

Socratic midwifery, Platonic inspiration

There are certain famous passages in literature which are so well known that, paradoxically, they become extremely difficult to read. The words are so familiar, their appeal so direct and powerful, that the reader, drawn in, does not ask the questions which would lead to a critical and explicit awareness of what is actually in the text. One such passage, I believe, is the fine and deservedly famous section of Plato's *Theaetetus* (148e–151d) where Socrates compares himself to a midwife and his method of dialectical questioning to the midwife's art of delivery.

It is a passage often referred to in accounts of Socrates but seldom examined in detail. The scholarly literature shows little recognition of the interesting and sometimes remarkable things that are stated or implied, commented upon or not commented upon, in this and in certain related texts, such as the equally famous speech of Diotima in the *Symposium*. Consider, for example (to make our start at a reasonably mundane level), the question whether the midwife comparison is to be attributed to the historical Socrates. Not a few scholars have accepted, with more or less confidence, that it is;¹ there are many more who, while they have not formally expressed a view on the historical point, must acknowledge in themselves the accuracy of Richard Robinson's observation that the image of Socrates as a midwife of ideas 'has so gripped our minds that we usually think of it as a feature of all the Socratic literature and of the real Socrates'.² This is high testimony to the power of the image. For the fact is, Plato makes it abundantly clear that the comparison is *not*, in any sense, to be attributed to the historical Socrates.

¹ Thus e.g., Taylor (1911) 148ff.; Burnet (1916/1929) 161; Cornford (1935) 28; Guthrie (1969) 397, n. 1, 444; also Humbert (1967) 90–3.

² Robinson (1950b) 4; compare Lacey (1971) 42: 'The comparison . . . is so apt for what seems to emerge as our general picture of Socrates that one feels tempted to say that if Plato had not written it we would have had to invent it.' Robinson himself (1953) 83–4, strongly dissents from the view he describes; like Maier (1913) 359–60, he thinks the midwife figure is a purely Platonic invention.

The conversation is so contrived that Theaetetus distinguishes, item by item, those elements of the comparison which are familiar to him because they are common gossip about Socrates and those which are not. He has heard what sort of questions Socrates is accustomed to ask (148c); that Socrates is the son of a midwife with the astonishingly appropriate name Phainarete, 'she who brings virtue to light' (149a);³ that he has an extraordinary way of reducing people to perplexity (149ab). Further he knows that the art of midwifery is reserved for women who are past the age for having children themselves (149bc). He has not, however, heard that Socrates is following his mother's art of midwifery when he asks his questions and induces perplexity. He has not heard this for the good reason that Socrates has not let it be known and would not like Theaetetus to make a public accusation of it either (149a). Nor did he know that midwives pride themselves on being the best matchmakers – again for the good reason that they are reluctant to practise this skill for fear they will be accused of pandering (149d–150a). Such concern to tell us exactly which details of the comparison a young man could be expected to know already can have no other motive than to sift fact from imagination, putting Socratic midwifery firmly in the realm of the imaginary.

It must, then, be the power of the image, its striking one as so absolutely the 'right' representation of what Socrates does, that blinds people to Plato's explicit sign-posting and convinces them that this was how Socrates himself viewed his role as educator of the young.⁴ The image has indeed great power – one may surmise that it touches certain chords in the reader's

³ As remarked by Guthrie (1969) 378, n. 1, this combination of biographical details takes some believing but appears to be true. 'Phainarete' was in use as a name and (if it is independent evidence) is again given as the name of Socrates' mother at *Alc.* I 131e.

⁴ It is true that the authors cited in n. 1 (Humbert excepted) find outside support for their view in a phrase that occurs in Aristophanes' *Clouds* 137, where one of Socrates' students complains that a sudden noise at the door has caused the miscarriage of a newly discovered idea (φροντίδ' ἐξήμβλωκος ἐξηυρημένην): supposedly, this is a fifth-century allusion to Socrates' use of the midwife figure, confirming its historicity. But, as a recent editor of the play observes (Dover (1968) xlii–xliii), if the midwife figure was so important and well known that the single word ἐξήμβλωκος would suffice for a humorous allusion (ἐξαμβλοῦν is used at *Tht.* 150e but Aristophanes ends his phrase with ἐξηυρημένην rather than a term appropriate to conception and the following lines produce no supporting terminological anticipations of the Platonic Socrates), it is surprising that there should be no trace of it in Plato's representations of Socrates before a late dialogue like the *Theaetetus*. Given that verbs such as τίκτειν and γεννᾶν were freely used to speak of giving birth to something in metaphorical senses, it is simpler to explain the joke of an intellectual miscarriage as a humorous twist on talk of giving birth to an idea (metaphors of mental birth and productivity are found, admittedly not earlier than the *Clouds*, in Cratinus, *Pytine* frag. 199 Kock, Ar. *Frogs* 96, 1059; cf. Xen. *Cyr.* v.4.35, where a soul is pregnant with a thought).

