The *Theaetetus* as a Superior Apology

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Introduction

When Plato was still a young man, his teacher Socrates was executed after he failing to persuade an Athenian jury that he was not an impious sophist who corrupted the youth. Plato’s account of Socrates’ arguments, the *Apology,* faithfully defends Socrates from these accusations. As I will explain, the account is not a defense of the *historical* Socrates, but the character that Plato fashions within his dramatic timeline. But I argue a stronger defense of that character exists in the Platonic corpus. Plato’s *Theaetetus* is a more effective defense of Socrates than the Apology because Plato presents it as a developed account rebutting the accusations against Socrates days before they are even read in court, without requiring him to argue like a lawyer. In the *Theaetetus*, readers get an explanation of Socratic midwifery and theology, which would have been more persuasive had Plato included them in the *Apology*.

While I am not the first to notice a connection between the *Apology* and the *Theaetetus,* I am the first to claim the latter provides a better defense of Socrates than the former. After reviewing the dialogues and their dramatic connection in Section 1, I seek to prove this claim in Section 2 by showing how the *Theaetetus* responds to the charges leveled against Socrates in the *Apology* and explaining why the responses the *Theaetetus* provides are superior. In Section 3 I raise two more arguments for why the *Theaetetus* overall makes a stronger defense namely: (1) we get a more developed picture of Socrates in the *Theaetetus* than in the *Apology* and (2) it preserves Socrates’ philosophical dignity by showing him in action, not supplicating the jury in the law court. If I am right, we can cease reading the *Apology* for the defense and examine it for what it really is: an indictment of Athens.

Section 1: The Dialogues Revisited

First, a word of caution: It is not my aim to make claims about the historical Socrates in this paper. Given the limited information available, this would be almost untenable. As Sarah Kofman quips, “With Socrates, we cannot escape from fiction” (1). Even Plato’s writings about Socrates likely do not hold true to the original. Since there is no reason to believe the conversations represented in the Socratic dialogues actually took place, there is “no reason to suppose that in writing them Plato intended simply to reconstruct from memory actual arguments… that Socrates had used…” (Cooper *Complete Works* xv). Indeed, I think it best to indulge in the fiction that Plato provides us, given that there are no surviving writings attributed to Socrates himself (Kofman 2).

In describing Socrates the literary character, I will rely on Plato’s dramatic timeline, observable to the attentive reader. The only alternative is to rely upon a certain interpretive thesis that places the dialogues in a particular chronology, which is “is in reality based only in small part on anything like hard facts about when Plato composed given dialogues” (Cooper *Complete Works* xii). One of those facts is that Socrates addressed his defense to an Athenian jury sometime in the year 399 BCE (Cooper 17) and we assume Plato published his interpretation not long thereafter (Grube 20). Another fact is that Theaetetus died an untimely death in 369 BCE and the *Theaetetus* appears to be written in his memory (Coper xiii). Given the paucity of evidence and guided by John M. Cooper’s sage advice, I will not introduce the dialogues to my readers in any particular order other than that which is indicated in Plato’s dramatic chronology (Cooper xiv[[1]](#footnote-1)).

In Plato’s drama, Socrates’ indictment precedes the actual defense and takes place on the same day as the conversation depicted in the *Euythyphro* (2b). The accusers indicting Socrates purportedly exemplify the ire of all kinds of citizens, led by the poet Meletus (Ap. 23e-24a; Euthphr. 2b). They charge him with “corrupting the young and …not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things” (Ap. 24c). Socrates must also rebut established rumors (attributed to Aristophanes) that he is “ a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth[[2]](#footnote-2), who makes the worse argument the stronger” (18b).

