http://doi.org/10.14393/REVEDFIL.v38a2024-70321

The megarian frame in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Cesar Augusto Mathias de Alencar[*]

Abstract: The *Theaetetus* has always occupied a prominent place, generally understood as belonging to Plato's more mature period. A concern is found, almost never analyzed in depth, in the conversation between Euclid of Megara and his companion Terpsion that opens *Theaetetus*, characterizing it as a writing belonging to the Megarian philosopher, whose teaching was denounced as eristic dialectic. Why then Euclid, author of *Theaetetus*? Our hypothesis intends, in view of the elaborated philosophy by the Socratic of Megara, to demonstrate that Plato sought to reproduce the Euclidean method for his own benefit, guided by a writing that puts at the center the issue of fixity desired by the *epistéme* as a matter of discourse, only surpassed within the scope of actions. The refutations of Theaetetus' opinions become the negative demonstration of the impossibility of *logos* to fix what proceeds from the educational event of truth, positively indicated by the art of maieutics and by the divine model described in the digression. From this perspective, the praise to Theaetetus' memory, which opens the Platonic text, will appear too as a homage to Socrates, through the framework of the Megarian text that situates us before the inescapable value of dialogic discourse as an educational instrument.

Keywords: Writing; Knowledge; Ethics; Education; Euclides of Megara.

A moldura megárica do *Teeteto*, de Platão

Resumo: O diálogo Teeteto sempre ocupou lugar de destaque, compreendido geralmente como pertencente à fase mais madura de Platão. Uma inquietação, quase nunca analisada a fundo, está na conversa entre Euclides de Mégara e seu companheiro Térpsion que abre o Teeteto, caracterizando-o como um escrito pertencente ao filósofo megárico, cuja tradição de ensino era denunciada por sua

[*] PhD in Philosophy from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Professor in the Universidade Federal do Amapá (UNIFAP) and in Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA). Email: dealencar.prof@gmail.com. Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/8781508238600725. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3145-0584.

dialética erística. Por que então Euclides, autor do Teeteto? Nossa hipótese pretende, em vista da filosofia formulada pelo socrático de Mégara, demonstrar que Platão procurou reproduzir em proveito próprio o método euclidiano, orientado por uma escrita que põe ao centro a questão da fixidez almejada pela epistéme como uma questão de discurso, apenas resolvida no âmbito das ações. As refutações das opiniões de Teeteto se tornam a demonstração negativa da impossibilidade de o lógos fixar aquilo que procede do acontecimento educativo da verdade, positivamente indicado pela arte da maiêutica e pelo modelo divino descrito na digressão. Sob essa perspectiva, o louvor à memória de Teeteto, que abre o texto platônico, aparecerá como uma homenagem a Sócrates, através da moldura do texto megárico que nos situa diante do valor inescapável do discurso dialógico como instrumento educativo.

Palavras-chave: Escrita; Conhecimento; Ética; Educação; Euclides de Mégara.

El cuadro megárico del *Teeteto* de Platón

Resumen: El diálogo de *Teeteto* ha ocupado siempre un lugar destacado, generalmente entendido como perteneciente a la fase más madura de Platón. Una inquietud, casi nunca analizada en profundidad, se encuentra en la conversación entre Euclides de Megara y su compañero Terpsion que abre el *Teeteto*, caracterizándolo como un escrito perteneciente al filósofo megárico, cuya tradición docente fue denunciada por su dialéctica erística. ¿Por qué entonces Euclides, autor de *Teeteto*? Nuestra hipótesis pretende, a la luz de la filosofía formulada por el socrático de Mégara, demostrar que Platón buscó reproducir el método euclidiano en beneficio propio, guiado por una escritura que pone en el centro la cuestión de la fijeza deseada por la *episteme*, como una cuestión de discurso que sólo se resuelve en el ámbito de las acciones. Las refutaciones de las opiniones de Teeteto se convierten en la demostración negativa de la imposibilidad del logos de fijar lo que procede del acontecimiento educativo de la verdad, señalada positivamente por el arte de la mayéutica y por el modelo divino descrito en la digresión. Desde esta perspectiva, el elogio de la memoria de Teeteto, que abre el texto platónico, aparecerá como un homenaje a Sócrates, en el marco del texto megárico que nos sitúa ante el valor ineludible del discurso dialógico como instrumento educativo.

Palabras clave: Escritura; Conocimiento; Principio Moral; Educación; Euclides de Megara.

Introduction

> *I would say that the tension does not lie in the opposition between the poetic and the philosophical, but between myth and concept, between adherence to the real and the krísis that language establishes in the world. Then, poetic word and philosophical word largely overlap*
> (Marcelo Marques, O caminho poético de Parmênides).[1]

All discourse depends, for its understanding, on what Paul Ricoeur[2] called the dialectic of event and meaning, that is, the complementary tension between the event of saying and what the discourse effectively says. Communication thus depends on the interaction not only between speaker and listener, but also on the nonverbal aspects that accompany speech and confer reference upon it, just as it does between the author of a text, its reader, and the circumstances of writing and reading. Ricoeur's proposal for a philosophy of language capable of overcoming the Romantic perspective in hermeneutics – initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey[3] places us in

[1] All translations of quoted material were made by the translator of this article, unless otherwise noted.
Original: "*Eu diria que a tensão não se dá na oposição entre o poético e o filosófico, mas entre o mito e o conceito, entre a adesão ao real e a krísis que a linguagem instaura no mundo. Deste modo, palavra poética e palavra filosófica se recobrem em grande parte*."

[2] Particulary in Ricoeur (1976).

[3] According to Ricoeur's assessment, the *Romantic* dimension of the hermeneutical approach in the founders of the art of interpretation stems from the aspiration to identify the *author's motivations* to understand him better than he was able to understand himself. One must not disregard, however, the case of the introduction that Friedrich Schleiermacher appended to his edition of Plato's works (*Platons Werke*, vol. 1, 1804, 1st ed.), which became emblematic of a type of reading of the Dialogues that seeks to attune the complementarity between form and content by drawing attention, for the first time, to Plato as a writer. Ricoeur emphasizes, in his critique, that the psychological stage of the hermeneutical task (see Schleiermacher, 2010) should not be grounded in a kind of magical affinity between the author of the text and its interpreter, but rather in the attainment of a contextual view of the event of discourse, insofar as it bears upon – and conditions – the meaning of what is said.

proximity to what seems to me the most adequate elucidation of the components of Plato's philosophy, known necessarily through Dialogues in which context – the dramatic and narrative reconstruction of the event of speech – is more decisive for understanding the elaboration of the argument than treating the argument as a structure isolated from the careful staging the philosopher endeavored to offer us.

What many commentators tend to dismiss without hesitation is, on the contrary, the most deliberate outcome of Plato's understanding of discourse, its nature, and its possible and desirable effects, especially in view of an educational purpose: the writing of philosophical dramatizations presents itself as a resource for creating a form of discourse that, precisely in saying, develops reflection upon what is said.

It is, in fact, misguided to reduce Platonic discourse to the argumentative structures generally regarded as most rationally adequate for the exercise of philosophy – thereby imposing upon the first great philosophical writer a conception of philosophy attuned not to its educational nature, as Plato himself acknowledges, but to its logical-demonstrative aspect, as contemporary philosophers associated with the analytic perspective, for example, tend to privilege. Yet if such a reading runs counter to the broad awareness of the philosophical experience Plato imagined his writing capable of providing, the privileging of the argumentative element, to the detriment of the dramatic poetics of the Dialogues, appears to have very ancient antecedents. Myles Burnyeat (1997) has indicated how, for Proclus, the importance of the prologues in the Platonic Dialogues – asserted against those who tended to reject them in favor of the argumentative portion – lies in considering them under a moral indication (a propaedeutic motivation intended to bring the reader into the morally appropriate disposition for reading), which would nevertheless be determined by the philosophical approach. In other words, the aspects signaled by the initial staging that introduces the characters, and the theme of the Dialogue would be properly clarified, in their moral appeal, only after observing the thematic structure of the argument developed in the central portion of the Dialogue. Thus would follow the conclusion Burnyeat seeks to lead us toward: "the opera explains the overture, not vice versa" (1997, p. 4). As Proclus suggests, one

cannot deny the importance and philosophical value of the manner in which Plato seeks to produce the contextual performance of the characters who will engage in dialogue throughout the text. It is therefore not only the dramatic quality of the prologues, but that of the dialogue as a whole, that must be considered. We must, as soon as possible, accept the game of Platonic writing – indeed, a considerable number of recent studies acknowledge that attention to the intelligence of the arguments present in the Dialogues is indispensable to a broader and more complex understanding of the poetic-narrative, and even mythic, dimensions that Plato's writing challenges us to adopt. From this perspective, the reading of certain Dialogues may be renewed, perhaps allowing for a different approach to specific philosophical formulations, conceived in their argumentative character, once they are situated within a textual economy that reveals itself – contrary to what Myles Burnyeat himself supposed – to be more ethical-pedagogical and rhetorical than properly analytic.