Guthrie (1969) 444 finds additional support in Xenophon's portrait of Socrates as a pander (*Symp.* 3.10, 4.56–60; cf. also 8.5 and 42). But (a) Socrates' pandering turns out to mean that he makes people attractive and agreeable to others – a far cry from intellectual midwifery; Xenophon goes on

own psyche – but the question we have to ask is why, given that the midwife figure is not historical, Plato should have chosen to develop it for this particular dialogue. We shall find that the answer lies, first, in some pointed contrasts with the treatment of related themes in other dialogues (notably the *Meno* and *Symposium*), and second, in the design of the *Theaetetus* itself: the midwifery passage prepares us for a highly important feature of Part I of the dialogue, the like of which is not to be met with in Plato's work elsewhere. ||

The necessary background to the picture of Socrates as midwife, without which the whole elaborate fancy would lose its sense, is, of course, the metaphor of the mind giving birth to ideas it has conceived. The compelling naturalness of this image is a matter of common experience and needs no argument. But it can be taken more or less seriously. At a superficial level it is a metaphor like any other, based on a sense of resemblance between physical and mental creativity. The resemblance seems so fitting, however, so familiar even, as to invite the thought that the metaphor corresponds, in some deeper sense, to psychological reality. The response it evokes is more like recognition than ordinary appreciation, a recognition of an aspect of one's own experience which may not be fully acknowledged. It is not only that we do often represent the originating of thoughts in terms of parturition, but that a significant emotional charge attaches to the idea that the mind is no less capable of conception and birth than the body of a woman. To take the metaphor seriously is to recognise it as embodying an important part of the meaning that the creative process can have for someone. In Plato's case, that his seriousness was of this order is something to be felt rather than proved, but felt it can be in the sustained use he makes of the imagery both here and in the *Symposium*, where the idea of mental pregnancy and birth is central to Diotima's discourse on love; but the development it receives is interestingly different from, even antithetical to, the *Theaetetus*.

(*ibid.* 61–4) to describe something akin to the academic matchmaking of *Thr.* 151b, but the activity is ascribed to Antisthenes rather than Socrates and its purpose is quite different from that which guides Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. And (b) the pandering which Socrates practises in Xenophon's *Symposium* is in the *Memorabilia* (11.6.36–9) an art he learned from Pericles' mistress Aspasia; now there was a dialogue *Aspasia* written by the Socratic philosopher Aeschines of Sphettus in which Socrates presented Aspasia as his instructress in much the same kind of educative pandering as Xenophon describes (which would, of course, be entirely appropriate to the figure of a great courtesan), and there is reason to believe that Xenophon's Socratic pandering is simply his development of this Aeschinean theme, with borrowings from Plato's *Symposium* and even from the *Theaetetus* itself: cf. Ehlers (1966) 63ff. These are not the materials to make history with. Neither Aristophanes nor Xenophon offer anything that could reasonably be thought to outweigh Plato's own dramatic indications that the midwife figure is not historical.

Diotima's thesis is that 'all men are pregnant both in body and in soul, and when they come of age our nature desires to give birth; it cannot give birth in anything ugly, only in what is beautiful' (206c), and this desire to give birth in what is beautiful is love (206e).⁵ Notice the strange reversal: the pregnancy is the cause, not the consequence, of love; and the birth is love's expressive manifestation. Although Diotima speaks of 'our nature', it is a male pregnancy she is describing, and the birth is the lover engendering offspring, at the physical level in bodily union with a woman, at the spiritual level in artistic and intellectual creation of every kind but most especially in passionate communion with a beautiful boy, who inspires his lover to deliver himself of discourses on virtue and other educative topics (208e–209e, 210a ff.). In short, at either level pregnancy precedes intercourse, because birth and intercourse are imaginatively equated. So striking a reversal could only be contrived in a realm of imagination and metaphor, but for that very reason it may reveal something about Plato's mind. To this we shall return.

Meanwhile, it is to be remarked that in the *Symposium* the great lover in the spiritual sense is Socrates himself, as we learn from Alcibiades' speech in his praise. It is Socrates whose talk with the young is rich with images of virtue (222a) and productive of improving effects (216b–217a), he therefore who is most fruitfully pregnant, while it is not Socrates but Beauty, present in the boy, who has the midwife's office of relieving travail (206d). In keeping with this, the *Symposium* envisages none but worthy children of the mind, namely, wisdom and the other virtues (209a, 212a), embodied in (and promoted by) a lover's improving discourses (209bc), advances in practical or theoretical knowledge (209a with 197ab, 210d), or the protreptic force of poetry and laws (209a, de).

