

VIII. Before and After the Sophist

Socratic Philosophy on Trial: Plato's *Sophist* and its Homeric Model

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The *Sophist* begins with Socrates' concern that the Eleatic Stranger may be a god in disguise, come to punish him for some "weakness in speeches"—as Socrates accused himself in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates apparently anticipates a philosophic trial in the context of his political trial. He provides a model for it, citing two passages in Homer's *Odyssey*: Odysseus warning the Cyclops about Zeus avenging wrong done to strangers is echoed by an anonymous suitor warning the wicked Antinous against abusing the beggar who may be a god in disguise. Applying the idea of a hidden god to the being of the philosopher behind the apparitions of sophist and statesman, Socrates introduces the theme of the conversations that follow. The idea of a punitive god, on the other hand, in Odysseus' warning to the Cyclops, provides a template for the interaction of Socrates with Theodorus and the Stranger, whose multiple roles display the trial of Socratic philosophy in light of two rivals. While the status of mathematics is taken up in the *Statesman*, the *Sophist* highlights the Stranger's technical method: his separation of like from like, paying no attention to rank, is contrasted with an art of purification that separates better from worse, which sounds like Socratic midwifery. But when the Stranger's procedure proves unable to separate Socrates from the ignoble sophist, he must resort to Socrates' evaluative inquiry. The Eleatic Stranger, like the Megarian and Pythagorean narrators of the *Theaetetus* and *Phaedo*, prefigures the schools of philosophy that will emerge after the death of Socrates. In demonstrating the limits of those post-Socratic schools to transmit Socratic philosophy, Plato's dialogues show their own indispensable accomplishment.

Odyssey, Socrates' philosophic trial, post-Socratic

Introduction

Immersed in the complex ontological issues of Plato's *Sophist*, it can be easy to forget that the dialogue belongs in the sequence representing Socrates' trial and death.¹ On the day following his conversation with the young mathematician Theaetetus, which initiates this series, Socrates meets up with

1 The set of dialogues—*Tht.*, *Euthyphr.*, *Sph.*, *Plt.*, *Ap.*, *Cri.*, *Phd.*—includes the quartet of practical conversations centered on Socrates' political trial and the theoretical trilogy that begins with the question, What is knowledge? Actually, the *Sophist* is introduced as the second dialogue in a promised quartet, to be followed by the *Plt.* and completed by *The Philosopher*—a plan confirmed at the opening of the *Plt.* (257a-b).

a Stranger from Elea and expresses fear that he may be a god in disguise, come to punish him for some failing: Socrates apparently anticipates some kind of philosophic trial in the context of his political trial. To conduct it, the Stranger will have to examine the problem of non-being, falsehood and image in his search for the sophist, which is in turn the way into the question, What is the philosopher? Why must that question be addressed so indirectly, through a trial of Socrates, which he cannot conduct himself?

Plato provides some clues in Socrates' opening reception of the Eleatic Stranger through a double reference to Homer's *Odyssey*.² Socrates indicates the primary application of the Homeric model to himself. But Plato's multifaceted portrayal of three interlocutors—Socrates, Theodorus, and the Stranger—invites a thought-experiment exploring other permutations, applied to the mathematics teacher who struggled with Socrates in the prior conversation and the Parmenidean philosopher he has brought with him on this occasion. The significance goes beyond their individual natures to their importance as representatives of alternatives to Socratic philosophy. Can mathematics defend its status as the paradigm of precise knowledge? Is the Eleatic method superior to Socratic examination of opinion? While mathematics is taken up in the *Statesman*, the *Sophist* highlights the contrast between the Stranger and Socrates, for which the Homeric model provides a basis.³

I. The God of Strangers in the *Odyssey*

The first reference to the *Odyssey*, which Socrates paraphrases with an explicit appeal to Homer, comes from Book 9, when Odysseus exhorts the monstrous Cyclops to fear Zeus, the guest god who requites wrong done to strangers and suppliants. The second reference, a partial quotation, comes from Book 17, when a young, unnamed suitor exhorts Antinous, the worst

2 See the Appendix at the end of this paper. Scholars who comment on the Homeric passages in the *Sophist* include: Benardete 1984, II. 69-70; Rosen 1983, 62-66; Howland 1997, 49-50, 170-171; Casadesús Bordoy 2013, 17-18; Francois Renaud, "Socrate citateur d'Homère dans le prologue du *Sophiste*," this volume.