I intend to offer an elucidation of the dramatic elements of the Dialogue *Theaetetus*, considering them as a Platonic resource that frames and contextualizes the arguments of the encounter between Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus in their search for a definition of knowledge (*epistéme*). The staging of the prologue of *Theaetetus* has already been identified as a particularly notable case within the Platonic corpus[4]. What I wish to demonstrate is that, from the very prologue, Plato sought to draw his text closer to the Socratic circle, presenting the debate on *epistéme* as a "text" eventually written by Euclid of Megara. What does this mean? Given the acknowledged importance of the opening words of the Platonic works, we believe it possible to demonstrate that the so-called Megarian frame proposes, as it were, a particular reading of the *Theaetetus*, guided by Plato's effort to situate his own position vis-à-vis the views of the most renowned

[4] Primarly because, in this case, we are confronted with the metatextual reference to a written work concerning another written work, which plays with textual representation and with the recollection of discourse in ways that are, to some extent, distinct even from the prologue of the Symposium, its closest parallel. On the consideration of prologues in Plato, see Myles Burnyeat (1997). On the distinctive character of the writing of *Theaetetus*, see Andrea Tschemplik (2008, p. 22-26).

Socratics then active. This position emerges from the scrutiny the master himself directs toward those views, by means of a dialectic shaped, like the Megarian one, in a predominantly negative fashion.

The *Theaetetus* and the Question of Its Prologue

Theaetetus, who gives his name to the Platonic Dialogue, was a young man from Sunium, the son of Euphronius, born in 415 BCE. He was sixteen years old at the time of his encounter with Socrates, if we consider that Euclid of Megara – one of the Socratics and the writer of the Dialogue that Plato presents us as Reading – states at the outset that his written account was dedicated to the meeting between Socrates and Theaetetus when the latter was still young and the former was close to death, in order to record the master's words "in a prophetic manner" (ὡς μαντικῶς, *Theaetetus* 142c). Socrates himself, at the end of the Dialogue, announces that he is on his way to the King's Stoa to learn of the public indictment (*graphé*) brought against him by Meletus, the year of which we know to be the same as that of his death in 399 BCE.

If these allusions draw the Dialogue close to others that foreground the context of Socrates[5] condemnation, they also allow us to register – through one of Socrates' many engagements with the most promising youths of his time – the inescapably political condition of philosophy when conceived as public dialogue. This political background forms the deeper ground of the accusation leveled against him by Meletus: that of corrupting the youth.

From this perspective, Plato's *Theaetetus* exposes Socrates to his philosophical destiny, while at the same time considering him in light of the fateful destiny of the young Theaetetus, now reported to be gravely ill after a

[5] I refer to the Dialogues of the cycle initiated by the *Euthyphro*, followed by the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*. This reference complements the other sequence – also highlighted at the end of the *Theaetetus* and at the beginning of the *Sophist* – which seems, in a certain sense, to forge another important tetralogy, composed of the *Parmenides*, the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, and the *Statesman*, in that order. There is, therefore, a marked literary integration, effected by the *Theaetetus*, between the Dialogues of the early phase and the first late Dialogues.

battle in Corinth – of whose military exploits Euclid had just heard. The precarious condition of Theaetetus, "alive, but barely" (142b), brought back to Euclid's memory the words of Socrates, and with them the youth of Theaetetus, praised by the philosopher shortly before his death. The nearness of death for so worthy a figure as Theaetetus seems to have provided an opportune occasion to recall the life of another of the most worthy figures for Euclid – undoubtedly also for Plato – perhaps the most worthy of all for both.

This political backdrop,[6] which the words and scenes of *Theaetetus* leave latent, frames the situation of the Dialogue both as dialogical discourse and, at the same time, as a pretext for the reading of a written text. The relation – so central to Platonism – between writing and orality here finds a particularly intriguing articulation. The fact remains that the entire extended examination of knowledge, within which we encounter Socrates' laudatory and prophetic words about the ailing Theaetetus, forms part of a written text attributed to Euclid the Socratic – a central figure in the fate of Socrates' circle after the master's death, with whom Plato and others are said to have shared exile. Naturally, this does not require us to assume that the epistemological discussion of the *Theaetetus* was the creation of that elder Socratic. A sensitive reading of Plato's textual strategies need not take with full seriousness our modern concerns regarding authorship and historical fact. The evidence here is *literary*, in the sense that the reading is valid only if we consider the indications – at least those clearly assumed – woven by the writer into the fabric of his art. If it is Plato who writes the *Theaetetus*, the recourse to Euclid as the writer-character seeks, in some way, to confer proximity between what we are about to read and what would have been the style and discursive understanding of the Megarian master, or even to significant aspects of his philosophy.

The question that every interpreter of the Theaetetus ought to take seriously from the outset, therefore, concerns the meaning of the so-called Megarian frame that circumscribes the reference to the encounter between

[6] Particularly emphasized in the study by Paul Stern (2008, p. 2): "thus, the Prologue ensures that the specter of politically hued deaths hovers over the subsequent proceedings." See also Paulo Butti (2004). It is worth noting from the outset that the theme of the digression, present in the *Theaetetus*, seeks to characterize the condition of the philosopher in political terms.

Socrates and Theaetetus on the investigation of knowledge, as a feature of Plato's compositional style in the Dialogues. In the rare studies where this question is raised, it has never led to a consideration of what we know about the Socratic in question as decisive for a comprehensive reading of the Theaetetus. The most well-known commentary on the Dialogue does not even trouble to mention the scene with the Megarians[7], and the seminal work of Macdonald Cornford (1935) on the question of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, although recognizing the fictional dimension involved in the staging described in the prologue, suggests that the Dialogue was written as a posthumous tribute by Plato to his friend Theaetetus, such that the text would have been composed or published only after the death of the great mathematician of the Academy. Yet the rationale behind this praise of Theaetetus, placed in the mouth of Euclid the Megarian, received no further problematization[8]. John McDowell, in his well-known translation and commentary on the Dialogue, emphasized the *prefatory dialogue* solely to situate the *Theaetetus* chronologically in relation to the *Parmenides* (1973, p. 113), without any interest in the Megarian scene represented there. Following in McDowell's wake, David Bostock (1988) and John M. Cooper (2015) did not devote attention to the opening scene either. The absence of any sustained effort to understand the characters who open Plato's Dialogue reveals, on the one hand, the primacy that the argumentative question has long enjoyed in studies of ancient philosophy, to the neglect of the work's contextual details and dramatic indications; and, on the other hand, the scant

[7] Burnyeat (1990), although he mentions the Prologue in the first section of his introduction, effectively begins his commentary only once the conversation between Socrates and Theodorus is underway.

[8] Cornford's reference (1935, p. 33) rests on the report of an ancient commentary on the *Theaetetus*, which notes the existence of another prologue – "considerably colder" – introducing the Dialogue. This report seems important for underscoring Plato's special care with the framing of his analysis of knowledge. If the Platonic rewriting of the prologue, motivated by a tribute to his recently deceased friend, is indeed historical, it compels us to regard it as a decisive component of the dialogical construction. John M. Cooper (2015, p. 1) is of a similar view: "the tributes to Theaetetus' prowess in the preface and in the Dialogue proper, where one of his main mathematical achievements is described and celebrated (147d-148b), strongly suggest that Plato composed the Dialogue as a memorial to him.

regard accorded to the presence of the Socratics – still often regarded as "minor" – among Plato's interlocutors, whose *dialogical* (that is, intertextual) engagement with friends and rivals within the circle of Socrates is rarely considered by scholars.

Among recent readings, some have indeed considered the prologue – such as that of David Sedley (2004) – under the guidance of the importance of dramatic detail for understanding the arguments of the *Theaetetus*. Without failing to note the interpretative novelty Plato proposes in his portrayal of Socrates – as the midwife of ideas whose gestation he himself in some sense occasions – Sedley advances the hypothesis that, in this late Dialogue, Plato develops the image of Socrates as midwife in order to suggest the decisively *positive* character of the Socratic practice of dialectical examination, a practice that Plato himself intends to exercise through the writing of the *Theaetetus*.