When it comes to the trial itself, the jury Socrates addresses represents the whole of Athens and her interests, supposedly threatened by his impiety and meddlesome teachings. Socrates must convince these men that he does not use rhetoric to obscure the truth, but that he believes in the Athenian gods and does not corrupt the youth. Plato dramatizes Socrates’ attemptto do just this in a monologue, punctuated by a brief elenchus with Meletus. The jury finds him guilty, imposes the sentence of death, and the story ends with Socrates adding some final thoughts before retiring. The *Crito* follows the *Apology* in Plato’s dramatic world, and depicts Socrates staunchly refusing to escape his impending execution, which is finally staged in the *Phaedo.*

The timeline as I have relayed it so far is incomplete: something else happens on the day of Socrates’ indictment before he meets Euthyphro. Indeed, turning to the final lines of the *Theaetetus,* we notice that Socrates uses his summons to excuse himself from his interlocutors, “And now I must go to the King’s Porch to meet the indictment that Meletus has brought against me.” (Tht. 210d). Here and in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates is referring to the “preliminary hearing” of his case, where he would likely give his deposition and provide evidence for his defense(Euthyphr. 2, Phillipson 248-249). Plato’s audience would know that a trial date would be set at such a hearing, so they would not read the *Euthyphro* as directly preceding the *Apology* (Phillipson 250)*.* We should not either. So now we see the *Theaetetus* leads to the *Euthyphro,* which in turn leads to the *Apology.* But what happened in the days between Socrates’ hearing and his trial? Another look back to the final lines of the *Theaetetus* provides the answer: Socrates promises to return the next morning to continue his inquiry with Theodorus and Theaetetus (Tht. 210d). In the *Sophist* Socrates fulfills this promise, accompanied by the Eleatic Visitor (Sop. 216a, Sedley 36). Since Socrates and the Visitor are also present in the *Sophists’* sequel, the *Statesman*, we can assume they occurred on the same day or sometime before Socrates’ trial. We can now paint a dramatic timeline for our purposes: *Theaetetus, Euthyphro, Sophist, Statesman, Apology, Crito, Phaedo* (Giannopoulou 4). Now that we have reviewed the *Apology* and placed it in its dramatic context, let us review the *Theaetetus*.

Plato’s *Theaetetus* portrays the exchange between Socrates, Theodorus the geometer and the dialogue’s brilliant young namesake. In it, Socrates associates the spurious theories of knowledge provided by his interlocutors with Protagorean relativism and Heraclitean flux, dismissing both. He does so in his capacity as midwife: not one attending to the children of women, but to the ideas borne of men. In the dialogue he induces his interlocutors to deliver three major definitions of knowledge. Theaetetus starts off by listing kinds of knowledge, and Socrates immediately dispatches that as hardly a definition. Then the real philosophizing begins: knowledge is first defined as sense perception, then as true judgment, and finally as true judgment accompanied by an account. All these definitions fall short of the mark. But this is no matter; in this paper I am less interested in the arguments themselves than I am about how Plato portrays the Socrates who delivers them. Does he make the weaker argument the stronger? Does he distain the gods of the city in favor of others? Does the exercise corrupt young Theaetetus? I believe that Plato’s depiction of Socrates provides evidence allaying these concerns in the *Theaetetus.*

As I said before, scholars have already expounded on the relationship between the *Apology* and the *Theaetetus.* A.A. Long argues that “Plato, up until and concluding with the composition of the *Theaetetus*, never stops re-writing the *Apology*” (119). Long is not contesting the composition date of the *Apology*, but analyzing Plato’s aims in writing his dialogues: Plato is still trying to defend Socrates in the *Theaetetus.* The Socrates he creates seeks to “improve on his account of himself in the *Apology*” (122).Inspired by Long’s argument, Zina Giannopoulou has devoted her recent monograph, *The Theaetetus as a Second Apology*, to arguing explicitly (and convincingly) for a connection between the two dialogues. David Sedley also notes the connection in his book, *The Midwife of Platonism*. Building on the foundation their scholarship provides, it is time to substantiate my own claims. Let us examine each of the charges from the *Apology* in turn, comparing them with the corresponding evidence in the *Theaetetus*.

Section 2: The Charges

Section 2.1: Midwifery Rebuts the Charge of Sophistry

In the *Apology,* Socrates first addresses the oldest rumors sewn by Aristophanes’ *Clouds,* a comedy parodying Socrates. Because of the play’s success, the idea that Socrates “busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth… makes the worse into the stronger argument and teaches these same things to others” has circulated from the time Socrates’ jurymen were children (18c). The charges of manipulating arguments and misleading students are serious enough, but what is so awful about being preoccupied with the natural world? Aristophanes’ criticism is not necessarily the study of natural phenomena, but the preoccupation with them at the expense of piety. Aristophanes has Socrates rejecting Zeus himself (366) in favor of the Clouds (423), which allow the Wrong Logic to prevail over the Right Logic in arguments (882). This certainly seems a different character than the one Plato crafts. But at the play’s conclusion, Aristophanes’ Socrates pays the same price as Plato’s for his impiety. As he perishes onstage, his killer shouts:

“For with what aim did ye insult the Gods,

And pry around the dwellings of the Moon?

