

**Pregnant or Barren? Socratic Wisdom in Plato's *Theaetetus* (149a-151d)**

**by**

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I, William Joseph Eckersley, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract:**

This thesis aims to solve a contradiction that is generated by claims of Socrates' in Plato's *Theaetetus* that I refer to as the "puzzle of Socratic wisdom". In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates claims to practice the art (*technē*) (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a) of midwifery, which, I argue at the opening of the first chapter, implies he possesses knowledge (*epistēmē*). This claim entails a contradiction when viewed in conjunction with Socrates' claims that, firstly, wisdom (*sophia*) is the same as *epistēmē* (*Theaet* 145d-e) and, secondly, that he lacks any *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2). Once I have shown this I consider two potential solutions that have been offered to this puzzle in the recent literature on the *Theaetetus*. Finding these solutions unsatisfactory, in the next chapter I consider the possibility that solutions that have been offered to a puzzle found in Plato's early dialogues might help to solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. By exposing the similarities between the puzzles found in the early dialogues and the puzzle of Socratic wisdom I seek to justify the interpretive strategy of using solutions to the former to help solve the latter. I then explain and rebut a potential objection to adopting this procedure. This being so I go on to pursue the strategy of applying solutions offered to the puzzle from the early dialogues to the puzzle from the *Theaetetus*; I argue that the solutions on offer are for the most part unsatisfactory. In the final chapter I turn to offering my own proposal for how to solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. I argue that Socrates should not be understood as possessing the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery. I propose that instead, God possesses the insights necessary for practicing mental obstetrics and that Socrates collaborates with God in delivering and assessing the beliefs of Socrates' interlocutors.

## **Impact Statement:**

This thesis recommends reassessing Socrates' philosophical methodology in the *Theaetetus* as being conducted from the starting point of possessing no knowledge.

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## Introduction:

This thesis aims to find a solution to a puzzle that arises during the opening of Plato's *Theaetetus* (*Theaet* 149a-151d) in the midst of a passage that Myles Burnyeat has called 'deservedly one of the most famous Plato ever wrote'.<sup>1</sup> This puzzle appears as a result of the fact that Plato portrays Socrates as claiming, on the one hand, that he practices the art (*technē*) of intellectual midwifery (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a, c) whilst on the other, that, as part of his practice of that art, he lacks all wisdom (*sophia*) (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, 150d1-2). What will become apparent (in section 1.3) is that we have compelling reasons to think that these claims imply contrary conclusions concerning Socrates' epistemic state in the dialogue. This contradiction I refer to as "the puzzle of Socratic wisdom".

The first chapter opens by explicating the features of the general notion of a *technē* found in the Platonic corpus. These aspects of a *technē* are then used to explain the structure of Socrates' art of intellectual midwifery in the *Theaetetus* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a, c). Elucidating these central features of Socrates' *technē* helps both to account for the way in which the puzzle of Socratic wisdom emerges (in sections 1.3 and 2.1) and, in the third chapter, the way in which I argue the puzzle can be solved. In the last section of the opening chapter (section 1.4) I present and offer grounds for rejecting two recent solutions that have been offered to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

The next chapter explains how the puzzle of Socratic wisdom and an epistemic puzzle from Plato's early dialogues are the same. These similarities imply that solutions that have been offered to the former puzzle may help solve the latter. This exegesis aims to justify undertaking the interpretive approach of using solutions offered to the former puzzle to solve the latter. Indicating a potential objection to this exegetical procedure, I rebut this challenge by endorsing David Sedley's

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<sup>1</sup> Burnyeat, Miles, *The Theaetetus of Plato (with a translation of Plato's*

interpretation of Socrates' character in the *Theaetetus*: that Socrates 'was, so to speak, the midwife of Platonism'.<sup>2</sup> Finally I proceed to assessing the possibility that each of three solutions that have been offered to the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues may help to solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. On the whole I offer reasons for dismissing this possibility.

In the last chapter I explain my own solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. From a close analysis of *Theaet* 150c I argue that Socrates is best understood as not possessing the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery and suggest that rather, God does. I indicate some pieces of evidence from the *Theaetetus* that point towards the conclusion that God and Socrates collaborate in the practice of midwifery. Lastly I offer some thoughts regarding what may have motivated Plato to attribute the origins of Socrates' philosophical practice to a divinity.

Following the last chapter I offer some closing remarks regarding the consequences my interpretation has for our perception of Socratic methodology and indicate some further lines of investigation that my interpretation recommends.

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<sup>2</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, Oxford Clarendon, 2004, p.8

## Chapter 1:

### 1.1: The General Notion of a *Technē*:

The first aspect of the “general notion” of a *technē* that I wish to draw attention to is that each *technē* has a unique function (*ergon*).<sup>3</sup> This can be seen from Socrates’ claim in the *Republic* that ‘every craft [*technē*] differ[s] from every other in having a different function [*ergon*]’ (*Rep* 345e-346a).<sup>4</sup> This is also a claim that is present in the *Ion* where it is agreed that ‘to each profession [*technē*] a god has granted the ability to know a certain function [*ergon*]’ (*Ion* 357c).<sup>5</sup> Here the reference to a ‘certain’ function again indicates the idea that each *technē* has a unique *ergon*, a point that is then confirmed a little further on when Socrates says that ‘when I find that the knowledge [involved in one case] deals with different subjects from the knowledge involved [in another case], then I claim that one is a different profession [*technē*] from another’ (*Ion* 357d-e). The ‘subject’ of the knowledge here is presumably the *ergon* of each *technē*, for as we saw, this is the ‘knowledge’ that a ‘god has granted’ to each practitioner of a *technē* (*Ion* 357c). Hence, Socrates’ claim here is that when the subject of the knowledge involved in a *technē* (viz. the *ergon*) is different, the *technē* is different, thus echoing the doctrine in the *Republic* (*Rep* 345e-356a) that each *technē* has a unique *ergon*.

Following the claim in the *Republic* that all *technai* are differentiated by their performing a unique function, Socrates and Thrasymachus concur that ‘each craft [*technē*] brings its own peculiar benefit’ (*Rep* 346c) such that ‘even if someone who is a ship’s captain becomes healthy because sailing is advantageous to health, you

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<sup>3</sup> “*ergon*” may also be translated “goal”, “product”, “output” or “result”.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from the *Republic* are from the translation by G.M.A Grube and C.D.C Reeve (rev.) in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.971-1224

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the *Ion* are from the translation by Paul Woodruff in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.937-950

wouldn't for that reason call his craft [*technē*] medicine' (*Rep* 346b). There are therefore two points being made here. Firstly, each *technē* produces some beneficial result (a 'peculiar benefit') (*Rep* 346c) and, secondly, this beneficial result, like the *ergon* of each *technē*, is unique to each *technē*. This point is then carried forward and Thrasymachus and Socrates eventually agree that even if all craftspeople earn money from the performance of their crafts (i.e. all crafts realise the same end *qua* earning money), the collection of payment for the practice of their *technē* is really the performance of an ancillary *technē* altogether (*Rep* 346c); reinforcing the point that the result realised by each *technē* is unique to it. There exist further specific examples of the idea both that *technai* realise some beneficial result and that that result is unique to each *technē*. In the *Euthydemus*, for instance, Socrates identifies 'nourishment from the earth' (*Euthd* 292a) as the unique result of farming (*Euthd* 292a) and 'health' (*Euthd* 291e) as the unique benefit conferred by medicine (*Euthd* 291e).<sup>6</sup> In the *Gorgias* the characters agree that 'weaving, for example, is concerned with the production of clothes' (*Grg* 449d) and 'music is concerned with the composition of tunes' (*Grg* 449d).<sup>7</sup> These instances thus confirm the idea that each *technē* is understood to produce a unique result. Later on in the *Gorgias*, during a passage that I shall be returning to later, the genuine *technai* of medicine, gymnastics, justice and legislation (*Grg* 464b-c) are distinguished from the *empeiriai* that mimic them (*Grg* 464c-d) on the basis that the former 'always provide care, in the one case for the body, in the other for the soul' (*Grg* 464c) whereas the latter take 'no thought at all of whatever's best' (*Grg* 464d). Lastly, in the *Charmides* the result of medicine (health) is said to 'confer' (*Charm* 165c) 'no small benefit' (*Charm* 165d) while in the *Euthydemus* Socrates claims that 'it [the

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations from the *Euthydemus* are from the translation of Rosamond Kent Sprague in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.708-746

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from the *Gorgias* are from the translation of Donald J Zeyl in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.791-870

kingly *technē*] must provide us with something good' (*Euthd* 292a).<sup>8</sup> These examples thus show that the unique result of each *technē* is understood to be beneficial.

So far then, the general notion of a *technē* as I have presented it consists in the idea that each *technē* serves some unique *ergon* and that it produces a specific beneficial result. Here a question might naturally arise, namely, what exactly is the *ergon* of each *technē*? The answer to this question, I would like to suggest, is that the unique *ergon* of each of the *technai* is to *realise* the unique beneficial result that is associated with it.<sup>9</sup> Some evidence for this interpretation can be found in the same passage from which I have been quoting thus far in the *Republic*. In that passage Socrates claims that 'wage-earning gives us wages, for this is its function [*ergon*]' (*Rep* 346a). Hence, the actual realisation of the beneficial result of the wage-earning *technē* (what it 'gives' us, its 'peculiar benefit') (*Rep* 346c) is identified with its *ergon*. The same claim also appears in the *Euthyphro* where Euthyphro replies affirmatively to the question: 'could you tell me to the achievement of what goal [*ergon*] service to doctors tends? Is it not, do you think, to achieving health?' (*Euthphr* 13d).<sup>10</sup> Supposing the identification of achieving the unique beneficial result of a *technē* with its unique *ergon* also explains nicely why, in the passage from the *Republic*, health is the specific result of medicine (*Rep* 346a) but not of sailing (*Rep* 346b); it is because the unique and specific function (*ergon*) of medicine is to produce health whereas this is not the case in naval navigation. Hence, the unique *ergon* of each *technē*, I submit, is to produce a unique beneficial result.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations from the *Charmides* are from the translation of Rosamond Kent Sprague published in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.639-664

<sup>9</sup> "is" in the sense of "is identical with"; the relation that is most commonly expressed in first order logic with the symbol "="

<sup>10</sup> All quotations from the *Euthyphro* are from the translation of G.M.A Grube published in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.1-17

<sup>11</sup> This is what the *ergon is*. *Performing* the *ergon* is therefore producing the unique beneficial result.



The last and most significant aspect of the general notion of a *technē* that I wish to draw attention to is that a *technē* is knowledge (*epistēmē*) in some sense.<sup>12</sup> There are a good number of passages in Plato's works in which this claim is maintained. For instance, in the *Charmides* the *technē* of medicine is said to be *epistēmē* a couple of times (*Charm* 165c, 171a). In the opening of the *Gorgias* also, Socrates tells the eponymous character, on the assumption (later argued against starting at *Grg* 462c) that oratory is a *technē* (*Grg* 449a) to 'answer that way about oratory...About which of the things there are, is it knowledge? [*epistēmē*]' (*Grg* 449d). For Socrates' request to make sense here, the assumption that he must be making is that a *technē* is *epistēmē*. Further, as we saw when discussing the *ergon* of each *technē* in the *Ion*, knowledge (*epistēmē*) was said to be involved in the practice of a *technē* (*Ion* 537c-e). What is more, the context of the claim makes it plain that in this passage Socrates is assuming that a *technē* is *epistēmē*.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates asks Theaetetus: 'When you talk about shoemaking, you mean just knowledge [*epistēmē*] of the making of shoes' (*Theaet* 146d) and that 'When you talk about carpentering, you mean simply the knowledge [*epistēmē*] of the making of wooden objects' (*Theaet* 146d) to which Theaetetus replies affirmatively.<sup>14</sup> This therefore confirms the interpretation that a *technē* is *epistēmē* quite straightforwardly. It will now help to investigate the question of what this *epistēmē* consists in.

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<sup>12</sup> Minimally, a *technē* should be taken to count as a *type* of knowledge (*epistēmē*). I do not wish to necessarily endorse the stronger claim that the terms *technē* and *epistēmē* can be conceptually identified or that the use of these terms can be taken to be co-extensional, although there is room for this kind of interpretation. See Benson, Hugh H. *Socratic Wisdom*, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 10-11 for a well-reasoned defense of when one is justified in maintaining this stronger view.

<sup>13</sup> Socrates seems to be using *technē* and *epistēmē* interchangeably in this passage.

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from the *Theaetetus* are from the translation of M. J. Levett and Myles Burnyeat (rev.) in *Plato: The Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.157-235

A good place to start looking for an answer to this question is the passage from the *Ion* where Socrates says that ‘to each profession [*technē*] a god has granted the knowledge of a certain function [*ergon*]' (*Ion* 537c). So the knowledge is ‘of’ the *ergon* of the *technē*. But this *epistēmē* can only plausibly be understood as knowledge not just of what the *ergon* of each *technē* is but knowledge of *how to perform* the particular *ergon*. For, if the point is that knowledge is involved in the practice of a *technē* (as seems to be suggested from the quotes in the last paragraph, especially at *Theaet* 146c-d), then it cannot be that, say, the cobbler simply knows that their function is to produce shoes. For anyone, cobbler or not, can say what the function of shoe making is. Rather, I suggest, the *epistēmē* involved in the practice of a *technē* is best understood as knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* (viz. realise the unique beneficial result) associated with it.

To see that this view has some plausibility one needs to look again at a passage from the *Ion* where Socrates requests that Ion ‘Take these fingers: I know that there are five of them, and you know the same thing...suppose I asked you whether it’s the same profession – arithmetic – that *teaches you and me the same things*’ (*Ion* 537e) (emphasis added). The implication of this statement is that mastery of arithmetic (a *technē*) teaches us or gives us (at least) knowledge concerning how to count (viz. how to determine quantity). As we saw, knowledge of the *ergon* of a *technē* is involved with possessing any *technē* (*Ion* 537c). We also know, from the *Gorgias* (*Grg* 453e) that the *ergon* of arithmetic is the production of persuasion regarding quantity. The fact that possessing skill with arithmetic teaches one to be able (at a minimum) to determine quantity (*Ion* 537e) dovetails nicely with the knowledge ‘of’ (*Ion* 537c) the *ergon* that consists in the production of such persuasion. I would thus like to argue that the knowledge that teaches those competent in arithmetic what a determinate quantity consists of must be the same knowledge as the knowledge ‘of’ this thing: the knowledge of the *ergon* is knowledge of how to produce the

beneficial result of arithmetic (at a minimum, persuasion regarding quantity): that is what it ‘teaches’ (*Ion* 537e) us.

I would also like to argue that the view that the knowledge involved in practicing a *technē* is knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* of that *technē* is supported by a careful interpretation of a celebrated passage from the *Gorgias* (*Grg* 464b-466a). In this passage Socrates engages in a lengthy reflection to argue for the claim, *contra* Polus, that oratory is an *empeiria* (a ‘knack’) (*Grg* 462c) rather than a *technē*. In this passage Socrates is seen to distinguish the practices of ‘flattery’ that (*Grg* 463b) achieve their aim of ‘gratification’ (*Grg* 462c) only through the ability of those who practice them to use *empeiriai* (*Grg* 462c), from the *technai* by claiming that the latter practices involve possessing knowledge (*epistēmē*) (*Grg* 464c) while the former do not. In this passage Socrates first enumerates two ‘subjects’ (*Grg* 464b); one that involves care of the soul called ‘politics’ at *Grg* 464b and one that involves care of the body and which remains nameless (*Grg* 464b). These two subjects are then said to come in two further parts, each of which is a *technē* (*Grg* 464b-c), giving us four *technai* altogether. These four *technai* (gymnastics, medicine, legislation and justice) (*Grg* 464b-c) are then distinguished from the empiric practices that mimic them:

‘Flattery [practices involving *empeiria* - *Grg* 463b] takes notice of them [the four *technai*] and I won’t say by *knowing* but by *guessing* – divides itself into four, masks itself with each of the parts, and then pretends to be the characters of the masks’ (*Grg* 464c-d)

Thus the claim that Socrates is arguing for here is that the four *technai* involve knowing (possessing *epistēmē*) when they are practiced whilst each of the *empeiriai* that copies them operate merely by ‘guessing’ (*Grg* 464c). Now, the *epistēmē* involved in the practice of these *technē*, one might suppose on the basis of this passage, can be understood as being capable of articulation in an ‘account’ (*Grg* 465a), another feature that

distinguishes the *technai* from *empeiria* (*Grg* 465a). Why should one understand this to be the case?

The account a practitioner of a *technē* can give, we are told, comprises of ‘the real nature of the things it [the *technē*] applies’ (*Grg* 465a, 501a) that is, it is of ‘the cause [*aition*] of the things it does’ (*Grg* 465a, 501a).<sup>15</sup> Now, on the basis of what I have said previously, I would like here to suggest that what a *technē* does is realise its unique beneficial result (viz. “doing” a *technē* involves *performing* its unique *ergon*). What is articulated in the account, on this reading, therefore, is the cause or explanation of the performance of the *ergon* of the *technē*. Here, then, I suggest, it is plausible to interpret this ‘cause’ (*Grg* 465a, 501a) as knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* of the *technē*. One such reason for doing so is that knowledge of how to do x, in this case how to perform the *ergon* of a *technē*, is a sufficient explanation of one’s doing x where x = any action. Using this principle to explain what the content of the ‘account’ (*Grg* 465a) practitioners of *technai* can give consists in entails that practitioners of *technai* can offer an account of the *epistēmē* of how to perform the unique *ergon* of their *technē*. Supposing the interpretation I am proposing to be correct can usefully illuminate this passage from the *Gorgias* by being able to offer a philosophically plausible way of understanding the account that practitioners of *technai* are able to give, shedding further light on what distinguishes such practices from the *empeiriai* (*Grg* 465a).

An articulation of the central aspects of the general notion of a *technē* should now be possible. What I would like to claim is that, in general, practicing a *technē* turns out to involve the fulfilment of a unique *ergon* that is the realisation of a unique beneficial result and is a process that is explained by the practitioner’s *epistēmē* of how to perform the *ergon*. With this general notion in mind one is now ready to apply this concept to the Socratic *technē* in the *Theaetetus*.

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<sup>15</sup> The term “*aition*” here may also be translated “explanation”.

## 1.2: The Socratic *Technē* in the *Theaetetus*:

The passage from the *Theaetetus* that is the primary focus of this thesis runs from *Theaet* 149a-151d and contains six occasions on which Socrates claims to practice the *technē* of midwifery (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a9, c).<sup>16</sup> I shall now seek to explain the features of Socrates' *technē* using the general notion just articulated.

Usefully Plato has Socrates explicitly identify what the *ergon* of his intellectual midwifery consists in when he says:

'the work of the [ordinary] midwives is a highly important one; but it is not so important as my own performance. And for this reason, that there is not in midwifery the further complication that the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms and sometimes of realities, and that the two are hard to distinguish. *If they were, then the midwife's greatest function [ergon] would be to distinguish the true from the false offspring*' (*Theaet* 150a-b) (emphasis added)

The italicised section of the above quote makes it clear that if people *could* be delivered of 'true' (*Theaet* 150b) and 'false' (*Theaet* 150b) 'offspring' (*Theaet* 150b) then, a 'midwife's greatest function [*ergon*]' (*Theaet* 150b) would be to determine which of the offspring fall into which category (*Theaet* 150b). We need now to notice two things. Firstly, Socrates uses the same term for function (*ergon*) that he used in all of the texts in section 1.1 where the various connotations of this term were explained in connection with the general notion of a *technē*.

