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SOCRATIC MIDWIFERY

In Plato's *Theaetetus* Socrates is portrayed as a midwife of the intellect. The comparison of Socratic questioning to midwifery had until recently been commonly attributed to Socrates himself. In 1977 M. F. Burnyeat published *Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration*, which transformed the way in which the dialogue has since been perceived. The author maintains that the midwife comparison is in no sense to be attributed to the historical Socrates.

The view that the midwife figure is a purely Platonic invention had been expressed before. Richard Robinson introduced it when drawing a sharp line between the philosophy of Socrates and that of Plato. Socratic dialectic was in his view destructive, Plato's constructive. In the *Theaetetus* Plato invented the figure of Socrates the midwife to accommodate the Socratic method to his own productive personality.¹ Similarly Gilbert Ryle in *Plato's Progress* describes the Socratic method as 'the rule-governed concatenations of questions, answerable by "yes" or "no", which are intended to drive the answerer into self-contradiction'. Consequently, he finds Plato in the *Theaetetus* 'sitting on the fence', representing Socratic dialectic as both 'elenctic and solution-hunting, as thesis-demolishing and thesis-establishing'; he dismisses the midwife figure as being self-contradictory.²

Burnyeat does not accept Robinson's and Ryle's limitation of Socrates to purely destructive dialectic. In his view Socrates always hoped to find truth by his examination of other people's minds; as evidence he quotes Plato's *Apology* (21b ff.), *Crito* (46b), *Hippias Minor* (369c–e, 372c), *Euthyphro* (11d–e) and *Gorgias* (453a–b, 486e ff.).³ He commits himself to this premiss in his attack on P. T. Geach.⁴ The latter in his analysis of the *Euthyphro*, Plato's early dialogue, criticises the Socratic rejection of examples, as an answer to questions of the form What-is-courage, What-is-knowledge, as a Socratic fallacy. Burnyeat deploys against him the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates' dismissal of examples and his insistence on the definition of knowledge has a positive role to play. He holds that the dialogue contains 'the most elaborate specimen we have of Socrates' dialectical method at work'.⁵ Geach himself invokes the *Theaetetus* in his article on the *Euthyphro*. He writes: 'How harmful the rejection of examples may be we see from the *Theaetetus*'.⁶ He follows Wittgenstein: 'When Socrates asks the question "what is knowledge?" he does not even regard it as a preliminary answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.'⁷ Burnyeat contends that Geach's criticism of 'the Socratic fallacy' is more akin to G. E. Moore than to Wittgenstein and presents 'an obstacle to a sympathetic historical understanding of the Socratic method itself'.⁸

¹ R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 83–4.

² G. Ryle, *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 119–21.

³ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 24 (1977), 16 n. 14.

⁴ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore', *Philosophy* 52 (1977).

⁵ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology', op. cit., 381.

⁶ P. T. Geach, 'Plato's *Euthyphro*, An Analysis and Commentary', *Monist* 50 (1966), 372.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958), p. 20. Quoted from Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology', op. cit. n. 4, 383.

⁸ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology', op. cit., 398.

When Robinson and Ryle treat the midwifery image as Plato's invention, they are driven by philosophical considerations; their presentation of the Socratic method as purely destructive is at stake. The tendency to look for the historical Socrates in Plato's early dialogues alone works their way. Burnyeat, who finds the Socratic method productive and detects the historical Socrates at work in the late *Theaetetus*, must look for other reasons for rejecting the Socratic provenance of the image. He claims that Plato himself erected sign-posts to make clear that the midwifery comparison is his device.⁹ In his view, section 148e–151d of the dialogue 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 maintains that this can have no other motive than to sift fact from fantasy, putting Socratic midwifery 'firmly in the realm of the imaginary'.¹⁰ If Burnyeat's thesis is to be judged on its merits, Plato's alleged sign-posts must be examined.

Socrates finds Theaetetus 'suffering the pains of labour' and asks him whether he has heard that he, Socrates, is the son of a midwife called Phaenarete. Theaetetus admits that he has (148e–149a). Burnyeat notes 'the astonishingly appropriate name Phaenarete, "she who brings virtue to light"', and although he does not dispute its historicity, he betrays his unease by cautioning the reader that 'this combination of biographical details takes some believing'.¹¹ And indeed, if Socrates' mother was a midwife and if her name was Phaenarete, Burnyeat's attempt to prove the Platonic provenance of the midwifery comparison would be jeopardised from the outset. Socrates, bent as he was on the quest for virtue and on arousing it in others through dialectic, could hardly have failed to compare such dialectic to the midwife's tools of delivery – dialectic as 'phaenarete' – especially given the importance mothers have for their children. Is there, then, any evidence that would confirm Phaenarete as historically authentic? From the *Life* of Socrates by Diogenes Laertius we may infer that nothing was known in antiquity that would disprove the testimony of the *Theaetetus*: 'Socrates was the son of Sophroniscus, a sculptor, and of Phaenarete, a midwife, as, among others, Plato says in the *Theaetetus*' (2.18). But far more important is the testimony of the *Alcibiades I*, a Platonic dialogue whose authorship is often disputed; if we do not accept Plato's authorship, the *Alcibiades I* offers an independent testimony.

