

Midwifing Democracy

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEMOCRATIC PROMISE OF SOCRATIC MAIEUSIS

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I.

In his two books about establishing the Clemente Course in the Humanities, an experimental school teaching logic, poetry, philosophy, and art to poor people, Earl Shorris describes the democratic promise of, among other things, engaging Socrates.¹ From his experiences working with poor people across the United States and in Mexico, Shorris comes to see that the challenges facing these people stem not from lack of training or motivation to work, but that they arise with the denial of the kind of political education necessary for citizenship and the practice of politics. As Shorris explains: “The problem in America is that the vast majority are not political and have no means of entrance into the public life, the *vita activa* of a political person. Legitimate power, which validates the person as fully human, is not available to the poor.”² A conversation with Viniece Walker, a prisoner at the Bedford Hills maximum security prison in New York state, leads Shorris to the ideas behind the program:

“You’ve got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children. And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts, lectures, where they can learn the moral life of downtown.”

I smiled at her, misunderstanding, thinking I was indulging her. “And then they won’t be poor anymore.”

She read every nuance of my response, and answered angrily, “And they won’t be poor *no more*.”

“What you mean is . . . ”

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¹ These two books actually began as one book, *New American Blues* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), which was revised and changed for its paperback edition, *Riches for the Poor* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

² Shorris, “Serving the Poor.” *American Libraries* (May 2000), 46 – 48, at 48. Shorris expanded on this point in his cover story for *Harper’s Magazine*. Shorris, “On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Vol. 295, Issue 1768 (September 1997), 50 – 60. This article offers a useful overview of the inspiration, purpose, and successes of the Clemente Program as it has grown across the United States and in Mexico.

“What I mean is what I said, a moral alternative to the street.”³

The humanities, Shorris surmises, offer the kind of reflective thinking that creates this moral alternative, thus promising an escape from the impoverished political life led by so many citizens around him.

For Shorris, Socrates exemplifies this kind of thinking and its promise for democracy through his description of himself as a midwife.⁴ This “midwifery of the mind,” Shorris explains, begins the political life of the student by introducing self reflection which in turn allows them to escape the constraints of force they endure by necessity as the poor and excluded. Sparked by maieutic activity, reflective thinking begins the dialogue within oneself, preparing those involved for engaged political life and the dialogue of politics. This process creates public, dialogical spaces and inculcates citizens with the autonomy and reflective capacities necessary for democratic citizenship.⁵ For Shorris and the other teachers and students in the Clemente Course, engaging Socrates holds the promise of active and inclusive democracy.⁶

Inspired by Shorris and his use of Socrates for democracy, the particular image of the midwife and its democratic promise provoked this essay. What constitutes maieusis or maieutic activity? What makes this a compelling understanding of Socrates? What are its dangers, unmentioned by Shorris? How could we understand maieutic activity as part of

³ Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 97.

⁴ I will use the English word “midwife” to translate “maia,” the Greek word for “midwife.” For the activity of midwifery, I will use the Greek “maieusis” and for its adjectival form “maieutic.”

⁵ As Shorris explains: “The political life and the life of the mind followed a similar course and used a similar method: politics is always dialogue; it cannot ever be done alone. Like dialogue, politics does not happen within a person, but in the free space between persons, the political space. There cannot ever be a private life of politics, since politics takes place between persons, in a public way, not public in the sense of broadcast or crowds but as the opposite of private.” Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 29.

⁶ Of course, to move from Socrates to a vibrant democracy is a leap – and Shorris does not claim that the humanities alone are the means of doing so. But alongside other, more structural programs, they provide a crucial ingredient. Kevin Mattson makes this point in Mattson, “Teaching Democracy: Reflections on the Clemente Course in the Humanities, Higher Education, and Democracy” in *The Good Society*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2002), 80 – 84.

democratic practice or democratic theory? These questions will form the basis of the following reflections, reflections in which I will try to elaborate both the possibilities and the pitfalls of “midwifing democracy” through sustained attention to Plato’s *Theaetetus*, where the image appears, and the work of Hannah Arendt on Socrates’ maieusis.