What a change to move to the *Theaetetus* and find Socrates barren, like other midwives (150cd).⁶ The youth has the pregnancy (how he got to be

⁵ The vocabulary allows no backing away from the implications of the metaphor, for although in its literal sense *τίκτειν* (to beget or give birth to) is commonly used of the father no less than the mother (cf. LSJ *s.v.*), *κυεῖν* (to have conceived, be pregnant) is not. What is withdrawn is the initial suggestion that all men are pregnant in soul as well as body (cf. 209a). Nevertheless, the idea of paternal pregnancy arouses resistance in some readers, e.g., Clay (1975) 124–5, arguing against Vlastos (1973) 21 with n. 59; according to Clay, the meaning of *κυεῖν* here is simply human fecundity or ripeness (similarly Robin (1933) 16–17). Clay refers for support to the midwifery passage of the *Theaetetus*. But clearly, to deny that *κυεῖν* in the *Theaetetus* means to be pregnant is to refuse to accept that the metaphor of midwifery is the metaphor it is; the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for Diotima's imagery in the *Symposium*.

⁶ Unlike Artemis, the virgin goddess of childbirth, the ordinary midwife has not always been barren – being human, she needs first-hand experience of childbirth if she is to help others (149bc). Some have inferred, therefore, that Socrates too had once been fruitful; thus the anonymous Academic

pregnant is left as mysterious as in the *Symposium*); Socrates merely helps to bring forth his conception. Correspondingly, not all a young mind's offspring are worthy to be reared. Socrates' most important task, and one that has no analogue in ordinary midwifery, is that of testing whether the thought-product he has delivered is genuine and true or a false counterfeit, a 'wind-egg' with no life in it (150ac, 151cd, 151e, 157d, 160e–161a, 210b).

There can be no doubt which of the two representations of Socrates is more appropriate to the Socratic method as that is practised in the *Theaetetus*, especially its first part. (That it is primarily [Part I](#) of the dialogue which the midwifery section introduces is clear from this, that reminders of the comparison between the Socratic method and the midwife's art recur at intervals throughout [Part I](#) (151e, 157cd, 160e–161b, 161e, 184b) but not again until the brief concluding remarks which bring the dialogue to a close (210bd). The discussion in Parts II and III makes no pretence to exemplify Socrates' art of midwifery; the definition in Part III is not even, strictly speaking, Theaetetus' own || conception but a view which suddenly comes to mind as one that he heard someone else put forward (201c).) The *Symposium* presents a middle period Socrates, argumentative still but with positive doctrine of his own or learned from Diotima. The *Theaetetus* starts by introducing Socrates as a lover of young Athenians, in contrast to Theodorus who would not like to be thought susceptible to beauty (143de; cf. 146a, 185e, 210d), but on its own this is no more than a trait from the early dialogues brought in to help with the scene-setting (cf. e.g., *Chrm.* 154b ff., *Lys.* 223b, *Prt.* 309a, *Grg.* 481d, *Meno* 76b; cf. *Symposium* 216d), after which it virtually drops out of view. The midwife figure signals a return to the aporetic style of those early dialogues and to the Socratic method which is the substance of that style.⁷

So much is clear. Less obvious, perhaps, is the survival into the *Theaetetus* of a devalued version of the *Symposium*'s sexualised view of teaching – devalued in that it has become separated from the metaphor of mental conception and birth and is now associated with sophistic education in pointed *contrast* to Socrates' own approach. The first hint of this development comes in the argument with which Socrates overrules Theaetetus'

commentator on the dialogue whose work has been preserved on papyrus from the second century AD (Diels and Schubart (1905) 54.2–13; Schmidt (1881) 96; Taylor (1926) 324, n. 2. A better view is that of Campbell (1883) 28: 'This point is dropped in the comparison: unless Plato means to hint that the art of Socrates was superhuman.' For Socrates says quite clearly that he has never given birth (150cd). By the same token, the anonymous commentator 57.15–42 and others are wrong to treat the *Symposium* and *Theaetetus* together as constituting a coherent complex of ideas: Taylor (1911) 149–51; Burnet (1916/1929) 161; and Guthrie (1969) 397, n. 1, 444; also Bury (1932) 110; Robin (1933) 174–5.

⁷ On the Socratic method in the *Theaetetus* I may refer to [chapter 1](#) above.

surprise at the inclusion of matchmaking among the skills of the ordinary midwife. Taking a thoroughly agricultural view of marriage, Socrates maintains that knowledge of cultivating and harvesting is inseparable from, belongs to the same field of competence as, knowledge of what seeds to plant in what ground; hence the midwife, who is the harvester of human crop, is the best person to tell which man should sow his seed in which woman in order to produce the best children (149de). Pure invention, as we have already seen, but why? Simply to provide Socrates with an analogue for one of his own practices. It being part of a midwife's job to discern who is pregnant and who is not (149c), when he thinks that a young man who has come to him has no need of his assistance because he is not pregnant and has no conception for him to deliver, he kindly arranges to 'marry him off' to Prodicus or some other suitable teacher, so that the youth can receive the marvellous benefits of his instruction (151b; cf. *Lach.* 200d). The ironical implication, which Socrates refrains from spelling out, is not kindly: an empty mind which has no conceptions of its own (cf. 148e) is fitted only to be sown with another's seed. As for Prodicus, a 'marriage' arranged with him would be a 'good match' both in the conventional sense, since Prodicus stood high in popular esteem,⁸ and also, one suspects, because the ideas he implanted in the young man's empty mind would be correspondingly empty and anodyne.⁹

⁸ Cf. Dover (1968) lv: 'Prodicus was the most distinguished and respected intellectual of the day, and achieved in his lifetime . . . something like the "proverbial" status of Thales' – this on the evidence of comedy and other sources, though missing the irony in the present passage.