Even if we accept Plato's authorship, we will find it hard to believe that Plato would have invented Phaenarete for the occasion. Socrates claims in the dialogue that he, the son of Sophroniscus and Phaenarete, is the only true lover of Alcibiades, the son of Cleinias (131e). That Cleinias was the father of Alcibiades is mentioned by Plato in the *Protagoras* (309c) and the *Gorgias* (481d) and amply authenticated by Thucydides (5.43.2; 52.2; 6.8.2; 15.2); Sophroniscus, the father of Socrates, is mentioned in Plato's *Laches* (180d), *Euthydemus* (297e) and *Hippias Maior* (298c). If we join those who reject Plato's authorship of the *Hippias Maior*, we have again an independent testimony that Sophroniscus was Socrates' father. In the *Alcibiades I*, quoted above, Socrates points out the unique relationship between himself and Alcibiades; that is why he refers – in the middle of the dialogue – to Alcibiades as the son of Cleinias and himself as the son of Sophroniscus and Phaenarete. The whole point of the passage would be lost, if Phaenarete were a fictional name.

Socrates asks: 'And have you also heard that I practise the same art?' Theaetetus answers: 'No, I certainly haven't.' Socrates has in fact kept it secret: 'It's one thing

⁹ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', op. cit., 7.

¹⁰ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', loc. cit.

¹¹ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', loc. cit.; n. 3, p. 14.

people don't say about me, because they don't know it. What they do say is that I'm very odd, and that I make people feel difficulties. Have you heard that too?' Theaetetus has (149a).¹² This is the first of the two sign-posts. In Burnyeat's view Theaetetus' ignorance and Socrates' emphasis on secrecy should make the reader alert to Plato's claiming the image as his own contrivance. But if the reader reflects at all on the passage, he will find good reason for Socrates' reticence. The midwife comparison underlines the divide between Socrates and his interlocutors. Socrates is accountable for the delivery, his interlocutors for the offspring. It takes Theaetetus, so similar to Socrates in every way (143e, 145b–d), to provide a subject on whom Socrates will openly employ the process. With others Socrates prefers to stand on an equal footing: 'I perplex others, not because I know the way, but because I am utterly perplexed myself.'¹³ That is an attitude conducive to involving others in the search for truth. Would Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Meno and others be willing to talk to Socrates if he approached them as a self-professed midwife of the intellect? In the *Protagoras* Socrates addresses his interlocutor: 'Do not imagine that I have any other interest in asking questions of you but that of clearing up my own problems as they arise...all men who have a companion are readier in deed, word and thought' (348c–d). The latter attitude is both more characteristic of Socrates as a practising philosopher, and more potent in eliciting response. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates is portrayed at the end of his career (142c); at the end of the dialogue he cuts short his discussion with Theaetetus, because he must present himself to the King Archon to face the indictment raised against him by Meletus (210d).

That Theaetetus was nevertheless not the only one to whom Socrates talked about his midwifery vocation may be inferred from Aristophanes' *Clouds* where Socrates' disciple, suddenly interrupted in his train of thought by heavy knocking on the door, exclaims: 'You have caused a miscarriage of my discovery.' When asked about the nature of the miscarriage, the disciple answers: 'It would be improper to talk about it with anybody but the disciples' (135–9). The parallel is telling. In the *Theaetetus* the term 'miscarriage' is reserved for an abortive mental offspring (150a), and Socrates here warns Theaetetus not to divulge the midwifery comparison (149a), probably out of habit, since they are surrounded by Theaetetus' young friends and Theodorus (146a–b). The textual affiliations lead the reader to detect here the historical Socrates, not Plato.

Drawing on Dover, Burnyeat maintains that Aristophanes cannot offer anything 'that could reasonably be thought to outweigh Plato's own dramatic indications that the midwife figure is not historical'. He argues that if the image were so important and well known as to provide Aristophanes with an opportunity for humorous allusion, it would be surprising 'that there should be no trace of it in Plato's representations of Socrates before a late dialogue like the *Theaetetus*'.¹⁴

I believe that Burnyeat may be challenged even on this point. As he himself observes,¹⁵ central to the midwifery image in the *Theaetetus* are the 'incantations' that serve Socrates as his midwifery tools: they are the Socratic dialectic. The comparison appears in the *Meno* (80a3) and more extensively in the *Charmides* (156d ff.). When Charmides is credited with temperance, Socrates submits him to dialectical questioning: 'If you have temperance in you, it must afford some perception from

¹² In quoting from the *Theaetetus* I follow McDowell's translation in the Clarendon Plato Series.