Thinking about the promise of midwifing democracy seems appropriate given democracy’s troubled times in the contemporary United States.⁷ In their most recent books, Sheldon Wolin⁸ and William Connolly,⁹ respectively, have sketched the magnitude of the challenges facing democracy, challenges that loom and intimidate anyone but the epic theorist. According to Wolin, democracy in the United States has become, at its best, managed: managed by elites who propagate myths, creating their own reality, and working in tandem with global corporations which have even less accountability to shareholders, employees, and customers than so-called politicians have to their alleged constituents. Worse to come hovers on the horizon: the specter of “inverted totalitarianism,” which describes the possibility that corporate power will come to dominate every aspect of existence while the citizenry will suffer equally complete political demobilization. Democratic politics stands in danger of total eclipse by the logics of consolidation and capitalism taken to their extremes. It is a somber assessment and a terrifying prophesy.

Yet despite the doom of these grand theories, democratic theory has also found hope and possibility in micropractices that help create and foster the development of democratic citizens and the growth of democratic publics. Inspired by and in critical dialogue with the likes of Connolly and Wolin, these theorists of democratic practices have looked to

⁷ I should note, however, that democracy’s troubled state is perhaps always the case, as Romand Coles has pointed out in Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xi.

⁸ Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁹ William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

the ongoing and growing work of democratic activism in various communities as ways of theorizing “from the outside” about democratic possibilities.¹⁰ In addition to historic democratic movements such as the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, gay rights movements, and the anti-war movement, contemporary theorists of democracy have recently drawn inspiration from coalitions for urban renewal such as the Industrial Areas Foundation and Christian community organizing such as Jean Vanier’s L’Arche movement.¹¹ These and many other examples might serve as what Harry Boyte has termed the democratization of knowledge systems through the practice of citizenship¹² or what Romand Coles means when he argues that “hope lies in hyperactive efforts to invent arts of receptive democratic engagement across differences, through which alternative powers might gather the strength to actually make another world possible.”¹³ Thinking “from the outside” means engaging old things in new ways, reencountering the ordinary, finding hope in the smallest things – all with an eye toward a new way of politics and a more inclusive, just political life.

Socrates may seem far from such theorizing, but I will suggest in this essay that thinking through his maieutic activity and its implications can help develop possibilities for democratic work in the twenty-first century. As we saw Shorris suggest, maieusis can elicit political thinking and in turn empower political beings. Traveling to Plato’s *Theaetetus*, I offer three readings of the midwife through the dialogue’s three distinct arguments in answer to the question, What is knowledge? These show the field of possibilities for the midwife from sophistic to isolated philosopher to potential friend. But not one of these readings emerges

¹⁰ I should note that Wolin’s “grand theory,” as I termed it earlier, also calls for precisely this kind of work. See his “Agitated Times,” *Parallax*, Vol. 11, no. 4 (2005), 2 – 11. The quotation is from this essay, at 10.

¹¹ As Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles have recently done in Coles and Hauerwas, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

¹² Harry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 75.

¹³ Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, x.

as a master narrative – each ends aporetically as does the dialogue as a whole. The *Theaetetus* leaves us with more questions than answers.

Hannah Arendt helps frame some of these questions in her retelling of the tradition of philosophy's diremption from politics, a diremption which began with Socrates. Arendt helps elaborate the associational and reflective possibilities that the midwife embodies, as well as the ways in which such an understanding of Socrates and his activity underscores the twin dangers of elitism and rule by expertise on the one hand and quietism and withdrawal on the other. Unable to free Socrates from a reading that points toward the latter, Arendt cordons him in the realm of thinking, abandoning his generative political possibilities.