3 Mathematics becomes an explicit issue at the center of the *Plt.*, when the Stranger puts forward the measure of the mean as superior to mathematical measure (cf. note 12 below). The self-defense of Socratic philosophy takes shape throughout the Platonic corpus in confrontation with two great challenges: the philosophic life vs. the political life and the philosopher vs. the poet. Those contests remain on the horizon of the trilogy, where the rivals to Socratic political philosophy belong within the theoretical sphere, each with a claim to possess knowledge in a more technical form.

of the lot, that the beggar he is mistreating—Odysseus in disguise—may be one of the gods who appear among us in the semblance of strangers. This double reference indicates with wonderful brevity the fundamental structure of the *Odyssey*: Odysseus' narrative of his fantasy adventures in the first half of the poem is mirrored, in the second half, by the reality of the domestic and political situation he faces back home. While the cannibalistic giant represents a pre-civilized condition of bestiality, his realistic replacement is a cruel man who abuses the stranger in his midst. The Odysseus of Book 9 is the “man of many ways” and the narration of his fantasy adventures exhibits a theoretical interest in understanding the nature of things, especially human beings in all their diversity. Everything he learned in that journey colors Odysseus' experience back in Ithaca, where he faces the practical task of taking back his wife and his estate. Both episodes capture the significance of guest-friendship: while that practice promotes the recognition of humanity, beyond any particular political identity, it is supported by the idea that the stranger could be a hidden god.

With his appropriation of these *Odyssey* passages at the opening of the *Sophist*, Plato builds on Homer's foundation, but he provides a sign of his own philosophic concerns by means of a slight alteration. He has Socrates re-mix the two passages, inserting into Odysseus' speech about the punitive god of strangers the young suitor's caution about the gods' watching over human outrage, leaving in that speech only the conception of the gods' shifting shapes as they roam through the cities. Applying the paradigm of hidden gods to the being of the philosopher behind his apparitions, Socrates introduces the theme of the two dialogues. The idea of punitive gods meting out justice, on the other hand, governs the “action” of the dialogues: Odysseus' warning the criminal Cyclops about an avenging god serves as the template for the interaction of the three interlocutors and speculation on their multiple roles provides a lens through which to view the philosophic trial of Socratic philosophy.

II. The Being of the Philosopher and His Apparitions

It is Theodorus' introduction of his guest from Elea as a “very philosophic man” that leads Socrates to respond immediately with his appeal to Homer: Zeus *Xenios* attends strangers with a sense of just shame (*Sophist* 216a, *Odyssey* IX. 270-271), and gods appearing as strangers watch over human *hubris* and lawfulness (*Odyssey* XVII.487). Socrates' concern that the Stranger may be “some kind of refutative god” come to punish them for

being “poor in speeches” echoes the terms Socrates applied to himself and Theaetetus in the previous conversation, when they failed in their effort to define knowledge (*Theaetetus* 197a). Theodorus rejects Socrates’ concern along with his poetic language: it is no god he has brought with him, though he calls the Stranger, like all philosophers, “divine.” Socrates pounces on the mathematician’s literal-minded correction to introduce the central problem of the dialogue. The Stranger may not be a god in disguise, but it is just as hard to recognize the true being of the philosophers, who, due to the ignorance of the many, are bound to appear at times as sophists, at times as statesmen, while sometimes giving the impression of being crazy. The Stranger is about to undertake a paired inquiry into sophist and statesman, while he realizes he may himself appear crazy when his effort to capture the sophist compels him to attack his intellectual father, Parmenides (242a-b).