⁹ Prodicus is the sophist whom Plato names most often in passing references but discusses least. Nowhere are his views accorded serious treatment. His trite and unoriginal moral fable on the Choice of Heracles is briefly mentioned (*Symp.* 177b; cf. *Prt.* 340d), but it was Xenophon who thought its content worth preserving (*Mem.* 11.1.21ff.). His speciality, the drawing of excessively neat distinctions between closely related words (on display at *Prt.* 337ac), is referred to in the dialogues with dismissive irony and seldom found relevant to any matter of real philosophical substance (*Chrm.* 163bd; *Prt.* 358ab, de; *Euthyd.* 277e–278a with 278b; *Meno* 75e; *Lach.* 197bd is hardly more favourable, *Prt.* 340a ff. is parody, and at *Cra.* 384bc Socrates relates how Prodicus' one-drachma show-lecture did not entice him to enroll for the fifty-drachma session it was designed to advertise). Opinions have differed on what is to be made of Socrates describing himself as Prodicus' pupil (*Prt.* 341a, *Meno* 96d; for discussion, with further references, cf. Bluck (1961) 400–1; Guthrie (1969) 222–3, 275–6), but both passages are highly ironical and it is irony without a trace of respect. There is no respect, either, in the portrait of Prodicus in the opening scene of the *Protagoras* (315c–316a), where the sophist keeps himself wrapped up in bed in a disused storeroom, as if unable to compete with his rivals discoursing outside, and the booming of his bass voice in the small space makes his words too indistinct for Socrates to catch any sense from them (!). This is cruel, but in our dialogue too Plato regards it as a mark of a mean and captious mind to insist on linguistic exactitude unless some serious purpose requires it (164cd, 165a, 166c, 168bc, and esp. 184c; cf. *Plt.* 261e). A couple of further references to Prodicus' ideas merely reinforce the impression of mediocrity (*Euthyd.* 305c, *Phdr.* 267b); Plato says nothing of Prodicus' views on the origins of religion, which sound more interesting but are not easy to reconstruct from the confusion of later doxographical material (cf. Guthrie (1969) 238ff.). On the whole, it is hard not to concur with Plato's implied judgement of the man.

Here, then, are two contrasting notions of education. The sophist treats his pupil as an empty receptacle to be filled from the outside with the teacher's ideas. Socrates respects the pupil's own creativity, holding that, with the right kind of assistance, the young man will produce ideas from his own mind and will be enabled to work out for himself whether they are true or false. Like childbirth, the process can be painful, for it hurts to be made to formulate one's own ideas and, having done so, to find out for oneself what they are worth (151a, c); many turn on Socrates in angry resentment at seeing some nonsense they have produced exposed by him (151a, cd). But the other side of the coin is the progress that can be made this way, progress measured not only by the valuable truths found within oneself and brought to birth (150de),¹⁰ but also by the accompanying growth in self-knowledge, the awareness of what one knows and does not know (210bc). Self-knowledge is the benefit peculiarly associated with the Socratic method, and Theaetetus is already dimly aware that he is in travail with a conception of what knowledge is (151b with 148e). Orthodox teaching, even when it is a reputable man like Theodorus (cf. 143de) rather than Prodicus giving the instruction, does not have the same effect, save *per accidens*, because the thoughts imparted to the pupil are not his to begin with and do not have their roots in his experience and attachments.

This contrast, between putting ideas into the pupil's mind and drawing them out from within, is not new in Plato. It is the key contrast in the *Meno's* exposition of the theory that learning is recollection (cf. 81e–82a, 82b, e, 84cd, 85bd). Many have assumed, accordingly, that the midwife figure is a continuation or reworking of that theory, or at least that it casts middle period shadows on the argument ahead by alluding, right at the outset of the inquiry, to the theory of recollection and the philosophical doctrines associated with it.¹¹ Surprising as that would be in a dialogue which shows every sign that Plato intends to make a fresh start on fundamental questions in epistemology, it can be seen to be incorrect from a careful reckoning of differences. ||

The *Meno's* theory that learning is the recollecting of knowledge possessed by the soul before birth stands or falls by the contention that *any* soul, throughout its embodied life, has true opinions within it which can

¹⁰ 150d7–8 speaks only of 'many fine things' brought to birth, but it is not in the spirit of the passage for Socrates to describe in such terms ideas which are false (cf. 151d), and their truth is in fact certified at 150e7.