Put in conversation, the multiple practices of maieusis in the *Theaetetus* and Arendt's hopes and doubts about Socrates intimate more profound ways of midwifing democracy while also acknowledging the dangers that attend maieusis; this dialogue in turn allows us to see the usefulness of engaging Socrates,¹⁴ and of learning from and with his maieutic activity.¹⁵ Finally, the juxtaposition generates an insight into the glinting potential for wonder at plurality such that might inspire a new kind of political thinking. If Wolin and Connolly

¹⁴ While claims for "usefulness" may easily become trapped in regnant tempos and regimes such as Wolin's logics of capital and corporations such that "usefulness" acts as another way of disappearing democracy, I wish to assert a different kind of usefulness against the conventional one. On my reading, Socrates is useful for criticizing such normalized usefulness; his usefulness lies precisely in the strangeness that he casts over the world, envisaging things in new light, surprising us with questions, and sparking critical evaluation of our unquestioned assumptions. In this sense, "usefulness" can offer a way of advancing the counterhegemonic projects of democracy despite the normalizing discourse of use that threatens to subsume it.

¹⁵ To explicate the methodology implicit in this essay, I intend this essay – and the larger project of which it is a part – to build on recent work by a number of scholars who have looked to classical political thought in order to advance democratic theorizing today. Often drawing on the work of H.G. Gadamer, these scholars have advocated establishing a dialogue between ancient sources and contemporary concerns, seeing understanding as the "interplay of the movement of tradition and movement of the interpreter" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [New York: Continuum, 2000], 293). These scholars have shown that the meanings of texts go beyond authors and that all reading and understanding involves application to contemporary questions. This kind of anachronism is not necessarily a bad thing. As Margaret Leslie writes: "There is illumination also to be gained from genuine historical understanding achieved through a dialogue between the historian's own concerns and the past he seeks to apprehend" (Leslie, "In Defense of Anachronism," *Political Studies*, Vol. 18, no. 4 [1970], 433 – 447).

are right about the democracy's bleak horizon, my hope is that this essay might offer in its coruscations of juxtaposition and of wonder a flash of light for these "dark times."

II.

Anxiety racks young Theaetetus. He knows what Socrates wants – or at least he thinks he does – but fails to persuade himself that his answer merits consideration. And yet he cannot cease from worrying about these very questions! How can he answer Socrates knowing that yet another question will immediately confront him? How can he reveal to another's incisive mind the inchoate character of his own? Theaetetus's perplexity threatens to abort the dialogue just as it has commenced. But Socrates has sought the youthful Theaetetus for his great potential to "turn out well," and Theodorus, Theaetetus's teacher in mathematics, has assured Socrates that Theaetetus not only has great gifts, but that he even resembles Socrates: not beautiful at all, snub-nosed and with eyes that stick out. Socrates seems to have met a perfect student! Yet they have hardly begun before Theaetetus's quailing begins. In response, Socrates describes himself as a midwife.¹⁶

Theaetetus's suffering, Socrates explains, has its cause in "pains of labor" that come from Theaetetus's being pregnant; fortunately, Socrates practices the same art of maieusis which his mother practiced, and this promises Theaetetus some relief. While it is a secret that Socrates has this art, it also has gained him his reputation for being "the strangest sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties."¹⁷ Socrates suggests that he has already begun to act on Theaetetus, inducing his painful perplexities and that this perplexing character of his maieutic activity has led to a false reputation. Misinformed about the nature of his activity, many have reproached him for claiming to know nothing, when he appears to

¹⁶ The midwife passage on which this section focuses begins at 148e1 and continues until 151d6. All quotations refer to the Oxford Classical Text (Duke, ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993]). I have generally relied on the Levett translation as revised by Myles Burnyeat (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), although with some emendations.

¹⁷ 149a: *Hoti de atopotatos eimi kai poiō tous anthrōpous aporein.*

know something. Little do they know, Socrates confesses to Theaetetus, that he, like his female counterparts, is barren – but of wisdom.