> I propose an interpretation of the Dialogue according to which Socrates – by which I now mean the historical or semi-historical figure of that name, familiar to us from Plato's early Dialogues – although not himself a Platonist, was, so to speak, the midwife of Platonism. In developing this implicit portrait of Socrates as the midwife of Platonism, Plato intended to demonstrate, if not an identity, at least a profound continuity between, on the one hand, the historical contribution of his revered master and, on the other, Platonic truth. (Sedley, 2004, p. 8)

In truth, what Sedley characterizes as this "profound continuity" between the historical Socrates and Plato's literary use of him presupposes the now well-known distinction – articulated since the work of Gregory Vlastos – between two Socrates: in Sedley's terms, the *aporetic* Socrates and the *doctrinal* one. The Meno is singled out as paradigmatic of this double use by Plato, a strategy that would also appear in the *Republic*,

though in a more controversial form[9]. The novelty of the *Theaetetus*, however, would consist in the aporetic performance of Socrates as midwife of the Socratic Plato himself, prompting us – through the aporia at the Dialogue's conclusion – to consider what Plato had elsewhere taught in texts such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*: namely, the doctrines of the Forms and of recollection, which seem to provide the very solution to the problem of knowledge that the author of the *Theaetetus* conspicuously refrains from advancing. In other words, for Sedley – whose position Charles H. Kahn (2018) explicitly endorses – the *Theaetetus* functions as a kind of maieutic exercise performed by Plato upon his readers, preparing them to "*give birth*" to the doctrine of the Forms as the necessary resolution to the perplexity in which the Dialogue leaves us.[10]

This interpretative proposal, however, tends to presuppose a readership of the *Theaetetus* already "Platonically informed," thoroughly familiar not only with Plato's modes of exposition in his other writings but also with the doctrines expressed therein – whether in writing or in oral teaching. On this view, Plato's refinement in the *Theaetetus* would lie in showing, based on an insight into the historical Socrates, that Platonism represents the most adequate fulfillment of the master's aspiration to the practice of philosophy. Even Kahn, when he identifies Plato's use of argumentative digressions in the *Theaetetus* – such as the famous excursus – as a way of avoiding a "direct presentation of Plato's metaphysical views," while understanding them as "clearly designed to remind an informed reader of such views," concludes: "the whole Dialogue is planned as a dialectical work" (2018, p. 72),[11] to be read

[9] Beyond the reference to the aporetic Socrates of Book I and the doctrinal Socrates of the subsequent books, the idea advanced by David Sedley (2004, p. 10) is that, in the *Republic IV*, the *supposed* overcoming of Socratic intellectualism is only apparent. Sedley understands Plato's effort to articulate the tripartition of the soul not as a rejection of Socratism, but rather as a supplement to it – an effort that, in his view, can be traced throughout the "entirely intellectual" considerations of Books V-VII.

[10] On the re-signification of the figure of the aporetic Socrates as midwife of ideas, see A. A. Long (1998).

[11] Original: "*diretamente as visões metafísicas de Platão*"; "*claramente projetados para recordar tais visões a um leitor informado*"; "*o diálogo inteiro é planejado como um trabalho dialético*."

from the standpoint of someone who knows that Plato deliberately has something to say about *epistéme* that is not said within the Dialogue itself. This unsaid element, Kahn (2018, p. 71) maintains, lies in the

> positive conclusion implied by the negative outcome of the entire Dialogue and more directly established by the refutation of unrestricted flux, namely that some element of unchanging Being is required as an object of knowledge.

If, as Kahn maintains, the composition of the *Theaetetus* requires the interpreter to grasp decisively its place among Plato's late Dialogues – literarily situated after the *Parmenides* and before the *Sophist* – then that place must account for the "absent presence" of the consideration of the immutability of Being, whose principal point of reference lies in Eleatic doctrine,[12] as a solution to the problem of knowledge. Sedley's interpretative suggestion, in proposing that Platonic writing be read as a maieutic exercise directed at the reader, plays on the significance of Socrates' examination within the very process of reading the Dialogue. The text written by Euclid and placed in the proem of the *Theaetetus*, Sedley argues, would have been capable of summoning ancient readers – more effectively, no doubt, than modern ones – to an authentic recollection of the experience of Socratic philosophy as lived in its historical meaning (2004, p. 17). That experience is constructed differently from the narrative frameworks with which Plato introduces certain other Dialogues, such as the *Symposium* and the *Parmenides*, for here it is circumscribed within the invariance of the written text. It is difficult not to observe that invariance is itself one of the most important marks of *epistéme*[13]. With the prologue, Sedley concludes, Plato invites his reader to participate in what is most permanent and enduring in the Socratic examination. Yet the presence of the one said to be

[12] The absent presence concerns Socrates' professed inability to assess the theses of immobility in the way he does those of the mobilists (*Theaetetus* 180e-181b). It is worth noting the way Plato consistently refers to the immobilists by pairing Parmenides with Melissus. The alleged proximity between the Eleatics and Euclid will be addressed in the following section.

[13] See, for example, *Cratylus* (437a-b).

the author of the written text – Euclid – receives from Sedley, and even less from Kahn, no specific justification.

This issue is taken up more directly in the article by Claudia Mársico (2020), which proposes reading the *nostalgic gaze* present in the *Theaetetus* as fertile ground for demonstrating Plato's exercise of writing as woven within a circle of Socratic intellectuals who, though diverging in their solutions to the philosophical questions awakened by Socrates, nevertheless tend to share the bonds that attach them to the master's philosophy. Not by chance, as indicated in the critical apparatus compiled by Gabriele Giannantoni (1990), the *Theaetetus* is among the dialogues richest in allusions to other philosophies.[14] In presenting the *Theaetetus* as a dialogue resonant with decisive features of what we know as Socratism, Mársico situates the fundamental role of the Megarian pair in the proem on the basis of the undeniable fact that the *Theaetetus* unfolds as an aporetic examination, akin to the well-known charge attributed to Euclid that every attempt at knowledge through *logos* is ultimately untenable. As we shall see, this charge becomes even more significant in light of Socrates' appeal to the divine model of the philosopher, sketched in the famous digression, which retrieves the Megarian idea of the practical character of access to the Good. Noting that "the work is, so to speak, in Megarian hands," Mársico (2020, p. 2) reinforces the imperative to take seriously the presence of Euclid as the writer of the *Theaetetus*, above all because, "in this context, the *contaminatio* between δόξα and ἐπιστήμη and the difficulties concerning the notion of an infallible ἐπιστήμη are not marginal subtleties; they are rather central and expected features."

The Euclidean thesis of discourse

Regarding the philosophy of Euclid of Megara, scant as our evidence is, a few important indications may nevertheless be gathered. The first concerns Euclid's alleged fondness for the kind of discussion known as

[14] The other Dialogue in question is the *Republic*; see Mársico (2020, p. 1).

eristic. A testimony from Diogenes Laertius refers to this, together with what is said to have been Socrates' reservation concerning the Megarian's dedication to such disputes – a reservation that must in some measure also be ours, albeit for different reasons, so long as we are dealing with Euclid.

> When Socrates saw that Euclid had devoted himself seriously to eristic arguments (περὶ τοὺς ἐριστικοὺς λόγους), he said to him: "Euclid, you will be able to use them against sophists, but never against men," for he believed that argumentation based on such themes was debilitating, as Plato also says in the *Euthydemus*. (DL II.30; *SSR* II.A.3)[15]

I say that this reservation must "also be ours" because, as the passage suggests, Diogenes appeals to Plato's *Euthydemus* in order to attribute an *eristic* character to the kind of discourse practiced by Euclid. Yet both Plato and Xenophon make use of *eristic* exchanges in representing the Socratic method. In the *Euthydemus* – a Dialogue that echoes Megarian procedures – Socrates indicates that the dialectic practiced there possesses philosophical dignity (304e-307b).[16] If there is, in some respect, a proximity between the method of Socrates and that of Euclid, the reservation reported by Laertius would seem not to concern the type of discourse employed by the Megarian as such, but rather the intention governing its use: with someone worthy of being educated, and not with sophists, the so-called contentious arguments (ἐριστικοὶ λόγοι) prove inadequate, since their polemical result, *aporia*, ought to constitute only the first step in philosophical education. This leads us to the

[15] Original: "*Ao ver Sócrates que Euclides dedicara-se com seriedade aos discursos erísticos (περὶ τοὺς ἐριστικοὺς λόγους), disse-lhe: 'Euclides, poderás usá-los com sofistas, jamais com homens', pois cria que a argumentação fundada sobre esses temas era debilitante, como também disse Platão em* Eutidemo."

[16] On the *Euthydemus* as portraying certain Megarian attitudes, see Louis-André Dorion (2003, pp. 35-50). It is worth noting that the dialogical unity of the *Memorabilia*, in which Xenophon illustrates the Socratic use of this dialectic, was designated by Livio Rossetti (2015, p. 49) under the title Xenophon's *Euthydemus*.

very center of the hermeneutic question raised by Euclid's philosophy: in what manner did the Megarian understand discourse as an instrument of education?

To approach this question, we must examine further indications concerning Euclid's thought, especially those pertaining to the two principal interpretative initiatives regarding what appears to be the central thesis of his philosophical proposal: the idea of the Good-as-One. According to what may be called the "traditional" position,[17] Euclid would trace his thesis back to Xenophanes and the Eleatics, elaborating a certain ontological unity for the notion of the Good. According to another position, which we may call "Socratic," emphasis is placed instead on the primacy of the ethical question in Euclid, stablishing his concern in the defense of the unity of the virtues on the basis of the Good – which, not being adequately expressible in discourse, can only be grasped from the standpoint of the end of our actions.