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<sup>16</sup> Socrates' claims to practice a *technē*: 'I practice the same art [*technē*] myself [as his mother does]' (*Theaet* 149a4); 'it is a secret that I have this art [*technē*]' (*Theaet* 149a7); 'My art [*technē*] of midwifery is just like theirs [ordinary midwife's] in most respects' (*Theaet* 150b6); 'the most important thing about my art [*technē*] is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring' (*Theaet* 150c1); 'this pain [labour pain] my art [*technē*] is able to bring on, and also to allay' (*Theaet* 151a9); 'I want you [Theaetetus] to come to me as to one who is both the son of a midwife and himself skilled in the art [*technē*]' (*Theaet* 151c).

This therefore provides some good textual evidence to link what Socrates is saying here about the *technē* of midwifery to that general notion. Secondly, Socrates implies on a couple of occasions, proceeding the claims at *Theaet* 150a-b that, in the case of his own mental midwifery, someone *can* be delivered of either a ‘phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth’ (*Theaet* 150c) or, as he also says, something ‘really fertile or a mere wind-egg’ (*Theaet* 151e). This indicates that the practice of midwifery that Socrates partakes in is a kind of midwifery, where, as he puts it at *Theaet* 150a-b ‘the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms and sometimes of realities, and that the two are hard to distinguish’ (*Theaet* 150a-b) thus implying that ‘the greatest function [*ergon*] of [his] midwifery’ (*Theaet* 150b) is ‘to distinguish the true from the false offspring’ (*Theaet* 150b). Hence, we should conclude that (at least the greatest) function of Socrates’ midwifery is to determine the veracity of his interlocutor’s brain-children. Granted that this is the *ergon* of Socrates’ midwifery, what beneficial result does performing the *ergon* realise?

If the unique *ergon* of the Socratic *technē* is to ‘see whether what he have here [Theaetetus’ intellectual offspring] is really fertile or a mere wind-egg’ (*Theaet* 151e), it seems that what is realised by performing the *ergon* must be some kind of judgement about whether the first-born is a true or false belief.<sup>17</sup> This I would argue must be the case because forming a judgment as to which offspring are false, which true, is minimally what is required for one to ‘distinguish’ (*Theaet* 150b) the offspring on that basis. Hence, for that reason, one should conclude that the result of the *technē* of midwifery is the formation of a judgement regarding an interlocutor’s belief. There is some evidence later in the *Theaetetus* that supports this view and which can also explain in what sense the formation of the salient kind of judgement is

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<sup>17</sup> The offspring must be beliefs because they can be distinguished as true or false by performing the *ergon* of midwifery on them (*Theaet* 150c) and Theaetetus and Socrates agree that knowledge is ‘infallible’ (*Theaet* 152c). Thus, if Theaetetus’ offspring were knowledge, they could not be subjected to the testing involved in practicing the *ergon*.

*beneficial*. If one looks forward in the text, the result of the testing of Theaetetus' firstborn that is reached between *Theaet* 186e-187a is declared to be 'the clearest possible proof that knowledge is something different from perception' (*Theaet* 186e). This Socrates then characterises as having 'made a little progress' (*Theaet* 187a), for he and Theaetetus have discovered 'what knowledge is not' (*Theaet* 187a). Firstly, this corresponds to the idea that the result of the Socratic *technē* is a judgement concerning the veracity of Theaetetus' beliefs. For, in this case, Theaetetus' first born has, through a lengthy process of examination (almost thirty Stephanus' pages worth) been judged false. The fact that Socrates calls this judgement 'progress' (*Theaet* 187a) corresponds to the idea that this result of midwifery is beneficial. The result is advantageous presumably because it represents a development; an elimination of candidate answers to the dialogue's central question (*Theaet* 145e-146a) because Socrates and his young protégé have found out 'what knowledge is not' (*Theaet* 187a).

We are now in a position to see what *epistēmē* Socrates possesses as part of the practice of his *technē*. The answer is that if the knowledge associated with the practice of each *technē* is *epistēmē* of how to achieve the particular result that each *technē* realises (viz. knowledge of how to perform the *ergon*), as we saw in section 1.1, then Socrates' practice of the *technē* of intellectual midwifery must be *epistēmē* of how to produce a judgement regarding the truth or falsity of his interlocutor's beliefs. Once again, this seems to correspond well with a claim that Socrates makes later in the dialogue. At *Theaet* 161b Socrates claims that 'All I know, such as it is, is how to take an argument from someone else – someone who is wise – and give it a fair reception' (*Theaet* 161b).<sup>18</sup> If giving a belief a 'fair reception' (*Theaet* 161b)

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<sup>18</sup> Although what Socrates claims possession of here does *appear* to be the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery, his qualification in the sense in which he will apparently lay claim to this knowledge (it is all he knows 'such as it is') (*Theaet* 161b) should lead us to conclude that he only apparently lays claim to such knowledge in this passage (at least in the absence of an explanation as to the sense in which he means

corresponds to producing a judgement as to that belief's veracity, then the *epistēmē* Socrates appears to admit he has possession of in this passage would correspond exactly to the *epistēmē* that I am suggesting comprises Socrates' *technē* of midwifery.

Therefore, the Socratic *technē* of midwifery ends up being a practice, the function of which is to form a judgment concerning the truth or falsity of Socrates' interlocutor's beliefs and which consists in knowledge of how to form that judgment. Now, as I have said, this full articulation of the features of Socratic midwifery will only be seen to play a major argumentative role in the final chapter of this thesis. There I shall draw upon the model of Socratic midwifery I have presented above and use the features of it that I have identified as the foundations of a number of arguments that I shall advance when presenting my own solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. For now the most significant feature of Socratic midwifery to bear in mind is that Socrates' *technē*, like all others, consists in *epistēmē*.

### **1.3: The Puzzle of Socratic Wisdom:**

Before one can see how this puzzle arises, one must first make a few observations regarding the text of the *Theaetetus*. At *Theaet* 145d-e, just before Socrates outlines the features of the Maieutic Method, he and Theaetetus have the following conversation:

S: 'What makes men wise, I take it, is wisdom [*sophia*]?

T: Yes.

S: And is this in any way different from knowledge [*epistēmē*]?

T: What?

S: Wisdom [*sophia*]. Isn't it the things which they know that men are wise about?

T: Well, yes.

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to qualify this claim). Nonetheless, Socrates' comment here is clearly quite suggestive.



S: So knowledge [*epistēmē*] and wisdom [*sophia*] will be the same thing?

T: Yes.<sup>19</sup>

(*Theaet* 145d-e)

The conclusion of this passage is clear enough. The Greek terms *epistēmē* (for the most part and so far in my thesis translated “knowledge”) and *sophia* (almost always translated “wisdom”) are to be understood as co-referential, as equivalent terms. Next, it is important to notice that as part of Socrates’ practice of his *technē* (i.e.: ‘one thing that I have in common with ordinary midwives’) (*Theaet* 150c) is that he is ‘barren’ (*Theaet* 150c4), in Socrates’ case, ‘of wisdom [*sophia*]’ (*Theaet* 150c4). This point is then reiterated a couple more times. For example Socrates proclaims that there is ‘no wisdom [*sophia*] in me’ (*Theaet* 150c6) and that he ‘cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worthy of the name of wisdom [*sophia*]’ (*Theaet* 150d1-2). Finally, some would claim also that Socrates says ‘I am not in any sense a wise [*sophia*] man’ (*Theaet* 150d1).<sup>20</sup> If we combine this with the claim that Socrates and Theaetetus agree to at *Theaet* 145e, that *epistēmē* and *sophia* are equivalent terms, then the logical consequence is that when Socrates (incontestably) claims to have no *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2), this implies that he also has no *epistēmē*.

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<sup>19</sup> Σ: σοφία δέ γ'οἶμαι σοφοὶ οἱ σοφοί.

Θ: ναί

Σ: τοῦτο δὲ μῶν διαφέρει τι ἐπιστήμης;

Θ: τὸ ποῖον;

Σ: ἡ σοφία. ἢ οὐχ ἄπερ ἐπιστήμονες ταῦτα καὶ σοφοί;

Θ: τί μήν;

Σ: ταῦτόν ἄρα ἐπιστήμη καὶ σοφία;

Θ: ναί

<sup>20</sup> That this last quote should be taken to express a wholesale disavowal of wisdom is contentious. The Greek text has Socrates claiming to be ‘οὐ πάνυ τι σοφός’ which Levett translates (as I quote above) ‘not in any sense a wise man’ (*Theaet* 150d1) although the phrase ‘οὐ πάνυ τι σοφός’ may express a claim that is less extreme viz. “not *entirely* wise”. I return to discussion of this line in section 1.4 where it is of more direct relevance. I quote the line here only to indicate that some endorse translating the claim in this way.

This is how the puzzle of Socratic wisdom arises. As was seen in section 1.2, Socrates, in practicing his *technē* should be taken to know how to produce a judgement as to the truth or falsity of his interlocutor's beliefs. The "knowledge" (knowledge of how to form the salient kind of judgment) that Socrates needed to possess (along with all other craftspeople as was concluded in section 1.1) was *epistēmē*. We are therefore faced with a puzzle: Socrates on the one hand claims implicitly to possess *epistēmē* of how to test the veracity of his interlocutors' beliefs, yet, as part of that same practice, to lack any *sophia* and hence, *epistēmē* (*Theaet* 145e). There is thus a clear contradiction generated by the inferences from Socrates' claims here. From his claims to practice a *technē* we inferred that Socrates possesses *epistēmē* (for a *technē* consists in *epistēmē* as we saw in sections 1.1 and 1.2). And from his claims that he has no *sophia* we just inferred that he has no *epistēmē*. The contradiction generated by these inferences is the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

#### **1.4: Sedley's and Giannopoulou's Solutions:**

David Sedley and Zina Giannopoulou in their recent books on the *Theaetetus* both suggest that there is some textual evidence at *Theaet* 150d1 that could dissolve the contradiction if the line is correctly translated and interpreted.<sup>21</sup> Both of these commentators concur that *Theaet* 150d1 provides textual evidence for attributing some wisdom to Socrates and that, furthermore, there are good reasons for supposing that this wisdom consists in the knowledge involved in the practice of his midwifery.<sup>22</sup>

Here is Socrates' claim at *Theaet* 150d1 in context:

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<sup>21</sup> Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.31; Giannopoulou, Zina, *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p.43

<sup>22</sup> Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.31; Giannopoulou, Zina, *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology*, p.43

‘The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is that God compels me to attend to the travail of others but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise [οὐ πάνυ τι σοφός] man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worthy of the name of wisdom. But with those who associate with me it is different’.<sup>23</sup> (*Theaet* 150c-d) trans. M.J. Levett and Myles Burnyeat (rev.)

Now, *contra* Levett’s translation above, Sedley argues that the correct translation of the text at 150d1 is ‘not entirely wise’ (*Theaet* 150d1) and not, as ‘usually translated’ ‘not at all wise’. This translation Sedley defends in a paper that he has written on the subject of the *Theaetetus*.<sup>24</sup> However, before we look at Sedley’s reasons for preferring this translation of *Theaet* 150d1, it is worth pausing briefly to see how translating and interpreting *Theaet* 150d1 in the way Sedley argues it should be might solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

The reason why taking the meaning of the text at 150d1 (‘οὐ πάνυ τι’) to be ‘not entirely’ would solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom is that it indicates, minimally, that Socrates ‘does possess the rudiments of wisdom’.<sup>25</sup> For, if one is not *entirely* wise, then this suggests that one has some elementary wisdom or knowledge. Add to this the interpretive claim that Sedley argues for, that ‘there is good reason to interpret these rudiments as consisting in the insights that enable him [Socrates] to practice midwifery itself’, and one can argue that *Theaet*

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<sup>23</sup> ‘καί ὅπερ ἤδη πολλοί μοι ὠνείδισαν, ὡς τοὺς μὲν ἄλλοσέρωτῶ, αὐτὸς δὲ οὐδὲν ἀποφαίνομαι περὶ οὐδενὸς διὰ τὸ μηδὲν ἔχειν σοφόν, ἀληθὲς ὠνείδιζουσιν. τὸ δὲ αἴτιον τούτου τόδε: μαιεύεσθαι με ὁ θεὸς ἀναγκάζει, γεννᾶν δὲ ἀπεκώλυσεν. εἰμί δὴ οὖν αὐτὸς μὲν οὐ πάνυ τι σοφός, οὐδέ τί μοι ἔστιν ὠρηματοιοῦτον γεγονὸς τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς ἔκγονον οἱ δ’ ἐμοῖσιν γιγνόμενοι τὸ μὲν πρῶτον’ (*Theaet* 150c-d).

<sup>24</sup> Sedley, David, “Three Platonist Interpretations of the *Theaetetus*” In Gill, Christopher & McCabe, M. M. (eds.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato*. Oxford University Press. pp.79-103, 1996, p.98

<sup>25</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.31

150d1 provides some direct textual evidence that suggests that Socrates does possess the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery.<sup>26</sup> This would dissolve the contradiction by allowing that when Socrates disavows wisdom entirely (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2), he should not be taken to disavow the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery because *Theaet* 150d1 would act so as to qualify the total disavowals by indicating his possession of knowledge pertinent to practicing midwifery. What reasons are there, in Sedley's view, for interpreting *Theaet* 150d1 (granted his preferred translation of the line) in this way?

The first is that because Socrates 'is making a whole series of assertions about his midwifery' in this passage one might be inclined to infer that whatever items of knowledge are here implicitly claimed to be involved in the practice of midwifery must be possessed by Socrates, Sedley argues.<sup>27</sup> *Theaet* 150d1 would thus stand as a confirmation of this point. The point would be reinforced, Sedley notes, by the fact that Socrates here claims that his midwifery is a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a).<sup>28</sup> Secondly, Sedley argues, and as we have already seen, there is some textual evidence later in the *Theaetetus* that could be taken to support the claim that Socrates does possess the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery:

'all I know, such as it is, is how to take an argument from someone else – someone who *is* wise – and give it a fair reception' (*Theaet* 161b)

Hence, Sedley concludes, *Theaet* 161b makes it 'virtually explicit' that Socrates' 'expertise of midwifery constitutes the sole exception to his disavowal of knowledge' in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>29</sup> For, the knowledge Socrates seems to describe having at *Theaet* 161b ('all' he knows) (*Theaet* 161b) arguably corresponds to the knowledge one might

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.32

suppose is involved in the practice of midwifery (viz. knowledge of how to take arguments from others and test them). Indeed, in section 1.2, I argued that, given the application of the general notion of a *technē* to Socratic midwifery, one might be warranted in making this inference from the text at *Theaet* 161b. If one does so any knowledge or wisdom that Socrates admits to having must correspond to the only knowledge that he apparently admits to possessing (*Theaet* 161b) viz. knowledge of midwifery. If *Theaet* 150d1 can be translated in a way that suggests that Socrates is attributing himself with wisdom and hence knowledge (from his comments at *Theaet* 145d-e) then one must conclude that this is the same knowledge he apparently admits to having at *Theaet* 161b.

Having seen the valuable payoff to translating *Theaet* 150d1, interpreting the wisdom there referred to as consisting in the knowledge required for Socrates to practice the *technē* of midwifery and Sedley's reasons for doing so, let us turn our attention to another question.<sup>30</sup> Namely the question of why, in Sedley's view, one should translate 'οὐ πᾶν τι' as 'not entirely' at *Theaet* 150d1.

Sedley offers one principal reason to suppose this translation is the correct one. This is that *Cratylus* 386a5-c8, *Lysis* 204d4, and *Euthydemus* 286e9 'put it beyond doubt' that "not entirely" is the sense of 'οὐ πᾶν τι'.<sup>31</sup> That is, these passages present us with an unambiguous precedent in the Platonic corpus, Sedley thinks, for translating the sense of 'οὐ πᾶν τι' as 'not entirely'. Let us then look at

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<sup>30</sup> The reasons, discussed above, that Sedley offers for interpreting Socrates' claim at *Theaet* 151d as an admission that he possesses knowledge could obviously also be taken to support interpreting Socrates' character as possessing the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery on their own. These reasons I return to later, when discussing Zina Giannopoulou's solution. This is because Giannopoulou endorses the reasons Sedley offers herself (*Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology*, p.47 fn.76) and at the present moment, a lengthy digression is required to explain Sedley's grounds for translating *Theaet* 150d1 in the way he argues it should be.

<sup>31</sup> Sedley, David, "Three Platonist Interpretations of the Theaetetus", p.98, fn.43

the context of these passages to see if they confirm Sedley's contention.<sup>32</sup>

Σ: ἢ ἔχειν δοκεῖ σοι αὐτά αὐτῶν τινα βεβαιότητα τῆς οὐσίας;

Ἐ: ἤδη ποτὲ ἐγωγε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἀπορῶν και ἐνταῦθα ἐξηνέχθην εἰς ἅπερ Πρωταγόρας λέγει: οὐ πάνυ τι μέντοι μοι δοκεῖ οὕτως ἔχειν

Σ: τί δέ: ἐς τὸδε ἤδη ἐξηνέχθης, ὥστε μὴ πάνυ σοι

(*Crat* 386a5-9)

At *Cratylus* 386a5 Hermogenes' claim that contains the disputed phrase is 'I've been driven to take refuge in Protagoras' doctrine, even though I don't believe it at all' (*Crat* 386a) (trans. C.D.C Reeve).<sup>33</sup> One thing that does appear to be the case here is that Reeve's translation ('I don't believe it at all') (*Crat* 386a), *contra* Sedley, does not fit poorly with the context. In this passage Hermogenes is claiming to be 'puzzled' (*Crat* 386a) by how objects can be given different names by different people or in different languages. This causes Hermogenes to tell Socrates that he has 'taken refuge in Protagoras' doctrine' (*Crat* 386a) presumably so as to furnish himself with some kind of explanation of how such differences in language are possible. But Hermogenes' claim to dialectically endorse Protagoras' *homo mensura* doctrine doesn't settle the issue of whether, in fact, he doesn't *entirely* believe it (as Sedley supposes) or whether he doesn't believe it *at all* (as Reeve translates the claim). The strength of Hermogenes' actual commitment to Protagoras' doctrine is unclear because the important point is that he, in fact, doesn't believe it. The extent to which he endorses it non-dialectically therefore cannot be settled by appeal to the context of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> All quotations from the *Cratylus* are taken from the translation of C.D.C Reeve in *Plato: The Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.101-157

claim; Hermogenes doesn't accept the doctrine and this is the message his character means to convey. Hence, the sense of 'οὐ πάνυ τι' in this passage should be regarded as ambiguous.

The case of the other two passages that Sedley cites (*Lysis* 204d and *Euthydemus* 286e9) is the same: either admissible translation will make sense given the context. Let us see why, starting with the *Lysis*.

ὥτα καὶ ἐμπέπληκε Λύσιδος ἂν μὲν δὴ καὶ ὑποπίη εὐμαρία ἡμῖν ἐστὶν καὶ ἐξ ὕπνου ἐγρομένοις Λύσιδος οἴεσθαι τοῦνομα ἀκούειν. καὶ ἃ μὲν καταλογάδην διηγείται, δεινὰ ὄντα, οὐ πάνυ τι δεινὰ ἐστὶν, ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ τὰ ποιήματα ἡμῶν ἐπιχειρήσει καταντλεῖν καὶ συγγράμματα. καὶ ὃ ἐστὶν τούτων δεινότερον, ὅτι καὶ ἄδει εἰς τὰ παιδικὰ φωνῆ θαυμασίᾳ, ἦν ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἀκούοντας ἀνέχεσθαι.