Socrates' art of maieusis has one important difference from his mother's: he attends men, not women, and when vetting offspring, the “the most important thing” about his art consists in being “capable of assaying in every way whether the thought of the young is giving birth to an image and a lie or something fruitful and true” (150b – c).¹⁸ “The god” has ordered Socrates to practice maieusis while forbidding Socrates from giving birth himself – not that it matters, since Socrates' barrenness means he cannot claim any discovery worth wisdom's name. Instead, Socrates attends the travail of others, although with varying results:

But whoever associates with me, some appear at first as even very foolish, but all – whomever the god allows – as the association advances, make an amazing lot of progress. It's their own opinion and everyone else's too. And this too is as plain as day, that they never learnt anything from me, but they on their own from themselves found and gave birth to many beautiful things.¹⁹ (150d)

This progress depends not on Socrates' own learning but on his assisting others to develop themselves. Proof of this lies, Socrates asserts, in those who have abandoned his company too abruptly and then failed to care well for their “offspring”: taking all the credit upon themselves they have neglected these “children” Socrates helped them to bear and lost them by setting more value on lies and phantoms than on truth. While many have changed their mind and returned, it often came too late and the child was lost. Suspecting that Theaetetus is indeed in labor, Socrates promises to allay his pains and examine what he says so that they together might see if it is mirage or truth. While often people have reacted negatively – “ready to bite” – when Socrates has disposed of their nonsense, Socrates insists that

¹⁸Benardete's translation: Seth Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

¹⁹ Benardete's translation.

Theaetetus should believe that Socrates practices his art with “good will”; Socrates can neither accept non-truth over truth nor can the god who compels Socrates’ activity.

Finishing his self-description, Socrates initiates their investigations anew and Theaetetus responds vigorously, encouraged by Socrates’ explanation. The image functions to elicit the dialogue that follows and the birth pangs disappear.²⁰ Yet the midwife description continues: Socrates repeatedly refers to the midwifing process during the ensuing conversation²¹ and at the dialogue’s end, Socrates confirms that they have been engaged in maieutic activity all along. Their series of definitions of knowledge, Socrates asks Theaetetus, haven’t they all shown themselves as “wind eggs,” unfertilized eggs unfit for further development? Theaetetus agrees.

The political stakes of this image hardly leap from the dialogue’s pages, but the setting of the *Theaetetus* connects it unmistakably to political issues concerning Socrates’ life and death, the political significance of his activity, and the place of philosophic investigation in democratic Athens – all of which inflect how we might view Socrates’ maieusis. The dialogue begins with a brief exchange between Euclides and Terpsion, Socratics from Megara, many years after the death of Socrates.²² Euclides was on his way to meet Theaetetus, but Theaetetus had fallen ill; Euclides reports that he was just listening to people singing Theaetetus’s praises for his valiant fighting in Corinth and this recalls, they remark, Socrates’ prophesy that much would come of Theaetetus. The memory of Socrates reminds Euclides that he had transcribed recollections of a conversation many years earlier between a

²⁰ I owe this point to Polansky, who enthusiastically puts it this way: “The midwife image thus appears as itself an instance of Socrates’ maieutic activity! Hastening the onset of Theaetetus’s labor, the image serves both as an image of Socrates’ lack and an instance of its performance.” Ronald M. Polansky, *Philosophy and Knowledge* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992, at 59.

²¹ This occurs at the following places: 151e, 154d, 157c – d, 160e – 161b, 184b, and 210b..

²² For accounts of what little we know about the dialogue’s participants, see Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: a prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002).

young Theaetetus and Socrates on the eve of the latter's trial; they relax and listen to a slave read the dialogue.

Thus the death of a well-known philosopher (of a kind) – Theaetetus – and the death of perhaps the most notorious philosopher – Socrates – frame the dramatic action of the *Theaetetus*. Moreover, Theaetetus's military service during which he subsequently died recalls Socrates' own service to Athens, both as a soldier and in his role as the city's gadfly. The dialogue literally points to Socrates' trial and execution as we reach the end of the *Theaetetus*, when Socrates departs to meet the indictment of Meletus at the Archon's porch. All of these resonances with the life and death of Socrates provoke the questions which in turn surround his trial: Was Socrates indeed guilty of corrupting the youth? Was Socrates a good citizen of Athens? What were the politics of Socrates' activity? What are his political legacies? In terms of the *Theaetetus* and the image of the midwife, what could one find objectionable about moderating one's fellow citizens by disabusing them of wrong-headed ideas? While Socrates' questioning surely irritated many of his interlocutors, does this explain his trial and execution? What ultimately is the political significance of Socrates' maieusis?