Let us consider the traditional position, which rests upon the following testimony from Cicero (*Academica Priora*, II.42.129; SSR II.A.31):

> The school of the Megarians was famous. Its founder, according to what I have read, was Xenophanes, whom I mentioned earlier, followed by Parmenides and Zeno (from whom these philosophers were called "Eleatics"), then Euclid of Megara, the disciple of Socrates, from whom they were later called Megarians. They said that only what is one, always alike and identical with itself, is good. They also borrowed much from Plato.[18]

[17] According to Mársico (FS I, introduction, 3.2), this amounts to "a synthesis of the Eleatic and Socratic traditions, according to Zeller, or else an integration of both implying either an 'ethicization' of the Parmenidean on or an ontologization of the Socratic good." It is clear that the two alternatives presented by Mársico belong to the first perspective, upon which depends the kind of interpretation one adopts regarding the ontological character of Being in Parmenides. To this perspective, we oppose another, circumscribed to the ethical character of the question. On the ontological character of Being in Parmenides, see Marcelo Marques (1990).

[18] Original: "*A escola dos megáricos foi célebre. Seu iniciador, segundo o que li, foi Xenófanes, a quem mencionei antes, seguindo-o logo Parmênides e Zenão (pelos quais esses filósofos foram chamados 'eleáticos'), depois Euclides de Mégara, o discípulo de Sócrates, a partir de quem se lhes deu o nome de megáricos. Diziam que é bom apenas o que é uno, sempre similar e igual a si mesmo. Também tomaram muito de Platão*."

According to what the sources allow us to ascertain, the dates of activity of the principal figures mentioned here do not make it plausible that Euclid could have met Xenophanes, Parmenides, or Zeno in order to receive instruction from them. What is therefore at issue in this passage is a mode of understanding succession as *theoretical* affiliation rather than as direct *discipleship*[19]. This is what allows Cicero to conflate Xenophanes – an independent thinker – and the whole of Eleatism as, in the end, Megarian. In truth, the relative emphasis placed on establishing such theoretical lines of succession points to the interpretative reconstruction undertaken by later intellectuals, as a result of which even the very existence of a distinct "Eleatic school" has at times been called into question as a probable Platonic creation.[20] It is also striking, in the passage cited above, that Plato is presented as exercising influence over Euclid and the Megarians – an indication that Plato himself may have been Cicero's principal source.

It is worth adducing another testimony, in order to add further details – following the succession sketched in Cicero's account – regarding what was taken to be the theoretical core of Euclid's affiliation with the doctrine of the One:

> But others appeared who said the opposite, for they held that perceptions (τὰς αἰσθήσεις) and appearances (τὰς φαντασίας) should be disregarded, and that one should trust only reason (τῷ λόγῳ) itself. This, they said, had first been maintained by Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus, and later by the followers of Stilpo and the Megarians. For this reason, they asserted that Being is one and that its opposite does not exist (τὸ ὂν ἓν εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἕτερον μὴ εἶναι), and that it neither comes to be nor perishes, nor moves at all. (Aristocles, *On Philosophy*,

[19] The testimonies concerning the Megarians generally operate by way of theoretical affinity, without any concern to establish lines of pedagogical succession. On the different ways of construing succession and their implications for the characterization of the philosophy of Euclid of Megara, see Mariana Gardella (2015, pp. 42-43).

[20] See the study by Nestor Cordero (1991, pp. 93-124).

> frag. 2 [according to Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, XIV.17.1, p. 756 b–c]; *SSR*, II.O.26)[21]

Once again, the Megarian group appears linked to the Eleatic tradition – or to those who defended the ontological principle of the One-Being – this time with emphasis not on Euclid of Megara, but on Stilpo, his most prominent disciple, as the likely representative of the theses binding this tradition together: the unity of Being, the non-existence of its contrary, and confidence in reason. It is certain that there was no unanimity within the Megarian circle concerning these points – except perhaps regarding trust in reason, which entailed a distrust of the sensible.[22] Such trust, moreover, was grounded in a corresponding discrediting of ordinary language, deemed as deceptive as perception itself. For this reason, Aristotle, apparently directing himself against Megarian views in *Metaphysics IV*, characterizes their adherents as men eager to "seek a rational account in everything"[23] – an account sustained, he suggests, more by the pleasure of disputation than by a stable commitment to truth, now affirming one position, now its opposite, much as Plato portrays in the *Euthydemus*. We are here confronted with Megarian dialectic in operation – a dialectic denounced as *eristic*, in the view of Enrico Berti (2013), because it rests upon that univocity of Being sustained by Parmenides and later refuted

[21] Original: "*Mas apareceram outros que diziam o contrário, pois criam que se deve desdenhar das percepções (τὰς αἰσθήσεις) e das representações (τὰς φαντασίας), e confiar apenas na razão (τῷ λόγῳ) ela mesma. Com efeito, isso era dito primeiro por Xenófanes, Parmênides, Zenão e Melisso, e também depois os seguidores de Estípon e dos megáricos. Por isso, afirmavam que o ser é uno e que o seu contrário não existe (τὸ ὂν ἓν εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἕτερον μὴ εἶναι), nem gera algo, nem se destrói, nem se move em absoluto*."

[22] As already indicated by Eduard Zeller (1887, p. 259) and Robert Muller (1985, pp. 46-47; 83-110). Both, however, proceed toward ontological considerations, insofar as they suggest that the Megarians attributed to thought the capacity to know the permanent determinants of reality.

[23] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (1012a21). Giovanni Reale, in a note to his critical edition, observes that W. D. Ross believed Aristotle to be referring there to Antisthenes. This does not exclude, however, the possibility that the reference concerns the Megarians as well, since both Socratic groups defend similar theses (see Aristotle, 2013, pp. 91-110).

by Gorgias.[24] The denial of sensible knowledge through subtle or sophistical arguments had already figured in Zeno's refutations of motion and later resurfaced in the skeptical tradition inaugurated by Pyrrho, a disciple of Bryson, son of Stilpo the Megarian (DL IX.61).

It would seem that Euclid is absent from the cited testimony precisely because he did not, within the framework of these three views, uphold the One-Being. For Euclid, the principle of unity was located rather in the Good: not only is its contrary – evil – non-existent, but language itself is deceptive insofar as it presents the Good under a multiplicity of names. The defense of this interpretation – what I have termed the *Socratic* reading – has been taken up again by Mariana Gardella (2015), following earlier studies by Kurt von Fritz (1931) and Gabriele Giannantoni (1991), among the most significant contributions on the matter. In the confrontation between these two interpretative positions, what proves decisive is whether Euclid is to be regarded primarily as a dialectical-eristic thinker with ontological resonances – a characterization that may plausibly apply to some of his successors – or rather as a philosopher of fundamentally ethical concerns, whose investigation of language seeks to expose its dangerous ambiguity for the excellence of human action. It is with the intention of highlighting this latter reading that one may say, with Giannantoni (1990, IV, p. 51):

> […] judging from what can be conjectured based on the contents of Euclid's works – whose titles refer us to a type of literary activity directly 'Socratic' – nothing leads us to suppose any treatment of ontological or metaphysical problems akin to those of the Eleatic tradition.[25]

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[24] See Berti (2013, pp. 50-53; 96-98). Berti's view once again underscores the attribution of eristic to a mode of dialogue that is properly Socratic, and which is distinguished from so-called eristic by its educational intentionality, as emphasized in the *Euthydemus* and as we shall observe in other testimonies concerning Euclid of Megara. With regard to the doctrine of the univocity of Being, understood as the foundation of the conception of the two paths in *On Nature* by Parmenides, the diagnosis is Aristotelian (*Metaphysics* I.5, 986b18-20). A literarily more suggestive consideration of Being as presence may be found in Marques (1990, p. 55ff.).

[25] Original: "[...] *a partir do que é possível conjeturar pelo conteúdo das obras de Euclides, com títulos que nos remetem a um tipo de atividade literária diretamente 'socrática', nada*

Gardella (2015, p. 51-54) spared no effort in clarifying the Megarian position, drawing on testimonies that associate Euclid of Megara with the kind of defense of self-mastery characteristic of the Socratic circle. The following text provides an example: "Euclid said: most men are foolish: they avoid the food and clothing of slaves, but not the habits of slaves" (*SSR* II.A.21). This type of exhortative statement seems, at first glance, to point to a distinction between *being* and *appearing* – a deception that is not merely epistemic but above all ethical, since it describes conduct sustained by a false conception. One might believe oneself not to be a slave because one does not resemble one, because one strives to distinguish oneself from one, and yet in fact be one. The ignorance lies in taking similar situations to be distinct, thereby misusing the term *servus*. To avoid being a slave, Socrates repeatedly maintained, one must master oneself – one must possess *enkrateia*. The exhortation to self-mastery and care for the soul constitutes the most fundamental task of Socratic philosophy.[26]

If Euclid belongs within the Socratic tradition whose task was to define *areté* on the basis of knowledge,[27] Gardella (2015) seeks to undo an ontological reading of the Good to foreground Euclid's ethical perspective, rooted in exhortation. The importance of *areté* among the Socratics is well known: Isocrates criticizes them for maintaining that the virtues are one and are attained through knowledge (*Against the Sophists*, §§1-6), engaging for that purpose in eristic exercises which, in his view, appeared useless. The most compelling defense of Socratism in Euclid, therefore, lies not in a metaphysical register but in an ethical-exhortative one. According to Isocrates' testimony, this ethical concern consists in the defense of the unity

nos induz a supor qualquer tratamento de problemas ontológicos ou metafísicos semelhantes ao da tradição eleata."