(*Lys* 204d4-8)

In this passage Ctesippus' is complaining about Hippothales constant rhapsodizing about his beloved, Lysis. As part of this complaint Ctesippus draws a comparison between how irritating it is to hear Hippothales talk about Lysis and how terrible it is to hear Hippothales' poems about his lover (*Lys* 204d). What Ctesippus says is that 'As bad as all this is in normal conversation, it's nothing compared to when he drowns us with his poems and prose pieces. And worst of all, he actually sings odes to his beloved in a weird voice, which we have to put up with listening to' (*Lys* 204d) (trans. Stanley Lombardo).<sup>34</sup> Here, once again the context doesn't settle whether Ctesippus is claiming that it's 'not entirely bad' to hear Hippothales talk about Lysis and yet, even worse to hear Hippothales read his poems about him; or 'not at all' bad to hear Hippothales talk about Lysis but bad to hear the poems. The sense in which one should translate 'οὐ πάνυ τι' in this passage therefore remains ambiguous because the extremity of the comparison

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<sup>34</sup> All quotations from the *Lysis* are taken from the translation of the Stanley Lombardo in *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.687-708

Ctesippus is supposed to be drawing is not clear. One can either choose to read the first part of the comparison (Hippotheses' conversation about Lysis) as not bad at all viz. in no way bad, whereas the poems really are bad; or, the conversation as not entirely bad, viz. bad to some extent but not as bad as the poems. Either translation captures the idea that Ctesippus dislikes Hippotheses poems (and his singing the most) but the context does not make it clear the extent to which he thinks the conversation is bad *compared* to the poetry. Therefore the sense of the phrase should be regarded as ambiguous.

Let us now inspect the last of the passages Sedley cites:

ἀλλὰ σύ, ἔφη, ἔλεγξον.

ἢ καὶ ἔστι τοῦτο κατὰ τὸν σὸν λόγον, ἐξελέγξαι μηδενὸς ψευδομένου;

οὐκ ἔστιν, ἔφη ὁ Εὐθύδημος.

οὐδ' ἄρα ἐκέλευεν, ἔφην ἐγὼ νυνδὴ Διονυσόδωρος ἐξελέγξαι;

τὸ γὰρ μὴ ὄν πῶς ἂν τις κελεύσαι; οὐ δὲ κελεύεις;

ὅτι, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ὦ Εὐθύδημε, τὰ σοφὰ ταῦτα καὶ τὰ εὖ ἔχοντα οὐ πάνυ τι μανθανώ, ἀλλὰ παχέως πως ἐννοῶ. ἴσως μὲν οὖν φορτικώτερόν τι ἐρήσομαι, ἀλλὰ συγγίγνωσκε

(*Euthd* 286e)

At the opening of this complex passage (*Euthd* 285d-286c), the sophist Dionysodorus makes Ctesippus fall silent (*Euthd* 286b) by having him commit to the premises of an argument the conclusion of which entails that contradiction is impossible (*Euthd* 286b). At this point Socrates enters the discussion (*Euthd* 286c) to try and refute the conclusion (*Euthd* 286c-e) and is apparently disproven himself when one of the



sophists (the text does not make it clear which) points out that Socrates' argument against the position that contradiction is impossible depends upon the claim that the sophists are here explicitly denying viz. that one can 'order a thing [refutation] that doesn't exist' (*Euthd* 286e). In reply to this comment Socrates self-deprecatingly rejoins that 'I'm rather thick-witted and don't understand these fine clever things' (*Euthd* 286e). In the translation I am quoting from Sprague chooses to leave the phrase 'ού πάνυ τι' un-translated, presumably to retain the ambiguity I am suggesting pertains to the use of the phrase in this context. However Socrates' claim could be translated (including 'ού πάνυ τι'): 'I'm rather thick-witted and don't *at all* understand these fine clever things' or 'I'm rather thick-witted and don't *entirely* understand these fine clever things'. Hence, once again, the context of the claim doesn't make the extent of Socrates' understanding of the sophist's argument obvious. The important point Socrates is making is that he doesn't understand the sophists, the extent to which he doesn't isn't clear. Socrates may well be completely confused by the sophists reasoning and not understand it at all, or, he may grasp it to a degree but not entirely; either claim seems to make equally good sense of the fact that Socrates is here asserting that he doesn't understand the sophist's argument.

On the basis of the observations I have just made I think one should be suspicious of Sedley's rationale for claiming that his translation of *Theaet* 150d1 is 'linguistically correct' because the sense of the phrase in these passages is seemingly unclear.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the balance cannot be tipped in favour of Sedley's translation of *Theaet* 150d1 by the evidence he offers. This cannot establish, of course, that Levett's translation of the text should be preferred to Sedley's. Hence we are left in the position that either translation of *Theaet* 150d1 is equally plausible. I will now show that there is a reason to accept Levett's translation before arguing that neither Sedley's nor Levett's interpretation can be admitted to be "correct".

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<sup>35</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.31 fn.55

The reason one might give for endorsing Levett's translation is that it seems to fit the context better than Sedley's. If one replaces Levett's translation with Sedley's and looks at the claim in context one can see this:

The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is that God compels me to attend to the travail of others but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am *not an entirely wise* [οὐ πᾶν τι σοφός] man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worthy of the name of wisdom. But with those who associate with me it is different'.<sup>36</sup> (*Theaet* 150c-d) (emphasis added) (trans. M.J. Levett rev. Myles Burnyeat except line 150d1 where the italicised text indicates the use of Sedley's preferred translation)

So, adopting Sedley's translation of the ambiguity would entail that Plato intended Socrates to claim to possess some wisdom and then deny that he has made any wise discoveries of his own soul in the same breath. Although using Sedley's translation of *Theaet* 150d1 does not therefore entail that Socrates is *explicitly* contradicting the claim he makes immediately after it, using Sedley's translation certainly introduces a degree of tension into Socrates' claims in these lines.<sup>37</sup> Without providing a reason to explain why Socrates should be making such a contrary statement, translating the claim in a way that fits the apparent message of the text (that Socrates has *no* wisdom) is

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<sup>36</sup> See fn.23 for the Greek.

<sup>37</sup> Having made no discoveries of his own soul worthy of being called wisdom or knowledge (*Theaet* 150d1-2), one might quite reasonably suppose, should be taken to mean that Socrates has never engendered wisdom or knowledge in himself viz. that none of the epistemic items in his soul have ever qualified as knowledge or wisdom and hence, that Socrates has no wisdom. Although this is not the *explicit* content of the claim I think it must be agreed to be the natural interpretation, especially given the context (Socrates' uncontroversial claims to lack all wisdom at *Theaet* 150c4 and c6).

preferable and this is something that Levett's translation can achieve.<sup>38</sup> This is because using Levett's translation ('I am not in any sense a wise man') (*Theaet* 150d1) makes that line express essentially the same claim as *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2: that Socrates has no wisdom. Using Levett's translation therefore makes the lines read in a way that avoids importing the kind of tension into the text that Sedley's translation brings with it (between claims to lack all wisdom at *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2 and a claim to be 'not entirely' wise at *Theaet* 150d1).

So there is a basis for approaching Sedley's grounds for preferring his translation of *Theaet* 150d1 with a degree of scepticism and, additionally, a reason to suppose that Levett's translation could be taken to be the correct one. However, I do not wish to endorse either translation. The reason for accepting Levett's translation falls short of compelling because the phrase *could* be taken to express either sense. Instead I would like to propose that leaving the sense of the phrase at *Theaet* 150d1 ambiguous captures the meaning of the text better than either Sedley's or Levett's translation. There are two good grounds for this.

The first is that the sense of the phrase *is* ambiguous. Leaving the sense unclear therefore captures the explicit meaning of the line. The second reason is that I would like to conjecture that there is some purpose behind Plato leaving the sense of the phrase at *Theaet* 150d1 unclear. This is that Plato may have wished, by using the ambiguity in the claim at *Theaet* 150d1, to draw his reader's attention to the fact that there is a lack of clarity surrounding how to understand Socrates' disavowal of wisdom in the *Theaetetus*. Furthermore what may have motivated Plato to do *this*, I suppose, is a desire to draw his reader's attention to the existence of the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. The ambiguous claim at *Theaet* 150d1 can achieve this by forcing the reader to consider the debate that I have just explored surrounding how to

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<sup>38</sup> I would argue that this is (at least part of) the message of this passage based on Socrates' complete disavowals of wisdom at *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2.

understand the sense of *Theaet* 150d1. For, this debate, is, in a way, a microcosm of the puzzle of Socratic wisdom itself; the discussion I have just explored and the puzzle of Socratic wisdom both naturally prompt the question: does Socrates admit of possessing knowledge or does he not in the *Theaetetus*?<sup>39</sup> In this way, Socrates' claim at *Theaet* 150d1 may serve the purpose of drawing the reader's attention to the broader epistemic question at issue in this passage. That is, does Socrates really possess a *technē* (that consists in *epistēmē*) or rather does he mean it when he claims that he has no *sophia* (which also consists in *epistēmē*)?

Endorsing this way of interpreting and translating *Theaet* 150d1 henceforth leaves one at the same impasse with which this section began. If one is to disregard *Theaet* 150d1 as indicating either a wholesale *or* a partial denial of possessing knowledge or wisdom, one still has good grounds to infer contradictory conclusions regarding Socrates' epistemic state in the *Theaetetus*; on the one hand from his claims to practice a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c) and, on the other, from his (straightforward) claims to lack all *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2). I shall now turn my attention to one further interpretation of Socrates' barrenness and examine how it might be thought to solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom before judging whether it does so successfully.

Zina Giannopoulou in her *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology* has produced an interpretation of Socrates' disavowals of wisdom that dissolves the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. To see how, one has to begin with Giannopoulou's central interpretive suggestion: that one should read 'Socrates' obstetric infertility [his disavowals of wisdom at *Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2] as the suppression of beliefs in the sense of definitions, and of theories for and against other people's definitions and their

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<sup>39</sup> The puzzle is generated by the inferences "Socrates has knowledge" (from his claims to practice a *technē* and the arguments in sections 1.1 and 1.2) and "Socrates does not have any knowledge" (from *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2 when considered alongside *Theaet* 145d-e). The question that therefore requires answering to dissolve the contradiction is the one in the text above which could be phrased: "which of the foregoing inferences is the correct one?".

relevant beliefs'.<sup>40</sup> As for why one should read Socrates' disavowals as restricted in the sense supposed, Giannopoulou claims that Socrates is committed to the principle of the 'epistemological priority of definitions' because of the 'prominence of the "what is F?" question' throughout the dialogue.<sup>41</sup> The formal way of expressing this principle that Giannopoulou offers is: 'in order to know anything about F-ness or about whether particular things or particular people have F-ness, one must first be able to define F-ness'.<sup>42</sup> As Socrates does not know what knowledge is (from *Theaet* 145e-146a), Giannopoulou reasonably claims, he will not be able to define it.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, naturally 'lacking this definition, he cannot engender beliefs appropriately related to and internally consistent with it or submit theories for and against others' definitions'.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Giannopoulou concludes, for that reason, Socrates claims to lack wisdom (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2), wisdom that depends upon one's ability to offer definitions which he cannot offer.

Additionally this is a view of Socratic barrenness that coheres well with his contention that he offers no theories and makes no assertions of his own (*Theaet* 150c, 157c, 161b). It also receives a degree of corroboration from the fact that Socrates links the views that Theaetetus conceives to absent wise men, especially throughout the opening of the text, for example at *Theaet* 152e; for, having no definitions to offer of his own, Socrates offers those of others.<sup>45</sup>

Now, this interpretation of Socratic disavowals provides some good reasons to understand Socrates' barrenness as a lack of a very particular epistemic item. This consequently allows the possibility that Socrates may have the knowledge involved in the practice of midwifery if the particular epistemic items that Giannopoulou supposes Socrates disavows are not in any way related to the knowledge that is involved

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<sup>40</sup> Giannopoulou, Zina, *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology*, p.41

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.42

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.43

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp. 43-46

in practicing midwifery. Evidently, the knowledge involved in intellectual midwifery does not appear to depend upon possessing 'beliefs in the sense of definitions, and of theories for and against other people's definitions and their relevant beliefs'.<sup>46</sup> This seems to be Giannopoulou's reason for concluding that 'the only kind of knowledge that the midwife Socrates has is the craft-knowledge of eliciting from his interlocutors what he himself lacks and submitting it to scrutiny'.<sup>47</sup> Giannopoulou's conclusion here, therefore, appears to be that Socrates' claim to practice a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a) is sufficient to establish that he has the *epistēmē* associated with performing midwifery. If Socrates' *technē* consists in (a type of) *epistēmē* (as I argued in sections 1.1-1.2) and he does not disavow possession of any types of knowledge that are in any way related to that kind of *epistēmē* when he claims to lack any wisdom (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) as appears to follow from Giannopoulou's account, then one might suppose he does have the *epistēmē* involved in practicing midwifery when he claims his midwifery is a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c).

Further to this interpretation of Socrates' barrenness, Giannopoulou also makes the claim that Socrates' 'awareness [of his lack of wisdom] is compatible with the specialized knowledge that Socrates possesses as a practitioner of mental midwifery'.<sup>48</sup> This Giannopoulou supposes is the case for the same reasons as Sedley, citing his previously discussed book in her footnotes.<sup>49</sup> I will now inspect these grounds for supposing that Socrates does possess the knowledge involved in the practice of midwifery first by assessing Giannopoulou's interpretation of Socratic barrenness and then by investigating the grounds that she too endorses from Sedley's book that I earlier promised I would return to.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.41

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.43

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.47

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.47 fn.76

Unfortunately there is one issue with Giannopoulou's interpretation of Socratic barrenness that is so problematic for her view that it compels one to reject it. This is that Socrates' disavowals in the *Theaetetus* are disavowals of wisdom that we know consists, for Socrates, in *knowledge* (from his claims at *Theaet* 145d-e). Hence, it cannot be *only* beliefs that Socrates disavows possession of in the *Theaetetus* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) as Giannopoulou argues.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Socrates does mean to disavow having beliefs of the type that Giannopoulou supposes (indeed she gives good reasons for thinking he does), but this cannot, on any reading, be the lone thing he means to claim he lacks in saying that he lacks all *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2).<sup>51</sup> Observing this to be the case again raises the puzzle afresh. Giannopoulou's interpretation of the sense in which Socrates qualifies his disavowal of wisdom is ruled out by the text and so Socrates' claims to lack all wisdom or knowledge (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) will resultantly continue to entail a contradiction alongside his claims to practice a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c). Let us now look at the further grounds that Sedley offers (and Giannopoulou endorses) for thinking Socrates possesses the knowledge pertinent to practicing midwifery.

At *Theaet* 161b the salient claim Socrates makes, as we have seen, is that 'all I know, *such as it is*, is how to take an argument from

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.41

<sup>51</sup> Although this is not obviously true because Socrates does offer definitions in the *Theaetetus*. For example, in the opening: 'shoemaking' (*Theaet* 146d), carpentry (*Theaet* 146e) and 'clay' (*Theaet* 147c) are all defined by Socrates. If Giannopoulou were to reply that it is only philosophical subjects about which Socrates does not offer definitions I would reply that firstly shoemaking and carpentry *are* philosophical subjects for Socrates (these being examples of *technai* which, we saw in chapter one, Socrates develops a rich account of throughout Plato's works). Secondly I would point out that Socrates does offer some definitions of things that are more obviously topics of philosophical intrigue in the *Theaetetus*. For instance, perception (*Theaet* 156c-157c) and thought (*Theaet* 189e-190a) are both defined by Socrates. Although the former of these is denied by Socrates to be his own theory (*Theaet* 157c) he certainly *expresses* the definition.

someone – someone who is wise – and give it a fair reception’ (*Theaet* 161b) (emphasis added). Now, although Socrates does, as I have so far been careful to maintain, *appear* to attribute himself with knowledge of how to practice midwifery in this passage, one should, in the absence of grounds for thinking otherwise, infer only that Socrates gives the impression of admitting to possessing such knowledge here. This is the case because although Socrates seems to admit at *Theaet* 161b that he has knowledge that involves taking and analysing the views of his interlocutors (the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery as we saw in section 1.2) he can only be taken to claim this is the case ‘such as it is’ (*Theaet* 161b). This qualification in the sense in which Socrates will admit to possessing knowledge at *Theaet* 161b indicates that one should approach the claim that Socrates straightforwardly admits to possessing the knowledge involved in midwifery in this passage with skepticism. As neither Sedley nor Giannopoulou offer an explanation as to the sense in which Socrates means to qualify his claim to knowledge at *Theaet* 161b this passage cannot be used to establish that Socrates here admits to possessing the knowledge involved in midwifery without further interpretive work being done. Although Sedley judiciously observes that this claim only makes it ‘virtually explicit’ that Socrates here admits to possessing the salient kind of knowledge, neither he nor Giannopoulou account for the sense in which Socrates’ apparent claim to knowledge here is not unequivocal.<sup>52</sup> We are therefore justified in inferring only that Socrates *appears* to attribute himself with knowledge in this passage, not that he does so.

The second of the grounds Giannopoulou adopts from Sedley’s account is that we might be tempted to infer that Socrates could not make a whole series of assertions about his midwifery (which he certainly does do between *Theaet* 149a-151d) without possessing any knowledge about it.<sup>53</sup> However, the fact that Socrates makes a series of claims about his midwifery is insufficient to establish that Socrates

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<sup>52</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.32

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.31



must possess the knowledge involved in the practice of midwifery. One can make (completely unfounded) assertions about x whilst lacking the knowledge involved in doing x where x = any action. Hence this line of argument cannot establish that Socrates has the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery either.

Lastly, Sedley's point that Socrates has knowledge because he asserts that his midwifery is a *technē* can hardly be thought to establish that he really does possess the salient kind of knowledge. This is because Socrates' claims to lack all wisdom (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) entail (because of his comments at *Theaet* 145d-e) that Socrates has no knowledge. Thus because Socrates lacks all wisdom (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) and hence knowledge (from *Theaet* 145d-e), we have good reason to think that he cannot have the knowledge we would normally attribute to him on the basis of his assertion that his midwifery is a *technē*.

## Chapter 2:

### 2.1: The Epistemic Puzzles from the Early Dialogues and the *Theaetetus*:

Having seen what grounds there are for rejecting two recently offered solutions to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom I shall, in this chapter, undertake a different interpretive strategy to attempt to dissolve the contradiction. To achieve this aim this section explicates the structure of an epistemic puzzle from Plato's early dialogues and explains how it is the same in various respects as the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. By explaining these similarities I intend to motivate the interpretive strategy of applying solutions that have been offered in the literature to the former puzzle to attempt to solve the latter. This method of unraveling the puzzle of Socratic wisdom will not be utilised until the final section of this chapter because at the end of this section I will present an objection to undertaking the strategy this section proposes to warrant us pursuing. The section to follow this is resultantly dedicated to refuting the challenge raised at the end of the present one.

To justify my proposed method of solving the puzzle I will first explain that the puzzle from the early dialogues is generated by two kinds of claims. These two types of claims are, on the one hand, assertions that we have compelling reasons to think imply that Socrates has knowledge and, on the other, claims that we have equally compelling reasons for concluding imply that Socrates does not possess the knowledge that the former type of claims imply that he does have. The contradiction formed of the inferences from these types of claims is the puzzle from the early dialogues. I will go on to show that this contradiction raises a question, a well-reasoned answer to which would solve it. I will then proceed to demonstrate how the puzzle of Socratic wisdom shares all of the foregoing features with the puzzle from the early dialogues. This gives one a good reason to think that the

solutions offered to the puzzle from the early dialogues may solve the puzzle in the *Theaetetus*.