These questions also orbit Socrates' description of himself as a midwife, and I will suggest in this essay that the series of arguments which form the bulk of the dialogue itself allow us to consider and reconsider this description from different vantage points. Each of dialogue's three primary arguments presents a hypothetical answer to the question – what is knowledge? – while also reflecting back on the politics of Socrates' maieutic activity. In other words, these three arguments offer three possible readings of Socrates' maieusis while also giving us ways of elaborating on and responding to the concerns Arendt will later raise regarding the politics of the midwife. Plato, however, leaves us to disentangle these multiple

voices; I will argue in what follows that reflecting on the different strands of the *Theaetetus* can help us think through what it might mean to midwife democracy.²³

In *Theaetetus*'s first attempt to answer the question – what is knowledge? – he offers that knowledge is perception (151e). Socrates immediately compares this to Protagoras's assertion that "man is the measure of all things." Since every person perceives the world differently, each person measures the world according to his or her self. Moreover, it is real in the sense that if knowledge is perception, what we perceive is known, and the known exists – it *is*. As Socrates puts it: "as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you" (152a). This also means, Socrates continues, that nothing that is itself is just one thing. Because knowledge must correspond to what is and each person's perception of a thing constitutes knowledge, nothing can be the same; everything must be in motion, changing according to how it is perceived. The flux of the world in turn creates a flux in knowledge; since "all things become relatively to something" (157b) we must abolish the verb "to be" and always speak only of things in motion.

Yet this argument poses a problem for anyone who claims to teach knowledge. If everyone knows what they perceive, then no one can assess another's experience better than another nor can anyone claim authority to examine another's judgment in order to determine its truth or falsity. In other words, no wisdom exists in the world. "How could it ever be," Socrates asks *Theaetetus*, "that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men, and worth large fees; while we, in comparison with him the

²³ My ways of reading the *Theaetetus* depart from other work which has focused on readings of the dialogue that seek to reconcile it with "Platonic doctrine," however that is understood. I also abstain from addressing the historical truth of the midwife description, which has been the subject of scholarly controversy. My interest lies in suggestive uses of the midwife rather than the dialogue's ultimate place in Plato's world or elsewhere.

ignorant ones, needed to go and sit at his feet?” (161d) Isn’t Theaetetus surprised that he is now equal in wisdom to Protagoras?²⁴

Theaetetus admits astonishment, but Socrates’ response also shows how the argument thus far applies to Socrates himself – and one possible reading of his maieutic activity. Socrates suggests that Theaetetus listens too easily to the many and has accepted that “knowledge is perception” simply because of its ring of plausibility. Clearly, Socrates says, Protagoras could not have meant this; obviously some have more expertise than others. Socrates too claims expertise in his role as midwife. Thus Socrates’ dismissal of this argument also implicates Socrates in the claims of the sophists, giving a different reading of Socrates: just as the many claims that knowledge is perception against sophistic claims to expertise, so too has the many viewed Socrates as one of the sophists, an imposter claiming special access to the truth.

Moreover, characterizing knowledge as perception also corresponds to a rough sketch of how Athenian democracy actually functioned. Athenian democracy worked under the assumption that each person’s opinion counted toward the construction of knowledge. As Josiah Ober has shown, Athens constituted its knowledge democratically: democratic procedures such as trials, votes, examinations and cross-examinations, and other forms of deliberations established democratic knowledges.²⁵ Since everyone knows what they perceive, no midwife is necessary.