The philosopher’s likeness to the Homeric gods prompts the task of the inquiry Socrates assigns to the Stranger (216d-217a): if it is pleasing to him, Socrates would like to know “what those in that place”—the Eleatics? the philosophers who look down from on high?—“believe and name these”: sophist, statesman, philosopher. To Theodorus’ reasonable query, What about them?, Socrates clarifies: Did they consider them one, two, or, like their names, three? Theodorus offers his guest’s willingness, without consulting him at all, to take on the assignment. The Stranger can immediately report the simple answer “three”: a plurality of independent units, each in itself a Parmenidean one, displays the paradoxical affinity of Eleatic thought with mathematics. Counting the beings attached to three names raises no problem of a hidden nature behind multiple appearances. In contrast, the Stranger admits, it is a real challenge to address the Socratic question “What is it?”.

His guest is making excuses now, Theodorus complains, as he did in a similar discussion on their way to the present gathering. Socrates presses the Stranger not to refuse this favor, but only to choose the manner of inquiry: would the Stranger be more pleased to deliver a long speech himself, or proceed through questions? Socrates recollects the occasion in his youth when he heard the aged Parmenides conduct “all-beautiful speeches” through questioning. Of course, in that “laborious game” (*Parmenides* 137b), the venerable philosopher hardly seemed concerned with the opinions of his youthful interlocutor, and the Stranger now reveals his Parmenidean heritage: questioning through dialogue is easier as long as the other participates painlessly, but if he doubts or resists, it’s easier by oneself. Socrates recommends Theaetetus. But the Stranger is torn: he feels shame, coming together with this group for the first time, if he were simply to deliver a

long speech by himself or in reply to another, as if making a display, but the issue before them really requires a monologue (217d). And yet, refusing to gratify Socrates and the others would appear unfriendly, “unbecoming a stranger (*axenos*) and savage.” So, in the end he accepts Theaetetus as his docile partner in the conversation.

III. The Interlocutors of the Sophist on the Homeric Model

This opening exchange about the conduct of the inquiry already hints at the interaction of Socrates, Theodorus, and the Stranger on Homer's mythical model of Odysseus' speech to the Cyclops.⁴

1a) Socrates' explicit paraphrase of that passage implies his self-identification as Odysseus, addressing a warning to Theodorus as the Cyclops, about the Stranger as a disguised god with punitive intentions. The suitability of this role for Theodorus is suggested by the way he introduced Socrates to his star student the day before. Worried that his high praise could be construed as a sign of desire for the youth, he makes sure to note that Theaetetus is not beautiful—in fact, he tells Socrates, with his snub nose and bulging eyes, the young man bears a close resemblance to you (*Theaetetus* 143e)! As the discussion proceeds Theodorus pushes Theaetetus forward with little concern for his consent, while repeatedly struggling himself to escape from Socrates' examination of his opinions.⁵

1b) Socrates' worry, however, about the punishment of “those of us poor in speeches” must mean above all himself. He is alluding to the self-critique he shared with Theaetetus when he remarked on how shameless it seems to be using words like “to know” precisely while lacking an answer to the question, What is knowledge? Theaetetus wonders how it would be possible to proceed without that. A contradictor (*antilogikos*), Socrates admits, would never allow them to go forward, but being so inferior, they should dare to say what it is to know. Theaetetus urges, “Dare, by Zeus! (197a), but Socrates worries now that he is paying the price for that boldness.

⁴ See the Appendix for an outline of the permutations that follow.

⁵ This is bound to be disastrous for a teacher of geometry attracted to Protagoras' sophistic relativism (see especially *Tht.* 170d-171c). The *Plt.* begins with Socrates expressing gratitude to Theodorus for enabling his acquaintance with Theaetetus and the Stranger in their search for the sophist. But when Theodorus promises he will be three times more grateful after going through the statesman and philosopher, Socrates mocks “the great calculator and geometer,” who thinks of the three having equal value. Theodorus accepts Socrates' playful abuse, while threatening to get back at him some other time (257a-b).

Socrates' anticipation of an impending trial by the Stranger looks like a very dark assessment of his preceding conversation with Theaetetus. After all, he was not even able to give an account of how false opinion is possible—a problem that lies at the heart of his philosophic enterprise. Apparently obsessed with this sense of failure, Socrates, in the time leading up to his death, repeatedly recounts the conversation to its future narrator (*Theaetetus* 142c-143a). Socrates' criticism of his own inadequacy in *logoi*, which he conveys late in his conversation with Theaetetus, is anticipated in the initial account he gives of his practice as a midwife of ideas: he entreats Theaetetus not to get angry if his ideas are judged a mere image and not true—like a woman getting angry at the loss of her first child in birth. In fact, Socrates admits, many of those whose offspring he takes away are almost ready to bite him (*Theaetetus* 151c-d)!