The most obvious claims that Socrates makes in the early dialogues that we have reasons to think entail that he has knowledge are those where he explicitly claims to know various things.<sup>54</sup> The reason that one should think these claims imply that Socrates possesses knowledge is that, in the absence of grounds for thinking that Socrates is lying, Socrates' word should be taken at face value. Thus, if the foregoing condition is not fulfilled and if Socrates' says that he knows some proposition then one has a reason to infer from that claim that he possesses knowledge of that proposition. For instance, in the following cases from the *Apology*:

'I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, whether he be god or man' (*Apol* 29b)

and also:

'Am I then to choose in preference to this [the death penalty] something that I know very well to be an evil' (*Apol* 36b-c)

In these passages we have few reasons to think that Socrates is lying, indeed, we have especially good reason to conclude the opposite as Socrates is careful to emphasise the fact that he is telling the truth throughout the *Apology* (*Apol* 17b). Consequently we have compelling

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<sup>54</sup> Some commentators, for instance Vlastos "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35:138, pp.1-31, 1985, find non-explicit claims to knowledge that they nonetheless argue we have reasons for thinking imply that Socrates has knowledge. However, these reasons often fall short of being compelling in the way that Socrates' explicit claims to knowledge do as Socrates does not, in these instances, actually claim to know anything. Indeed, in one of Vlastos' favorite examples (*Grg* 508e-509a) of such a claim (Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge" pp.21-22), Socrates in fact explicitly disavows the knowledge Vlastos thinks we have a warrant for concluding he has (*Grg* 509a).

grounds for concluding that *Apol* 29b and *Apol* 36b-c entail that Socrates has knowledge. This makes them instances of one of the types of claims, the inferences from which lead to the acceptance of contradictory conclusions that form the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues. In addition to these instances from the *Apology* one can find more passages in the early dialogues where Socrates claims explicitly to know things.

A prime example of this occurs in the *Euthydemus* where Socrates is straightforwardly asked: 'Is there anything you know?' (*Euthd* 293b) to which he replies 'Oh yes...many things, though trivial ones' (*Euthd* 293b).<sup>55</sup> Not only does Socrates here profess to know something but indeed, 'many things' (*Euthd* 293b). A little further on in the text it is also made clear that Socrates believes himself to know that good men are just; for, by maintaining the opposite to Dionysodorus, Socrates trips up the sophist by using his own claim that Socrates 'must always know and, at the same time, [know] everything' (*Euthd* 296c) against him (*Euthd* 296d-297a). Also implicit in the opening to this interchange is a claim of Socrates' to know some things when he says that he knows them 'by means of my soul' (*Euthd* 295e). In the *Protagoras* Socrates confesses to having 'especially studied' (*Pr* 339b) an ode of Simonides and claims to 'know it' (*Pr* 339b); he then also goes on to claim that he knows the second quotation that Protagoras offers from the ode is indeed part of the same poem (*Pr* 339c). Lastly Socrates also claims in the *Protagoras* to know that if he knew what virtue consists in he would know the answer to the question of whether it can be taught (*Pr* 360e-361a).

These claims are all of the same type as those at *Apol* 29b and *Apol* 36b-c. We have no compelling grounds for inferring that Socrates is lying in these passages and therefore, here we are warranted in thinking that these claims entail that Socrates has knowledge. This

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<sup>55</sup> Whether what Socrates here admits to knowing is trivial or not, the important point is that he should, on the basis of this claim, be attributed with some knowledge.

makes them further examples of one of the types of claims that lead to the generation of the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues. Let us now inspect some instances of claims of the second type that generate that puzzle.

One can find some instances in the early dialogues where Socrates asserts things that we have reasons for thinking entail that he does not possess knowledge with regard to a particular topic of philosophical investigation.<sup>56</sup> However, these are not claims of the type that generate the puzzle under consideration. The explanation of this is that in none of these cases do we have reasons to suppose that the claims Socrates is making imply that he does not have the knowledge we elsewhere have grounds for concluding that he has (e.g. *Apol* 29b, *Euthd* 293b, *Pr* 360e-361a). However, in the *Apology*, Socrates makes some assertions that we are warranted in inferring entail that Socrates does not only lack knowledge with regard to a particular topic, but any wisdom or knowledge at all.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, we have reasons to think that these claims in the *Apology* entail that Socrates does not have the knowledge that we have reason to conclude other claims he makes imply that he does have (e.g. *Apol* 29b, *Euthd* 293b, *Pr* 360e-361a). That is, any knowledge at all.

In the *Apology*, after a brief preamble, Socrates begins to tell the gathered citizens of Athens a story where he attempts to explain and justify his philosophical practice (*Apol* 21b-24b). During the course of this tale Socrates tells us of how he was ‘very conscious that I am not wise at all’ (*Apol* 21b). He claims that he was, likewise, ‘conscious of knowing practically nothing’ (*Apol* 22d). Indeed, it might appear, from this passage in the *Apology* (*Apol* 21b-23d), that the only thing that Socrates might be taken to claim to “know” is that ‘I do not think I know

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<sup>56</sup> E.g. *Euthphr* 16a, *Charm* 165b-c, *Lchs* 186b-c, *Grg* 509a, *Meno* 71a, *Lys* 212a and *Rep* 337e.

<sup>57</sup> It is fairly assumed that in the early dialogues, Socrates uses knowledge (*epistēmē*) and wisdom (*sophia*) as equivalent terms. I will continue to base the following exegesis on this assumption. One reason to accept this hypothesis is that a couple of passages contain a Socrates who equivocates these terms (*Protagoras* 330b and *Apology* 21c-d).

what I do not know' (*Apol* 21d). Now, *Apol* 21b especially, I would like to argue, expresses the claim that Socrates has no wisdom or knowledge. On the reasonable supposition that being wise entails having knowledge for Socrates in the early dialogues, being 'not at all wise' (*Apol* 21b) would entail that Socrates was not at all knowledgeable; that he has no knowledge.<sup>58</sup> From this we are warranted in further deducing that what Socrates says at *Apol* 21b entails that Socrates does not know the things we elsewhere have grounds for thinking his claims entail that he does know. This makes *Apol* 21b an instance of the second type of claim that generates the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues.

Consider then; on the one hand, we can supply compelling reasons to think that *Apol* 29b, *Euthd* 293b and *Pr* 339b entail that Socrates knows certain things, on the other, we have equally compelling reasons to suppose that *Apol* 21b entails that Socrates does not have the knowledge we have reasons for thinking *Apol* 29b, *Euthd* 293b and *Pr* 339b entail that he does have. We therefore have equally compelling reasons to reach conclusions that are mutually incompatible from these types of claims; conclusions that form a contradiction if both accepted. Namely, from the first type of claim above, that Socrates knows some particular things, from the second that he does not know anything and consequently, any particular things. This contradiction is the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues. Resultantly, this contradiction prompts a question, a well reasoned answer to which would lead to its dissolution, namely: 'In Plato's earliest dialogues, when Socrates says he has no knowledge, does he or does he not mean what he says?'.<sup>59</sup> A well-reasoned answer to this question would dissolve the contradiction by giving us grounds to conclude either one of two things. These two

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<sup>58</sup> As earlier noted (fn.57 above) in this passage (*Apol* 21c-d) Socrates clearly equivocates between knowledge and wisdom; especially at 21d where he tells the jurors that he concluded that he was 'wiser' (*Apol* 21d) than the politician he interviewed because 'he [the politician] thinks he *knows* something when he does not' (*Apol* 21d) (emphasis added).

<sup>59</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", p.1

things are either: that Socrates doesn't mean what he says viz. that he does possess knowledge (*contra* the conclusion we have reason to think is entailed by *Apol* 21b); or, that he does mean what he says viz. that he doesn't have knowledge (*contra* the conclusion we had grounds for thinking is implied by *Apol* 29b, *Euthd* 293b and *Pr* 339b). By providing good reasons to reject either of the conclusions drawn from these lines (a rational answer to the salient question) one would be able to deny one of the inferences that form the contradiction and thus dissolve it. Let us now turn our attention to the *Theaetetus* to see how the Puzzle of Socratic wisdom is the same as that from the early dialogues in the foregoing respects.

In the *Theaetetus* Socrates asserts explicitly three times that he possesses no wisdom:<sup>60</sup>

'there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough' (*Theaet* 150c6)

but also that:

'I myself am barren of wisdom' (*Theaet* 150c4)

and finally that:

'I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worthy of the name of wisdom' (*Theaet* 150d1-2)

We know from section 1.3, where I explained the logical structure of the puzzle of Socratic wisdom, that, given Socrates' comments at *Theaet* 145d-e, we are warranted in concluding that *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2 imply that Socrates has no knowledge. Thus we have reason for thinking that *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2 entail that Socrates does not have knowledge that we elsewhere in the *Theaetetus* may have reason

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<sup>60</sup> In the passage that is the focus of this thesis. Socrates also reaffirms his disavowal at *Theaet* 179b.

to conclude that he does have viz. any knowledge at all. Hence, the claims at *Theaet* 150c4, c6 and d1-2 are of the same type as one of the kinds that lead to the generation of the puzzle from the early dialogues.

In the *Theaetetus*, as we have seen, Socrates claims to practice the *technē* of midwifery (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a). In section 1.1 I argued that a *technē* consists in knowledge for Socrates and in section 1.2 that Socrates' claims to practice a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a) should therefore be taken to imply that Socrates possesses a specific kind of knowledge. These arguments offer us a compelling warrant to infer that Socrates' claim to practice a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a) entails that he has knowledge. This makes Socrates' claims to practice the art of midwifery (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a) the same in kind as the other type of assertion that lead to the formation of the puzzle from the early dialogues viz. the type not looked at in the preceding paragraph.

So, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates makes some assertions that we have compelling grounds for thinking imply that he has knowledge (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c). By contrast Socrates says some other things (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) that we have equally compelling reasons to conclude entail that he does not have the knowledge we have reasons to think *Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c entail that he has. Hence, the inferences one draws on the basis of these types of claims lead one to accept contradictory conclusions with regard to Socrates' epistemic state in the *Theaetetus* viz. the inferences that 1) Socrates does have some knowledge and 2) that he does not have any knowledge. What should also be apparent is that this contradiction is the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. This is because the inferences and the reasons given for drawing them are exactly the same as those inferences and grounds for drawing them that we previously saw lead to the formation of the puzzle of Socratic wisdom in section 1.3. Now, because the puzzle is a contradiction generated by accepting the conclusions that Socrates both does and does not have knowledge, the puzzle can be solved by offering a well reasoned response to the



question: “in the *Theaetetus* does Socrates mean what he says when he claims to lack all knowledge?”. This is due to the fact that providing a well-reasoned answer to this question would dissolve the contradiction by offering grounds to conclude one of two things with regard to Socrates’ epistemic state in the *Theaetetus*. These conclusions that either: Socrates does mean what he says viz. that he has no knowledge (*contra* the conclusion we have reasons to think is implied by *Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c); or, that Socrates does not mean what he says viz. that he does have some knowledge (*contra* the inference we have reasons to draw from *Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2). If either of these answers can be given on the basis of a sound rationale then one would have grounds for dismissing one of the two inferences that form the contradiction, which would solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

So the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues and the puzzle of Socratic wisdom are contradictions formed by the same two inferences from the same two types of claims. Answering the salient question that is therefore raised by these puzzles could dissolve either of these contradictions. These similarities provide a basis for thinking that solutions to one puzzle may help to solve the other. Therefore, I hope to have justified the strategy of applying solutions offered to the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom in the *Theaetetus*. Before we pursue this strategy I shall now outline and proceed to respond to a powerful objection against following it.

To raise this objection, one would have to endorse two claims. The first of these is that, given any plausible understanding of the compositional chronology of the Platonic dialogues, the *Theaetetus* is a text composed in the middle period of Plato’s literary career. Secondly one would have to endorse the view that ‘Plato gradually transforms his speaker Socrates from an open minded critic and inquirer [in the early period texts] into a mouthpiece for his own Platonic doctrines and a committed proponent of the underlying arguments [in the middle

period texts]’.<sup>61</sup> From this it follows that, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates’ voice is subsumed within Plato’s own whereas this is not the case in the early dialogues. This entails that the claims made by Socrates in the *Theaetetus* are presentations of the Plato’s own arguments and doctrinal positions. This is what I shall call the “Platonised” interpretation of the *Theaetetus*.<sup>62</sup> Now, the Platonised interpretation of the *Theaetetus* implies that when Socrates declares himself the practitioner of a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a) that involves him lacking *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2), it is Plato, speaking through his character Socrates, making claims that apply to Plato himself. Hence, on this Platonised interpretation, the puzzle of Socratic wisdom raises the challenge of how to make sense of middle period doctrines of Plato’s that we have reasons to think imply contradictory conclusions with regard to Socrates’ characters’ (hence Plato’s) epistemic state. This would make the puzzle of Socratic wisdom stand in contrast to the epistemic puzzle of the early dialogues in that respect. For if Socrates’ character in the early dialogues represents, at a minimum, the views of his character and not those of Plato himself, then the epistemic puzzle raised in the early dialogues would present a problem about how to make sense of the views of that character, and not the views of Plato himself. So, granted all this, the consequence for my proposed interpretive strategy would be that it amounts to the suggestion that one should try to dissolve a contradiction generated by middle period views of Plato’s own by using solutions that have been offered to the same contradiction that is generated by the same kinds of claims made by a character in the early dialogues. This, it could be objected, would not be the best interpretive strategy to pursue. This is because, one might argue, it is more propitious to try and understand a

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<sup>61</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.9

<sup>62</sup> One commentator who pursues such a “Platonised” reading of the *Theaetetus* is F.M. Cornford. His famous commentary *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge*, abounds with claims such as that he ‘aims at discovering what Plato really means’ *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge*, Routledge, 1935 (repr. 1960), p.viii. Such locutions confirm that Cornford accepted the Platonised interpretation.

contradiction generated by middle period doctrines of *Plato's* by investigating their relation to the views expressed in the texts of his middle period.<sup>63</sup> Hence, the objection amounts to this; the interpretive strategy I propose to follow is unjustified because it would not be the most promising strategy one could potentially adopt to solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

## **2.2: The Character of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*:**

In this section I wish to respond to the objection just raised by first presenting and endorsing an argument of David Sedley's against the adoption of the Platonised interpretation of the *Theaetetus*. Once this is done I will turn my attention to articulating Sedley's proposed alternative to the Platonised interpretation of the *Theaetetus* that I also advocate accepting. There are two reasons for this. Firstly because Sedley's own view is a proper contrary of the Platonised interpretation in that Sedley's view is that there is *no* identity between the voices of Socrates and Plato in the *Theaetetus*.<sup>64</sup> Therefore endorsing Sedley's understanding of Socrates' persona in the text provides one with a further rationale for maintaining that the Platonised interpretation is false. Secondly, I will return to this interpretation in the final chapter where it plays a brief but important argumentative role in the last section of that chapter.

The reason Sedley offers to reject the Platonised interpretation of the *Theaetetus* is an argument in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Sedley's *reductio* begins with the observation that if one grants the

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<sup>63</sup> Cornford, who endorsed a Platonised reading (see fn. 62) of the *Theaetetus* obviously thought this. He is famous for defending the view that *Anamnesis* and Socratic midwifery are based on equivalent conceptions of how knowledge is acquired (that it is recollected) and that, in the midwife passage in the *Theaetetus*, Plato is indicating that 'Anamnesis [the theory of recollection found in the *Meno* 81a-86c] was a theory that squared the profession and practice of Socrates with Plato's discovery of the separately existing forms' *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, p.28.

<sup>64</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.8

Platonised interpretation of the *Theaetetus* a challenge arises for the interpreter.<sup>65</sup> This challenge is that because Plato's 'Socrates, is to all appearances almost entirely innocent of that Platonic metaphysics [of the middle period]' in the *Theaetetus*, this ignorance requires some explanation.<sup>66</sup> This is especially so, Sedley argues, because many of Plato's middle period doctrines are of direct relevance to answering the question that is the subject of inquiry in the *Theaetetus* viz. "what is knowledge?" (*Theaet* 145e-146a).<sup>67</sup> Now, on the Platonised reading, the most preeminent and credible explanation of the absence of Platonic doctrine that, I agree for the same reasons as Sedley, should be rejected, is the 'hypothesis that Plato has abandoned his entire metaphysics of transcendence and thrown everything back into the melting pot'.<sup>68</sup> This account of the absence of Platonic doctrine in the *Theaetetus* is eloquently outlined by Gregory Vlastos, who endorses a version of this view when he claims that:

'in the *Parmenides* Socrates' two-world metaphysical theory comes in for a furious battering...old Parmenides hits it again and again with objections to which its young spokesman [Young Socrates] has not a word to say in reply...Declining to meet head-on these formidable difficulties, Plato proceeds in the *Theaetetus* - which makes at 183e a pointed allusion to that (fictional) meeting between the aged Parmenides and the youthful Socrates - to assay a new beginning, starting with a clean slate.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid p.7. Sedley's thought here does not presuppose the idea that Socrates is not presenting doctrines Plato *accepts* in the *Theaetetus*. Sedley's (correct) observation amounts to the claim that Socrates does not explicitly allude to any of the metaphysical doctrines of Plato's middle period that are presented in other texts of the middle period in the *Theaetetus* (e.g. Forms, *Anamnesis*, transcendent souls etc.).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.8

<sup>68</sup> Ibid p.7

<sup>69</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, *The Evidence of Aristotle and Xenophon in Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp.81-106, p.85 fn.11

However, Sedley argues, ‘the price of that hypothesis is the near-impossible feat of re-dating the *Timaeus* earlier than the *Theaetetus*’.<sup>70</sup> One would have to do this if one accepted Vlastos’ view because the *Timaeus* contains a number of allusions to or reiterations of the detailed metaphysical picture that Plato develops in the *Republic* (a middle period text).<sup>71</sup> Hence, if, as the hypothesis holds, Plato embarks upon a re-examination of the concept of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* (because he has rejected the theories presented in the *Republic* in the *Parmenides*), the *Timaeus* must have been composed before both the *Theaetetus*, and, on Vlastos’ interpretation, the *Parmenides* too. The view that the *Timaeus* is a middle period text that predates the composition of the *Theaetetus* cannot be accepted due to the manifest stylistic dissimilarities between the *Timaeus* and the other middle period dialogues.<sup>72</sup> This therefore provides us with good grounds for supposing that there must be some other purpose behind a lack of explicit allusions to middle period doctrines in the *Theaetetus* than hypothesising that it represents the beginning of a completely new

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<sup>70</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.7

<sup>71</sup> The most obvious and damning example of this is the “two worlds” theory of knowledge that is expounded in the argument in *Republic V* (*Rep* 476e-480a) and reiterated at the opening of the *Timaeus* (*Tim* 27d-28a). In the argument from the *Republic V* the relation of knowledge and belief to their objects distinguishes them; Plato there proposes that belief grasps ‘what is not and what purely is’ (*Rep* 479d) while knowledge grasps ‘things themselves that are always the same in every respect’ (*Rep* 479e). In the *Timaeus* this fundamental epistemic and ontological distinction appears in the form of a rhetorical question at the opening of the text: ‘What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which becomes but never is? The former is grasped by understanding which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion.’ (*Tim* 27d-28a)

<sup>72</sup> One obvious stylistic difference is the reduction of the role that Socrates plays in the *Timaeus* compared to the middle period dialogues. In the *Timaeus* Socrates is demoted to the role of an auditor who does little but listen to and absorb the information presented in the eponymous character’s monologue. Another later period text that follows this same pattern is the *Sophist* where, again, Socrates is present yet says very little, the task of presenting doctrine being instead passed on to the mysterious “Eleatic Stranger” (*Soph* 217d).

mode of investigation after the “rejection” of Plato’s metaphysics of the middle period in the *Parmenides*. Therefore one should not identify the views of Socrates with those of Plato in the *Theaetetus*; if one does, one cannot offer a plausible explanation of the fact that Socrates presents no middle period doctrine in the text.<sup>73</sup>

This *reductio* therefore offers one a convincing basis upon which to reject the Platonised interpretation of the *Theaetetus* and hence to answer the objection articulated at the close of the last section. If the Platonised interpretation is false, because it can be shown to imply a result that very few are willing to accept, then, when Socrates makes the claims that we have reasons to infer imply a contradiction (the claims that generate the puzzle of Socratic wisdom) these are not claims of Plato’s own. If they are not Plato’s own views, then it does not follow that the challenge that the puzzle of Socratic wisdom raises is one that involves trying to make sense of middle period doctrines that imply a contradiction. Therefore it would not follow that the most promising interpretive strategy to adopt to solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom would be to try and understand the puzzle in the context of Plato’s other middle period philosophy. Now let us look at what justification Sedley offers for approaching the *Theaetetus* as a text wherein Socrates’ voice is separated from Plato’s own (other than that the contrary view implies an interpretation we have good grounds for thinking is false).