By taking the side of sophists who seek to intervene in the democratic process of knowledge construction, Socrates appears as one sophist among many. He threatens the demos with his expertise. Socrates may not charge large fees, but he still earns reproaches for

²⁴ A few other arguments nest within this larger argument, which I pass over in order to focus on the midwife. Bernard Williams treats these nested arguments as fitting with my reading in Williams, “Introduction to Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 83 – 96.

²⁵ Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 33.

giving the appearance that he knows something others do not. Socrates had also implicated his maieutic activity with the sophists by saying he often refers his associates to sophists such as Prodicus when he deems them not pregnant. One reading of Socrates, in other words, sees him as just another sophist and an affront to the epistemological foundations of Athenian democracy.²⁶

But the argument continues and a second way of reading Socrates' maieusis emerges alongside it. Socrates asserts that some people must have more expertise than others, and asks Theaetetus to offer another answer to the question, What is knowledge? They have not treated Protagoras fairly, Socrates says, because clearly Protagoras would respond that wisdom and wise people exist. Wisdom would depend on the ability to change appearances: the wise man is "the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him" (166d). Some states are better than others and the education Protagoras and others offer changes the worse state to the better. This becomes clearest in political life:

The wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones. Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable *is* just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just. (167c)

Poleis *need* leaders, Socrates later adds, to inform their deliberations. Whatever view a polis takes on an issue becomes "truth and fact" for that city; to follow their best interests, they require advising (172).

²⁶ I may exaggerate a little bit here. Certainly the relation between elite and mass is more complicated than this, as Josiah Ober has shown extensively (*Political Dissent and Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989]). My point is that this reading of Socrates contains an implicit challenge to the democratic order, one which has within its logic claims to rule by experts, the kind of philosophic tyranny that Arendt condemns and fears.

Such advising depends on a friendly relationship between philosophers and politicians, Socrates continues. Treating Protagoras fairly, as they have done by allowing him to defend their initial mischaracterization of his argument (in the previous section) demonstrates this amiability. As Theodorus joins the conversation, he and Socrates digress to treat the differences between the philosophic and the political life, a digression which explores the problem of informing “true judgment,” the counsel needed by any polis to replace enervating conventions with salubrious ones. But the stark contrast between these two ways of life undermines the hope in knowledge as true judgment.

Unlike philosophers, the men of the law courts hurry everywhere, always with an eye on the clock: “as a result of all this, they become sharp and shrewd, knowing how to cozen their master in speech and beguile him in deed, but they become small and not upright in their souls, for their enslavement since their youth on has deprived them of the possibility of growth, straightness, and liberality” (173a). For the philosopher, Socrates offers this description:

The philosopher grows up without knowing the way to the market-place, or the whereabouts of the law courts or the council chambers or any other place of public assembly . . . because it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way . . . throughout the universe. . . . (173e)

Socrates continues by telling the story of Thales, who gazed so intently at the heavens that he fell into a well. Philosophers do not know their neighbors; they are too busy asking “What is man?” Such a man appears clumsy and fatuous in the law courts. Praises of men of reputation sound pointless to him and such a man becomes “quite as coarse and uncultivated as the stock-farmer” (174e). In all of these cases, “the philosopher is the object of general derision, partly for what men take to be his superior manner, and partly for his constant ignorance and lack of resources in dealing with the obvious” (175b). And yet when

he draws someone “to a higher level,” asking questions about justice and happiness, the philosopher appears perfectly comfortable – a savant.

Socrates explains that there are two human types: the philosopher brought up in true freedom and leisure and the practical man, who is keen and smart at doing the mundane jobs of daily life: making a bed, sweetening a sauce, and delivering a flattering speech, for example (174e). While Theodorus hopes that everyone will see the philosophers’ wisdom and that peace will follow, Socrates responds that the evils of life will never completely disappear. For this reason, Socrates says, a man should become as god-like as possible, pursuing justice and purity through understanding, the true judgment which seems far from everyday life (176b). Those who fail to see this may believe they possess qualities “necessary for survival in their community,” but they believe in ignorance.

