler's and McDowell's translations works on two levels. First, it joins the ἀληθές parallel to γόνιμον in stressing that the art of intellectual midwifery examines an idea to see whether it is correct, and second, it extends the image of the anatomical midwife by playing on the sense of γόνιμος which means "born in

[84] Ford 1994: 212 notes that "The result of these sallies in interpretation, then, is to abandon the search for what Protagoras exactly meant to say by these words and to use them as a springboard for examining the interlocutors' own ideas"; see also Ambuel 2015: 75. Blondell 2002: 252 states: "Through the characters and their interactions, abstract epistemological issues are shown to play themselves out in the world of specific, particularized human beings, with their varied abilities to learn from the world, themselves, and each other." Roochnik 2002: 50 notes the dialogue teaches that "we must think ourselves to be selves;" later, that the dialogue systematically thematizes the process of self-recognition through the frequent use of Socrates and Theaetetus as examples (45-46).

[85] For example: "genuine" (Fowler 1921; McDowell 1973); "fruitful" (Benardete 1984); "noble" (Chappell 2004); "generated" (Sachs 2004); and "viable" (Ambuel 2015).

lawful wedlock" (LSJ, s.v. γόνιμος, def. A.3.b).[86] Ambuel's "viable" does similar work, by weakly continuing the metaphor of the midwife (babies and propositions may both be tested for their "viability") while also taking γόνιμον as a semantic ally with ἀληθές.[87]

Two translations, belonging to Benardete and Sachs, appear more eccentric than the three discussed above. But by assigning a distinct meaning to γόνιμον, their translations—Benardete's *fruitful* and Sachs' *generated*—treat the two adjectives as more than just playful pleonasm. Each finds a new way to extend the image of the midwife, and each carries implications for the question of what "the most important thing" in Socrates' art of intellectual midwifery might be. By describing an idea as *generated*, Sachs thinks Socrates means one that is "true-born, or truly one's own thinking."[88] Sachs later suggests that Socrates lists all the proponents of the secret doctrine of flux to name the "seminal thinkers" responsible for the philosophical pregnancy of Theaetetus.[89] On Sachs' reading, γόνιμον would therefore represent the virtue of a philosophical idea that had mixed one's own ideas in proper proportion with those of great and influential thinkers.

This reading of the enigmatic γόνιμον and the meaning of its passage accords well with the dialogue's featured theme of textual interpretation and with the dialogue's teaching that a successful textual interpretation must always be accompanied by a parallel self-interpretation. However, Benardete's translation of γόνιμον to mean *fruitful* can add still more to this picture.

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[86] I am not certain that either translator intended for *genuine* to extend the image of the midwife by punning on "legitimate," but the double meaning is present. McDowell 1973: 116 does clarify in his commentary that he either takes γόνιμος to be effectively synonymous with ἀληθές or to be a less important word than ἀληθές for the interpretation of the passage. McDowell's commentary notes that Socrates claims that as a midwife he can test a thesis for correctness, but it makes no mention of his capacity as a judge of *genuineness,* and likely subsumes the notion of genuineness under that of correctness.

[87] As with McDowell, Ambuel 2015: 28 clarifies in his commentary his reading of the passage, which again either assimilates γόνιμος to ἀληθές or focuses on the latter to the exclusion of the former: "This makes the most important part of Socrates' art not the delivery, but the subsequent separating of the true from the false."

[88] Sachs 2004: 27.

[89] Sachs 2004: 31.

An interpretation that is *generated* in Sachs' sense is also *fruitful* since it has produced a deeper understanding of both the text and one's own beliefs.[90]

III.3 Objections and Replies

In the preceding paragraphs, I have traced the outline of an art of philosophical reading, a certain interpretive method demonstrated by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. This characterization corresponds to Socrates' words and actions through three specific hermeneutic techniques united by a pervasive spirit of generosity. I can think of three objections that are likely to be voiced against the claim that Socrates follows the method of philosophical reading I have described. First, one might say that Socrates doesn't mean it, that he is only indulging in his eponymous irony when he describes Protagoras, his philosophical adversary, as "wise." I do believe that irony is present in these passages, but it does not exclude my interpretation.[91] It has been widely acknowledged that Socrates modifies his manner and message of speech to suit the unique character of each of his interlocutors (this is the practice of *psychagogia*, described in the *Phaedrus* at 261a). I believe that he is doing just that in these passages in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates tells the young Theaetetus simply that the philosopher was wise (152b; 152c; 157d), but he tells the older Theodorus that he was wise on account of his age (171d). What is the reason for Socrates' decision to mention Protagoras' advanced age when speaking to Theodorus, but not to Theaetetus? Whether Socrates' comment to Theodorus is a sincere attempt at flattery or a humorous and transparent one makes little difference; Socrates is appealing to Theodorus' own

[90] The final translation of γόνιμον is Chappell's "noble" (Chappell 2004: 44), which is puzzling and not based in any of senses of the word listed in LSJ 1996.