Strike, smite them, spare them not, for many reasons,

But most because they have blasphemed the Gods!”[[3]](#footnote-3) (Aristophanes 1506).

Since this accusation is related to piety and not necessarily argumentation, I address it with the later accusations of impiety in section 2.3. I will here address the charge of permitting the Wrong Logic to prevail over the Right Logic.

The claim that Socrates makes the weaker argument the stronger includes him in the ranks of the sophists. Plato’s audience was familiar with such men who proclaimed they had attained some truth and sought to propagate it (Cooper xix). In the *Apology,* Socrates seeks to differentiate himself from sophists by claiming he has no knowledge (22c). This is why he believes the Delphic oracle proclaimed that no man was wiser than he: Socrates does not think he knows what he does not know (21e). Socrates essentially argues that he is not a sophist because he makes no assertions; he merely critiques those of others who consider themselves wise (23b). But this seems an odd defense since Socrates freely admits that his combative method of elenchus has garnered him many enemies (21e). A less confrontational Socratic method may have found more sympathy. Thankfully the art of Socratic midwifery in the *Theaetetus* is just such a method (Giannopoulou 39).

The midwifery analogy describes a collaborative inquiry where Socrates (the son of a midwife) attends to the philosophical struggles of young men to help them produce ideas. He then examines the newborn thoughts for their soundness, just as a midwife attends expectant mothers and examines infants to confirm their health and status. And just as midwives have already completed menopause and are unable to bear children themselves, Socrates makes no knowledge claims during the process of midwifery. He only assists the men as “they discover in themselves a multitude of beautiful things” with the sanction of the god (150d). The whole of the *Theaetetus* is an exercise in midwifery following Theaetetus’ ill-conceived list of knowledge kinds. Despite his early failure Socrates knows that Theaetetus is pregnant with ideas about knowledge and that his consternations are simply labor pains (148e). Socrates must draw out the ideas using his craft (*technē*). But again, since Socrates is “barren of theories,” he must employ the theories of others to support or counter those put forth by the interlocutors, then test the ideas with reason alone (157c; Giannopoulou 44). He proclaims, “I myself am barren of wisdom… I am in not any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom.” (150c-d). The only thing he claims as his own is his *technē*, not knowledge of any kind (Sedley 32).

This disavowal of knowledge inherent in the midwife analogy directly rebuts the charge of sophistry and should call to mind the similar passages in the *Apology* (20c, 29b, 38c). Socrates’ obstetric craft reconciles his practice of dialectic with his intellectual barrenness in a way that contrasts him with the sophists, who “appear wise about everything…without actually being wise” (Sph. 233c). Sophists seek to peddle their belief-knowledge to the masses for profit and fame. This is exactly the kind of “knowledge” that Socrates rejects in the *Apology* (24b) and avoids in the analogy of the barren midwife. As Giannopoulou notes, “ Far from blunting the rhetorical force of his defense in the *Apology*, the craft of mental midwifery in the *Theaetetus* sharpens it by being a different – indeed, the exact opposite – kind of expertise from that to which his opponents lay claim” (7). His rambling about his mission to show *others* what they don’t know likely alienated his jury in the *Apology*, confirming their view that he thought himself above them. But in the *Theaetetus*, Plato has improved the image of Socrates and presents us with a collaborative midwife, not the Socrates of the elenchus (Giannopoulou 39). Plato frames the work of the midwife as a more sophisticated[[4]](#footnote-4) style of Socratic teaching, and one more persuasive when considering the charge of sophistry. Now that we have addressed midwifery in the *Theaetetus* and how it rebuts the charge of sophistry, we can consider the newer charges against Socrates: that he does not believe in the city’s gods but prefers ones of his own making and that he corrupts the youth. Let us take each in turn.

