

## Aristophanes and the digression in Plato's *Theaetetus*

The digression (172a–177c) in Plato's *Theaetetus*, in which Plato describes and contrasts two types—the twisted, slavish lawyer/orator skilled in the ways of the law courts, and the philosopher at leisure—divides scholarly opinion. Some (e.g. Ryle 1966) see it as “philosophically quite pointless,” while others (e.g. Barker 1976) see it as an argument itself, and “entirely relevant to its context.” Regardless of its status as an argument, the digression is, as Stern (2002) argues, rhetorically significant, a claim strengthened by Burnyeat's observation that it is “situated almost exactly at the midpoint of the dialogue” (1990). I argue that the digression evokes Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates and the accusations that Socrates corrupts the young. Plato includes specific verbal echoes of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a play in which the young Pheidippides' education by Socrates leads to the collapse of his *oikos*. Sedley (2004) and especially Howland (1998) have observed that the image of the lawyer/orator that Socrates uses in the digression suggests an inversion of the famous image of Socrates hanging in the basket from *Clouds*. Howland and Hemmingway (1990) both point out that the digression can be read as a defense of the philosophical life; they also point out the connection of the digression to the *Apology*, where Plato specifically mentions Aristophanes' play. However, none of these studies lay out explicitly how Plato uses words and phrases from *Clouds*.

An example of Plato making use of words and phrases from *Clouds* is his description of the activities of the philosopher's mind. In *Clouds*, during Strepsiades' conversation with the student at Socrates' φροντιστήριον (which immediately precedes the appearance of Socrates in the basket), the student shows Strepsiades the pursuits in

which students at the φροντιστήριον are engaged. These include investigating “the things below the earth” (τὰ κατὰ γῆς, line 188), while their backsides “look towards heaven” (ὁ πρῶκτός ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν βλέπει, 193). The student then describes this as ἀστρονομία (194) and explains that they also do γεωμετρία; i.e., they measure the land (γῆν ἀναμετρήσαι, 202–203). In the *Theaetetus*, Plato describes the philosopher’s mind as flying “both below the earth, and measuring the earth’s surface” (τᾶς τε γᾶς ὑπένερθε καὶ τὰ ἐπίπεδα γεωμετροῦσα) and “above the sky, studying astronomy” (οὐρανοῦ θ’ ὑπερ ἀστρονομοῦσα, 173c). Both passages also include references to Thales (*Clouds* 180, *Theaetetus* 174a), include jokes about accidents befalling a philosopher gazing at the sky (*Clouds* 173, *Theaetetus* 174a).

Aristophanes, who had already used an *oikos* to represent Athens in his *Knights*, uses Pheidippides to represent Alcibiades (Tarrant (1989)), whose association with Socrates was well known and whose actions repeatedly harmed Athens. I argue that the criticism of Socrates in *Clouds* is not that Socrates himself has done harm, but rather that his young associates go on to do harm to the city. That Plato evokes *Clouds* in the digression, and that this digression is located in the *Theaetetus*, suggests that Plato is offering *Theaetetus* as a counterexample to the claim that Socrates corrupts the young. He could point to *Theaetetus*’ contributions to mathematics, which he has the young *Theaetetus* allude to in his conversation with Socrates (147c–148b), as well as his bravery in service to Athens (Nails 2002), which he shows in the framing dialogue set at the time of *Theaetetus*’ wounding in battle.

## Bibliography

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