1c and 1d) While Socrates appears to place himself in the role of the Cyclops whom the Stranger has come to punish, it was precisely their inferior condition, he assured Theaetetus, that made it possible to continue the inquiry, while they would have been stopped in their tracks by a “contradictor”—a characterization that runs through all the shapes of the sophist (*Sophist* 232b, cf. 225b). If the Stranger has come to refute Socrates, he would be that contradictor, a Cyclopean sophist standing in the way of philosophic inquiry. The Stranger suggests that identity at the outset when he admits his natural inclination for monologue, though it would appear unfriendly (*axenos*) and harsh. And he will condemn his criminality at the center of the *Sophist*, although the victim is not Socrates but his “father” Parmenides (241d). If Socrates is Odysseus issuing an admonition to the Stranger, he would be cautioning him to be on the lookout, either for Theodorus' punitive motive in setting up this gathering or for his own part in assigning the task the Stranger must undertake, which will involve this act of intellectual parricide.

2a and 2b) It is not only Socrates, however, who fits the role of an Odysseus warning the criminal against the presence of a punitive deity. Theodorus could be said to play that part when he levels his accusation against the Stranger for making excuses about not reporting what he must have heard among the Eleatics (*Sophist* 217b), as if the Stranger is willfully withholding the answer to the Socratic question, which he should be able to recite from memory. Theodorus could be cautioning the Stranger, then, that the conversation he has arranged has a punitive purpose, or especially, that he should be on guard for Socrates as the “refutative god” who is exercising indirect control through the inquiry he has imposed.

Indeed, Socrates adopts that role in the conversation the day before. The analogy of his intellectual midwifery with females who preside at birth requires one qualification. Female midwives are never barren women, but only those past childbearing, for while Artemis, the goddess of childbirth, is herself childless, human nature is too weak to acquire an art without prior experience. Socrates, in contrast, possesses his art of midwifery though he is himself barren, with no progeny of his own soul (*Theaetetus* 150C): if he possesses an art of refuting ideas, but no human can acquire an art without experience, he must therefore be a “refutative god”! Socrates confirms this suggestion when he expresses hope that, if he has to take some foolish notion away, Theaetetus will not be indignant like so many others, who just don’t realize that no god is unkind to humans (*Theaetetus* 151c-d)!

2c and 2d) Whatever critical view of the Stranger Theodorus may entertain, it pales in contrast to his recognition of Socrates as the guilty party. Theodorus introduces his guest as “a very philosophic man” and assures Socrates that the Stranger is more measured than those who are fanatically contentious. This characteristic sign of the sophist (225e) is a trait Theodorus must associate with Socrates, having compared him to the mythical giant Antaeus, who would not let anyone pass by and escape from wrestling with him (*Theaetetus* 169b). Theodorus might be ready to warn this Cyclopean zealot in contentiousness of the punishment he should expect from him, or from the divine philosopher he has brought along with him for this purpose.

3a and 3b) One further set of possibilities emerges with the Stranger playing the part of Odysseus. Having become acquainted with Theodorus and Theaetetus in their earlier conversation, he might recognize the resentment the mathematics teacher harbors about the way he was treated by Socrates. He could feel obligated, in that case, to forewarn Socrates of his Cyclopean character in the eyes of Theodorus, who would be intending to take revenge. Of course, the Stranger might realize the good grounds for Socrates’ punitive treatment of Theodorus, which would lead him to alert the mathematician to its potential continuation.

