

Icaroplato? Aerial Perspective and Cartographic Imagination in Plato's "Eleatic Trilogy"

In the respective openings of Plato's *Sophist* (217a) and *Statesman* (257a), Socrates and his companions, including the anonymous "Eleatic Stranger" who assumes the lead conversational role, anticipate a third dialogue devoted to the topic of the "philosopher." While Plato never composed a *Philosophos* (see esp. Gill 2012), he provides suggestive glimpses of the philosopher throughout the dramatically connected trilogy of *Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman*. There is in the latter two dialogues, as scholars have frequently observed, an implicit comparison of Socrates and the Stranger; in the *Theaetetus* too, however, Socrates digresses at length on the nature of the philosopher's "out-of-place-ness" (ἀτοπία) in the everyday world. Like Thales, who once fell into a well because he was too busy contemplating the sky (174a), the philosopher displays an unusual tendency "to look at the whole earth" (εἰς ἅπασαν εἰωθὼς τὴν γῆν βλέπειν, 174e), while also inducing in others a sense of vertigo as he leads them to share his own "lofty" view (εἰλιγγιῶν τε ἀπὸ ὑψηλοῦ κρεμασθεῖς, 175d). Similarly, in the *Sophist*, Socrates is prompted by the Stranger's arrival to muse about the nature of "real philosophers" who "look down from above on the life of those below" (ὄντως φιλόσοφοι, καθορῶντες ὑπόθεν τὸν τῶν κάτω βίον, 216c). Berger 1982 and Rue 1993 have aptly characterized this "gods'-eye" view as one of "philosophical flight."

The ability to detach oneself from an embodied, earthly standpoint and to see the world from such an "aerial perspective" is a motif that appears in a variety of ancient philosophical traditions (Hadot 1995). Yet it is also a key area of overlap between philosophical discourse, on one hand, and the genres of historiography, geography, and ethnography, on the other. It is no accident, for instance, that the Milesian Anaximander represents, for the Greeks, the

fountainhead of both natural philosophy and cartography, or that Socrates' "Thinkery" in Aristophanes' *Clouds* contains both a map and the basket from which the philosopher "treads the air" (ἀεροβατῶ, 225). Indeed, Purves 2010 has persuasively demonstrated that historians like Herodotus were deeply concerned with confronting the stylistic and epistemological tensions between a linear, "hodological" point of view and a synoptic, cartographic one.

With respect to Plato, the "aerial perspective" and the influence of geographic thought have been discussed primarily with respect to his eschatological myths (as in the *Phaedo*) and to his topographical descriptions of cities (as in the *Laws* and *Timaeus-Critias*; see e.g. Nightingale 2002; Corcoran 2016; Helmer 2021/22). In addition, more recent studies, such as Bakewell 2020, have productively analyzed the details of Platonic itineraries, (e.g. in *Republic* 1). Nevertheless, while some investigations have, in passing, pointed out "cartographic" characteristics of the "Eleatic Trilogy" (e.g. Lane 1998), the ramifications of these different scholarly insights for the interpretation of these dialogues have not been systematically pursued.

In this paper, therefore, I explicate more fully the presence of geographic and cartographic imagery and develop an interpretation of the significance of the "aerial perspective" in *Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman*. First, I survey specific elements of the trilogy that indicate a wider geographic context—the portraits of the "flying philosopher," references to Greeks and βάρβαροι, (*Tht.* 175a; *Pol.* 262d), the cosmological myth at the center of the *Statesman*. Having established this context, I then focus on the spatio-temporal aspects of the Stranger's method of division, through which he defines concepts by repeatedly splitting a larger class (γένος) into subclasses. Much as Purves has suggested for Herodotus, I identify, within the taxonomies produced by this method, a core tension between the "hodological" descriptions of its process and the "maps" (as in ethnography, of γένη) that it ultimately produces. I conclude that, rather

than favoring one or the other perspective—the grounded/hodological or the aerial/synoptic—Plato emphasizes both the value and limitations of each, locating the properly philosophical perspective in this productive tension.

Bibliography

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