¹³ Plato, *Meno* 80a–c.

¹⁴ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', op. cit., 14 n. 4.

¹⁵ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', op. cit., 11 and n. 17, p. 16.

which you can form an opinion of what it is' (158e–159a). Similarly, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates first probes whether Theaetetus himself has experienced the acquisition of knowledge, and only then does he ask 'What do you think knowledge is?' (145c–146c). That is what Socratic midwifery is all about; to bring to light what is within and subject it to a test. The *Charmides* presents the substance of the midwifery art; the comparison of dialectic to 'incantations' that links the *Charmides* with the *Theaetetus* provides further a link between the art of midwifery proper and the associated art of matchmaking as presented in the *Theaetetus* and in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. But the latter must be discussed under the heading of Burnyeat's second sign-post.

The second sign-post: Socrates asks Theaetetus whether he knows that midwives are good at recognising pregnancy in women, that they can induce childbirth and alleviate pains by *incantations*, and that they can cause miscarriage when necessary. Theaetetus is familiar with all that. Then Socrates asks whether he knows that they are good matchmakers as well, and Theaetetus answers that he does not (149d).

Burnyeat, as we have seen, contends that this distinction between what Theaetetus knows and what he does not is contrived by Plato as a sign-post to claim the image as his own invention. But the passage itself offers no indication of such ulterior motives. Socrates again gives good reasons for Theaetetus' ignorance; midwives are reluctant to avow their skills in matchmaking for fear of being accused of procuring (150a). Socrates as the son of a midwife would be expected to know more about that aspect of it than a teenager from an aristocratic family.

Socrates' matchmaking consists in helping to find suitable teachers for young men who cannot benefit from his own dialectical skills: 'I've given away several of them to Prodicus, and several to other wise and gifted gentlemen' (151b). There is a telling parallel to this in Xenophon's *Symposium*, and Burnyeat, true to his thesis, must deny that it reflects the historical Socrates. He argues that Xenophon borrowed it from Plato's *Theaetetus*.¹⁶

Leaving other considerations aside for the moment, Burnyeat's contention seems to invite certain questions on chronology. The *Theaetetus* is commonly dated after the year 369 B.C., when Theaetetus was fatally wounded. Those who wish to see in Xenophon's *Symposium* echoes of Plato's *Symposium* date it after 385 – Dover goes further than that and dates it after 378 – but even they might find it hard to date it after the *Theaetetus*.¹⁷ Nevertheless, once mooted, the idea of Xenophon's borrowing from the dialogue deserves to be examined.

In Xenophon's *Symposium* Socrates offers pandering as his most treasured art: 'Are there not words that create ill feeling and others that conduce to friendliness?... Would not the good pander teach only the words that tend to make one attractive?... Would not the better pander make one attractive to many rather than to a single person?... If a person could render people attractive to the entire community, would he not satisfy the requirements of the ideal pander?' When all agree that pandering, thus formulated, is a highly laudable and desirable ability, Socrates adds that Antisthenes seems to him to be a man of just that sort; he had acted as pander between the host Callias and Prodicus and between Callias and Hippias (4.58–62). Although Burnyeat implies Xenophon's borrowing from the *Theaetetus*, he emphasises that Xenophon ascribes 'academic matchmaking' to Antisthenes rather

¹⁶ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', op. cit., 14 n. 4.

¹⁷ K. J. Dover, 'The Date of Plato's Symposium', *Phronesis* 10 (1965), 2–20, at p. 15; H. Thesleff, 'The Interrelation and Date of the Symposia of Plato and Xenophon', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 25 (1978), 168.

than Socrates.¹⁸ But Socrates in Xenophon's *Symposium* does not disclaim 'academic matchmaking'. He only aims a gibe at Antisthenes, for Callias' love of philosophy was superficial and the sophists were after his money. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* dispels any doubt about the ascription of 'academic matchmaking' to Socrates. Socrates there has 'made a point of finding out who in Athens are the great masters of various sciences' (2.16), and offers to introduce his interlocutor to them (3.14–16). Even Plato in his early dialogues testifies that 'academic matchmaking' is Socrates' concern. Socrates, in Plato's *Laches* (200d), recommends to Nicias other tutors than himself for his son. Furthermore, Plato's *Protagoras* as a whole may be looked on as an exercise in Socratic matchmaking. Young Hippocrates calls on Socrates to procure Protagoras as his teacher. Socrates takes him to Protagoras, arouses Protagoras' desire to become Hippocrates' teacher, and compels him to present his teaching credentials.