[26] For conclusions concerning the philosophy of Socrates, see Alencar (2021).

[27] In a brief passage of Diogenes Laertius, we find the indication that, for the Megarians, excellence – though one – is called by many names: "*He did not admit that there are many excellences, as Zeno did, nor that there is one with many names, as the Megarians maintained, but rather understood it in relation to ways of life*." (DL VII.161; SSR II.A.32)

of virtue *in knowledge* – a unity which, as indicated in the following report preserved by Diogenes Laertius, is grounded in the Good:

> He [Euclid] declared that the Good is one, though it is called by many names – at times prudence, at times god, or again intellect, and so forth. He rejected whatever was contrary to the Good, asserting that it does not exist. (DL, II.106 [Hesychius of Miletus, *On Illustrious Men*, 27; Arsenius, p. 253.27–254.2]; SSR, II.A.30.)

If we attempt to relate this indication concerning the Good to the earlier mention of confidence in reason, it would be appropriate to suppose that the Megarian intended to show, *through logos*, how the Good escapes determination by perception and ordinary language, since both render multiple what is in fact one. The testimony suggests that Euclid's concern is directed toward the intelligible domain – toward reason as the capacity to apprehend unity. This *ethical* quality of reason appears, for instance, in Plato's *Theaetetus*, when Socrates proposes *definition* as the criterion of the maieutic examination. We must therefore understand how Euclid employs discourse to expose discourse's incapacity to express unity. When Diogenes concludes by stating that the contrary of the Good does not exist, Euclid's argument does not seem to situate the Good as a mode of being among things. After all, there are things distinct from the Good – there are horses, and there is Socrates, for example. The contrary of the Good – that is, evil – is what does not exist. The One-Good does not designate a single reality, but rather what grounds reality insofar as it is desirable for us, since it guarantees the intelligibility of multiplicity. The issue, then, is not ontology but ethics and education.

In another significant passage, Euclid is said to have understood the nature of the highest Good "even if he did not explain it" (*SSR* II.A.31; *FS* 85). This lack of explanation may stem either from a refusal to treat the matter – similar to what is said of Plato in the *Seventh Letter* – or from the notion that language distances itself from the Good insofar as it renders its unity multiple. For *logos* not only divides things in their unity (at the very least into subject and predicate), but also leads us, through linguistic habit, to believe that reality itself is multiple rather than one in its intelligibility. From a Euclidean perspective,

the *logos* adequate to express the Good would, ultimately, be the reverse of *logos* – that is, silence. In other words, the Good should not be spoken but lived, for it is in the motivation to act that we experience its unity. The way in which Mársico summarizes this Euclidean consideration is worth noting:

> Let us note, however, that this claim [that the Good cannot be spoken in discourse] highlights a fundamental aspect of the Megarian position, namely the inadequacy between language and reality: if the Good – whether or not identified with the real – is one, and the linguistic apparatus is necessarily multiple and varied, then everyday opinions reflecting such multiplicity are mistaken, and it may even be impossible to represent unity. Thus, the activity of eristic dialectic would function as a way of drawing attention to these limitations, which, without strictly collapsing into skepticism, nonetheless share important points of contact with it regarding the limits of apprehending and expressing reality. (Mársico, *FS* I.87, p. 54, n. 122)

So far as we can tell, this was the reason why Euclid of Megara not only grasped the force of the dialogical refutation practiced by Socrates – whose mechanism was woven from that same agonistic play of contention designed to provoke *aporia* – but also developed it to the point of transforming his writing and argumentation into the most effective way of persuading his interlocutor to turn toward the virtuous unity of the Good rather than lose himself in the multiplicity of words. Discourse, in this light, would have no function other than a protreptic one; thus, it is not a matter of discoursing about the Good, as Gardella (2015, p. 54) proposes in defending Euclid's doctrine as an *agathology*. It is rather a matter of orienting oneself toward the Good through *logos*, freeing oneself from deceptive conceptions to attend ever more closely to what is intelligible in the human disposition to act and to know. For in desiring to act well, we seek nothing other than what is best to be done. It was with this reorientation of the gaze toward the Good in view that Euclid appears to have practiced his dialectic, as he did in his exchange with his brother:

> The Socratic Euclid became renowned among the schools because, upon hearing the senseless and fierce voice of his brother saying, "May I perish if I do not take revenge on you," he replied: "And I, if I cannot persuade you to put an end to your anger and to love me as you once did." (Plutarch, *On Brotherly Love*, 18, p. 489d; *SSR*, II.A.15)

In keeping with the Greek way of thinking, which identified the Good with the Beautiful, Euclid held that among human beings those act best "who imitate the most beautiful things" (οἵ τινες καὶ τὰ κάλλιστα μιμοῦνται; *SSR*, II.A.18, *FS* I.74). *Logos*, endowed with an educational function, must be employed both to refute misguided opinions and to exhort the hearer toward the better path – the imitation of beauty or of the Good in its unity – or else it is of no value.

Negative Dialectic and the Writing of the *Theaetetus*

The effort of writing, as F. Trabattoni (2003, p. 101) observes, "turns into an extremely dangerous boomerang:"[28] while it seeks to safeguard certain truths useful for practical life in fixed formulations, it can never entangle itself in the belief that the text is a receptacle of truth. If this boomerang effect appears to inherit Thucydides' conception of writing as a lasting possession[29] – it simultaneously mirrors the ironic stance of the philosophical writer exposed in Plato's *Phaedrus* through its reference to Isocrates. For only one who writes while knowing what truth is (εἰ μὲν εἰδὼς ᾗ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἔχει

[28] Original: "*Traduz-se em um perigosíssimo bumerangue*."

[29] κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, I.22), a passage in which Thucydides, reflecting on his account of that great war, emphasizes the clarity of his investigation of events so that it may serve future situations of a similar kind, given the enduring features of human nature. The myth of Thoth, narrated in Plato's *Phaedrus*, seems in part to correspond to this legacy of preservation highlighted by Thucydides, and may help us understand Euclid's carefulness in the *Theaetetus*: that is, the attempt to transform into a legacy the limitation whereby logos recreates what has occurred – almost as a mummification of the past.

συνέθηκε ταῦτα, 278c) may properly be called a *philosopher*; the discursive prominence of the young Isocrates, like that of any great writer, can never serve as testimony to the presence of philosophy (ἔνεστί τις φιλοσοφία, 279a), of the kind Socrates claimed to discern in him. Philosophy, insofar as it resides in the soul, cannot be fixed in writing – which renders both legitimate and unsettling the question of what esteem Plato, as author of the *Phaedrus*, could have held for the very practice of writing to which he devoted himself.[30]

In a certain sense, it may be said that the *Theaetetus* is, even more than the *Phaedrus*, Plato's decisive Dialogue concerning this boomerang effect of writing – that is, concerning the fixity sought by the text and the impossibility of fixing truth. At this point, I suggest that Megarian dialectic, as a framework particularly apt to produce such an effect, becomes a Platonic strategy – almost always unnoticed – for diagnosing the conflicts surrounding *epistéme*. For, recalling the suggestive definition proposed in the *Cratylus*, the theme of *epistéme* appears closely aligned with that of writing: in reflecting on "the very name of knowledge" (*epistéme*), Socrates notes its ambiguity, observing that with it we signal the attempt to fix in the soul things that flow around us (ἵστησιν ἡμῶν ἐπὶ τοῖς πράγμασι τὴν ψυχὴν ἢ ὅτι συμπεριφέρεται. 437a). *Epistéme* belongs to a semantic field encompassing notions such as stabilizing, fastening, retaining, making endure, remaining. A field that allows Socrates, for instance, to remark that "'inquiry' in a certain sense means fixing the flux" (ἡ 'ἱστορία' αὐτό που σημαίνει ὅτι ἵστησι τὸν ῥοῦν. *Cratylus*, 437b). There is, however, an unmistakable irony in this proposed definition, clearly shaped by the desire to *fix the notion that we seek to fix something* of things within ourselves. And if it is not advisable to take too seriously many of the etymologies advanced in the *Cratylus*, neither would it be prudent to dismiss the playful indications offered by a writer who philosophizes by playing with his writing.[31]

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[30] In the *Seventh Letter* (341b-c), Plato goes so far as to problematize any claim that one might have access to his essential teachings through writing, "*for it is not something that can be expressed in words, as other kinds of knowledge (*mathēmata*) are*."