3c and 3d) The most important application of the Homeric passage, however, if the Stranger is playing the part of Odysseus, would be the expectation of his own testing of Socratic philosophy, which he is about to undertake through his search for the sophist. He puts to work, for this purpose, a technical method of division, starting out from the category of *technē*. His first split enables him to defer analysis of the productive arts until after he introduces the problem of image-making. Plunging, instead, into the acquisitive arts, he pursues a hunt for the sophist, while uncovering

Socrates hiding in many forms along the way,⁶ distinguished only by the slightest variations from the “many-headed” beast under pursuit. If, however, the Stranger is not confirming Socrates’ harsh self-judgment, it could be his own technical method that should be subjected to a critical assessment, held up to the standard of Socratic inquiry.⁷

IV. *The Eleatic Method and the Socratic Art of Purification*

The Stranger’s inability to get hold of the slippery sophist in the course of five attempted definitions is also a failure to differentiate that multi-colored creature from the philosopher, more precisely, from Socrates. It is not until he makes a new start, with the recognition of their own activity of separation, that the Stranger brings to light, in the diacritical art, an internal division of philosophy: the method of separating like from like, which the Stranger claims as his own, is set over against the separation of better from worse, an art of purification that looks like a version of Socrates’ midwifery (*Sophist* 226d, cf. 227a-c).

This differentiation occurs at a very strange moment in the analysis of purification. Before turning to the more obvious separation between purification of bodies and of soul, the Stranger proposes a seemingly unnecessary split between ensouled bodies, inside vs. outside, and soul-less, noting the trivial arts in that last class, such as *kosmetikē*, the art of beautification (226e-227c).⁸ The Stranger’s comment on the many laughable names of such arts leads him to characterize his own procedure: its separation of like from like takes no account of what is thought ridiculous or serious, treating every subject as of equal value, like the units of mathematics: the lice-catcher belongs in the art of hunting on a par with the most renowned general.

6 Socrates first shows up as the private hunter who practices an erotic art through exchanges by gift-bearing, then as a merchant who associates for gratification, demanding only his own nurture as a wage; he looks like the sophist as a retailer who sells soul wares remaining in the city; and when the sophist is traced from the competitive art as a money-making eristic, Socrates seems to be only a garrulous money-wasting eristic (*adoleschikos*, 225d)—a term he applied to himself (*Tht.* 195b-c; cf. *Plt.* 299b).

7 The technical character of the Eleatic method is reflected, not only in the choice of *technē* as the starting point for the Stranger’s divisions, but also in his eventual discovery of philosophy in the form of a “dialectical science” (253c-254b).

8 In the *Gorg.*, the “cosmetic art” appears in the proportion Socrates proposes between arts that care for body and soul and the practices of “flattery” that shadow them (464b-465c): [gymnastics : medicine : : cosmetics : : cookery : : legislation : justice : : sophistics : rhetoric].

The “*methodos* of the speeches” has no more concern with sponge-bathing than *pharmakon*-drinking (227a-c). Suddenly, the *Sophist* opens into the death scene of the *Phaedo*: Socrates first goes out to bathe himself, to save the women the trouble of cleansing his corpse, and that “soul-less body” is produced by the *pharmakon* he will drink, which “purifies” the inside of the body by bringing life to an end. The Stranger acknowledges that his method is incapable of determining which benefit is greater: it cannot make a judgment on the worth of life and death.

From the death of Socrates, hiding in the class of purification of bodies, the Stranger turns to the purification of soul, which he analyzes through an analogy with two defective states of the body: disease as an inner conflict of elements and ugliness as an impulse that fails to reach its target, the one treated by medicine, the other by gymnastics. The psychic counterpart to disease, which should be inner conflict, Theaetetus associates with moral vices, while psychic ugliness is ignorance, which falls short of the knowledge at which it aims. Perfect health of soul, then, would be moral virtue, while beauty of soul would be omniscience. In the absence of those conditions, medicine is said to have its counterpart in punitive justice, and gymnastics in an art of instruction. But the instructive art must be subject to one further cut, based on a differentiation of ignorance: for despite recommending a cut down the middle of ignorance, the Stranger sees a single greatest form separate from all the rest, and that is thinking one knows what one does not really know—the condition of *doxosophia* that is the target of Socrates’ examination of opinion.⁹ Parents try to handle this folly by admonishing their children’s errors, but that seems useless to those who believe no improvement is possible as long as someone holds a false belief that he has knowledge. They aim to eliminate that belief by bringing out the individual’s contradictory opinions through examination, and this refutation, the Stranger adds, leads the subject to be angry with himself, while growing gentle toward others.¹⁰ At the very point when Socrates lamented his midwifery

9 Treatment of the greatest form of ignorance, Theaetetus asserts, is called *paideia* by “us here,” presumably the Athenians, and, the Stranger adds, “by all the Greeks,” hinting at the conventional status of education. In fact, one might say, far from being a cure for *doxosophia*, education in transmitting information can be a powerful source of that condition.