Section 2.2: Impiety

In Ancient Greece the state religion was an integral part of the city’s life and health. John M. Cooper noted in a 2016 lecture that if even one Athenian citizen did not regard the Olympian gods with reverence, that individual “was courting danger for the whole city.” Socrates is charged with impiety in the *Apology* but also with believing in other “spiritual things” (24b). I will not attempt to argue for Socrates’ innocence here, since there is compelling evidence for his guilt. Miles Burnyeat argues that both what Socrates says and what he omits from his defense in the *Apology* are damning and concludes that Socrates is guilty (12). According to him, “there is little or nothing to show that *the* gods, the numerous particular and highly individual gods the city believes in, mean anything to Socrates at all” (Burnyeat 4). With this in mind, I will attempt only to show that the *Theaetetus* has a more persuasive defense against the charge of impiety than does the *Apology.*

Consider the two-fold response Socrates does give in the *Apology*. He exposes Meletus’ inconsistent statements on the stand by elenchus (26c-27e) and also highlights his own obedience to the god through the oracle (23a-b, 29a, 30a, 30e-31a). The elenchus leaves something to be desired; while Socrates gets the better of Meletus, he doesn’t respond to the charge *as written* (Burnyeat 4). Socrates catches Meletus by getting him to assert that Socrates does not believe in any gods at all, which Socrates can easily refute (26b,e). But in proving he is not an atheist, Socrates still leaves unchallenged the charge of “not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things” (Ap. 24c). Further, after covering his obedience to the oracle (which is a rather misleading move since the oracle’s proclamation was not “obviously jussive”) Socrates even goes so far as to say he believes in gods “as none of [his] accusers do” (Giannopoulou 53 fn. 96; 35d). This comment, combined with his combative elenchus, amounts to a spiritual narcissism that likens Socrates even more to a sophist; one who now appeals to the gods for legitimacy in addition to some mystical divine sign (31d, 40d). Socrates’ frequent name-dropping of Olympians does not convince the jury either (Ap. 25a,c, 26c). In their minds, instead of participating in the ritual practices of Olympian deity worship[[5]](#footnote-5), Socrates worships a god who demands he sow seeds of discord in the community and expects to be praised for the work!

Contrast this defense with the metaphor of the midwife provided in the *Theaetetus.* Here, since the god grants his art to him through blood, Socrates *is* clearly compelled to assist those in intellectual labor. And since this kind of investigation is not as confrontational, it would likely be more palatable to the jurors (150c, 210c). But we must go further; what makes the *Theaetetus* a better defense against the impiety charge is its explanation of what *kind* of god Socrates does believe in, even if it means he implicates himself in believing in other deities than the city does. This claim may at first seem counter-intuitive, given my argument for its superiority on the argument’s persuasive ability. But since Socrates is already guilty of not believing in the Olympian gods, it doesn’t seem like much of a loss! If he his indeed guilty, he should at least try to explain the reasons for believing in a different god, rather than avoiding the charge as he does in the *Apology*.

Before we define Socrates’ god, we must contextualize the definition itself. It appears in the *Theaetetus’* ***“***digression,” or “interlude,” (172c-177d) which interrupts the refutation of the first definition, also associated with Protagoras’ “man is the measure” doctrine (Levett xxiv). The digression explores (through Socrates) what relativism looks like within the city, pursuing a “greater discussion emerging from the lesser one,” with the goal of identifying justice as an objective value (172b, Sedley 65). Indeed, the discussion is so rich that I must return to it twice more in this paper! Socrates first juxtaposes the lawyer with the philosopher: the philosopher seeks the objective truth, while the pragmatic lawyer lives a measly life in the relative world of sense perception and flattery (Giannopoulou 91). Socrates concludes that the best course of action is to move out of pragmatism (associated with evil at 176a) and become most like the god as possible (176b). At that moment Plato throws us into a discussion of godliness, for to “to become just and pious, with understanding” is to search for the opposite of earthly evils, namely the heavenly virtues among which the god dwells (176b).