Dismissing the evidence of Xenophon's *Symposium*, Burnyeat points to the *Memorabilia* where Socrates refers to Pericles' mistress Aspasia, and maintains that the Socratic matchmaking in Xenophon is derived from the *Aspasia* of Aeschines of Sphettus.¹⁹ Although he does not specify his claim further, Burnyeat must be referring to the fragment of the work preserved by Cicero in *De Inventione*:

In a dialogue by Aeschines Socraticus Socrates reveals that Aspasia reasoned thus with Xenophon's wife and with Xenophon himself: 'Please tell me, madam, if your neighbour had a better gold ornament than you have, would you prefer that one or your own?' 'That one,' she replied. 'Now, if she had dresses and other feminine finery more expensive than you have, would you prefer yours or hers?' 'Hers, of course,' she replied. 'Well now, if she had a better husband than you have, would you prefer your husband or hers?' At this the woman blushed (51).

Aspasia now turns to Xenophon and questions him similarly, then she admonishes both of them:

You, madam, want to have the best husband, and you, Xenophon, want above all things to have the most excellent wife. So, unless you succeed in making yourselves better than any other husband and wife in the world, you will never attain what you regard as the best thing of all (52).²⁰

The fragment had been linked with Xenophon's *Memorabilia* before. Diels, in his article on the third book of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, while discussing an anachronism in Plato's *Menexenus*, contends that the Xenophon of the fragment is the Socratic Xenophon. This would imply a crass anachronism; but that is exactly what Diels wants; he needs a parallel to the *Menexenus* anachronism. He supports the conjecture by surmising further that Aeschines, in bringing together Xenophon and Aspasia, compliments Xenophon and that Xenophon returns the compliment by letting Socrates speak of Aspasia.²¹ Dittmar seems to have been so impressed by Diels' surmises that he includes the Aspasia passage of the *Memorabilia* (2.6.36) among Aeschines' fragments.²² The grounds on which Diels and Dittmar proceed are tenuous, but still a far cry from Burnyeat's contention that Xenophon's Socratic pandering is derived from Aeschines of Sphettus. Let us turn to the Aspasia passage in the *Memorabilia*.

¹⁸ M. F. Burnyeat, loc. cit.

¹⁹ M. F. Burnyeat, loc. cit.

²⁰ Tr. according to H. M. Hubbell's tr. of Cicero, *De Inventione* 51, 52, and G. C. Field's tr. of the fr. in *Plato and his Contemporaries* (1930), p. 151; cf. schol. of Victorinus ad. Cic. loc.

²¹ H. Diels, 'Ueber das dritte Buch der Aristotelischen Rhetorik', *Abh. der Berl. Akad.* (1886), 22.

²² H. Dittmar, *Aeschines von Sphettos* (Berlin, 1912), p. 283; cf. n. 1, p. 281.

Socrates advises Critobulus on how to win desirable friends. The first prerequisite is to become morally sound oneself; when that is achieved, there are potent 'incantations' with which Socrates is ready to assist him (2.6.10). Just as in the *Theaetetus* the 'incantations' represent Socratic dialectical questioning, the midwife's tools of delivery, so in the *Memorabilia* the 'incantations' encompass Socrates' matchmaking discourse. It is in this context that Socrates refers to Aspasia:

She once told me that good matchmakers are successful in making marriages only when the good reports they carry to and fro are true; false reports she would not recommend, for the victims of deception hate one another and the matchmakers too. I am convinced that this is sound, and so I think it is not open to me to say anything in your praise that I can't say truthfully (2.6.33–6).

Xenophon's passage can in no way be derived from the *Aspasia* fragment of Aeschines. Aspasia is a historical personality, as for example Aristophanes testifies in the *Acharnians* (524–39). I see no grounds to doubt that the fragment of Aeschines, the passage from the *Memorabilia* and a similar passage from Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* where Socrates recommends Aspasia's advice (3.14) present separate items of information that shed light on the historical Socrates: he frequented her company and held her views in esteem.

Towards the end of his article Burnyeat conjectures how Plato may have arrived at the midwifery image. Inspired evidently by Gregory Vlastos' *The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato*, he suggests a link with Plato's homosexuality and concludes that 'in the midwifery passages we have been discussing, we catch a glimpse into a dark corner of Plato's personality'.²³ By leaving the midwifery comparison with the historical Socrates we avoid misplaced psychoanalysis.*

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²³ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery', 13.

* I would like to express my gratitude to Bridget Hadaway for raising the English of my article to a level adequate to the subject discussed.