10 As Socrates comments in his trial, the young who follow him take great pleasure hearing him refute those with a pretense to know, but those subjects are full of anger at him (*Ap.* 23c). Pleasure and benefit could coincide, perhaps, only if the individual purified of his pretense to know could stand back to observe the experience as a spectator—the special opportunity, in fact, that Plato extends to his reader.

making his ungrateful subject ready to bite him (151c-d), the Stranger puts his “cosmetic” art to work and beautifies Socratic examination.

The Stranger compares this soul-purifier to the doctor who holds that the body cannot benefit from food until any impediments are removed. The treatment of ignorance as ugliness of soul, which was supposed to be the task of a psychic gymnastics, has shifted into a psychic medicine. But anyone who remains unrefuted, the Stranger concludes, suffering the greatest impurity, is ugly in just the way one who is to be happy should be most pure and beautiful. An amazing turn-around in the argument! According to the original analysis, health of soul would be moral virtue and beauty omniscience; now to be freed from *doxosophia* is to be cured of both psychic disease and ugliness, while knowledge of ignorance counts as both health and beauty of soul.

The Stranger’s final comments on this division mark a decisive moment in the dialogue. He is afraid to label one who practices the art of purification a “sophist,” granting that title too high an honor. Theaetetus, however, who was subjected to Socrates’ refutation, has no doubt that their account “resembles some such” (231a). The Stranger cautions: they must be on guard against likenesses, since they are dealing with a most slippery genus.¹¹ He has restricted his own procedure to separating like from like; but to do that in the case of Socrates and the sophist he must abandon the indifference of his method to shame or honor: the “refutation of vain *doxosophia*,” he concedes to Theaetetus, has come to light for them as the “noble or well-born sophistic genus” (231b). The Stranger does his best to save Socrates from the designation of “sophist” by including the qualification “noble.” But for that he must have recourse to the discrimination of better and worse, which was the defining mark of the art of purification.¹² By the end of the analysis of the

11 Theaetetus introduces, unwittingly, the ontological issues of likeness and class formation that become thematic in the discussion. When Stranger comments that a wolf is like a dog, the most wild like the most tame, he appears to mean the tame philosopher vs. the wild sophist, but if the sophist only succeeds by putting to work the popular opinions of his audience, perhaps he is the one “tamed” by the role he plays in the city.

12 The criticism Socrates levels at the beginning of the *Plt.* against Theodorus’ mathematics (cf. note 3 above) applies as well to the Stranger’s practice of division in that dialogue. His “pursuit of speeches” cares no more for the august than what is not: it leads to the king as herdsman over a two-footed herd, distinguished from the swineherd with his four-footed one (*Plt.* 266c-d). The Eleatic method looks as incapable of bringing the royal art to light as of discovering the philosopher behind his phantom images.

diacritical art, it is the Stranger's own technical method that has been put on trial, precisely by means of a consideration that belongs to the Socratic way.¹³

V. Socratic Philosophy After the Death of Socrates

The *Sophist* began with Socrates' double reference to Homer's *Odyssey*, which on its most obvious reading puts Socrates in the role of Odysseus, but at the same time the Cyclops, who fears a punishing god. The guilt Socrates claims to experience, of course, is not for barbaric crimes beneath the level of civilization, but for the inadequate conduct of his previous conversation. The punishment he claims to fear is not divine retribution in Hades, but a rejection of his procedure in that inquiry, while the agent who exacts it is not a punitive god but the Eleatic Stranger, about to introduce a new method of investigation. The gods who take on all sorts of apparitions as they roam through the cities are the philosophers, whose appearance in phantom images is blamed on the ignorance of the many. But the failure to recognize the being of the philosopher, unlike a punitive god, would not invite retribution—at least not *from* the philosopher. If punishment is involved, it is *of* the philosopher who is misunderstood: Socrates is about to go on trial for injustice and impiety, to be convicted by the city and put to death.¹⁴ It is puzzling, then, that Socrates anticipates a philosophic trial in which the alleged shortcoming in his conduct of inquiry becomes a crime and its potential correction a punishment.