[91] Cf. Ambuel 2015. Hyland 1995: 98-99 proposes that at least some instances of Socratic irony anticipate Hegelian dialectic. Hyland's "triadic" structure for Platonic irony is appropriate here. Socrates does mean to undermine the supposed wisdom of Protagoras when he refers to him as σοφός. But the apparent complement is not entirely negated by this, since the assumption of wisdom is an important hermeneutical assumption.

age when he claims that Protagoras' years make him wiser than those present. Regardless of whether the comment is sincere or facetious, the practical effect of his appeal is paramount; by playfully stressing the wisdom of Protagoras, Socrates appeals to Theodorus on a specific and individual level in exhorting him to the task of seriously interpreting Protagoras' text.

The second objection goes primarily toward the technique of the assumption of the author's wisdom, and opposes to this technique the counter that Socrates would be a fool to follow it. Many books are written, many philosophical traditions exist, and to afford to each the generosity and deference that Socrates does to Protagoras and his fellows-in-thought would preclude the possibility of real learning or progress through philosophical reading. One would be immobilized and incapacitated by the obligation to treat *all* ideas as serious and deserving of an equal amount of generosity and respect. But Socrates advocates a selective hermeneutics of generosity, not an indiscriminate one.[92] Indeed, Socrates is impelled to praise Theaetetus' first definition of knowledge as οὐ φαῦλον ("not trivial") precisely because it is the definition ὃν ἔλεγε καὶ Πρωταγόρας ("which Protagoras also said," 151e). The definition stakes a claim to some initial credibility because of its similarity to the ideas of Protagoras, a great and influential philosopher whose ideas merit serious consideration.[93] It is perhaps only figures like Protagoras, whose writings have obvious merit on account of their influence, whom Socrates finds worthy of a full hermeneutic treatment, one infused with a generosity, patience, and painstaking effort that cannot be doled out to just any text.

[92] Cf. Sedley 2004: 33. Sedley assigns to "the midwife's toolkit" the ability "to distinguish which objects of an investigation can and which cannot be studied by his art." While Sedley means here the ability to distinguish between objects that admit of *a priori* investigation and those that do not, a reading of the dialogue that recognizes its focus on interpretation would find that the intellectual midwife is more likely to distinguish between texts that would hold up to the rigors of Socrates' interpretive method.
[93] That Theaetetus has become philosophically pregnant by Protagoras is a consequence of his influence.

In addition to the fact that Socrates' assumption of wisdom is selective rather than indiscriminate, there is another reason to believe that this technique is valuable to the philosopher who practices it. Moreover, the reason comes from Socrates himself, as he cautions Alcibiades to follow something very much like the assumption of wisdom in *Alcibiades I*. Carpenter and Polansky (2002) have reasoned that an elenctic refutation of Alcibiades in *Alcibiades I* supports the principle of method that one's opponent must not be underestimated (*Alcibiades I* 118b-c).[94] Socrates convinces Alcibiades to assume that his competitors, the Spartan generals and the Persian King, are formidable (δεινός). Under this assumption, Alcibiades will cultivate himself, which is recognized as a "big help."

Since Socrates has singled out Protagoras for refutation in the *Theaetetus*, he finds himself occupying the same position relative to Protagoras that Alcibiades occupied toward his political rivals. Following the logic of *Alcibiades I,* it is therefore in Socrates' interest to assume that Protagoras is wise and skilled in his writings and teachings, because Socrates will construct better arguments against him under this assumption. It is also significant and harmonious with the findings of this study that the benefits of this assumption redound to one's self; in the end it is Alcibiades who becomes better cultivated as a result of his assumption that his competitors are δεινός, and Socrates who becomes a better opponent in argument as a result of his assumption that Protagoras is wise.[95]

[94] Carpenter and Polansky 2002: 95-97.
[95] A prominent view related to Socratic elenchus should be expressed here, because it speaks to Socrates' practical stake in the assumption of wisdom and its selective deployment. Bickhouse and Smith 1994: 18-19 argue that it is only by elenchus that Socrates is justified in his positive beliefs on moral questions. After refuting a great variety of people who do not share his own views by elenchi which reveal inconsistencies in their thought, he can conclude inductively that his own set of moral beliefs is the only one that is consistent. But the inductive nature of the conclusion requires that it be continuously tested, and Socrates' confidence in his own moral positions depends on his successful elenctic practice. It is natural that the wise would be the most suitable subjects for this practice. If Socrates knows of a wise man he has not refuted, then he must suspend his confidence in his moral beliefs. A more skeptical presentation of the same line of reasoning is presented in Vlastos 1983: 713-714. One detriment to many of these interpretations of Socratic elenchus is their exclusive focus on the "early dialogues," despite Socrates'

A third potential objection is that Socrates' reverence for the supposedly wise is out of character with his irreverent and ironic manner in the rest of Plato's dialogues, and even in the *Theaetetus* itself. Plato's Socrates is an iconoclast with a penchant for demonstrating precisely that the supposedly wise are in fact not so through the elenchus. A hermeneutics of generosity propelled by the assumption of wisdom appears to be incongruous with Socrates' zetetic skepticism and with his signature philosophical method of elenchus.