¹¹ Plutarch, *Quaest. Plat.* 1000DE (cf. Olympiodorus, *In Plat. Phaed.* 159.1–3 Norvin); the anonymous commentator 47.31ff., 55.26ff.; Proclus, *In Plat. Alc. I* 28.16–29.3 Creuzer; Peipers (1874) 232ff.; Schmidt (1881) 99; Cornford (1935) 27–8; Robin (1935) 72; Gulley (1954) 200, n. 1.

be elicited by the right kind of questioning; hence the test case in which Socrates' questions lead an uneducated slave to the solution of a mathematical problem (82a ff.). The *Theaetetus* makes no such general claim, since, as we have seen, not all souls conceive, and even those that do are not necessarily pregnant at all times (cf. 210bc). The *Meno* appears to hold, further, that all knowledge is to be gained by recollection, from within (81cd, 85ce). There are interpretative problems about how this is to be taken, but, once again, the *Theaetetus* is more modest: it is not said or implied that all truths, or all knowable truths, are to be got from within, only that many important ones are delivered by Socrates' skill (150d), and nothing at all is indicated as to how these might become *knowledge*. That would prejudice the discussion to come, while any hint that Socratic midwifery could encompass all (knowable) truths would be inconsistent with one of the more positive of later results, that perception, the use of the senses, is necessary for knowledge of various empirical matters (185e, 201b) and in some cases even for mistaken judgements about them (193a–194b). Thirdly, the theory of recollection was introduced in the *Meno* (80d ff.) to meet a puzzle about seeking to know what one does not know (how is this possible unless one knows what one is looking for, in which case how can inquiry be needed?): now the same problem, or a closely related puzzle about knowing and not knowing the same thing, is very much alive in [Part II](#) of the *Theaetetus* (188a ff.); yet not only is no connection drawn with Socratic midwifery but Plato at once discounts as beside the point any solution which appeals, as the *Meno* does, to intermediate internal states like learning and forgetting (188a). Add, finally, that the *Theaetetus* has nothing to say in these contexts about the soul existing independently of the body and it is clear that the bolder claims which accompanied the inner/outer contrast in the *Meno* are withdrawn in the later work.¹²

The fact is, the doctrine of recollection served at least two purposes for Plato. It offered the beginnings of a general theory of knowledge which would tie in logically with other central doctrines of his middle period philosophy such as the independence and immortality of the soul and the Theory of Forms (cf. *Phd.* 76d–77a). At the same time, in the *Meno* at least, it was, more specifically, a theory of the Socratic method, designed to

¹² Others who agree that the midwife figure does not allude to recollection use the argument that conceptions in the *Theaetetus* may be false, which recollections cannot be, at least so far as concerns the theory of recollection in the *Phaedo* (72e ff.) and *Phaedrus* (249b ff.) where what is recollected is (knowledge of) Forms (Robinson (1950b) 4; Hackforth (1957) 128–9; McDowell (1973) 116–17). This is true, but I do not emphasise the point because in the *Meno* the term 'recollection' covers the whole dialectical process leading up to successful recollection of a correct answer, in which process the eliciting and testing of false opinions has an essential part to play (cf. *Meno* 82e, 84a).

explain how the dialectical process of eliciting an interlocutor's beliefs and testing them for consistency need not be wholly negative and destructive; if the discussion is pursued with sincerity and determination, Socratic inquiry can lead to knowledge. Now our *Theaetetus* passage confines itself to aspects of the Socratic method and, as we have seen, its claims are carefully limited. So far from the midwife figure drawing into the dialogue ideas pertaining to Plato's middle period theory of knowledge, this is put into abeyance and a fresh start prepared by the return to the style and method of the early dialogues. Even on the method itself the *Theaetetus* is cautious: unlike the theory of recollection, the metaphor of conception and birth offers no assurance that the answer sought is already within us waiting to be found. Theaetetus' answers to the question 'What is knowledge?' all fail, and the dialogue is content to leave him empty and conscious of his own ignorance. He will be the better for this, intellectually and morally, but Socrates holds out no definite prospect that he will become pregnant again, still less that he will ever really know what knowledge is (210bc).¹³ The only assurance the *Theaetetus* has to give is on the value of the self-knowledge to which Socratic inquiry leads.

So far, what is distinctive about the midwife figure, when the *Theaetetus* is compared with the *Meno* and *Symposium*, is its restraint. The passage presents a method of education which is at the same time a method of doing philosophy, and does so in a way that avoids, and seems designed to avoid, metaphysical commitments. It goes over some of the same ground as the theory of recollection in the *Meno*, emphasising again the contrast between putting ideas into a pupil's mind and drawing them out from within, but the positive doctrine that Plato had once built on this contrast is conspicuously left out. And Socrates himself, instead of being a mouthpiece for Platonic views, is restored to something like his original role as the man who knows nothing on his own account but has a mission to help others by || his questioning. All this can be understood as a move 'back to Socrates' for the purpose of a dialogue which is critical in intent and deliberately restrained in its positive commitments.