The god of the *Theaetetus* is one virtuous by the pursuit of wisdom, who hopes that humans can attain the same state through dialectic. He is “supremely just” and completely innocent of wrongdoing (176c). Cautioning Theaetetus from growing angry with him during his obstetric examination, Socrates proclaims “…no God can wish evil to man…even I don’t do [examinations] out of malice, but because it is not permitted to me to accept a lie and put away truth” (151c-d). The mention of the god informs the meaning of “permitted” here; god does not allow Socrates to accept a lie because that god would be doing “evil to man” by preventing the man from becoming “most like him” (176c). This moral god makes sense when we consider, as Gregory Vlastos does, that “it is of the essence of [Socrates’] rationalist program in theology to assume that the entailment of virtue by wisdom binds gods no less than men” (Vlastos 164). But then the gods must act morally, drawing a stark contrast between the new deities that Socrates proposes and the volatile Olympians. This change in the gods’ nature “would be tantamount to the destruction of the old gods [and] the creation of new ones” (166). This is what I mean when I argue that to provide a persuasive defense, Socrates would have to explain his rationale, even if it proves him guilty.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Socrates’ theology has implications for the city of Athens. To explain them, it is imperative to observe the parallel between piety and justice (Sedley 81-82). We know from the digression’s lawyer and philosopher dichotomy that “civic justice is at worst a sham …[which is] strongly colored by local relativities,” and piety is similarly relative “to local perspectives, dependent on civic practice and belief” (76, 83). In the Digression Socrates describes a just god in whom “there is no sort of wrong whatsoever” (176c). Further, men can only become just in turning their minds to the wisdom of philosophy. So in the case of pursuing piety, man must turn away from the city’s poor models of piety (i.e. cults and practices), guided only by the realization that the god is ultimately good and just (83). Just as Socrates is asserting an objective justice in the digression, he is also arguing for an objective piety, not one expected by a city bogged down in ritual and dogma.

I believe this defense against impiety, namely the redefinition of piety itself, is a stronger defense for Socrates. Here Plato does not have him avoiding the charge with a lawyer’s dodge, as he does in the *Apology.* Socrates’ theology in the *Theaetetus* actually explains *why* he so relies on philosophy and not on the gods and what that means for the city. However, his support of such piety would certainly have proven his guilt in court, since the philosophers’ moral god would have been be a radical change from those whose worship undergirded Athenian society. Further, Socrates argues that the failure to understand the god’s goodness (and exhortation to become like him) amount to “manifest folly and wickedness” (176c). If uttered in court, this attack on the city’s religious structure would have meant certain death. Plato could not have included this kind of defense in the *Apology.* It is likely that Plato felt comfortable depicting Socrates in this more revealing way long after the publication of the *Apology* (Sedley 85).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Section 2.3: Direct Evidence Against Corrupting the Youth

The final charge against Socrates is that he corrupts the youth. Meletus reveals in elenchus that this is related to the charge of impiety; Socrates is allegedly teaching the young “not to believe in the gods in whom the city believes but in other new spiritual things” (26b). Since I have already addressed the charge of impiety, I will focus on the defense that Socrates provides independent of his impiety defense, namely that he is not a teacher (33a-34b).

Socrates reasserts that he has no students and accepts no fees; he simply allows people of all ages to listen as he is “talking and dealing with [his] own concerns” (33a). This distances him from anyone who “slanderously” calls himself his pupil. He argues these people simply join him to see those who are reputed wise revealed as fools, a sight which Socrates himself admits, “is not unpleasant” (33c). But the mention of this immediately before he reiterates his divine mission is an unfortunate mistake, reminding the jury of his impiety. What is substantive however, is Socrates’ call for those he has wronged (or their kin) to come forward and testify (33d). He proceeds to list off the names of his followers who have come to his aid in court, including Plato himself. None of them would believe themselves wronged by Socratic teaching! Dramatic though it may be, a lack of evidence does not necessarily prove innocence. For an account of Socrates’ interactions with the young, we must turn again to the *Theaetetus*.