[31] On writing as play, see Plato, *Phaedrus* (276d). Gorgias expresses himself in similar fashion at the conclusion of his *Encomium of Helen*.

This game of affirming by negating and negating by affirming reaches a kind of mastery in the *Theaetetus*. The Euclidean frame through which Plato leads us to read his representation of Theaetetus' maieutic encounter inserts us into the very constitution of written discourse as a model for staging Socratic dialectic. Strictly speaking, we read a text by Euclid. He composed it with exemplary dedication, enabling us to glimpse how the dynamic between orality and writing was experienced by those men in their association with Socrates. Let us hear Plato ventriloquize Euclid's words, as he recounts how he set about recollecting the conversation that Socrates had told him he once held with the young Theaetetus (142d-143a):

> At the time, after going straight home, I wrote memoranda; later, as I had leisure, I would recall and write; and whenever I returned to Athens, I would repeatedly question Socrates about what I had not remembered and, coming back here, would correct my account – so that practically the entire conversation has been written down by me.[32]

Here we find important indications for understanding the Socratic context, especially regarding the so-called *logoi sokratikoi*. Apparently, Socrates was in the habit of narrating (διηγέομαι, 143b) the conversations he had conducted – conversations that surely echoed fundamental themes and problems subjected to his philosophical scrutiny.[33] There also seems to have been encouragement for his companions to undertake such recollections, among which Euclid's decision to commit them to writing stands out. Within Plato's logos, we may interpret this gesture as a subtle ironic note regarding Euclid. The opening scene of the *Theaetetus* sketches a praise of the

[32] Original translated by Iglésias and Rodrigues with modifications: "*Mas, na ocasião, indo diretamente para casa, escrevi memoriais, e, posteriormente, de acordo com o tempo livre, ao ir rememorando, ia escrevendo; e todas as vezes que voltava à Atenas, interrogava Sócrates repetidamente sobre o que não havia lembrado e, vindo para cá, corrigia; de modo que praticamente a conversação toda está escrita por mim*."

[33] Theaetetus himself remarks (148e) that he had heard reports concerning the kind of questioning developed by Socrates.

Megarian's meticulousness, his devotion to reconstructing the master's discursive legacy, while at the same time hinting at a reservation concerning his possibly fragile memory – perhaps explaining his strenuous effort to reconstruct Socrates' and *Theaetetus*' words. We know from certain testimonies of Euclid's dedication in traveling from Megara to Athens, even disguising himself as a woman to avoid arrest during wartime hostilities. Plato surely knew that casting doubt on Euclid's memory would touch upon his exemplary Socratism.[34] Perhaps, then, the proem of the *Theaetetus* is not a critique of Euclid's weak memory but rather a reflection on the distinctive challenge writing poses: the task of recording and fixing what can never truly be fixed. If the Dialogue we read is the result of that challenge, it becomes nearly impossible to read it without considering the nature of *logos*, *alétheia*, and the supposed coalescence between them invoked by *epistéme* and *graphé*.

Even more unsettling is Plato's recourse to this device when one considers that he portrays the effort of writing through the figure of a philosopher who emphatically underscored the incapacity of discourse to establish what bears the highest value for human life: the good that guides action. If the Megarian's dialectic serves merely an exhortative function – purging the opinions that distort the full experience of wise action – then one must seek in his literary refinement, prior to any *fixation* of knowledge about anything whatsoever, the record of those advances and retreats that unsettle the soul until it comes to discover, until it is brought to give birth to, a new understanding.[35] It is therefore emblematic that in the Theaetetus, a text "written" by Euclid, Socratic art is specified as maieutic. Despite the terminological novelty – which I take to result precisely from the 'Euclidean authorship' of the text – references in other Socratics to the erotic-pedagogical

[34] Memory appears as decisive for the constitution of the philosopher and of philosophical work from the earliest burlesque references to Socrates' teaching in *Clouds* by Aristophanes. Concerning the report about Euclid in the testimony of Timon of Phlius, and its exemplary application within the Socratic circle, see Alencar (2019).

[35] I refer here to a procedure so characteristic of Socrates that the comedy *Clouds* itself staged it: "Come now, set to work, prepare the old man for initiation into learning; shake up his mind and test him in knowledge" (*Clouds*, vv. 476-477). For an analysis of the comic play as a Socratic testimony, see C. Alencar (2021).

character of dialectical inquiry are not lacking; the maieutic exercise appears here as one more expression within the semantic field associated with eros.[36] Yet "one more" does not quite capture the point: under Plato's pen, what we observe in maieutic art is the most expansive image possible of the ethical aim inherent in Socrates' erotic practice of Dialogue.

A purpose, therefore, that is not merely attained at the end of the process, but is itself, above all, the principle what from the very beginning positions the philosopher and his characteristic mode of discourse. From the outset to the conclusion, the maieutic art shapes the manner in which Socrates finds himself moved to engage the young Theaetetus in Dialogue. Let us read how, at the end, Socrates and Theaetetus come to an understanding concerning the kind of good obtained through maieutics:

> SOC. Tell me, my friend, are we still pregnant with something and in labor concerning knowledge, or have we now given birth to everything?
> THEAET. By Zeus, I have said far more, thanks to you, than what was in me.
> SOC. Then, does not the maieutic art declare that all these things are but winds and not worthy of nourishment (πάντα ἡ μαιευτικὴ ἡμῖν τέχνη ἀνεμιαῖά φησι γεγενῆσθαι καὶ οὐκ ἄξια τροφῆς)?
> THEAET. Certainly.
> SOC. If, after this, you attempt to become pregnant with other things, Theaetetus, and if you truly are pregnant, you will, because of the present inquiry, be filled with better things; but if you are empty (κενός), you will be less burdensome to those who associate with you and more gentle, wisely not supposing that you know what you do not know. (οὐκ οἰόμενος εἰδέναι ἃ μὴ οἶσθα. *Theaetetus*, 210b-c)[37]

[36] Intellectual pregnancy is given special prominence in the speech of Diotima of Mantinea in the *Symposium* (206b).

[37] Original translated by Iglésias and Rodrigues: "*SOC – Será que então, amigo, ainda estamos prenhes de algo e sentimos dores de parto acerca da ciência ou <já> demos à luz tudo? TEE – Sim, por Zeus. Eu, pelo menos, disse, graças a ti, muito mais coisas do que as que eu tinha em mim. SOC – Então, não é?, a arte maiêutica diz-nos todas essas coisas serem*

The metaphor of wind and emptiness draws the attention of anyone who, since the *Apology*, has recognized the influence of the image of clouds in characterizing the Socratic procedure.[38] The metaphor likewise surfaces at the opening of the Dialogue, when Socrates undertakes to elucidate Protagoras' "man-measure" doctrine, which Theaetetus links to his initial definition: since a wise man cannot utter nonsense, Protagoras must have intended that when the same wind (ἀνέμου τοῦ αὐτοῦ) blows, some experience it as cold, others as intensely so, thereby rendering each of us, according to Protagoras, the measure of what the "very breath itself" (ἑαυτοῦ τὸ πνεῦμα) is (152a-b). That Theaetetus acknowledges having come to know this teaching through reading (ἀναγιγνώσκω) is suggestive: set against the written fixity of Protagoras' doctrine, Socrates' account – through successive efforts to understand the sophist, even to the point of "defending" him (168d-170a) – prompts Theodorus to insist vehemently that the tradition of the mobilists abhors, with all its strength, any admission that something fixed might exist (179e-180b). Writing, in this case, is merely a pretext: when one asks them what they mean, "they shoot, as from a quiver, enigmatic little formulas, and if you seek an explanation by asking what they signify, you will be struck by another, which, as to novelty, is nothing more than a change of names." (180a)[39] The resonance with the method of the eristics is evident. It becomes even more intriguing when the imagery of wind and clouds appears in the passage in which Socrates, out

ventos e não merecedoras de alimentação (πάντα ἡ μαιευτικὴ ἡμῖν τέχνη ἀνεμιαῖά φησι γεγενῆσθαι καὶ οὐκ ἄξια τροφῆς). TEE – Perfeitamente. SOC – Se, então, depois disso, tentares tornar-te prenhe de outras coisas, Teeteto, e se, realmente, estiveres <prenhe>, estarás, devido à investigação de agora, cheio de coisas melhores; mas se estiveres vazio (κενός), estarás menos pesado aos que convivem <contigo> e mais dócil, prudentemente não acreditando saber o que não sabes." (The angle brackets (< >) indicate passages where alterations were made by the translators)

[38] On the intertextuality of Plato's testimony in dialogue with Aristophanes' *Clouds*, see C. Alencar (2021).