Yet things are not quite the same as they were in the early, Socratic dialogues. The characteristically Socratic procedure of subjecting the interlocutor's ideas to critical scrutiny is now preceded by the process of bringing his conception to birth, and the description and dramatic display of this process is where the midwife figure exhibits its major innovations. It is not

¹³ Contrary to the opinion of Proclus, *In Plat. Alc. I* 28.4–8, that after cleansing Theaetetus of false opinions Socrates lets him go as now being capable of discovering the truth by himself.

simply that the conception may prove to be genuine and true (that possibility was not ruled out in the early period),¹⁴ nor that if the conception is false, it is well to see it for the nonsense it is and be rid of it. These are but the end-results of a process which begins with Socrates awakening or allaying perplexity, and perplexity (*aporia*) is the sign of a conception struggling to be born (148e, 151ab). Where earlier dialogues had valued perplexity merely as a necessary step towards disencumbering someone of the conceit of knowledge (*Ion* 532bc, 533cd, *Hp. mi.* 369ac, *Euthphr.* 11bc, *Lach.* 194ac, 200e–201a, *Chrm.* 169c, *Lys.* 213cd, *Prt.* 348c, and esp. *Meno* 72a, 80ad, 84ad), the *Theaetetus* treats it as a productive state, the first stirring of creative thought.

With this difference goes another. Socrates' earlier interlocutors, once they have grasped what is asked of them, are prompt enough to produce a definition,¹⁵ after which Socrates proceeds immediately to testing and refutation. Theaetetus, however, begins in doubt and perplexity about answering the question 'What is knowledge?' (148be), and has to be encouraged to formulate a reply (151d), which he manages to do only with hesitation and expressions of uncertainty:

Well, then, *it seems to me* that one who knows something perceives what he knows, and knowledge, *at least as it looks at the moment*, is simply perception. (151e)

Socrates responds, quite in his old manner, by announcing his intention that the two of them should now set about testing whether the definition is genuine or a wind-egg. But then he checks himself¹⁶ with the remark that Theaetetus has come out with the same view of knowledge as was held by Protagoras (151e) – and there begins the long process of drawing out the epistemological implications of the thesis that knowledge is perception.

¹⁴ Robinson (1953) 83–4, describes the midwife figure as a subterfuge to allow the mature Plato to present in a constructive light the essentially destructive Socratic method of dialectical refutation; cf. the similar view taken by Ryle (1966) 120–1. But for all his irony Socrates always did hope to find truth by his examination of other people's minds (*Ap.* 21b ff., *Crito* 46b, *Hp.mi.* 369ce, 372c, *Euthphr.* 11de, *Grg.* 453ab, 486e ff.); and when he found nothing but false pretensions to wisdom and knowledge he hoped, by exposing this, to enlist his interlocutor in a common search for truth and virtue (*Ap.* 29d ff., *Chrm.* 165b, 176ad, *Prt.* 348cd, 361cd, *Meno* 80d). The most that can be said on this score is that he goes beyond the early dialogues in declaring positively that he has brought many fine conceptions to birth (150d).

¹⁵ Charmides hesitates to say what *sōphrosunē* (temperance, modesty) is, but that is because he is supposed to have the virtue himself and fears it will look immodest if he describes the qualities involved (*Chrm.* 159ab).

¹⁶ That is the force of μέντοι at 151e8, which must be adversative; it is not here the affirmative 'Well now' and the like favoured by most translators and by Denniston (1954) 400. Otherwise the dramatic structure falls apart, since, as we are about to see, the testing is in fact postponed until 160e.

In the event, Theaetetus' child is not fully born, ready for testing, until 160e. This extended elaboration of a thesis – a *tour de force* without parallel in any other dialogue – is what the midwife figure is evidently meant to prepare us for.

It is not my concern here to study how, and with what justification, Socrates involves the thesis that knowledge is perception ever more deeply in the doctrines of Protagoras and Heraclitus. As he does so, however, he has occasion to induce more perplexity in Theaetetus (cf. e.g., 155cd, 158ab), and to alleviate it by taking the argument further. At one point (157c), when he has rounded off a particularly extravagant-seeming set of Heraclitean thoughts and asks how Theaetetus likes the taste of them, the young man is reduced to the puzzled admission that he does not know whether he should accept them as his own, still less can he tell whether Socrates actually believes the ideas he has been expounding or is just putting him to the test. To which Socrates replies, in a significant statement:

You are forgetting, my friend, that I neither know nor claim as my own anything of the sort. None of them are my offspring. It is you I am delivering, and that is why I chant incantations and offer you tastes from each of the wise, until I bring your opinion into the light of the world – when it has been brought forth, then will be the time to examine whether it is a wind-egg or quick with life. Until then, take heart and persevere with your answers, telling me bravely, whatever I ask about, exactly what appears to you. (157cd)

The reference is to the incantations and medicines which a midwife uses to bring on and alleviate the pains of labour (cf. 149cd). The equivalent in Socrates' art of spiritual midwifery is his arousing and allaying the pains of perplexity (151ab),¹⁷ thereby stimulating the further creative thought needed to bring to birth the opinion Theaetetus has conceived. That is to say, the entire process of elaborating Theaetetus' || definition of knowledge with the aid of medicinal tastings from Protagoras and Heraclitus is represented as one of discovering what Theaetetus' own opinion really is. This is clearly of great importance for understanding the logic of Socrates' treatment of the definition, but it is important also for the present discussion of the more psychological aspects of his procedure.