Socrates identifies himself as a man invested in the development of the Athenian youth at the outset of the dialogue (143d). Already we have evidence that Socrates does notdeliberately corrupt the youth as Meletus accuses, but desires that they may “turn out well” (Ap. 25d; Tht. 143d). To this end, he begs Theodorus to summon Theaetetus, an Athenian geometry student, so he may examine the boy for signs that he is pregnant with ideas (144d, 145b). As I have said, what follows is a prolonged obstetric exam, resulting in three labors and equally many exposures. But even a dialogue that ends in confusion is beneficial to the student: henceforth, Theaetetus will have better ideas, be more modest, and most importantly, he will avoid what Socrates calls in the Apology the “most blameworthy ignorance…believ[ing] that one knows what one does not know”(Tht. 210c, Ap. 29). The very next day, in fact, Theaetetus plays “to excellent effect his modest role as respondent to the stranger from Elea” (Sedley 36). Socratic midwifery has at its core the betterment of the pregnant man, in contrast to the portrait of elenchus we have in the *Apology*, which seeks to investigate whether or not the interlocutor is a fool disguised as an expert (23b). If the jury could see this kind of Socratic practice, they might pause before taking seriously Meletus’ assertion that Socrates corrupts the youth (intentionally or not).

An added benefit of considering the *Theaetetus* a defense against this charge is that we see Socrates’ concern about the youth extends to the city as a whole. By this I mean the Digression’s two patterns of man (the divine and the evildoer) can also apply to cities. The jury, as a representative of Athens, has before them a choice in his trial. If they are “blinded” by a “lack of understanding” and fail to notice the “unjust practices” of the legal system, they will condemn Socrates (176e-177a). But then there will come a reckoning, and the city will be incapable of justifying his execution. Athens will look like “nothing more than a child” (177b). This reading is in line with Socrates’ own comments at trial when he argues that none of his accusers can harm him; only the city will be harmed if he is executed and that it is on the city’s behalf that he argues for his innocence (Ap. 30d). It will be hard for Athens to find a suitable replacement, he acknowledges (30e, 31a). Imagine what kind of questions a successor would ask. Perhaps he would inquire after his elders, “Why did you convict that clever man Socrates? What were his crimes against the city?” This would be the kind of embarrassment referenced in the *Theaetetus*. Perhaps Meletus (much older in this hypothetical) would respond in his customary way, but notices that “the things he says do not satisfy even himself; that famous eloquence of his” has disappeared (177b). Without the *Theaetetus* to provide evidence that Socrates is not actually harming the city but improving it through the application of his *technē*, the prophetic assertions in the *Apology* make him seem like even more of a sophist than before.

To this point I have argued that the *Theaetetus* holds more persuasive justifications for Socrates’ work in Athens including accounts of Socrates’ *technē*, a better understanding of the god in whom he believes, and an enumeration of the benefits of intellectual obstetrics. I now present two additional reasons the *Theaetetus* is a more persuasive defense; (1) that Plato focuses more on the character of Socrates himself, and (2) that the *Theaetetus* does not occur in a law-court, saving Socrates from the association with lawyering.

Section 3: Additional Arguments for the *Theaetetus’* Superiority

Section 3.1: A Verified Picture

Although Plato is describing his character Socrates in the *Apology*, he is still tied to the events that he witnessed at the trial of the historical Socrates (34a, 38b). Since other witnesses were presumably alive when the *Apology* was published, Plato could not have gotten away with many inaccuracies, lest they contradict him (Grube 20). This limitation leaves him little room to describe the dramatic character of his Socrates in full. I am not arguing that Plato’s *Apology* does not describe Socrates accurately, but simply that it does not give us the full picture of Plato’s character. It is simply Plato’s account of *a moment* of Socrates’ life, serving a literary-historical purpose (Grube 20). But in the *Theaetetus,* Plato takes care to stress the dialogue’s direct descent from Socrates with no limitations.

Plato’s exposition to the *Theaetetus* describes the transmission of the account about to be relayed: Socrates reportedly recounts the dialogue to Eucleides, who takes notes and subsequently confirms their accuracy with Socrates himself in Athens (143a). The character of Euclides would be identifiable to Plato’s reader as Euclides of Megara, a follower of Socrates who was present at his death (Phaedo 59c). Ancient sources actually report Euclides publishing Socratic dialogues as well. Cooper writes: “…it is as if, except for the prologue, Plato is giving us under his own name one of Euclides’ dialogues!” in the *Theaetetus* (158). Indeed, the dialogue is Plato’s presentation of the transcript Euclides reconstructed from his notes (143c).