[39] Original: "*arremessam, como que atirando de uma aljava, formulazinhas enigmáticas, e, se buscas obter uma explicação disso, <perguntando> o que quer dizer, serás atingido por uma outra <formulazinha>, que, quanto à novidade, é <apenas> alteração de nomes*." (The angle brackets (< >) indicate passages where alterations were made by the translators)

of reverence for the doctrine of those who defend immobility, such as Parmenides and Melissus, avoids discussing it so as not *to cloud* the question concerning *epistéme* and Theaetetus' maieutics.

> What is more serious is that the very matter for the sake of which the discussion is undertaken – namely, what knowledge is – remains unexamined if one lends an ear to the disorderly questions that burst forth like revelers. And especially the one we are now awakening, vast in magnitude: if someone were to examine it as something incidental, it would suffer something unworthy; and if sufficiently extended, it would make the question of knowledge disappear (ἀφανιεῖ). One must do neither, but rather attempt, through the maieutic art, to free Theaetetus from whatever he is pregnant with concerning knowledge. (*Theaetetus*, 183e-184a)[40]

There is little doubt that, since the *Theaetetus* is the dialogue in which Socratic maieutics is enacted and in which the principle of univocity that enables sophistical traps is carefully avoided, the ultimate aim of the discussion proves not *epistemological* but *ethical* – or, in Butti's (2004, p. 29) words, "the inquiry into knowledge cannot be separated from the problem of wisdom and therefore implies the question of philosophy in its identification with wisdom."[41] The aim is to free Theaetetus from false opinions, those examined in the second definition, about which it is concluded that it is impossible to know what they are (τὸ δ' ἐστὶν ἀδύνατον γνῶναι) if one does not first know what *epistéme* itself is (*Theaetetus*, 200d). There is, therefore, a clear

[40] Original translated by Iglésias and Rodrigues: "*E o mais grave é que aquilo por conta de que a discussão se lança – a propósito da ciência, o que afinal ela é – fica sem exame, devido às questões que irrompem desordenadamente, como foliões, se se lhes dá ouvido. E sobretudo esta que estamos despertando, imensa pelo tamanho, se alguém a examina como um acessório, sofreria algo indigno, e se de maneira suficiente, alongando-se, fará nublar (ἀφανιεῖ) <a questão> da ciência. É preciso pois <não fazer> nem uma coisa nem outra, mas sim tentarmos nós, pela arte maiêutica, livrar Teeteto daquilo de que ele está prenhe a respeito da ciência*." (The angle brackets (< >) indicate passages where alterations were made by the translators)

[41] Original: "*a investigação sobre o conhecimento não pode ser separada do problema da sabedoria e implica, por conseguinte, a questão da filosofia na sua identificação com a sabedoria*."

supposition that there exists a way of freeing oneself from false opinions that proceeds from epistemic fixity toward ethical gain. This procedure, named maieutics, must be capable, by examining *logos* through the determination of its limits, of rendering the soul *sensitive* to *areté* and *sophia*.

The Dialogue thus articulates the description of the effects of maieutics, cited above, with the initial portrayal of Socrates as one endowed with the divine art of midwifing souls (149a-151d), presenting it as the technique through which philosophy circumscribes the examination of knowledge within the sphere of better action. This is no surprise to anyone who has given due attention to the digression (172c-177b): there Socrates denounces that, unlike the philosopher, those who do not follow the divine paradigm – the paradigm of the true human excellence (ἡ ὡς ἀληθῶς δεινότης ἀνδρὸς), whose knowledge is wisdom and true virtue (ἡ τούτου γνῶσις σοφία καὶ ἀρετὴ ἀληθινή, 176c) – and who fail to follow it because they are excessively convinced that the best thing is merely not to appear bad but rather good, when called upon to justify their values privately, under circumstances such as those in which Theaetetus finds himself, end up dissatisfied with themselves regarding what they say (οὐκ ἀρέσκουσιν αὐτοὶ αὑτοῖς περὶ ὧν λέγουσι, *Theaetetus*, 177b). It is not surprising that Theodorus was able to follow the digression more easily than the dialectic (177c): the former addresses a type of listener/reader who is, at first glance, less flexible before examination, articulating a doctrine concerning the philosophical way of life in opposition to that of sophistry, and doing so by indicating private face-to-face dialectic as the method capable of neutralizing the rhetoric of the multitude. That is to say, the digression situates dialectic considering its ethical purpose. For this reason, I believe that the characterization of the modes of life, contrary to what Burnyeat (1990)[42] supposes, is essential for framing – together with the description of the maieutic art – the entirety of Theaetetus' education, by presenting *sophia*

[42] According to Burnyeat (1990, p. 36), the merely ethical suggestion made by the digression, directed at figures such as Theodorus of Cyrene, "it is a feature of this interpretation that it gives the digression the weight which it is clearly meant to have, while leaving it a digression which does not interfere with or contribute to the main inquiry."

as the ground of the best choice, within which *epistéme* itself functions as a dialectical resource for rendering the young interlocutor's soul flexible toward excellence. This allows us to recognize, more adequately, the fundamental relations between *sophia* and *epistéme*.

Let us consider this more closely. Before describing his art based on *Theaetetus*' *aporia* in the pains of labor, Socrates refers to a minor *aporia* with which he himself finds himself perplexed each time. The difficulty – literally posited as the object of the Dialogue that follows, though often overlooked in commentary – emerges through a play on words: "is not learning simply becoming wiser about what one learns?" (οὐ τὸ μανθάνειν ἐστὶν τὸ σοφώτερον γίγνεσθαι περὶ ὃ μανθάνει τις; Plato, 145d). It is in reference to learning that the wise person is said to know. The question arises, it must be noted, within a typically erotic context,[43] in which Socrates, in order to draw near to a young man, tends to call into question whatever relation of apprenticeship he may have with another teacher. Theaetetus, a pupil of Theodorus, must have learned from him many things pertaining to geometry, astronomy, music, and calculation. By redirecting Theaetetus' attention to learning (τὸ μανθάνειν), Socrates removes him from the sphere of influence of the mathematician Theodorus and, with it, from that fixity proper to the nature of numbers – and from the rigidity of one who appears too old to learn (Plato, 146b; 177c). Socrates' erotic strategy thus consists in orienting Theaetetus toward movement, toward action (τὸ μανθάνειν) as the very terrain of knowledge. The opposition between the rigid and the fluid, or between the stagnant (ἀήθης) and the dynamic (ἐπίδοσις), situates the maieutic exercise as a process in which, from the multiplicity of terms fixed by language, one is led toward the intelligible unity that escapes them.

It is for this reason that, thus seduced into Socrates' well-known passion for speeches (ὑπὸ φιλολογίας. 146a), Theaetetus proposes his first attempt to grasp *epistéme* as pertaining both to the mathematical sciences learned from Theodorus and to the *tékhnai*, among which Socrates will situate maieutics. The young man, now divided between the two masters, confuses the

[43] As is clearly seen, for example, in the role assumed by Socrates in Lysis (206e-207b).

movement of the act of learning with the contents that come to be learned. In both cases, he refers to that of which *epistéme* is *epistéme*. A new movement on Socrates' part becomes necessary. The philosophical midwife now directs Theaetetus' gaze toward what it would mean "to know what *epistéme* itself is" (γνῶναι ἐπιστήμην αὐτὸ ὅτι ποτ᾽ ἐστίν. 146e), by way of the example of clay. Employing the mathematical device of the *dynámei* (147d-e), the young man finally enters – though not without *aporia* – into the Socratic sphere of the exercise of seeking to articulate a *logos* capable of grasping (λαβεῖν) the unity of *epistéme*. Thus, we read that learning results in a definition that *encompasses, in a single form, the many instances of something* (περιελαβεῖν ταύτας πολλὰς οὔσας ἑνὶ εἴδει. 148d). Unaware of it, Theaetetus is set in a race in which Socrates, as victor, shows him the laurels already won. The path by which Theaetetus will become wiser in the end is forged in the pursuit of this *epistéme* already defined as the principle of the very action of seeking it. If wisdom is what is obtained in the act of learning, we might say – so as to characterize the respective place of *sophía* and *epistéme* – that we know when we learn to establish definition as an epistemic principle.