Yet Socrates also adds that “there is one accident to which the unjust man is liable.” If he gives and take an account of the things he disparages – the things philosophers claim to know – he will see the insufficiencies of what he thinks he knows: “In the end the things he says do not satisfy even himself; that famous eloquence of his somehow dries up, and he is left looking nothing more than a child” (177b). But this also points to a problem with their own – Socrates’ and Theaetetus’s – understanding of knowledge as the true judgment of the philosopher.

The arguments that follow try to explain knowledge as true judgment, the second definition Theaetetus offers (187a), but this quickly becomes untenable. Socrates suggests that anyone could happen to have a true belief without knowing it and thus judge truly but not have knowledge. I can judge that this honey will taste good without knowing if it in fact has become rancid and I may be right out of sheer luck. Moreover, false judgment as the opposite of knowledge also poses a problem. It occurs often, and it proves impossible to

explain it. Doesn't one need to know something in order to judge it falsely? Then how can false judgment be the opposite of knowledge? After a series of possible responses, they conclude that some form of knowledge is necessary for error and thus that knowledge cannot be the same as true judgment.²⁷

Socrates' final response to Theaetetus's assertion that knowledge is true judgment, however, casts a political shadow over these arguments, one that outlines this second reading of Socrates' maieusis. Socrates asserts that "a whole art" indicates that knowledge is not true judgment (201a). The art of the "greatest representatives of wisdom" – such as orators and lawyers – resides in producing conviction, persuading or causing jurors to judge one thing or another. Yet jurors' judgment, whether correct or not, does not necessarily hinge on knowledge. Clearly jurors do not *know* – orators and lawyers rather persuade them that one thing has more plausibility than another. If true judgment were knowledge, Socrates asserts, even the best juryman in the world couldn't form a correct judgment without knowledge (201c).

In a dialogue which ends with Socrates' going to meet his indictment, this observation on the difference between judgment and knowledge must change how we read Socrates. Describing his maieutic activity, Socrates had said that he acts as a kind of friendly philosopher, building relationships with his interlocutors that improve and advance them. Socrates also claimed that his greatest task was assaying his associates' opinions, and delivering them of wind eggs, their images and lies, and nurturing instead beautiful things, the "true and fruitful." But this comment at the end of the second argument reminds us that even if Socrates possesses some privileged knowledge that might help political life, even if Socrates could in fact develop the best opinions of his interlocutors, even if Socrates

²⁷ Again, I pass over a series of perplexing examples lest they dampen this essay's attention to Socrates.

beautifies the polis – even if the midwife benefits the polis immensely, nothing guarantees its communication and thus its effects. Socrates’ maieusis may never affect judgment and he may never affect his interlocutors. To use a metaphor of Socrates’ devising, there is no way to assess the depth of the impression Socrates makes on the soul of another. This argument suggests maieusis’s fecklessness.

Yes, Socrates clearly differs from the “flying philosopher” from his description,²⁸ but he also suffers the same criticisms: apathy toward politics, concern with abstractions, inability to conform with Athens’ standards. All of these resonated with Socrates’ description of himself as a midwife who often angers his associates, has a reputation for strangeness, and must keep his art secret.

Moreover, if judgment is indeed disconnected from knowledge, philosophy has nothing to say. Poleis may need (or seek) advice, but this argument suggests that the diremption of the philosophic conditions of knowledge and the political conditions of judgment means such advice will never come. We do not learn how judgments form, but Socrates and his interlocutors reject its connection to knowledge. Thus the problem lies not in persuasion but in that successful persuasion does not indicate any basis in knowledge. The midwife languishes in separation from politics.

Yet another reading becomes possible in the final pages of the dialogue. Dissuaded from knowledge as true judgment, Theaetetus experiences some inspiration. He heard “a man” say that “it is true judgment with an account that is knowledge; true judgment without an account falls outside of knowledge” (201d). But this hypothesis, investigated in terms of another dream which Socrates experiences, quickly becomes problematic. Unable to say

²⁸ So Harry Berger describes the philosopher of the *Theaetetus*, in Berger “Plato’s Flying Philosopher,” *Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XIII, no. 4 (Summer 1982), 385 – 407.

precisely what a knowable thing is, Socrates and Theaetetus attempt to explain “an account,” but this leads to a tautology.