Why does Plato portray Socrates at the end of his life adopting this perspective of the city with its practice of punitive justice? And once he does,

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- 13 This judgment finds some support in the center of each conversation the Stranger conducts. In the *Sph.*, the intellectual parricide he commits against his Parmenidean heritage makes it possible to recognize the being of non-being in the form of the other (241d-242b, cf. 258b-259b). And that discovery allows, not only for an account of images, but for the distinction of kinds, which is required for the method of division. At the center of the *Plt.*, the Stranger introduces the measure of the mean, and subordinates the mathematical measure to it, since the fitting, the opportune, or the needful is the standard for anything good and beautiful (284b-d). The measure of the mean, over against excess or deficiency, belongs in the sphere of better and worse, recognized only by the Socratic art of purification and beyond the scope of the Eleatic method.
- 14 That momentous event, in the background of Plato's trilogy, comes into view conspicuously during the Stranger's examination of law in the *Plt.*: given the authority of the law, anyone even seeking knowledge "contrary to the writings" could be labeled a garrulous sophist, hauled into court on the charge of corrupting the youth, and if convicted, punished with the most severe penalties (299a-e).

why is not possible for Socrates to achieve on his own self-knowledge about his philosophic life? Does Socrates' repeated return to his conversation with Theaetetus, which he regards as a significant failure, indicate too severe a judgment of himself?¹⁵ Has the association of that conversation with his political trial colored his assessment of his worth as a philosopher?¹⁶ If, in any case, the trial of Socrates requires uncovering the being of the philosopher behind his mistaken appearance as a sophist, that entails an investigation of the nature of images, and with that the ontological problem of non-being, which belongs naturally to a critical Eleatic philosopher.¹⁷

It is possible, though hardly obvious, that Plato's intention is to demonstrate the superiority of the Stranger's technical method of division over Socrates' customary manner of examination of opinion. In fact, the many idiosyncratic moments in the Stranger's process of division, beginning with the angler as paradigm for the sophist, cast strong doubts on its status as a strictly rule-governed method. The Stranger's success with Theaetetus turns on his adapting many, if not all steps in the divisions to his understanding of the young man, to what he needs and what he will accept. Despite his original inclination to monologue, the Stranger appears to have something like the knowledge of soul that is the mark of Socratic philosophy.¹⁸ Why, then, does Plato exaggerate the status of the Stranger's procedure as a systematic *technē*?

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- 15 The original conversation takes place just before Socrates gets the indictment in the *Euthyphr.*, meeting up next with the Eleatic Stranger. It is sometime after those encounters that Socrates is engaged in reporting his conversation to Euclides, possibly before the trial, but also in prison afterwards. Plato's *Theaetetus*, Alex Priou proposes, should be read with an eye to how Socrates might have presented his original exchange with Theaetetus in response to the *Sph.* and *Plt.* conversations and perhaps his trial as well. In this light, it has a claim to count as the missing fourth dialogue, *The Philosopher*. See *Defending Socrates: Political Philosophy Before the Tribunal of Science*, "Overture."
 - 16 As the closest thing to a Socratic writing, the *Tht.* points to Socrates' awareness of one limitation— not having produced a written corpus that would preserve his distinctive philosophic way. Of course, this implicit self-critique amounts to a decisive praise of Plato's art of writing.
 - 17 It is less clear why the Eleatic Stranger is the necessary leader of the conversation in search of the statesman.
 - 18 If the *Sph.* presents Plato's vindication of Socrates, that would be accomplished, Matthew Dinan 2013, 117, 136 argues, through a critical portrayal of the Stranger, in his lack of "Socrates' characteristic self-knowledge." Evanthia Speliotis 2013, 198, in contrast, thinking of the need for another true philosopher to recognize the truth of Socrates behind his appearance as a sophist, wonders if that is the role the Stranger is playing.