The genealogy of the account relayed in the *Theaetetus* is a powerful literary device for Plato. Scholars note how Plato “goes out of his way to signal that the source of the written words is Socrates himself,” in the *Theaetetus*, leaving us with an account that has “Socrates’ own approval and imprimatur” (Giannopoulu 22; Sedley 16). The *Apology* needed no introduction as a defense of Socrates, but the *Theaetetus* does. If Long is right that Plato is continually improving his vision of Socrates, then Plato must introduce the revised Socrates with ethos. The “*directness*” of the accountnecessarily bolsters the dialogue’s credibility as a record of Socratic teachings (Sedley 16; 142c-143a). Here Plato is defending his character just how he would defend himself if he were not restricted by the law-courts. He would show his audience just how he practices midwifery, proving to them that he is no sophist, and that he is a pious man (simply to a different god).

Section 3.2: Preserving Socrates’ Dignity

My final argument for the *Theaetetus’* superiority is that its portrayal of Socrates preserves his dignity as a philosopher, rather than sullying it by attempting to convince a jury of his innocence. While there is certainly nothing wrong with Socrates mounting a defense[[8]](#footnote-8), I have shown that the fact that he does defend himself does not make that account the most persuasive or noble one we have of him. In the *Apology*, Socrates plays the part of a lawyer, a role that garners much attention in the *Theaetetus’* Digression. If we are to take the Digression seriously (and we are) we must subject all advocates to the same critique, even if it means addressing Socrates as a lawyer.

The Lawyer of the Digression is always rushing his argument, since he must “speak with one eye on the clock” (172e). But Socrates’ trial corroborates that lawyers are not simply dispassionate representatives. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates states that the lawyer’s case is “never a matter of indifference; it always directly concerns the speaker,” and (perhaps with a bit of foreshadowing) “sometimes life itself is at stake” (172e). This passion, he argues, drives the lawyer to flatter the jury, a practice that leaves his soul warped (172a-b). Socrates finds himself under the same time constraints, which negatively affect his argument. He rails against the time limit on “a trial for life,” for if he had had “many days, [the jury] would be convinced” of his innocence (Ap. 37b). In addition, Socrates has to respond directly to Meletus, giving a prescribed statement with “his adversary standing over him, armed…with the sworn statement” from which he must not deviate (Tht. 172e).

Here Socrates cannot “draw someone to a higher level” to pursue wisdom, for the court deals only with the implementation of justice, not justice itself (175b). The lawyer’s role is simply to persuade the jury. The persuasive shortcuts cause jurors to judge, but they cannot create knowledge (201b). It is only possible for a juryman to have knowledge if “either he saw it for himself, or he learned of it from a reliable source” (Stramel 9). Socrates believes that many of the jurors have heard him speak, but none of them could have heard every word he said and thus been sure he was innocent of all the charges at all times, so we cannot rely on the first arm of the disjunction (Ap. 17c). But the second does not hold either: due to the constraints imposed by time lawyers are not teachers[[9]](#footnote-9) but persuaders (Stramel 9; Tht. 201b).

The character of the lawyer is in stark contrast to that of the philosopher. Socrates even claims that comparing the philosopher with the lawyer “is surely like comparing the up-bringing of a slave with that of a free man” (172c)! Compared with the lawyer in servitude, the philosopher has an unlimited supply of time and topics at his disposal with only one goal: to hit upon “that which is” (172d). Since he has no jury to persuade but simply a friendly audience, the philosopher is the master of his own arguments and dictates the course of the discussion (173c). Directed only by his own ideas, has no need to engage in political maneuvering to assert his power. Class means nothing to him, and as for the law, he does not even know the location of the law-courts! (173d-e). When the philosopher does go to court (again, foreshadowing here), he makes a scene: knowing no political intrigue and unimpressed with titles and wealth, he applies himself to greater things. Sedley argues that by directly addressing the philosopher in court, Plato renews a connection with his “earlier attempts, from the *Apology* onwards, to account for Socrates’ failure to secure an acquittal” (66). Although in the *Apology* Socrates asks that his arguments be given greater weight than his speaking ability, he is foiled by the constraints put on him in the role of lawyer and must conclude, “I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness,” which an unprincipled defense requires (17c-d; 38e).