To achieve the foregoing aim Sedley begins by offering the central interpretive claim of his book:

‘Socrates fails to see the Platonic implications [of the arguments he and Theaetetus construct], and instead it is we, as seasoned readers of Plato who are expected to recognise and exploit them. If the question is asked, what could legitimize such a division between of the roles of Plato and Socrates, the answer is: the concept of *midwifery*.’<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.8

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

By this Sedley means that he thinks Plato has not abandoned the metaphysics of the middle period but has chosen, in the *Theaetetus*, to portray a non-doctrinal Socrates who articulates arguments that 'cry out for Platonist interpretations' so that we, who are by this time aware of Plato's positions in epistemology, ontology and metaphysics, able to see these positions 'Socratic origins'.<sup>75</sup> This end is achieved, Sedley argues, via employment of the image of Socrates as a 'barren' (*Theaet* 150c) midwife who, he argues, in the dialogue plays the role of '*the midwife of Platonism*'.<sup>76</sup> By adopting this depiction of Socrates, Sedley claims, 'Plato aims to demonstrate, if not the identity, at any rate the profound *continuity*, between, on the one hand, his revered master's historic contribution and, on the other, the Platonist truth'.<sup>77</sup>

We will return to the question of how Sedley thinks Socrates' method brings forth Platonic conclusions and how this achieves the end of demonstrating the intellectual and historical continuity of Socrates' and Plato's thought momentarily. Firstly we should notice that this interpretation offers a credible explanation of why there is no middle period doctrine in the claims of Socrates in the dialogue. This is because, on Sedley's view, it was necessary for Plato to portray Socrates as lacking these insights to show how Plato's own philosophical doctrines arose out of Socrates' investigative practices. Secondly we should look briefly at what grounds there are for accepting this initial sketch of Sedley's view before returning to the issue of how Socrates acts as the midwife of Platonism in the *Theaetetus*.

The first of these that Sedley offers is that there are some Platonic texts that offer a precedent for thinking that one of Plato's aims in composing them is to demonstrate the interrelatedness of Socratic and Platonic thought.<sup>78</sup> For instance, in the *Meno* and *Republic*, Sedley argues, the sequence of the arguments and the shift in philosophical

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.8

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, pp.9-10

content that accompanies them draws the reader's attention to the continuity Plato saw between the semi-historical Socrates of the early dialogues and the Platonised, doctrinal Socrates of the middle period texts.<sup>79</sup> And this does indeed seem to be the case because, for instance, the *Meno* opens with a perplexed Socrates who asserts that he knows nothing about virtue or whether it can be taught (*Meno* 71b) and who refutes all Meno's definitions of what virtue could consist in (*Meno* 70a-81a). Only once this phase of the discussion ends and the next begins (*Meno* 81a-100b), does the doctrinal, Platonic Socrates expound the theory of *Anamnesis* in response to Meno's paradox (*Meno* 80d). The *Republic* opens with a Socrates who declares his ignorance of what justice consists in (*Rep* 336e-337a) and then proceeds, in the remaining books (*Rep* II-X) to offer a detailed and complex account of justice that is full of (Platonic) doctrine. Both of these examples therefore support Sedley's contention that the structure of these texts 'amounts to a reassurance that the early Socratic phase was a necessary preliminary to the mature Platonic phase.'<sup>80</sup>

Another interesting case that Sedley adduces in support of adopting his view of the subtext in the *Theaetetus* begins with the observation that one of the results of Socrates' midwifery is that some of the his interlocutors (those who are pregnant) 'discover within themselves many fine things' (*Theaet* 150d).<sup>81</sup> This, Sedley suggests, is anomalous, granted what we know about Socrates' inquiries from Plato's early dialogues where, far from any viable brain children being delivered, Socrates always leaves his discussants in a state of *aporia*.<sup>82</sup> Thus, if Socrates has delivered some truths from interlocutors (*Theaet* 150d) whom among those to which he has spoken could this be? Sedley sees that there is 'only one plausible answer: *Plato himself*'.<sup>83</sup> The result is that 'if this last suggestion is right, we have here the single clue

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.10

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.9

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.36

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.37

<sup>83</sup> Ibid



planted by Plato...as to the meaning of the dialogue's subtext: Socrates was the midwife of Plato's own philosophy'.<sup>84</sup> Which again confirms Sedley's position on the subtext. If what Sedley argues here is correct, Socrates is supposed to be understood as drawing out ideas that suggest Platonic conclusions from Theaetetus; acting as the midwife to Plato's own ideas. Let us now look firstly at *how* Socratic midwifery involves presenting arguments that suggest Platonic conclusions and how this demonstrates the historical and philosophical continuity of Socratic and Platonic thought. Once this is done we will see *that* this occurs in the dialogue by examining one of Sedley's examples of where he takes this to happen.<sup>85</sup>

The presentation of arguments that hint at Platonic conclusions and which resultantly demonstrate Socratic-Platonic philosophical continuity is achieved by midwifery, Sedley says, by first entailing a distinction 'between the cognitive state of the dialectical questioner and that of the pupil. For "dialectical questioner" read Socrates and for "pupil" read Plato'.<sup>86</sup> This distinction then entails that there are multiple strata of midwifery practiced in and *by* the text, respectively, on the characters of the dialogue, and upon us as readers.<sup>87</sup> Pointing to the fact that the midwifery practiced on Theaetetus 'fails' (in the sense that none of Theaetetus' definitions of knowledge prove viable), Sedley notes that, as a result of this failure, the degrees of obstetric practice that are performed on Plato's readers viz. the 'external midwifery' the dialogue engages in, should be taken to succeed, in different ways, depending upon our prior knowledge of Platonic doctrine.<sup>88</sup>

If one is unaccustomed to Plato's middle period thought, Sedley claims, the external midwifery can bring one to 'the point where we are ready to abandon the written text and continue the dialectic for

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> I do not have the space to review more than one such example. The one instance I do look at intends to illustrate the point that Sedley's interpretation at least has a basis in the textual evidence.

<sup>86</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, pp.10-11

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, pp.11-12

ourselves, our puzzlement at the inquiry's failure being in reality our birth pangs as we struggle to bring forth a better definition of knowledge'; just as, historically, we might reasonably expect, Socrates did with Plato.<sup>89</sup> The next layer of midwifery then brings the reader to the point of having Platonic thoughts instilled in them by seeing the implications of the arguments in the text by having to puzzle again about the dialogue's "failure"; as we might also suppose Socrates did historically with Plato.<sup>90</sup> Finally, if one is an initiate into the fold of Platonic doctrine, the final stratum of midwifery practiced on the reader places them in the position of coming to understand that 'Socrates unconsciously advanced the process of enlightenment which culminated in Plato's mature thought'.<sup>91</sup> The final stratum achieves this because the dialectical exercises the real historical Socrates performed on Plato himself will be recognised as here being represented by the text of the dialogue, the midwifery it performs on our souls as readers bringing us to accept the Platonic conclusions that we come to see latently in that representation.<sup>92</sup> Now let us look at one example that confirms that midwifery does operate in this way.

One apposite example that substantiates the existence of the final (and most clearly evinced stratum) of midwifery appears in the infamous and controversial second refutation of the absent Protagoras, the so-called "self-refutation" argument (*Theaet* 170a-171e).<sup>93</sup> At *Theaet* 170c, Sedley points out, the 'first wave' of the self-refutation argument closely echoes a similar argument deployed against Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus* (*Euthd* 287e-288a).<sup>94</sup> In the self-refutation argument in the *Theaetetus* Socrates first has Theodorus agree that many people judge there to be true and false beliefs (*Theaet* 169d-170c). This view, taken together with the doctrine that 'things are

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p.61

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.62

for every man what they seem to him to be' (*Theaet* 170a), Socrates concludes, entails the following dilemma: 'Are we to say that all men, on every occasion, judge what is true? Or that they judge sometimes truly, sometimes falsely? Whichever we say, it comes to the same thing, namely, that men do not always judge what is true' (*Theaet* 170c). This dilemma is almost the same, Sedley points out, as that which Socrates presents to the sophists in the *Euthydemus* in response to a very similar doctrine, again apparently of Protagorean progeny (*Euthd* 286c), that no one can speak falsely (*Euthd* 286c). In the *Euthydemus* Socrates presents essentially the same dilemma when he asks 'are you [Dionysodorus] saying that I made a mistake [in making the claim that phrases have sense - *Euthd* 287c] or not? Because if I did not make one you will not refute me no matter how wise you are...And if I did make one, you said the wrong thing when you claimed it was impossible to make mistakes' (*Euthd* 287e-288a). Therefore Sedley concludes that 'These links to the *Euthydemus* should be enough to confirm that the refutation of broad Protagoreanism in the *Theaetetus* is meant to be read as displaying to us an authentic Socratic legacy'.<sup>95</sup> That is, it shows how Plato's freshly constructed dismissal of Protagoras' doctrine has its roots in Socratic approaches to argumentative technique. This argument therefore evinces the final stratum of midwifery.

Sedley's view that Socrates acts as the midwife of Platonism in the *Theaetetus* establishes that the best strategy to pursue to understand Socrates' character in the text is to see him as a revision to 'the historical or semi-historical figure of that name made famous by Plato's early dialogues' *contra* the Platonised view.<sup>96</sup> On the grounds that Sedley offers I therefore reject the possibility that the best interpretive strategy to pursue to try and solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom would be to try and understand it in the context of Plato's middle period philosophy. Thus I take it that the strategy I will

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.8

momentarily go on to adopt is well motivated on the basis of the similarities of the puzzles we looked at previously.

### 2.3: Exploring and Applying Solutions:

To aid in making this section easier to understand I have set out the puzzle of Socratic wisdom in the most formal way possible below:

1) If Socrates possesses a *technē* then Socrates possesses *epistēmē*  
(conclusion of section 1.3)

2) Socrates possesses a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a)

3) (from 1, 2):. Socrates possesses *epistēmē*

4) *epistēmē* is 'the same' as *sophia* (*Theaet* 145e)

5) Socrates has no *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2)

6) (from 4, 5):. Socrates has no *epistēmē*

C) (from 3, 6):.  $\perp$

The solutions that have been offered to the puzzle from the early dialogues that I will be investigating in this section all provide various well-reasoned answers to the salient question that the puzzles raise; these answers in turn imply various solutions to the puzzles in the way explained in section 2.1. When applying these solutions to the *Theaetetus* I will adapt, where relevant, the reasons offered for accepting them to fit the available evidence from that dialogue. The result shall be that the reasons offer various grounds for either dismissing one of the premises of the schema above or for thinking that the premises (any of 1-6) do not entail a contradiction (C). There are a

number of other ways one might approach answering the question raised by these puzzles and hence dissolving the contradictory schema, but the three that I shall consider in this section are those of Norman Gulley, Terence Irwin and Gregory Vlastos.<sup>97</sup>

### **2.3.1: Gulley's Solution:**

Norman Gulley famously argued for the view that Socrates' disavowals were ironic in his book *The Philosophy of Socrates*. As the title of Gulley's book suggests, he is interested in the philosophy of *Socrates* and not specifically in the character of Socrates as represented by Plato.<sup>98</sup> Despite this, particularly when reconstructing what he takes to be Socrates' philosophical methodology, Gulley chooses to draw on evidence from Plato's early works and, in so doing, presents an intriguing interpretation of the disavowals of wisdom in those texts.

Gulley's interpretation of Socrates' disavowals is that they should be taken to be insincere viz. "ironic".<sup>99</sup> Gulley's reason for thinking this, in 'the main' is that, in Plato's portrayal of him, Socrates' disavowals are

'hardly consistent with the way in which Socrates manages his arguments...the control and direction of Socrates' arguments bear all the marks of conscious manipulation towards just those positive doctrines in ethics which we find ascribed to Socrates by Aristotle'.<sup>100</sup>

Further, Gulley takes it that because Socrates' arguments move with 'consistency to fundamentally the same conclusions' (usually

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<sup>97</sup> Two other such options are 1) to distinguish cases where Socrates claims truly to lack wisdom from those where he claims this falsely and 2) to claim that there is a hint of irony in Socrates' disavowals that leaves the door open to an authorial suspicion that Socrates, in reality, knew more than he tended to let on.

<sup>98</sup> Gulley, Norman, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, MacMillan, 1968, p.vii

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p.64

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

conclusions that are inconsistent with the first premise of the argument) on multiple occasions, it seems 'implausible' to believe that Socrates' could have no prior knowledge of the conclusion that his argument will reach.<sup>101</sup> For these reasons, Gulley concludes that Socrates' disclamations of wisdom are mere irony. In answer to the very natural question that this interpretation raises, namely: "why, then, should Socrates claim to lack wisdom in the first place?", Gulley argues that Socrates, as portrayed by Plato, 'might be professing ignorance merely as an expedient to encourage his interlocutor to seek out the truth' in conversation with him.<sup>102</sup>

Gulley's interpretation's offers an attractive solution to the epistemic puzzle from the early dialogues. Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith's analysis of Gulley's view is that 'if accepted, [it] would neatly resolve the paradox', for it would do away with the need to find a coherent construal of Socrates' disavowal in light of the passages in the early dialogues where one has reasons to attribute knowledge to Socrates.<sup>103</sup> Gulley's solution to the puzzle thus answers the salient question involved in unravelling the puzzle with the confident response: Socrates does possess some knowledge in the early dialogues, because he knows in advance the conclusions his arguments will reach. The reasons Gulley adduces for this position, based on Socrates' portrayal in the early dialogues, are quite convincing.

Gulley's claim that Socrates' arguments move towards establishing doctrines we find ascribed to him by Aristotle certainly has some truth. One obvious example is Socrates' contention in the *Protagoras* that incontinence is impossible (*Pr* 358c) which Aristotle ascribes to Socrates in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* 1145b 21-27). This might be taken to suggest that Plato intended to portray Socrates' character as having prior knowledge of the fact that the conclusion of the brief sub-argument he produces in the *Protagoras* (*Pr* 358a-c),

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p.69

<sup>103</sup> Smith, Nicholas D. and Brickhouse, Thomas C., *Plato's Socrates*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.32

would be that incontinence is impossible. For, if this were a doctrine that Socrates was thought to have held (by inference from Aristotle's testimony), this fact could quite reasonably support reading the *Protagoras* as a text wherein Socrates is supposed to be portrayed as knowing that his argument will establish this claim.

Furthermore, Socrates' notoriously destructive method of argument, the *elenchus*, does move toward the establishment of the same kinds of conclusions in a variety of dialogues. The kind of conclusion that it reaches, for the most part, is a claim that is the negation of, or at least inconsistent with, a definition of an ethical predicate offered by Socrates' interlocutor. In the *Euthyphro*, for instance, Euthyphro defines piety as 'what is dear to the Gods' (*Euthphr* 7a) and is led by Socrates' use of the *elenchus* to the conclusion that 'the same things would be both pious and impious, according to this argument' (*Euthphr* 8a) by his unreflective acceptance of the common view that 'different gods consider different things to be just, beautiful, ugly, good and bad' (*Euthphr* 7e). Further examples of arguments from the early dialogues that follow this pattern can be seen at *Euthphr* 9d-10e, *Charm* 159a-160b and *Lchs* 192b-193e, to name but a few examples. This evidence again seems to support Gulley's view that Socrates controls the arguments in a way that suggests some prior knowledge of the conclusion that will be reached, for how else would he accomplish refutations of his interlocutor's views with such consistency?

Further to these last points, the motivation that Gulley provides for Socrates to dissemble when declaring his lack of wisdom is supported by a passage from the *Euthyphro*. At *Euthphr* 5a-b Socrates' desire to become a pupil of the learned priest (because of his ignorance of divine matters), appears to encourage the self-aggrandising Euthyphro to answer Socrates' question: "what is piety?" (*Euthphr* 5d). The disavowal therefore could be taken to operate as the kind of expedient Gulley suggests it does in this passage.

All of what has been said so far therefore offers us some grounds for thinking that Gulley's solution to the puzzle from the early dialogues is credible but what about the case of puzzle of Socratic wisdom? How would Gulley's solution solve that puzzle; what reasons does one have for thinking the solution might be correct?

Applying Gulley's solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom solves it in the same way it solves the puzzle from the early dialogues. As we previously saw, by understanding Socrates' disavowals (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) to be dissimulated one can answer the salient question that the puzzles raise with the response: Socrates does not mean what he says: he does have knowledge. Hence, Gulley's interpretation could solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom by offering reasons for denying premise 5 of the contradiction by providing grounds for thinking Socrates is being disingenuous when he makes these claims. This would then entail that premise 6 is false and dissolve the contradiction (C). The basis upon which one might suppose that this solution is the correct one can also be extracted from Gulley's account of the early dialogues and applied to the text of the *Theaetetus* in the following way.

The *Theaetetus* appears to contain a passage that one might read as an admission, on Socrates' part, that he is involved in directing the arguments in ways that would not be possible if he had no prior knowledge of the conclusion that would be reached or how to reach it, just as Gulley suggests there is evidence for in the early dialogues.<sup>104</sup> At *Theaet* 185e Socrates admits the following:

'you have saved me a vast amount of talk if it seems to you that, while the soul considers some things through the bodily powers, there are others which it considers alone and through itself. This is what I thought myself but I wanted you to think it too' (*Theaet* 185e).

This admission that Socrates would have been willing to direct the argument towards the establishment of a particular conclusion

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<sup>104</sup> Gulley, Norman, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, MacMillan, 1968, p.64



arguably suggests that Socrates knows that the premises of at least one argument entail that specific result. This might be thought to open the door to the suspicion that Socrates has in fact been using knowledge of how to reach other conclusions throughout the rest of the dialogue and influenced Theaetetus' reasoning so as to have him reach them. This in turn would suggest, as Gulley thinks is the case in the early dialogues, that Socrates should be attributed with some prior knowledge of the conclusions that his arguments will reach *contra* his assertions that he has no wisdom or knowledge (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2).

More convincing still is Gulley's claim that Socrates is motivated to dissemble about his possession of wisdom so as to encourage his interlocutors into discussion with him. And indeed, ascribing this motivation to Socrates' character in the *Theaetetus* has a precedent that goes back to antiquity; the Anonymous Commentator supposes the same motivation as Gulley does is behind Socrates' disavowals in the *Theaetetus* (47.11-14). What is more, this motivation makes good sense in the context of this dialogue. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates begins his explanation of the Maieutic Method (*Theaet* 149a-151d), of which the disavowals of wisdom are a significant part, in response to Theaetetus' reticence (*Theaet* 148d) to answer his question about what knowledge is (*Theaet* 145e-146a). It is only after being reassured that Socrates practices the *technē* of the 'barren' (*Theaet* 150c) midwife that he has been offered sufficient 'encouragement' (*Theaet* 151d) to be able to try and provide an account of 'what knowledge really is' (*Theaet* 146a). Hence, the motivation that Gulley ascribes to Socrates for falsely claiming to lack wisdom fits well with the text of the *Theaetetus*. Interpreting *Theaet* 185e in the way that I suggest and showing that the motivation Gulley provides for Socrates to dissemble about his lack of wisdom fits the evidence from the dialogue provides a basis for thinking that Gulley's solution can provide a credible solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. Let us now assess the reasons for accepting this solution against the other available evidence from the *Theaetetus*.