The assumption of wisdom, however, is provisional and temporary rather than conclusive and final. As has been made clear elsewhere in this chapter, interpretation is presented in the *Theaetetus* as a project which always leads toward and terminates in self-interpretation. A successful act of philosophical reading must bring the self to bear as a standard against the text one is interpreting and in turn apply the text as a measure of the self. Since one's own thoughts and beliefs are always the final word in an act of interpretation, and since they will invariably differ from the thoughts that lie beneath (διάνοια) the text one is interpreting,[96] every act of interpretation must inevitably reach beyond pure passivity and acquiescence to the text in question.

With this established, we are now better positioned to understand the sense in which Eucleides, the character of the *Theaetetus*' prologue who has committed the dialogue into textual form, is held up by Plato as a negative exemplum for literary philosophical activity. Eucleides tells Terpsion that he has repeatedly traveled back and forth from Megara to Athens to ensure

continued presence and elenctic activity in many of the dialogues that fall outside this group as it has been constructed. In fact, I consider it a strong possibility that much of the supposedly positive, Platonic teaching that occurs in the "middle" and "late" dialogues is truly refutative in nature. This is how Gadamer 1980: 37 understands the proofs of immortality presented in the *Phaedo*: "Thus the point of the demonstrations, it seems to me, is that they refute doubts and not that they justify belief."

[96] Even in the case of two people with great similarity of belief, there are certain to be differences that become apparent eventually. Even Socrates and Theaetetus, who share all the same facial features, are still not identical to one another (143e-144a). This same rift between the author's διάνοια and the reader's understanding of his text is also what underlies the literary aspect of the περιτροπή, discussed in Section II.3 of this chapter.

that the transcript he writes down of Socrates' conversation with Theaetetus, Theodorus, and the ghost of Protagoras comes as near as possible to perfect historical accuracy (143a). But by the standards of Socrates' art of midwifery, the product of Eucleides' philosophic activity would be a lifeless wind-egg; he has, at best, passively repeated the same words told to him by Socrates without mixing any of his own element into the composition.

The result places him in a position equivalent to that of Theaetetus at the moment he offers his first definition of knowledge, when it was the undiluted thought of Protagoras without any of Theaetetus' own contribution mixed in (152a). The final line of the dramatic frame brings out Eucleides' ironic status as a creator who lacks creativity: Eucleides orders his slave to read the text aloud, but the core of the sentence that constitutes this command is simply παῖ, λέγε ("Child, read," 143c). Although παῖ is the vocative address used by Eucleides to catch his slave's attention, this address also applies to the text Eucleides has so meticulously prepared — the offspring of his foray into philosophical writing.[97] But just like Theaetetus, the text resembles Socrates more than its own father (143e), since it has come verbatim from his lips through Eucleides as a passive conduit. This passive, uncreative example of literary philosophy with which Plato introduces the *Theaetetus* represents the danger of sycophantism and dogmatic listlessness. Far from encouraging this mindset in the reader of a philosophical text, Plato warns against it resoundingly as his opening move in the *Theaetetus.*

The third objection therefore fails to show an inconsistency of this method of philosophical reading with the character of Socrates as portrayed in the Socratic dialogues. Indeed, the Socratic method of reading is, in the end, one that prizes a self-focused and personal learning experience that moves beyond an uncritical reverence for the author. The Socratic

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[97] On the "genealogical" relationship of author to text, see Svenbro 1988: 3; 64-108. See also *Phaedrus* 257b; 275e and *Theaetetus* 164e.

method of textual interpretation is as well-suited to elenchus as the Socratic method of conversation, as Socrates eventual refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* demonstrates. But in conversation as well as interpretation, refutation is only convincing once the interlocutor has been given ample opportunity to express his viewpoint and make it known. Far from encouraging sycophantism, which truly would be uncharacteristic of Plato's Socrates, the assumption of wisdom facilitates the refutation of those assumed to be wise.

Philosophical Reading: Towards a Conclusion

In this chapter, I have extended the discussion of writing in the *Theaetetus* to embrace new territory in the main body of the dialogue. Three distinct usages of μέτρον and its derivatives have been identified and compared. This discussion revealed the problem of incommensurability inherent in Protagorean relativism and suggested that Socrates sees the written text as a measure of its reader. This problem of incommensurability was then highlighted as the crux of Socrates' metaphilosophical defeat of Protagoras in the περιτροπή, an argument which, according to my analysis, is strengthened by a less explicit parallel that took as its starting point the textual status of the deceased Protagoras' doctrines. Lastly, the framework of a Socratic style of philosophical reading was described. This style of reading is an alternative to the relativistic hermeneutics that were implied by, but also a great threat to, Protagoras' human-measure thesis. With this subtle and wide-ranging argument, Socrates has used the written text, a great interest of the bookish Theaetetus, as the site for a demonstration of the superiority of philosophical thought to sophistical thought. Only under the assumption of the possibility of a common measure between writer and reader can the text reach its full potential for communication and self-reflection.

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