What Theaetetus has to discover is not, presumably, the right words to express his opinion – he managed that when he gave his definition – but whether he really does believe them. In philosophy at least, to know what one's opinion is, it is not enough to have formulated a proposition

¹⁷ The comparison of Socrates' dialectical questioning to incantations composed for psychiatric effect was a theme of the *Charmides* (156d ff., 175e, 176b; cf. *Meno* 80a).

in words; one must have thought through its implications in a systematic way, confronting it with other relevant beliefs and considering whether these require it to be withdrawn or revised. This is, of course, exactly what happens in a discussion conducted by the Socratic method,¹⁸ but, more than that, it offers a purchase for the somewhat elusive notion that the real reward of Socratic inquiry is a certain kind of self-knowledge.

This idea is most explicit at the end of the dialogue when the midwife image recurs and Socrates talks about the benefits of not thinking one knows what one does not know (210bc). The recommendation to become aware of the limits of one's knowledge, which will in turn limit the tendency to be overbearing to others and promote temperance (*sôphrosunê* – 210c2–3), is the Socratic version of the traditional Apolline precept 'Know thyself' (cf. esp. *Chrm.* 164d ff., but also *Ap.* 21b–23b, *Ti.* 72a, *Soph.* 230b, *Phlb.* 48c ff.). But whereas the inscription at Delphi was not a call to self-exploration but a god's reminder that man is limited and should think mortal thoughts, Socrates engaged his fellow men in the task of finding out for themselves what they knew and what they did not. And to discover the limits of one's knowledge in this sense it is necessary first to find out what one really believes. The opinion will need to be tested, but to have formulated it and thought through its implications and connections with other beliefs is already a step towards self-knowledge.

A further aspect of self-knowledge is deployed in the description Socrates gives (150e–151a) of what happens to certain of his pupils who will not acknowledge the debt they owe to his obstetric skills. It is entirely in the spirit of the traditional Greek notion of self-knowledge to expect them to recognise the part played in the birth of their ideas by Socrates and his divine patron.¹⁹ But unlike Theaetetus, who in the dialogue is well aware of the extent to which Socrates' assistance has contributed to his fecundity (210b), these youths take all the credit for themselves. The outcome of this sorry failure of self-knowledge is, first, that they leave Socrates prematurely, on their own initiative or under the influence of others, and second, that their further conceptions miscarry on account of the bad company they

¹⁸ See [chapter 1](#) above.

¹⁹ Socrates' special patron is usually Apollo (*Ap.* 23bc, *Phd.* 85b). Accordingly, Stallbaum (1839) 69 and Campbell (1883) 31–2 suppose that the reference of the masculine ὁ θεός in 150cd is to Apollo. On the other hand, a midwife's allegiance is to Apollo's elder sister Artemis, and at 210c Socrates and his mother are said to have their art of midwifery 'from God' (ἐκ θεοῦ), as if there was but one deity for the two of them to serve. ὁ θεός in Greek can refer to a goddess (cf. *Hdt.* 1.31.3, 105.4, 11.133.2, 11.82.1–2), but it would probably be better to say that the divinity in charge of midwifery is thought of in a fairly indeterminate, generic way and assumes masculine guise when the art is practised by a man on men.

fall into and the ones Socrates delivered for them are lost by bad nurture, since they value false counterfeits more than the truth.²⁰ (How can they value the ideas they owe to Socrates' midwifery if they do not want to admit that they needed his assistance? It is psychologically right that they would prefer to neglect and destroy them.) Only when their ignorance eventually becomes obvious to themselves as well as to others do they plead with Socrates to take them back, and if his 'divine sign' does not say 'No' to his resuming the association, as sometimes happens, then they make progress again. In other words, Socratic education can only be successful with someone like Theaetetus who is aware of, and can accept, his need for it; that much self-knowledge is an indispensable motivating condition, for always the greatest obstacle to intellectual and moral progress with Socrates is people's unwillingness to confront their own ignorance.

Self-knowledge, then, is not only the goal of Socratic education. It is also, right from the beginning, a vital force in the process itself, which involves and is sustained by the pupil's growing awareness of his own cognitive resources, their strengths and their limitations. That being so, it is all the more surprising (to return to the meaning of creativity) that no question is raised as to the origin of conceptions. Socrates gives no sign of interest in the matter and he seems not to expect the pupil to think about it either. Why should the recommendation to self-knowledge stop short at this critical point?