If one starts with the motivation that Gulley argues stands behind Socrates' (false) claim to lack wisdom it does not take much to see that it makes little sense as a motivation for pretending to be ignorant. This is especially so when one first considers the context in which Socrates disavows knowledge in the early dialogues. Brickhouse and Smith note that 'Socrates repeatedly professes his ignorance to his jurors in the *Apology*, none of whom, under the circumstances, is in a position to be seduced into arguing with Socrates'.<sup>105</sup> A good example that supports this assertion comes at *Apol* 23b when Socrates makes his famous declaration that his wisdom consists in recognising the worthlessness of wisdom. At *Apol* 23b Socrates is not trying to encourage anyone to talk to him but quite clearly, as he says at the beginning of the speech, trying to 'show...what has caused this reputation and slander' (*Apol* 20d). Another good example of when Socrates asserts his lack of wisdom at a point at which it would make no sense for him to be encouraging an interlocutor to join the conversation is noticed by Vlastos during a passage from the *Gorgias* (*Grg* 509a).<sup>106</sup> There the conversation has *almost ended* and yet Socrates again asserts his ignorance (*Grg* 509a). Lastly, Hugh H. Benson makes the astute point that a significant number of the early dialogues finish with Socrates asserting his lack of knowledge.<sup>107</sup> Next, it is important to take note of the fact that Socrates' disavowals sometimes occur after an interlocutor has already begun a discussion with him.<sup>108</sup> This indicates

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<sup>105</sup> Smith, Nicholas D. and Brickhouse, Thomas C., *Plato's Socrates*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.32

<sup>106</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35:138, pp.1-31, 1985, pp. 4-5

<sup>107</sup> Benson, Hugh H., *Socratic Wisdom*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.178. More accurately, these dialogues end with Socrates admitting that he has not found the object of his inquiry. I reject Benson's claim that the *Apology* ends with a profession of ignorance because there Socrates does not admit to having failed to find the object of his inquiry: in the *Apology* there *is* no object of inquiry and Socrates only asserts that he has no knowledge of the afterlife (*Apol* 42a).

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, the *Laches*, Socrates there admits to having had no teacher with regards to the subject of courage (*Lchs* 186b-c) some time after *Lysimachus* requests Socrates to join the conversation (*Lchs* 181c).

that, in these instances, the interlocutors hardly need more encouragement for they have already begun to speak to Socrates. Lastly, in the *Lysis* Socrates' claim to not know what friendship is (*Lys* 212a) does not motivate Menexenus to join the conversation, instead Ctesippus butts in and tells Socrates that Menexenus wishes to answer Socrates' questions (*Lys* 211e), the disavowal appearing slightly after this in the text (*Lys* 212a).

What one can infer from these observations that is of relevance to Socrates' disavowals in the *Theaetetus* is that the motivation Gulley supposes is behind Socrates' disavowals cannot be ascribed to him *in general*. If such a motivation cannot be attributed to Socrates consistently throughout the Platonic corpus then this forces one to accept the conclusion that this motivation can only inform a false claim to lack wisdom in certain instances. This then further entails that Socrates sometimes claims truly, and on other occasions, falsely, to lack wisdom or knowledge. However, it is highly implausible to claim that Socrates may have been genuinely lacking in wisdom in the *Apology* 23b where, as we just saw, he cannot have the motivation Gulley suggests attributed to him, and yet lying about this in the *Theaetetus* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2). Supposing this would reduce Socrates' *dramatis persona* to absurdity, especially given the chronology of the events depicted in the dialogues. How could Socrates have lost all of his knowledge and wisdom from the time it takes him to leave *Theaetetus*, speak to Euthyphro (in the events depicted in that eponymous dialogue), hear his indictment and then proceed to his trial, portrayed as happening shortly thereafter in the *Apology*? Surely this makes little sense. Even if it is *prima facie* plausible to read Socrates' disavowals in the *Theaetetus* as motivated by wanting to encourage the young protégé to speak with him, the fact that this motivation cannot be ascribed to Socrates' character generally casts a shadow of doubt over the ascription of this motivation to Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. There may of course be other reasons for Socrates to lie about his lack of wisdom in

the *Theaetetus* but whatever these might be, Gulley does not suggest them, nor is any motivation particularly apparent from the text itself.

This point establishes that we have a reason to doubt the idea that Socrates speaks falsely when he disclaims wisdom. Without being able to provide a generalisable answer to the question: “why should Socrates lie about lacking wisdom?”, we have grounds to be immediately suspicious of Gulley’s interpretation of the disavowal. Lacking a motivation for Socrates to lie in these instances makes the view that he is dissembling rather implausible. For, Gulley’s interpretation in this instance would amount to the suggestion that we should take a character to be lying without any consistent rationale for doing so. One need only notice that Plato’s Socrates is manifestly obsessed with the pursuit of truth to see how implausible such a view would be when no motivation can be attributed to Socrates to lie in disclaiming wisdom.<sup>109</sup> What is more, there are also a number of considerations that stand in the way of accepting Gulley’s grounds for thinking Socrates falsely claims to lack wisdom.

The first of these is the authority of historical authors who endorse a reading of Socrates’ disavowals as sincere. Especially the evidence of Aristotle in this regard must be given significant weight (as the literature on the subject is right to do), for he was a near contemporary of the historical Socrates and an associate of Plato.<sup>110</sup> The relevant passage comes in *De Sophisticis Elenchis* where Aristotle claims that ‘Socrates used to ask questions but never answered them,

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<sup>109</sup> At least two pieces of evidence from the *Theaetetus* support this view. Firstly recall that the function of Socrates’ whole methodological procedure in the text is to distinguish the true and false beliefs of his interlocutors (*Theaet* 150c). Another such piece of evidence occurs in the digression where the philosophical life is distinguished from the life of the lawyer by the philosopher’s constant inquiries into the most fundamental nature of the universe (*Theaet* 173e).

<sup>110</sup> Irwin, Terence, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, Oxford Clarendon, 1977 p.40; Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato’s Socrates*, p.31 fn 3; Vlastos, Gregory, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge”, p.3

because he confessed ignorance' (*Sop El* 183b6-8).<sup>111</sup> This much seems to make it clear that Aristotle took Socrates' disavowal (whether from Plato's explanation of the texts or perhaps from first hand accounts of Socrates that corroborate Plato's portrayal of him) to be genuine. Vlastos notes that additionally a fragment of Aeschines Socraticus' *Alcibiades* (fr 10C) further supports this position.<sup>112</sup>

The second of the reasons to reject Gulley's view when applied to the *Theaetetus* is that despite the fact that Socrates seems to admit he would be willing to direct the argument towards the establishment of predetermined conclusions at *Theaet* 185e, this does not support the idea that Socrates has prior *knowledge* of the conclusions he and Theaetetus will reach. This is because Socrates' claim at *Theaet* 185e is that he wanted Theaetetus to endorse a particular conclusion and, further, that he would be *willing* to ask the questions in such a way that would end up with Theaetetus doing just that. However, Socrates here indicates that this will *not* be necessary in Theaetetus' case (*Theaet* 185e). Furthermore, although, as I earlier said, this willingness might be thought to open the door to the suspicion that Socrates might be doing this in the rest of arguments in the *Theaetetus*, it can only open to door to that, a suspicion, and one that it is not corroborated by any further claims Socrates makes in the dialogue. This gives us good reason to regard Gulley's reasons for thinking that Socrates is lying about his possession of wisdom with suspicion when adapted to the evidence available in the *Theaetetus*.

Bearing in mind the foregoing considerations, I do not think that one should endorse any aspect of Gulley's interpretation of Socrates' disavowal of wisdom as a solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

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<sup>111</sup> For a judicious defense of the translation of 'confessed' as bearing the sense of "sincerely maintained" as opposed to "feigned" see Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", p.3 fn. 7

<sup>112</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", p.3

### 2.3.2: Irwin's Solution:

Irwin's solution to the puzzle from the early dialogues in *Plato's Moral Theory* consists in the claim that Socrates' 'repeated disclaimers of knowledge are too frequent and emphatic to be dismissed as ironical'.<sup>113</sup> One of Irwin's reasons that support his concluding this is Aristotle's testimony from *De Sophisticis Elenchis* (*Sop El* 183b6-8) that we looked at when offering grounds for rejecting Gulley's solution.<sup>114</sup> Irwin also suggests that because 'Socrates observes strict conditions for knowledge', he can only credit himself with convictions or strongly held beliefs, but not knowledge.<sup>115</sup> Irwin argues that for Socrates, someone only counts as having knowledge of some predicate F if they can satisfactorily answer one of Socrates' "what is F?" questions (on the basis of *Euthphr* 5c-d, *Lchs* 190c and *Hps Maj* 286c).<sup>116</sup> Hence, concludes Irwin, 'it is not surprising that he [Socrates] claims no knowledge for himself, for he is evidently unable to answer any of these questions to his own satisfaction'.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the idea that Socrates does nonetheless allow himself a number of strongly held beliefs is supported by *Grg* 509a, Irwin supposes, where the thesis that it is better to suffer injustice than perpetrate it is said to be able to survive the *elenchus*.<sup>118</sup> Irwin claims that because the *elenchus* shows that this belief of Socrates' conflicts with more basic beliefs that his interlocutors hold, Socrates has some reasons for believing it.<sup>119</sup>

Irwin's solution to the puzzle from the early dialogues therefore dissolves the puzzle over the sincerity of Socrates' disclaimers in a way that is as satisfyingly simplistic as Gulley's. It unravels the contradiction by providing the contrary answer to that which Gulley was seen to offer to the salient question: Socrates has no knowledge or wisdom, only

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<sup>113</sup> Irwin, Terence, *Plato's Moral Theory*, Oxford Clarendon, 1977 p.39

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p.40

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*

conviction or strongly held belief. Let us see whether the grounds Irwin's offers for accepting his solution are credible.

As we have already seen when discussing Gulley's solution, there are good reasons for accepting Aristotle's testimony on the issue of how to interpret Socrates' disavowals of wisdom. An appeal to Aristotle's authority on the issue provides a reasonable basis for Irwin's principal interpretive claim that the disavowals should be understood as sincere.

That Socrates observes demanding standards for knowledge also seems correct on the basis of the passages Irwin adduces as evidence for this claim. That Socrates is unable to meet the high standards Irwin argues he adheres to also seems right on the basis of the passages that Irwin offers. For instance in the passage from the *Euthyphro* that Irwin cites Socrates implicitly assumes that if Euthyphro has the knowledge he lays claim to (*Euthphr* 5c) (of the pious and impious) he will be able to answer Socrates question: 'what are the pious and impious?' (*Euthphr* 5d). This is certainly an extremely difficult question to answer and if answering it is the only sufficient demonstration of our knowledge of piety and impiety as the passage suggests, we might infer from Socrates' evident inability to answer the question (*Euthphr* 5c), that he is right to claim he has no knowledge of piety and impiety (*Euthphr* 16a).

Further to this Irwin's suggestion that *Grg* 508e-509a could be taken to give us reason to suppose that Socrates takes himself only to have true beliefs also seems quite reasonable. For, in the latter half of that passage (*Grg* 509a) Socrates explicitly claims not to have knowledge of the claim that it is better to suffer than to perpetrate injustice (first maintained at *Grg* 469c). This does provide a good reason for thinking that whatever cognitive state Socrates is in with regard to the claim that it is better to suffer than to perpetrate injustice (*Grg* 469c) we should not call it "knowledge". The next most reasonable candidate for the epistemic condition that Socrates might be in with regard to this proposition, it could be argued, in line with Irwin's claim, is a strongly held belief. One might suppose this on a variety of grounds,

for example, the fact that in that passage Socrates claims to have ‘held down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant’ (*Grg* 508e), which sounds as though Socrates takes himself to have very convincing reasons to think the claim is true. Another such piece of evidence that lends weight to the view is the number of times Socrates reiterates the claim (*Grg* 470c, 473a, 479e) suggesting, as Chaerephon’s rather pointed comment seems to practically confirm, that Socrates is ‘in dead earnest about this’ (*Grg* 481b).

Having seen that Irwin’s account is plausible, let us now apply it to the *Theaetetus* and the puzzle of Socratic wisdom and see what reasons we have to accept that it may offer the best solution to that puzzle.

Irwin’s solution solves the puzzle of Socratic wisdom by answering the question that it raises with the response: “Socrates does mean what he says”; he does not have knowledge. It does so because Irwin’s solution provides good reasons to not conclude premise 3 from premises 1 and 2. This reason is that premise 3 would flatly contradict Socrates’ assertions that he lacks wisdom or knowledge (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2) (which Irwin argues, for the reasons just looked at) must be accepted as genuine. However, granted premises 1 and 2, 3 must follow of necessity. Is there any way that one might understand it to be possible that Socrates could possess the *technē* of midwifery (premise 2) whilst lacking *epistēmē* (*contra* premise 1)? Perhaps. If Socrates really only admits to possessing true beliefs then this might be taken to imply that rather than the practice of his *technē* of midwifery being guided by the possession of *epistēmē*, in the case of Socrates’ (on this view, rather exceptional) *technē* it might be guided by nothing but a set of true beliefs. Are there any grounds for accepting such an unusual interpretation?

One thought occurs. As we know from Plato himself, from his famous comments about the road to Larissa (*Meno* 97a-d), ‘as long as he [anyone] has the right opinion...he will not be a worse guide than the



one who knows' (*Meno* 97b).<sup>120</sup> Allowing this claim to be true would entail that Socrates could still practice the art of midwifery (in line with premise 2) but that he would do so in such a way that he lacks the *epistēmē* required for him to do so (*contra* premise 1). In this way, like the convinced but ignorant traveller to Larissa, Socrates might be a sincerely barren midwife of the intellect who possesses something that has the practical value of the *epistēmē* involved in practicing his *technē* (viz. true belief) without actually possessing any *knowledge*. The only argument that I can think of that might lend weight to this position when applied to the *Theaetetus* is that it has a great amount of explanatory value. If one supposed that Socrates practiced his *technē* of midwifery by being guided by true beliefs and not knowledge this could explain nicely how Socrates is able to practice the art and yet still lack knowledge or wisdom (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2).

What of Irwin's contention that one should take Socrates' disavowals to be expressed in earnest and of his reasons for thinking so when they are adapted to the evidence from the *Theaetetus*? I am inclined to agree with Irwin that Socrates' standards for knowledge are extremely demanding and that this is especially the case in the *Theaetetus*, where one can adduce textual evidence that supports such a reading. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates enumerates two conditions for what counts as knowledge (*Theaet* 152c). Although these differ from the condition that Irwin identifies from the early dialogues as implying a difficult standard for knowledge, what these different standards give us reason to conclude about Socrates' criteria for knowledge is the same: they are extremely hard to fulfil. What 'befits knowledge' (*Theaet* 152c) Socrates claims, is for it to be 'of what is' (*Theaet* 152c) and 'unerring' (*Theaet* 152c). The latter of these conditions particularly indicates a standard for knowledge that is very challenging to meet. Hence, Irwin's point that we should not be surprised to find that Socrates disclaims wisdom or knowledge, given the criteria he thinks must be fulfilled for

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<sup>120</sup> All quotations from the *Meno* are taken from the translation of G.M.A Grube in *Plato: The Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.870-898

something to count as an instance of such a cognitive state, receives strong textual support in the *Theaetetus*. Let us now assess whether Irwin's interpretation should be accepted.

Firstly, I am willing to endorse the claim, along with Irwin, that Socrates' disavowals of wisdom as entirely truthful and I do so for some of the same reasons he does when these are adapted to the evidence available from the *Theaetetus*. It seems reasonable to suppose that Socrates cannot fulfil the fantastically demanding criteria he thinks a claim must fulfil for it to count as knowledge (*Theaet* 152c) and Aristotle's testimony on the issue (*Sop El* 183b6-8) of how to interpret Socrates' disavowal corroborates the conclusion that we should take the disavowals to be sincere. Adding to this the fact that denying that the disavowals are genuine leads to a serious problem regarding how to understand what motivation to ascribe to Socrates to lie when he claims to lack wisdom or knowledge and one has yet another reason to accept this aspect of Irwin's view. Accepting the disavowals at face value poses no such interpretive issue, for, if Socrates speaks truthfully in claiming to lack wisdom; we need not find some latent motivation for him to lie when doing so. Given these points, I endorse Irwin's reading of the disavowal of wisdom, and some of his reasons for doing so.

The same cannot be said when applying Irwin's claim that Socrates only admits to strongly held conviction to the *Theaetetus*. Despite the explanatory value of Irwin's interpretative solution an obvious objection stands in the way of accepting it. This is that there is simply no textual evidence to support the claim that the possession of a set of true beliefs is sufficient for practicing the *technē* of midwifery. Indeed, in section 1.1 I pointed out that the opposite appears to be the case. There, I argued, Socrates claims that all *technai* are apparently comprised of knowledge, something that seems to entail that his practice cannot be guided by mere conviction (unless Socrates' midwifery can be shown, with good reason, to be exceptional in this respect). The lack of evidence and the conclusions of section 1.1 therefore offer good grounds for dismissing the idea that Socrates

practices midwifery on the basis of a set of true beliefs and thus, for thinking that Irwin's view in its entirety offers the correct solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. This is because, although we have seen that Irwin offers a convincing rationale to take Socrates' disavowals to be genuine, this simply leaves one in the position of needing to account for how this is possible in the face of Socrates' claims that we have reasons to think imply that he has knowledge (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a, c).

With the foregoing views examined I shall now turn my attention to assessment of Vlastos' solution to the puzzle from the early dialogues and evaluate whether it can offer a plausible solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

### **2.3.3: Vlastos' Solution:**

As I have already pointed out, Vlastos argues that to dissolve the puzzle of Socrates' disavowals in the early dialogues 'we need only suppose that he is making a dual use of his words for knowing'.<sup>121</sup> The two senses in which Vlastos supposes Socrates to have used the verb "to know", he calls 'knowledge-e' and 'knowledge-c'.<sup>122</sup> These senses of the term "knowledge" Vlastos characterised as follows.