The purpose of that strategy is suggested by the form of the dialogues that frame the series surrounding Socrates' trial and death. Plato chooses to present the conversations of the *Theaetetus* and the *Phaedo* through the voice of narrators who belong to the schools of philosophy that emerge after the death of Socrates. Like the Megarian and Neo-Pythagorean narrators of those dialogues, the Eleatic Stranger appears to offer a technical method that could carry on after the loss of the unique individual who is somehow *the* paradigmatic philosopher. But the philosophic sects that follow in Socrates' footsteps will inevitably take up some partial aspect of his thought and transform it into a doctrinaire form, in particular ignoring or suppressing the distinctive Socratic discovery of political philosophy. The conversations Plato sets at the end of Socrates' life display the limits of the post-Socratic schools as a means of preserving and transmitting Socratic philosophy. In doing so, they demonstrate the vital importance of the Platonic dialogues as the medium in which Socrates can live on. The *Sophist* began with Socrates invoking Odysseus' warning to the Cyclops about punitive gods, troubled that it might apply to himself as the potential subject of the Stranger's correction. It looks as if Plato, in the end, puts that apprehension into question, or rather, turns it around into a vindication of Socratic philosophy.

APPENDIX

Sophist 216a-b

Socrates: Have you really then failed to observe, Theodorus, that in accordance with Homer's speech it's no stranger you lead but a kind of god? He asserts that not only do **different gods accompany all those human beings who share in a just shame**, but that also, in particular, **the god of strangers proves not least to be their companion and looks down on the acts of outrage and of law-abidingness of human beings**? So perhaps your stranger who attends you might also be one of the Mightier, come to look over and refute us who are poor in speeches, and is a kind of refutative god.

Theodorus: No, Socrates, this is not the stranger's way. He's more measured than those whose zeal is devoted to contentiousness. And the man, in my opinion, is in no way a god; he is, however, divine, for I address all the philosophers as of this sort.

Socrates: And beautifully, my friend. This genus, however, is in all probability scarcely much easier to discern than that of the god. For on account of the ignorance of everyone else, these men—those who not in a fabricated

way but in their being are philosophers—certainly **show up in all sorts of apparitions and haunt the cities, looking down from on high on the life of those below.** And in the opinion of some they are worth nothing and of some everything, and at times they take on the apparitions of statesmen, and at times of sophists, and there are times when they give some the impression that they are altogether crazy.

Odyssey 9. 266-271

So [the Cyclops] spoke, and the inward heart in us was broken. . . “We are Achaians coming from Troy, beaten off our true course. . . but now in turn we come to you and are suppliants at your knees. . . Therefore stand in awe of the gods, O best of men. We are your suppliants, and Zeus **the god of strangers, who accompanies reverend strangers,** avenges any wrong toward strangers and suppliants.”

Odysseus	warns the Cyclops	about Zeus who accompanies reverend strangers
1a) Socrates	warns Theodorus	about the Stranger as a refutative god
1b) Socrates	warns himself	about Stranger as a refutative god
1c) Socrates	warns the Stranger	about Theodorus as a refutative god
1d) Socrates	warns the Stranger	about himself as a refutative god
2a) Theodorus	warns the Stranger	about himself as a refutative god
2b) Theodorus	warns the Stranger	about Socrates as a refutative god
2c) Theodorus	warns Socrates	about himself as a refutative god
2d) Theodorus	warns Socrates	about the Stranger as a refutative god
3a) the Stranger	warns Socrates	about Theodorus as a refutative god
3b) the Stranger	warns Theodorus	about Socrates as a refutative god
3c) the Stranger	warns Socrates	about himself as a refutative god
3d) the Stranger	warns himself	about Socrates as a refutative god

Odyssey 17. 483-487

And this is the way one of these haughty young men would speak to him: “Antinous, you did badly to hit the unhappy vagabond: a curse on you if he

turns out to be some god from heaven. **For the gods do take on all sorts of transformations, appearing as strangers from elsewhere, and thus they range at large through the cities, looking down on the acts of outrage and law-abidingness of humans.**

anonymous suitor	warns Antinous	about the beggar as one of the gods in disguise, who roam through the cities, watching over the outrage and lawabidingness of human beings
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