This does not mean that Socrates is the embodiment of the *Theaetetus’* philosopher. At the beginning of the lawyer and philosopher comparison, Socrates persuades Theodorus to consider only the best of the philosophers, slipping into the third person-plural forms to describe them (Giannopoulou 93). Socrates is a philosopher in that he seeks to “hit upon that which is,” but he is involved in worldly affairs (he clearly knows his way to the law-courts), which disqualifies him from being among the leading philosophers (172d). I concur with Giannopoulou when she argues, “the orator and the philosopher occupy the two opposite ends of the spectrum, and Socrates lies between them” (92). This need not be damning to Socrates’ image, for Socrates is involved in the city to engage his fellow citizens in midwifery! It is his mission to act as an intermediary for those who wish to ascend to the godlike state through dialectic. Sedley points out that this mission “has kept his mind more within the city than would be the case for the idealized philosopher whom he is describing” (Sedley 67). If anything, this concession should not cause us to look down on Socrates, but admire his selfless to the youth he serves with his *technē.* Socrates is certainly close to the ideal philosopher but because of his mission has not yet escaped the world to consider the heavenly virtues (Giannopoulou 95).

While we know Socrates is closer to the ideal philosopher in the *Theaetetus,* we cannot categorize Socrates clearly in the *Apology*. There, Socrates refutes the accusations as a lawyer, but since he defends himself without manipulating the jury, he is not totally identifiable with the lawyer archetype either. Regardless, this entanglement with the relativistic law-courts drags Socrates closer to the lawyer’s end of the spectrum. In the *Theaetetus*, we are not distracted by any lawyering; before Socrates is bound in the court’s fetters in the *Apology*,he more persuasively refutes all the accusations against him by his very conduct in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates is simply engaging the youth in dialogue with their benefit foremost in mind. A clock, a jury or an indictment does not hinder him from pursuing this goal. The *Theaetetus’* rebuttals are experiential: we see how Socrates is not a sophist, we see his theology clearly, and we see he has the best interests of the Athenian boys at heart. In the *Apology*, we can only take his word for it.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the *Theaetetus* is a better defense of Socrates than the *Apology*, not only in that it addresses each claim against Socrates more persuasively, but also that the dialogue better preserves the true character of Socrates. This claim of course should not render the *Apology* obsolete; it certainly has its place in the Platonic corpus. But once we realize that Plato frequently attempts to vindicate his teacher in dialogues like the *Theaetetus*, we can focus our efforts on analyzing the indictment of Athens hidden within its lines (Burnyeat 6). For if such a man as Socrates fell afoul of the law in Athens, what must be amiss in its laws?[[10]](#footnote-10)

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1. Vlastos makes some fascinating claims regarding this topic on the interpretive thesis, but I will not address them here (46). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I interpret this as a critique of natural philosophy, and treat it as a repetition of the impiety charge. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rogers translates this last line using all capitals. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to Vera Lochtefeld for raising this point in her research presentation on the evolution of Socratic education. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Socrates did not even go to the Oracle but heard its proclamation second-hand from Chaerephon. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is not without precedent. A person accused of murder may admit to taking the life of another while maintaining it was the right thing to do under the circumstances (i.e. self-defense) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this instance I am (with Sedley) relying on the relatively safe assumption that Plato wrote the *Theaetetus* after the *Apology*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Indeed Socrates believes he is compelled to mount one, just as he must submit to execution (Ap. 19a; Cri. 50b) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. But Socrates does believe it his job to “teach and persuade” the jurors in the *Apology*, which is why he does not “supplicate” them (35c). This apparent inconsistency between Socrates’ views about the lawyer’s roles vanishes when we realize Socrates describes what a lawyer’s job is, as opposed to how it is fulfilled in practice. It is reasonable that experienced lawyers began with similar notions but were crushed under the burden of the clock and adapted to persuasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This inspired by Burnyeat’s concluding hypothesis in “The Impiety of Socrates” (12). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)