Vlastos' argument for supposing that Socrates uses the word "knowledge" in his sense of "knowledge-e" (viz. elenctic knowledge) is that 'whatever Socrates might be willing to say he *knows*...would have to be knowledge reached and tested through his own personal method of inquiry, the elenchus', and hence that, 'the content of that knowledge must be propositions he thinks elenctically justifiable'.<sup>123</sup> What Vlastos means by saying that the propositions Socrates takes himself to know must be 'elenctically justifiable' is that Socrates must have discovered a proposition, "p" such that p 'can be maintained in elenctic argument,

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<sup>121</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", p.12

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p.18

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

while its denial cannot'.<sup>124</sup> Thus knowledge-e is “knowledge” of a proposition, p, which one has at least once been able to maintain in argument without one’s interlocutor’s arguments demonstrating that one is committed to beliefs that entail not-p. The textual evidence that Vlastos levies in support of attributing this conception of knowledge to Socrates is taken from the *Charmides*.<sup>125</sup>

At the point in the *Charmides* where Vlastos supposes Socrates uses the word “knowledge” in the sense of knowledge-e, Socrates is arguing with Critias over whether temperance is ‘to know oneself’ (*Charm* 165b). In response to Critias’ claim that Socrates is ‘trying to refute me and ignoring the real question at issue’ (*Charm* 166c) Socrates addresses Critias by saying:

‘how could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reasons than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements – the fear of unconsciously thinking I know when I do not’ (*Charm* 166c-d)

Vlastos comments that Socrates’s use of “to know” in this piece of text from the *Charmides* must be ‘referring directly to what he [Socrates] seeks to achieve by elenctic inquiry [viz. knowledge-e], the fear he is voicing is that he might think true theses which have fared well in past elenctic inquiry but are in fact false’.<sup>126</sup> Vlastos’ idea here, I take it, is that Socrates is claiming that refutation of Critias would be sufficient to establish that Critias does not “know” (know-e) the claim that temperance is knowledge of oneself (*Charm* 165b). And indeed, this does appear to be what Socrates is claiming, i.e. that if Socrates were to refute Critias it would demonstrate that Critias did not ‘know’ (*Charm* 166d) the proposition that temperance is self knowledge (call this p), when he thought he did. That is, in refuting Critias, Socrates would

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p.19

<sup>126</sup> Ibid

show that Critias couldn't maintain p because his other beliefs entail not-p, which would be sufficient to demonstrate that Critias does not possess knowledge-e of p.

The other sense in which Vlastos claims Socrates uses the word "knowledge" and which he thinks Socrates denies ever having possessed Vlastos calls 'knowledge-c'.<sup>127</sup> To argue that this sense of the term "knowledge" is one that Socrates operates with when he claims not to know something, Vlastos traces a long line of epistemological thought from some of the earliest Presocratics right through Plato's works and on into the texts of Aristotle. This exegesis therefore establishes that the majority of ancient Greek philosophers share an understanding of the sense of the term "knowledge" that is the same as the sense of Vlastos' knowledge-c.<sup>128</sup> The result is that it is plausible, on these grounds, to suppose that Socrates would have shared this same understanding of the sense of the term "knowledge". This sense of the term "knowledge" is knowledge of a proposition, p, which possesses the 'hallmark' of 'infallible certainty'.<sup>129</sup>

Even as early as Parmenides, Vlastos notes, the notion of knowledge as being supported by an 'unshaken heart of well-rounded truth' (DK 29 B1) was in use.<sup>130</sup> <sup>131</sup> 'Unshaken', Vlastos claims, in the sense that it is 'indisturbable by objections' and 'well rounded' in the sense of being 'systematically competent'.<sup>132</sup> That is, altogether, infallible. The requirement that knowledge, properly understood, is required to be infallible also appears in a number of Plato's dialogues. It is insisted upon, in language very reminiscent of Parmenides, in the *Timaeus*, for example, where knowledge is claimed to be 'unmoved by persuasion'

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<sup>127</sup> Vlastos calls this knowledge 'knowledge-c' on p.18 and claims that Socrates disavows possession of it on p.22

<sup>128</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", pp. 14-18

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p.18

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p.17

<sup>131</sup> I here quote Vlastos' own translation of Parmenides, p.17

<sup>132</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", p.17

(*Tim* 51e).<sup>133</sup> More explicitly the requirement that knowledge should be infallible also occurs in the *Republic* (*Rep* 477d) and, as we previously saw, the *Theaetetus* (*Theaet* 152c). Aristotle goes on to continue to assume the veracity of this requirement saying very generally in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that ‘we all believe that what we know could not be otherwise’ (*NE* 1139B19-21). Besides these examples, Vlastos indicates a number of other thinkers who also endorse this especially difficult criterion of knowledge.<sup>134</sup> This evidence, Vlastos must think, although he does not explicitly say this, is sufficient to show that Socrates understood (at least one) sense of the term “knowledge” to be the same as knowledge-c.

So, Vlastos thusly builds his case for the idea that Socrates operates with two distinct notions of knowledge in Plato’s texts. But *how* and *when* exactly does Vlastos think Socrates uses these distinct senses of the term “knowledge”? Vlastos claims that:

‘when he [Socrates] says he knows something he is referring to knowledge-e; when he says he knows nothing – absolutely nothing...he refers to knowledge-c; when he says he has no knowledge of a particular topic he may mean *either* that...he has no knowledge-c...*or* that what he lacks on that topic is knowledge-e’.<sup>135</sup>

Consequently, in Vlastos’ view, both Socrates’ disavowals and his claims to know various things will always turn out to be completely sincere because the sense of the term “knowledge” utilised by Socrates in any particular instance will depend upon the dialectical context.<sup>136</sup> Vlastos’ rationale for accepting the truth of this hypothesis is that it has unparalleled explanatory power when applied in this way to Socrates’

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<sup>133</sup> All quotations from the *Timaeus* are taken from the translation of Donald J. Zeyl in *Plato: The Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997, pp.1224-1292

<sup>134</sup> Vlastos, Gregory, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge” pp.14-18

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid* p.20

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*

comments in various dialogues.<sup>137</sup> For example, Vlastos claims that it can make sense of a troublesome passage from the *Gorgias* (*Grg* 508e-509a).<sup>138</sup> The hypothesis can explain why Socrates is portrayed as reiterating his claim to have ‘proved’ (*Grg* 479e) the proposition that it is better to suffer than perpetrate injustice (*Grg* 508e), by saying that he has tied it down with ‘arguments of iron and adamant’ (*Grg* 508e) before claiming, straight away afterwards, that ‘yet...I don’t know how these things are’ (*Grg* 509a). The perplexity over Socrates’ claim to have proven (and thus know, Vlastos claims) the truth of the proposition he is defending, and yet to ‘not know how these things are’ (*Grg* 509a) ‘does not arise’ on Vlastos’ hypothesis, he suggests.<sup>139</sup> This is because, by disambiguating the terms in the way Vlastos indicates, one can see Socrates’ assertion that he does not know how these things are (*Grg* 509a) as the claim that he does not *know-c* how these things are.<sup>140</sup> Socrates can therefore avoid dissembling about his reiteration of the claim to have proven the disputed proposition (*Grg* 508e) by implying that he has knowledge-e of it, for this does not prove that he knows-c how anything is (*Grg* 509a).

Hence, through a project of disambiguation of Socrates’ use of the term “knowledge” on the hypothesis Vlastos recommends, one can achieve a reconciliation between the passages that give one equally compelling reasons to maintain or deny that Socrates has knowledge in the early dialogues.<sup>141</sup> Vlastos’ solution to the puzzle from the early dialogues hence offers an answer to the salient question that the puzzle raises with the response: “it depends upon the context of the claim”. By providing reasons to think that when Socrates claims to know something, he claims to know it in a different sense (knowledge-e) to when he claims that he knows nothing (knowledge-c) Socrates turns out to always speak truthfully when he claims to know things and when

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, pp.20-23

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.21

<sup>139</sup> Ibid

<sup>140</sup> Ibid

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p.22

he claims to know nothing in the early dialogues. Hence, Vlastos' solution is that the types of claims that Socrates makes that we saw we had reasons to think imply contradictory conclusions (that formed the puzzle of the early dialogues) simply *do not imply these contradictory conclusions*.

To fully assess the explanatory value of Vlastos' hypothesis would take far too much space. What I would like to indicate instead, therefore, is that the perplexing passage from the *Gorgias* (*Grg* 508e-509a) that Vlastos argues can be explained best on his interpretation does seem to support his view that the notion of knowledge-e is all that Socrates means to claim for himself when he claims to have 'bound' (*Grg* 508e) the argument. After disclaiming his knowledge of 'how these things are' (*Grg* 509a), Socrates goes on to claim that 'no one I've ever met, as in this case, can say anything else [than the disputed proposition] without being ridiculous' (*Grg* 509a). This sounds rather like Socrates is claiming that throughout all of his elenctic encounters, whenever the disputed thesis comes up, no one has been able to refute (show that other epistemic commitments Socrates has entail the negation of) Socrates' assertion of it, which is just the notion of "knowledge" (knowledge-e) that Vlastos argues Socrates claims for himself in this scenario.<sup>142</sup> That is, knowledge-e.

Furthermore, as I have already said, and given some reasons for thinking, Socrates's disavowal should be taken to be true and one of the reasons that we should think so is because he clearly observes demanding standards for what counts as knowledge. Hence, I am happy to endorse Vlastos' view that when Socrates disavows wisdom or knowledge he disavows ever being in a cognitive state that possesses the hallmark of infallibility.

If we now apply Vlastos' solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom, we can see that the way it would achieve a solution to that puzzle would not be by denying the truth of any of the premises that form it. Instead, Vlastos' solution maintains that the *epistēmē* that

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p.21



Socrates possesses (premise 3) is knowledge-e and that the *epistēmē* Socrates lacks (premise 6) is knowledge-c. That is, Vlastos' solution would be to deny that there is any contradiction generated by premises 3 and 6 when we disambiguate the use of the term "knowledge" in these claims. By applying Vlastos' interpretation to the *Theaetetus* the (disambiguated) claims that form the "puzzle" would have the following content:

- 1) If Socrates possesses a *technē* then Socrates possesses knowledge-e
- 2) Socrates possesses a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a)
- 3) (from 1, 2):. Socrates possesses knowledge-e
- 4) knowledge-c is 'the same' as *sophia* (*Theaet* 145e)
- 5) Socrates has no *sophia* (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2)
- 6) (from 4, 5):. Socrates has no knowledge-c

This solution therefore comes with the unique benefit of not having to suppose that any of the premises that form the puzzle is false; which means one does not have to offer elaborate accounts of why one of the claims should not be attributed to Socrates. On what grounds might it be plausible to read Socrates' claims in the *Theaetetus* as hinting at Vlastos' distinction between knowledge-e and knowledge-c?

Remembering that Socrates claims in the *Theaetetus* that what 'befits knowledge' (*Theaet* 152c) is for it to be 'of what is' (*Theaet* 152c) and to be 'unerring' (*Theaet* 152c) provides direct textual evidence for Vlastos' contention that one of the senses in which Socrates uses the term "knowledge" is a sense that requires it to be infallible. This confirms that in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates takes the sense of the term

“knowledge” to be the same as at least one of those that Vlastos ascribes to him viz. knowledge-c.

What about understanding Socrates’ knowledge of how to form a judgement regarding the truth or falsity of his interlocutor’s belief (the knowledge involved in the practice of his midwifery – section 1.2) as knowledge-e? Knowledge-e, to quote Vlastos’ own words once more, is a cognitive state with regard to a proposition “p” that counts as knowledge when p ‘can be maintained in elenctic argument, while its denial cannot’.<sup>143</sup> Now, in the absence of being able to determine what propositions Socrates might have to know in order to practice midwifery, it is arguably difficult to determine whether, based on the text of the *Theaetetus*, we have reasons to attribute knowledge-e of these propositions to him.<sup>144</sup> However, there is one proposition that, if there were evidence that supported the claim that Socrates had knowledge-e of it, would be sufficient to confirm that Socrates possesses the knowledge involved in the practice of midwifery. This proposition is “I (that is, Socrates) know how to form a judgement as to the truth or falsity of my interlocutor’s beliefs”. If Socrates knew-e *this*, it would at least entail that he knew-e *that* he had the knowledge involved in the practice of midwifery. So, does Socrates ever engage in an elenctic argument with either of the dialogues’ other participants where those interlocutors try and commit Socrates to claims that contradict this claim but are unable to do so?

The answer is a flat “no”. Despite this manifestly being the case upon reading the *Theaetetus*, other reasons stand in the way of accepting this view. One of these is that there are no *elenctic* arguments

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p.18

<sup>144</sup> The problem that arises when trying to understand what propositions Socrates must know in order to practice midwifery is that knowledge involved in practicing a *technē* is knowledge of *how* to perform the unique *ergon* of the *technē* as we saw in sections 1.1 and 1.2. Even if “knowledge how” is reducible to propositional knowledge and Socrates understands this to be the case, to demonstrate this would require a lengthy digression which I do not have space to embark upon at this juncture.

in the *Theaetetus* because midwifery is the only method of investigation Socrates adopts in the text. This is a point that is confirmed by one of Socrates' statements at the end of the dialogue. There he declares that 'our art of midwifery tells us that that all of these offspring are wind-eggs and not worth bringing up' (*Theaet* 210b) which indicates that the investigation that comprises the main body of the text has been conducted using only the Maieutic Method. Furthermore the method of intellectual midwifery is different in several important respects to the elenctic method of argumentation that Vlastos thinks Socrates uses to establish that he has knowledge-*e* of various propositions.<sup>145</sup> Lastly, the puzzle of Socratic wisdom is generated by the inference from Socrates' claim to practice a *technē* (*Theaet* 149a4, a7, 150b6, c1, 151a) being contradicted by the inference from the claim that Socrates does not have any wisdom (*Theaet* 150c4, c6, d1-2), which entails that he has no knowledge (*Theaet* 145d-e). So, even if Socrates did maintain in an elenctic argument in the *Theaetetus* that he possessed the knowledge involved in midwifery, it would take almost nothing to show that Socrates does not have *knowledge-e* of this proposition. Socrates' interlocutor would need only to point to premises 4 and 5 in the schema at the opening of this section (which are paraphrases of Socrates' actual claims in the *Theaetetus*) to show that he has beliefs that contradict the claim that he knows how to reach a judgement

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<sup>145</sup> To see this is the case one need only note a few dissimilarities between the *elenchus* and midwifery. The method of midwifery is declared by Socrates to be a collaborative (*Theaet* 151e) effort to investigate topics of philosophical interest whereas the elenctic method is (generally) understood to be a combative (*Apol* 30e, *Meno* 80a) practice where Socrates riles up or perplexes his interlocutors. In the *Theaetetus* the maieutic method is only practiced on special initiates (*Theaet* 151b); those who are 'pregnant' (*Theaet* 148e), whereas in the *Apology* Socrates tells us that he practices the *elenchus* on 'anyone, citizen or stranger, who I think wise' (*Apol* 23b). Finally, the discovery that a claim of an interlocutor's is false as part of the practice of midwifery is declared by Socrates (with *Theaetetus*' agreement) to be 'progress' (*Theaet* 187a); by contrast, in elenctic inquiries, the discovery that an interlocutor's claim is inconsistent with their other thoughts is generally met with, if not outright contempt (*Meno* 94e), at least a degree of frustration during elenctic inquiry (*Euthphr* 11c-d).

regarding the truth or falsity of his interlocutor's beliefs. This would of course be sufficient to show that Socrates does not have knowledge-e of the proposition "I know how to reach a judgement regarding the truth or falsity of an interlocutor's beliefs".

## Chapter 3:

### 3.1: The Epistemic Structure of Mental Midwifery:

My proposed solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom is to argue for the view that premise 1 of the schema in section 2.3 viz. “if Socrates possesses a *technē* then Socrates possesses *epistēmē*” needs to be rephrased. I shall argue that it needs to be rephrased in a way such that the antecedent, “if Socrates possesses a *technē*”, instead reads “if Socrates possesses a *technē* other than intellectual midwifery”. This would make the whole of premise 1 read “if Socrates possesses a *technē* other than intellectual midwifery then Socrates possesses *epistēmē*”. My argument for this view has a basis in the textual evidence and we will come to this shortly. Firstly it is worth seeing how an argument that establishes this position would suffice to dissolve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

If premise 1 were reworded in the way I shall soon argue it should be then the antecedent would qualify which *technai* imply the possession of *epistēmē* in such a way that Socrates’ practice of mental obstetrics does not fulfil the condition of the antecedent. If this were the case then Socrates’ *technē* of midwifery would be the sole exception to the rule that possessing a *technē* entails possessing *epistēmē*; the rule that the original wording of premise 1 expressed. Hence the result of this would be that Socrates practices the *technē* of midwifery (*Theaet* 149a4, a7 150b6, c1, 151a, c) whilst not necessarily possessing *epistēmē*. The consequence would be that premise 3 (“Socrates possesses *epistēmē*”) would not follow from premises 1 and 2. If premise 3 does not follow from premises 1 and 2 then (C) does not follow from premises 3 and 6. If (C) cannot be established then there is no contradiction and the puzzle of Socratic wisdom is dissolved. Before we can look at the rationale for rephrasing premise 1 we need to notice something about Socrates’ practice of midwifery. This is that, his

performance of his *technē* (his performance of the *ergon* of his midwifery) involves asking questions.<sup>146</sup>

Evidence of the view that performing the *ergon* of midwifery involves asking questions, firstly, is manifest throughout the *Theaetetus*. When practicing midwifery on his young protégé it is evident that throughout the text Socrates does nothing but ask questions.<sup>147</sup> There is further evidence that corroborates this claim. It takes the form of Socrates' explicit allusions to the fact that practicing midwifery (thus, performing the *ergon* of midwifery) involves asking questions of his interlocutor. Socrates makes the first of these comments when concluding his explanation of his *technē* of midwifery; there he says: 'I want you [Theaetetus] to come to me as one who is both the son of a midwife and himself skilled in the art; and try to answer the questions I shall ask you as well as you can' (*Theaet* 151c). Next, slightly further on in the text, just after Socrates presents Theaetetus with a view of the mechanics underlying perception (*Theaet* 156a-157c), Theaetetus hesitates to accept the view that Socrates presents to him (*Theaet* 157c). On hearing this reticence Socrates explains how he is not offering his own theory (because he is practicing midwifery on Theaetetus) (*Theaet* 157c) and tells his young interlocutor to therefore 'answer like a man whatever appears to you about the things I ask you' (*Theaet* 157d). To this Theaetetus replies 'All right, go on with the questions' (*Theaet* 157d). This passage therefore confirms that it is not only Socrates who understands performing mental obstetrics to involve asking questions. Following this, during another interruption in the conversation where Socrates declares that Theaetetus' first born has

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<sup>146</sup> I take it to be a fairly uncontroversial claim that when Socrates is claiming to practice midwifery, this entails that he is performing the *ergon* of that *technē*. It seems like a natural inference that performing some action or set of actions entails performing the function that that action or those actions serves or serve respectively.

<sup>147</sup> The only notable exception is the digression (*Theaet* 172c-178c) where Socrates explains the differences between the life of the philosopher and that of the public man at the request of Theodorus (*Theaet* 172c).

been fully delivered (*Theaet* 161a) Socrates claims that it is now time to perform the testing of Theaetetus' first born (*Theaet* 161a-b). What he claims this testing will involve is trying 'to get our answer out of Theaetetus, not to make any contribution of my own' (*Theaet* 161b). In all of the forgoing passages, Socrates' indication that he will be questioning Theaetetus is prefixed with a reminder that he is, in the discussion to follow, going to be performing the function of the philosophical midwife on Theaetetus. These passages taken together therefore strongly suggest that the activity the intellectual midwife engages in (the performance of the *ergon* of that *technē*) involves questioning the midwife's interlocutor. With this in mind let us now proceed to a review of the evidence that supports my proposed solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom.