The inquiry is addressed, of course, to Plato. The metaphor of mental conception and birth is his and || he is responsible for the use made of it in the passage under discussion: his too is the emotional seriousness which the writing conveys. Why, then, is it that some conceive and others do not? Where do the conceptions come from? Even within the realm of metaphor the imagery invites these questions, but Plato forestalls the obvious answer, in the *Symposium* by placing the intercourse after the

²⁰ One such man is mentioned by name: Aristeides, son of Lysimachus (151a). Aristeides is one of the two youths whose education is discussed in the *Laches*, where Lysimachus and Melesias are pathetically anxious that their sons should make more of a name for themselves than they have managed to do (179cd). It emerges that the youths have already encountered Socrates and have come away full of praise for him (180d–181a), and the dialogue ends with some prospect that he will continue to take an interest in the question of their education; but it is implied that he will recommend a teacher rather than take charge of them himself (cf. 200d–201c). At all events, so far as we know Aristeides' career when he grew up was as undistinguished as his father's. Plato's reason for mentioning him in the *Theaetetus* is probably just to remind us of the *Laches* and of a young man whose dealings with Socrates led to nothing. (The pseudo-Platonic *Theages* 130ae fills out his story in some detail, but since the author gives an entirely different explanation for his departure from Socrates, namely, military service, the account can safely be set aside as a later invention.)

pregnancy, in the *Theaetetus* by setting up a contrast between the pupil conceiving for himself and impregnation by a teacher.

Some readers may think it inappropriate to press such a point. But it does seem significant that Plato should return time and again to sexual imagery for mental creativity without ever raising the question whether a conception does not need to be brought about by a metaphorical intercourse within the mind. The *Symposium* and *Theaetetus* are not the only dialogues in which this occurs. In the *Phaedrus*, where morally improving discourses are represented as a man's true sons, they are simply found within him, carrying a seed that will generate similar offspring in other souls (278ab; cf. 276b–277a). The *Republic* comes closer to what we are seeking when it describes an intercourse with the Forms which begets understanding and truth (490b; cf. the degenerate version at 496a, a marriage of unworthy persons with philosophy which begets sophistries), but the Forms are impersonal entities outside the mind. Perhaps the most revealing evidence comes from Plato's theorising about creative inspiration in such dialogues as the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus*.

Here he is very much alive to the part played by unconscious forces (as we would put it) but nearly always opposes this to the work of reason. Either ideas come in an uncontrolled eruption of inspired material, as in the case of the poet or seer, who is possessed, temporarily loses his reason and knows not what he says, or they are the product of reason (*Ion* 533e ff., *Phdr.* 244a–245a; cf. *Ap.* 22bc, *Meno* 99cd, also *Ti.* 71e–72b). The rigid 'either–or' character of this approach is obvious. For the most part Plato is unable, or unwilling, to envisage the possibility of a marriage or interaction between the two modes of mental functioning within a single mind. Yet if anything is clear in this area it is that some such interaction of intuitive inspiration and controlled thinking is a vital element in any kind of creative process. And in one quite exceptional passage, as highly wrought and inspired as any Plato ever wrote, he broke through to a realisation of this fundamental point. I refer to the account of philosophic madness in the *Phaedrus* myth (cf. 249b ff.), which essays to describe an interaction of reason and inspiration as intimate as could be wished.²¹ This is indeed exceptional, an exception so impressive as to confirm that our questions were on the mark. What Plato would never countenance, however, is that a very natural way to represent the creative interaction, especially if one is going on to use the metaphor of conception and birth, is the sexual imagery

²¹ The importance of the passage is remarked by Vlastos (1973) 27, n. 80.

of a marriage or intercourse between masculine and feminine aspects of the self.²²

We thus confront a 'blind-spot' in Plato. Ultimately, no doubt, it stems from a failure of self-knowledge in the area of his own creativity, but at this distance in time and with only his writings to go on, there is little hope of uncovering the cause. One may conjecture a connection with his need to resist allowing physical expression to the strong homosexual feelings which were so clearly part of his make-up.²³ Many readers have felt that a certain tendency to self-laceration over his own artistic creativity shows through in the *Republic* when Plato banishes poetry from his ideal commonwealth (cf. *Rep.* 607b, 608b); and there is the story that he burned his own poems after listening to Socrates (Diog. Laert. III.5, Aelian, *Var. hist.* II.30). But one may prefer to say simply that here and there in the dialogues, not least in the midwifery passage we have been discussing, we catch a glimpse into a dark corner of Plato's personality.²⁴

²² For a wise and jargon-free exploration of this difficult topic see Milner (1957).

²³ Clay (1975) 124, denies it can be known that Plato was homosexual. Certainly, the fact cannot be documented in a manner likely to satisfy a determined sceptic: who would expect it to be? It is no more, but also no less, than a conclusion to which most readers of Plato are irresistibly drawn. More important, it is a conclusion which, once accepted, must be central to any attempt at a sympathetic understanding of Plato's recurring preoccupation with the mysterious links, which at some level we all feel, between creativity and sexuality. This is amply clear from the very paper that Clay is criticising: Gregory Vlastos' brave and magnificent essay 'The individual as an object of love in Plato' (in Vlastos (1973)).

²⁴ This paper was prepared during the leisure generously provided by a Radcliffe Fellowship. I am grateful to the Radcliffe Trust for the tenure of the Fellowship and to University College London for allowing me to take it up. The paper itself benefited from comments by James Dybikowski, Malcolm Schofield, Richard Sorabji and Bernard Williams.