I would therefore propose to assume definition as the most adequate principle for what the Dialogue seeks to establish as *epistéme*. The supposed aporetic character of the *Theaetetus*, defended by many commentators, seems ultimately to disregard this Socratic definition.[44] For if it is not possible to define something without first knowing what it is – since the use of a name presupposes some knowledge (οἴει τίς τι συνίησίν τινος ὄνομα, ὃ μὴ οἶδεν τί ἐστιν. 147b) – is Socrates not precisely proposing epistéme as the name capable of designating the act of περιελαβεῖν ταύτας πολλὰς οὔσας ἑνὶ εἴδει? In that case, what is said as *epistéme* lies in the act of fixing, through *logos*, the single form of a multiplicity. Such a definition, however, will itself have to be dialectically invalidated. If through Megarian dialectic it was possible to

[44] By way of example: "the definition of knowledge is hard to attain, and is, in fact, not attained in this dialogue" (Fowler, 1922, p. 8). It is worth noting how Victor Goldschmidt (2002) characterizes the aporetic nature of the dialogue – among them the Theaetetus – as an impasse that "awakens reflection," subordinated to the purgative aim of dialectic.

grasp the incapacity of *logos* to account for something real that is one by virtue of the good with which we are concerned in our choices, then the example Socrates employs to invalidate the third sense of *logos*, within the scope of the third possible definition of *epistéme* (201b-210a), becomes irresistibly Megarian.

To know (γιγνώσκω) Theaetetus is not reducible to what can be said about him – for *logos*, added to the opinion formed about the young man based on his singularly snub nose (ἡ σιμότης), tends to clarify the difference (ἡ τῆς σῆς διαφορότητος ἑρμηνεία. 209a) which, however, can only be apprehended by the act of *having seen* Theaetetus (ἐγὼ ἑώρακα διάφορόν. 209c). In *logos*, such clarification is always tentative, always approximative, because words, in signifying something common (τῶν κοινῶν τι), do not replace the particularity of the opinion that apprehends the singular difference of each being (περὶ τὴν διαφορότητα ἄρα καὶ ἡ ὀρθὴ δόξα ἂν εἴη ἑκάστου πέρι). The so-called "exhortation of a blind man" (τυφλοῦ παρακέλευσις. 209e) is directed at those who, believing *logos* capable of serving as the mark of truth recognized by perception, seek to fix in words – signs of general qualities – that singular unity which can only be apprehended through the movement of reflection. The dialectical principle established at the beginning of the maieutic exercise is now invalidated as a residue for the truth sought, because there is no possible fixity in *logos*. The *Theaetetus* thus appears better characterized not as aporetic but as dialectical: the definition of *epistéme*, situated from the outset of the method, leads Theaetetus, by means of it, to distrust the capacity of *logos* to grasp the unity of what is always set right before his nose. The last of the offspring generated by the young Theaetetus closes the maieutic circle of his examination – a circle that is not vicious, like the eristic paradoxes so

common in the Megarian tradition,[45] [46] precisely because it was, from the beginning, prefigured by wisdom and grounded in learning as an ethical end.

The irresistible circularity of the Socratic exercises, as well as the ambiguity with which terms are employed, comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the *Theaetetus*. This circularity, which Socrates describes as a kind of intoxicating blindness, is in fact the matrix of his dialectical procedure. By requiring the recognition of the limitations of discourse, it seeks to present *epistéme* – defined through the very structure of definition[47], as a model of examination directed toward ethical ends. The *aporia* attributed to Socrates is

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[45] Particularly suggestive is the way in which Socrates, in Plato's *Euthydemus*, seeks to unravel the kind of wordplay that creates, for Clinias, a paradox: "For first, as Prodicus says, it is necessary to learn about the correctness of names. This is also what the strangers are showing you: that you did not know that people use the name *manthanein*, on the one hand, for something like the following – when someone, initially having no knowledge of a certain thing, later comes to acquire that knowledge; on the other hand, they use the same <term> also when <someone>, already possessing that knowledge, examines that same thing with that very knowledge, whether it be an object of action or of discourse. More properly, they give this the name *synienai*, and not *manthanein*, though there are occasions when they also <use the term> *manthanein*. What escapes your notice, as they are showing you, is that the same word is applied to people in opposite conditions: to the one who knows and to the one who does not <know>." (Plato, *Euthydemus*, 277e-278a) The same type of eristic paradox is what, in the *Meno* (80d–e), leads to the presentation of the doctrine of reminiscence.

[46] The original citation from the preceding footnote, with the angle brackets (< >) indicating the translators' modifications: "*Pois primeiro, como diz Pródico, é necessário aprender sobre a correção dos nomes. É isso que também estão mostrando para ti os estrangeiros: que não sabias que os homens dão o nome de "manthánein", por um lado, a algo tal qual o seguinte: quando alguém, não tendo a princípio nenhuma ciência sobre certa coisa, em seguida, posteriormente, adquire essa ciência; por outro lado, dão o mesmo <nome> também quando <alguém>, já tendo essa ciência, com essa mesma ciência examina essa mesma coisa, seja ela objeto de ação ou de discurso; de preferência, dão a isso o nome de "suniénai", e não "manthánein", mas há ocasiões em que também <empregam o nome> "manthánein". A ti, como eles estão mostrando, passa despercebido que a mesma palavra é aplicada a homens em condições opostas: ao que sabe e ao que não <sabe>*."

[47] Burnyeat does perceive the ambiguity and circularity in Plato's treatment, particularly with regard to Theaetetus' third definition, but he suggests that these derive instead from possible implications of the author's use of Greek in the dialogues, which he treats as allowing the expressions "to know X" and "to know what X is" to function interchangeably (1990, p. 222, n. 106). In my view, however, the interchangeability between knowing and defining is already determined by Socrates' maieutic art from the outset, in the necessary distinction drawn between wisdom and knowledge (Plato, 145d).

thus, from beginning to end, situated within his philosophical practice, within his *tékhne*. For how could one say of the wise man, placed under the divine paradigm of the digression, that he *possesses* wisdom as though it were a fixed discourse to be added to the opinion formed about things (208e; 209e)? Precisely because it makes no sense to understand wisdom as knowledge does Socrates sustain the difficulty to the very end, so as to regard the movement of coming to know (*gignoskeîn*) as the principle of the education achieved through the examination of opinions in discourse. If Socrates' *aporia* does not appear to have been Plato's own – since Plato had proposed the Forms as the objects of *epistéme* in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, for example – then we should understand the *Theaetetus* not as Plato's rejection or revalidation of his doctrine, but as a Platonic reflection on the limits of the Socratic technique. What is being revalidated in the later dialogues is Socrates' legacy – a legacy Plato updates through the most exemplary of Socratics, Euclid – presenting it as an educational exercise not only for the young Theaetetus, but also, as far as possible, for its readers.

Final Considerations

Plato's *Theaetetus*, according to the Megarian frame within which it was written, aims to be far more than a merely negative dialectic pointing to the Forms as a solution to the problem of knowledge. Under the pretext of the young Theaetetus, it brings the various conceptions of *epistéme* – arising from distinct positions within the Socratic circle – under the circumstantial scrutiny of a Socrates who carries his method of ethical examination to its furthest consequences. Of this method, Euclid would have been the exemplary representative: his presence as the Dialogue's writer attests at once to the logical sharpness and the contagious ethical effect of Megarian dialectic. To what the prologue had already marked as memorable in the characters of Theaetetus and Socrates, there is thus added this Platonic tribute to his Megarian friend. Plato established himself, for young men interested in the philosophical education available in Athens, as the only one truly capable of

fulfilling Socrates' legacy, advancing beyond the limits to which, as the Dialogue suggests, his friends and rivals ultimately found themselves confined.

Dialectic functions only with the prospect of attaining definition as a certain fixed and unique *logos* concerning the variety of things. Unity thus appears at the center of maieutic dynamism – not as a result, but as a principle never called into question. It is to this definition that I have referred as the most adequate application of the term *epistéme*, which entangles Theaetetus in a circularity fully realized only at the end, when the impossibility of *logos* to define something apprehended as unity is declared. From this circle, we readers can escape only by reflecting upon maieutics and the digression as establishing images that dissociate *epistéme* from *sophia*, subordinating the former to the latter. We have already had occasion to observe to what extent unity is a central concept in Euclid of Megara's philosophical enterprise. For him, there is no genuine multiplicity, if what we call "multiplicity" amounts only to assigning different names to what is, in reality, one. The unity of the good, established as the end of human actions, leads to the understanding that discourse is the domain in which we are properly wise or ignorant, depending on how we make use of words – whether we are dependent upon them or not.

The reference to writing, recalled at the end of the Dialogue through the fixing of Meletus' indictment (*graphé*) against Socrates – of which the philosopher intends to take notice after his long debate with Theaetetus and Theodorus, promising to meet again the next day to continue it – never seems to lose sight of the trait of movement proper to knowledge, and which therefore sets the limits of every fixation. Euclid, introduced in the prologue as the diligent copyist of Socrates' words in a heroic attempt to preserve the educational dynamism of philosophy, serves Plato not only as a companion capable of calling into question the knowledge of his Socratic rivals, but above all as one who establishes for readers the lived experience of Socrates' dialectical examination as the genuine intercourse through which the soul may free itself from the chains that imprison it within the cave. If this intercourse proved irresistible, as the memory of Socrates suggests, its most exemplary continuer – under Plato's pen – seems still to preserve that same seduction by which *logos* says everything without ever quite saying it.

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Submission date: 08/01/2023

Acceptance date: 07/31/2024