Let us return again to a central passage from Socrates' explanation of his Maieutic Method:

'the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth. For, one thing which I have in common with the ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren of wisdom. The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is this, that God compels me to attend to the travail of others but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worthy of the name of wisdom.'<sup>148</sup> (*Theaet* 150c-d)

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<sup>148</sup> μέγιστον δὲ τοῦτ' ἐνὶ τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ τέχνῃ, βασανίζειν δυνατὸν εἶναι παντὶ τρόπῳ πότερον εἶδωλον καὶ ψευδὸς ἀποτίκτει τοῦ νέου ἢ διάνοια ἢ γόνιμόν τε καὶ ἀληθές. ἐπεὶ τόδε γε καὶ ἐμοὶ ὑπάρχει ὅπερ ταῖς μαίαις: ἄγονός εἰμι σοφίας, καὶ ὅπερ ἤδη πολλοὶ μοι ὠνείδισαν, ὡς τοὺς μὲν ἄλλους ἐρωτῶ, αὐτὸς δὲ οὐδὲν ἀποφαίνομαι περὶ οὐδενὸς διὰ τὸ μηδὲν ἔχειν σοφόν, ἀληθές ὀνειδίζουσιν. τὸ δὲ αἴτιον τούτου τόδε: μαιεύεσθαί με ὁ θεὸς ἀναγκάζει, γεννᾶν δὲ ἀπεκώλυσεν. εἰμὶ δὴ οὖν

In the above quotation, as I argued in section 1.2, the first sentence spells out the *ergon* of Socrates' *technē*: to distinguish his interlocutor's beliefs on the basis of their truth or falsity. More than this though, the thought this sentence expresses is that Socrates has the 'ability' (*Theaet* 150c) to perform this *ergon*. If one then looks carefully at the claim in the sentence that follows, what one can discover is that the reason Socrates has this 'ability' (*Theaet* 150c) is *because* he is barren of wisdom.<sup>149</sup> This entails that the relation between Socrates' capacity to practice the *ergon* and his barrenness is minimally one of compatibility; however, it also implies that there is an *explanatory relation* between them where the latter accounts for the former. Next, in the third sentence in the above quotation, we find out that it is not only Socrates' 'ability' (*Theaet* 150c) to practice the *ergon* of midwifery that is explained by his lack of wisdom. This time it is his performance of that *ergon* (his asking questions) that is explained by his lacking wisdom or knowledge. By claiming that 'The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me' (*Theaet* 150c) Socrates attributes his asking questions of his interlocutor (performing the *ergon* of midwifery, as we just saw) to his barrenness. So far then, we have discovered from the beginning of this passage that Socrates' 'ability' (*Theaet* 150c) to practice the *ergon* and his actually performing it are both accounted for by his lack of wisdom. These claims give us reason to conclude that Socrates' practice of the *technē* of midwifery is an exception to the rule that premise 1 states, and hence to qualify the antecedent of premise 1 in the way I suggested at the opening of this chapter. Why?

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αὐτὸς μὲν οὐ τι τι σοφός, οὐδέ τί μοι ἔστιν εὖρημα τοιοῦτον γεγονὸς τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς ἔκγονον

<sup>149</sup> 'The use of 'For' (*Theaet* 150c) here seems to confirm this claim ('For, one thing I have in common with ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren of wisdom') (*Theaet* 150c) (emphasis added).



It is because Socrates here explicitly claims that he has the ability to practice and actually perform the *ergon* of midwifery both *in spite* of the fact that he has no knowledge and indeed, *because* of this (*Theaet* 150c). This therefore gives us grounds for thinking that Socrates' lack of wisdom is, at a minimum, compatible with his capacity for practicing and actually performing the *ergon* of his *technē* of intellectual midwifery. Hence, we have reason to suppose that Socrates' *technē* constitutes an exception to the rule that possessing a *technē* entails possessing *epistēmē*. This provides a rationale for inferring that premise 1 should be reworded: "if Socrates possesses a *technē* other than intellectual midwifery then Socrates possesses *epistēmē*". Doing this, as we saw at the opening of this chapter, can solve the puzzle of Socratic wisdom. It implies that one should answer the question that the puzzle raises with the response: "Socrates does mean what he says, he lacks all wisdom".

However, having shown that there is a case to be made for the idea that Socrates practices midwifery without any knowledge, one must recognise that this makes his *technē* extremely atypical in this respect. Further to this view running contrary to one of the central aspects of the general notion of a *technē* I elucidated at the opening of this thesis, it also runs contrary to an important suggestion that I made as part of that exegesis. This was the hypothesis that I offered to explain one of Socrates' claims in the *Gorgias* (*Grg* 465a). It consisted in the idea that the practitioners of *technai* are able to give accounts of the causes of their performances of the *erga* of their *technai*. In section 1.1 I argued that the most plausible way of understanding the cause of a practitioner's performance of the *ergon* of their *technē* was to claim that it consists in knowledge of how to perform that *ergon*. My basis for maintaining this was the principle that "knowledge of how to do x, in this case how to perform the *ergon* of a *technē*, is a sufficient explanation of one's doing x where x = any action".<sup>150</sup> Now, the view

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<sup>150</sup> The term *aition* in Greek can be translated either cause or explanation. In the *Gorgias* passage where Socrates claims that

that Socrates' ability to practice and actually perform the *ergon* of midwifery is explained by his *lacking* all knowledge (*Theaet* 150c) contradicts the foregoing hypothesis. We are thus left with the task of explaining how it is that Socrates' barrenness can explain his ability to practice and actually perform the *ergon* satisfactorily. That is, we are left with the task of filling the explanatory gap left by the fact that Socrates' practice of the *ergon* of midwifery is accounted for by his *lack* of knowledge as opposed to his possession of it. For, if knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* normally accounts for a practitioner's ability to practice it and actually perform it (as the hypothesis maintains) then Socrates' barrenness explaining these features of his *technē* seems to make little sense.

Usefully, Socrates tells us exactly how this gap is filled when he tells us of the relation that subsists between his barrenness and his practicing midwifery (*Theaet* 150c):

'the reason of it [the fact that Socrates' barrenness explains his ability to perform and actually practice midwifery] is this, that *God compels me to attend to the travail* [μαιεύεσθαί με ὁ θεὸς ἀναγκάζει] of others but has forbidden me to procreate' (*Theaet* 150c) (emphasis added)

Before we go further, it is important to note here that in the italicised section in the preceding quote what Socrates explicitly claims is that 'God compels me to act as a midwife' (*Theaet* 150c). The result of this is that God's impelling Socrates to act as a midwife accounts for Socrates' barrenness explaining his capacity to practice and actually perform the *ergon* of midwifery. So this can explain why Socrates' *technē* is atypical in the way his comments at *Theaet* 150c indicate. However, simply deferring the explanation of this to God only raises a further question. Namely, how does God's compelling Socrates to perform midwifery

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practitioners of *technai* can give accounts of the causes of their performing the *ergon* of their *technai* the term 'cause' (*Grg* 465a) in the Greek is *aition*.

account for the fact that his barrenness explains his performing midwifery and possessing the ability to do so? What I will go on to suggest is quite speculative but hopefully it will be seen to illuminate the interpretation so far advanced.

### **3.2: God's Role in the Maieutic Method:**

Let us return, firstly, to an examination of the features of Socrates' *technē* that God's compelling Socrates' to act as midwife explains (*Theaet* 150c). These are, as we saw in the preceding section, the fact that his lack of knowledge accounts for 1) his performance of the *ergon* of midwifery and 2) his ability to practice the *ergon* (*Theaet* 150c). This amounted to the claim that one should understand Socrates to practice midwifery without the knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* (for his barrenness implies that he has *no* knowledge) and this fact implied that Socrates' *technē* was exceptional in that respect. The reason for this, as, likewise, we just saw, is that ordinarily one might maintain that one's ability to practice and actually perform the *ergon* of a *technē* is explained by one's possessing knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* of that *technē* (on the hypothesis offered in section 1.1). Hence, the epistemic structure of Socrates' *technē* is exceptional because it seems to leave an explanatory gap: a gap that must be filled with an account of how Socrates' lack of knowledge explains his performing and having a capacity to practice the *ergon*. Hence, what follows is that whatever fills this explanatory gap must play, at a minimum, *the same explanatory role* as the knowledge that ordinarily accounts for a practitioner's ability to perform and actually practice the *ergon* of their *technē*. Now, as we saw, this gap is filled by God's compelling Socrates to act as a midwife (*Theaet* 150c). So, minimally, God's divine coercive power to make Socrates act as a midwife must play the same explanatory role as the knowledge of how to perform the *ergon* of midwifery. In what way could it play such a role?

The answer that suggests itself is that God possesses the knowledge involved in practicing the *ergon* of midwifery and that this results in Socrates being compelled to perform the *ergon*. One possible way in which God's compelling Socrates to perform midwifery could explain Socrates' obstetric practice would be if God's knowledge of midwifery acts as the basis of the compelling force that ensures Socrates performs the *ergon*. If this is so, it would make God's command that Socrates perform the *ergon* the result of that which usually plays the same explanatory role of an (ordinary) practitioner's performance of their *technē* (on the hypothesis from section 1.1). That is, knowledge of performing the *ergon* of midwifery in God's mind could ensure Socrates is forced to practice midwifery.

Putting these pieces together the result of this interpretation is that Socrates' barrenness (*Theaet* 150c) explains 1) his performance of the *ergon* (his asking questions) (*Theaet* 150c) and 2) his 'ability' (*Theaet* 150c) to perform the *ergon* (*Theaet* 150c). This is explained by God's coercing him to act as a midwife (*Theaet* 150c) (performing the *ergon*). The way that I suggested this coercion could explain this is if God's compelling Socrates to perform the *ergon* were in turn accounted for by God possessing the knowledge involved in practicing the *ergon*. This would entail that God's order to Socrates was grounded in God's being in the same epistemic state that plays the explanatory role of accounting for the performance of the *ergon* of any *technē* on the hypothesis advanced in section 1.1. This would hence allow God's coercion to be explained by that which plays the same explanatory role as that which ordinarily plays it in the performance of the *ergon* of a *technē*. This interpretation therefore offers some kind of explanation of how Socrates' *technē* can be so atypical. Ultimately it is because God possesses the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery that Socrates can be the genuinely barren midwife of men's souls. If this is right it shows that Socrates' practice of the *ergon* and his ability to perform it can be explained whilst he himself lacks any knowledge.

Before we go further it should be noticed that the view I am presenting appears to recommend a very minimal role for Socrates in the practice of midwifery. For, if God possesses the knowledge of how to perform the *ergon*, one might think that this entails that God knows what questions Socrates should ask Theaetetus and perhaps delivers these questions into Socrates' mind, making Socrates act as a mouthpiece for God's own purposes. This would make Socrates nothing but a divine puppet that contributes little personally to the conversation beyond the use of his voice. Thankfully for those who would give a greater intellectual role to the character of Socrates himself in the *Theaetetus* there is some strong evidence that suggests that this is not the way that intellectual midwifery works.

The most compelling piece of evidence that confirms that Socrates and God *collaborate* in the practice of midwifery and that hence confirms the view that Socrates is not merely God's mouthpiece appears in his claim that 'it is I [Socrates], with God's help, who deliver[s] them [Socrates' interlocutors] of this offspring' (*Theaet* 150d-e). The fact that Socrates claims that it is with 'God's help' (*Theaet* 150d) (emphasis added) that he delivers the brain-children of his interlocutors confirms that Socrates should be understood as playing a greater role than that entailed by the mouthpiece model. For, on the mouthpiece model, Socrates is not just assisted by God but rather is directed or controlled by God. Other claims about the role of the divine in metal obstetrics also seem to hint at the conclusion that the mouthpiece model cannot be correct. For instance Socrates tells Theaetetus that he will be able to answer Socrates' question "what is knowledge" 'if God is willing, and you play the man' (*Theaet* 151d), indicating that God must allow Socrates' questions to Theaetetus to be answered but not that God forces certain questions to be asked. Something similar also seems to underlie Socrates' claim that 'all whom God permits are seen to make progress' (*Theaet* 150d). This claim seems to amount to the proposal that God does not use Socrates as a mouthpiece but that he must allow for Socrates to reach the judgment

that it is the function of his midwifery to produce *contra* the view that God directs Socrates to reach his judgement.<sup>151</sup>

So, this evidence disconfirms the mouthpiece view but that leaves one with a conundrum: how to make sense of the fact that God possesses the knowledge involved in midwifery while allowing that the practice is cooperative. I shall not now attempt to make sense of how this could be the case because I do not have sufficient space to conjecture as to how this might be possible. The suggestion that God possesses the knowledge involved with midwifery was intended only to further explain how Socrates' lack of knowledge is compatible with his barrenness, to offer this view some further credibility. The scope of this essay aims at trying to find a solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom and this I have achieved with my earlier suggestion that Socrates' barrenness and his midwifery are compatible. I therefore choose to leave the project of understanding the relationship between the possession of the knowledge in God's mind and Socrates' practice of midwifery to another time. Before I conclude however, I would like to offer some comments regarding what may have motivated Plato to attribute the source of Socrates' philosophical practice to God.

### **3.3: Exonerating Socrates and Divinising the Source of Platonic Doctrine:**

First of all I will argue that Plato's attribution of the knowledge involved in Socrates' philosophical method to God serves the purpose of further exonerating Socrates of one of the crimes that he is portrayed as defending himself against in the *Apology*. To suggest that Plato composed the *Theaetetus* to serve the purpose of further absolving Socrates of his apparent offences is not a new interpretation. However, what I bring to this eminently plausible view of the *Theaetetus* is the

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<sup>151</sup> This is what the 'progress' (*Theaet* 150d) Socrates here alludes to consists in as I argued in section 1.2.

suggestion that it is Plato's assignment of the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery to God that can serve this particular purpose.

The charge that Plato's ascription of the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery to God can be seen to exonerate Socrates of is not among those that Meletus brings against him (*Apol* 24b) but rather those brought against him publicly by his 'earlier accusers' (*Apol* 24b) such as, Socrates claims, Aristophanes (*Apol* 19c). This is the charge that 'Socrates is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse argument the stronger and teaches these same things to others' (*Apol* 19b). In the *Apology* Socrates tells a story so as to explain the 'origin of this slander' (*Apol* 21b) that he claims will 'suffice as a defence' (*Apol* 24b).

At the opening of this story Socrates tells the gathered demesmen of Athens that his friend Chaerephon went to the Delphic Oracle to ask if any man was wiser than Socrates, at which the reply came that there was not (*Apol* 21a). After explaining that Chaerephon related this information to him Socrates then tells us of his reaction to the news, saying: 'When I heard this reply I asked myself: Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious of the fact that I am not wise at all; what does he then mean by saying that I am the wisest?' (*Apol* 21b). Socrates then proceeds to tell of how he interviewed a number of different persons to try and understand the oracle's pronouncement (*Apol* 21b-23b). Socrates tells of how he examined 'the politicians' (*Apol* 22a); 'the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs' (*Apol* 22a-b) and lastly the 'craftsmen' (*Apol* 22d) and concluded on each occasion that 'I am wiser than this man...he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know' (*Apol* 21d). Hence, as a result of these investigations, Socrates says, he came to the conclusion that:

'in fact the God is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said "This

man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.” So now I continue this investigation as the God bade me’ (*Apol* 23a-b)

So, by explaining that whatever wisdom or knowledge he possesses is ‘worthless’ (*Apol* 23b), Socrates exonerates himself of the crime of gaining knowledge about those things that presumably no one should; the ‘things in the sky and below the earth’ (*Apol* 19b). Further, lacking any knowledge of any value, of being aware only that he does not know various things (*Apol* 21b), Socrates has nothing *to* teach anyone. Hence, by explaining that the cause his philosophical practice in the *Apology* is his lack of knowledge or wisdom, rather than his possession of it, something he was moreover made to realise because of a divine fiat (*Apol* 23b), Socrates absolves himself of the crimes of his ‘earlier accusers’ (*Apol* 24b).

In the *Theaetetus* Plato goes one step further than this and not only makes Socrates’ practice of philosophical investigation, which is the upshot of his lacking any wisdom (*Theaet* 150c), a consequence of God’s injunction upon him to pursue a life of inquisition, as in the *Apology*, but a result of God’s direct intervention in Socrates’ life (*Theaet* 150c). As we have seen, it is plausible to understand God to possess the knowledge involved in maieutic practice in the *Theaetetus*. This being the case could be seen to serve the purpose of relieving any remaining suspicions in the minds of those who would seek to slander Socrates for possessing and disseminating heretical scientific knowledge. Those who were not convinced of Socrates’ tale in the *Apology* (*Apol* 22b-24b) would be further rebutted by the fact that in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates’ practice is a direct result of divine intervention in his life, for, this implies that whatever knowledge his accusers thought could be attributed to Socrates could not and, furthermore, that whatever knowledge they wished to infer that he had, was in fact divine in nature, being possessed by God.



Secondly I would like to suggest that divinising the source of Socrates' philosophical practice serves the purpose of consecrating the origins of Plato's own philosophical doctrines. To see why this could be the case one needs to begin by endorsing David Sedley's interpretation of the character of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, as I did in section 2.2. The important aspect of this interpretation for present purposes is Sedley's intriguing suggestion that Socrates in the *Theaetetus* presents arguments that 'cry out for Platonist interpretations' so that the practice of midwifery, conducted by Socrates in the text, leads Theaetetus, and hence, the reader, to accepting conclusions that form the basis of Plato's middle period metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>152</sup> By combining this view with my proposed solution to the puzzle of Socratic wisdom one can trace the progress of philosophical insight in the opposite direction. By supposing that God possesses the knowledge that allows Socrates to practice as a midwife and that, during that practice, as Sedley supposes, Socrates presents arguments that lead to the acceptance of Platonist conclusions, Plato not only sanctifies his esteemed master's philosophical practice but also the origins of his own thought. This, I suggest, may have motivated Plato to attribute the knowledge involved in Socrates' midwifery to God. By offering a retrospective look at the philosophical investigations that made Socrates so famous and crediting their origins to divinity Plato likewise credits his own philosophy to God.

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<sup>152</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.12

## Conclusion:

In this thesis I wish to have demonstrated that there is a serious case to be made for understanding Socrates' character in the *Theaetetus* to lack all wisdom or knowledge including, most controversially, that which is pertinent to the practice of his *technē* of midwifery. Further, I have aimed to show that all of the interpretations I have discussed do not offer compelling reasons to accept previously given answers to the question: "does Socrates possess knowledge or does he not?". Instead, I have proposed that from the available evidence, the most plausible answer to this question is that Socrates does not possess the knowledge involved in his philosophical practice and that rather, God is best recognised as possessing these insights.

From this interpretation two interesting results can be derived. Firstly, my interpretation has set the stage for a further investigation into the nature of Socratic methods of doing philosophy as Plato portrays them in the *Theaetetus*. This is primarily achieved by my suggestion that God is best understood as possessing the knowledge involved in practicing midwifery rather than Socrates. If this is the most viable way of solving the puzzle of Socratic wisdom given the textual evidence, more interesting interpretive work may now be conducted to show what other signs exist in the *Theaetetus* that point towards this reading being the correct one. Furthermore, new avenues of inquiry that may lead to a richer appreciation of Plato's motivations in composing the *Theaetetus* are now open for travel. The other result that follows is a consequence of the fact that, like two recent interpretations of the *Theaetetus* that I have discussed at some length in this thesis, my interpretation is 'close to the Academic sceptics' view'; although my own reading is closer to that of those ancient sceptics than either Sedley's or Giannopoulou's.<sup>153</sup> As Sedley points out, according to the Academic's position, Socrates in the *Theaetetus* 'admits to knowing

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<sup>153</sup> Giannopoulou, Zina, *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology*, p.46

nothing in *any* sense of “know”<sup>154</sup>. I hope to have shown that there are some convincing grounds for accepting this facet of the academic sceptic’s interpretation of the *Theaetetus*. Therefore I submit that there is a case for further reevaluating the degree to which the portrayal of Socrates’ methodology in the *Theaetetus* is a “sceptical” one. That is, for reassessing Socrates’ investigative procedure in the text as being conducted from a position of having no prior knowledge, not just of the topics under discussion in the dialogue, but of anything at all. My proposed interpretation therefore recommends a fresh exploration of both the role of the divine in Socrates’ philosophy and of ancient evaluations of Socrates’ philosophical practices.

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<sup>154</sup> Sedley, David, *The Midwife of Platonism*, p.31

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