Knowing something under their provisional definition means having “correct judgment about any one of the things that are” and grasping “in addition its difference from the rest” (208e). But if correct judgment must concern itself with the differentness of what it is about (209d), then adding an account requires that one *get to know* the differentness, not merely judge it – a tautology. “This most splendid of our accounts of knowledge,” Socrates says, “turns out to be a very amusing affair. For getting to know of course is acquiring knowledge” (210). Thus they have defined knowledge in terms of knowledge:

So it seems, the answer to the question “what is knowledge?” will be “correct judgment accompanied by knowledge of the differences” – for this is what we are asked to understand by the “addition of an account.” (210a-b)

The dialogue comes full circle: Knowledge is neither perception nor true judgment nor an account added to true judgment. Theaetetus may not be “ready to bite,” but he and Socrates seem to have bitten their own tail. Yet Socrates also claims that something has come of this: Even if Theaetetus never bears anything beautiful, he will be “less hard” on his associates and “tamer, believing in a moderate way that you don’t know what you don’t know” (210c2 – c4).²⁹ As Socrates continues: “My art is only capable of so much and no more, and I don’t know anything at all which everyone else does, all those who are and have been great and amazing men” (210c).

In addition to appearing as a sophist and as an outcast philosopher, Socrates now also appears as a kind of friend to Theaetetus. But his claim to benefit Theaetetus – and his interlocutors generally – is as tautological as the final argument he and Theaetetus have dismissed: it depends on the claim that they have benefited. We have no evidence to judge

²⁹ Benardete translation.

beyond Socrates' assertion. Just as in the case where Socrates prophesied about Theaetetus and the Socratics Euclides and Terpsion have now come to see Theaetetus as fulfilling this prophecy, we cannot know whether Socrates brought him to this state or not. The word Socrates used to describe his appearance to most Athenians, *atopōtatos*, is a superlative of *atopos*, meaning "strange" but also "odd" and, most literally, "without a place." We cannot place Socrates' influence. This reading of the midwife appears as aporetic as the dialogue in which it appears.

These three explorations of what is knowledge and the three corresponding readings of Socrates dramatize the dilemmas between philosophy and politics, the "problem" of Socrates in democratic Athens, and the concerns that I will suggest leads Arendt to leave her strong account of maieusis behind. Yet unlike Arendt, the *Theaetetus* does not endorse any particular solution to these dilemmas. It instead demands engagement with these tensions. Just as no definitive answer to the question – what is knowledge? – emerges from the dialogue, we cannot definitively say which reading corresponds to Socrates' maieusis.

In addition to these three readings, the literal sense of the midwife as it reflects back on Socrates' "midwifery of the mind" offers yet another reading. Although unelaborated in the dialogue and unmentioned by Arendt, Socrates' description of himself as a midwife also evokes the real bodily function of midwifing: labor, birth, and the intimacy and vulnerability (as well as pain, joy, exuberance, exhaustion, and so forth) that accompany actual birth. This reading of Socrates shows the mutual dependence involved in midwifing, the minimal friendship involved in welcoming a stranger to participate in the birthing process, and the risk – psychic and physical – of entering such a relationship. While silent in the *Theaetetus* and

Arendt, I think this aspect of the metaphor holds great promise for midwifing democracy; I return to it in my conclusion.³⁰

Yet Arendt, as I said, prefers one of these readings, the third, open-ended Socrates whose claim to benefit his interlocutors, while unsubstantiated, Arendt takes as authentic. In fact, she rather imaginatively expands on these benefits, giving us a way to understand Socrates' maieusis beyond Athens and instead as a possession for democracy in late modern life. I turn to Arendt, then, with an eye toward these possibilities.

III.

Hannah Arendt engaged Socrates throughout her multifaceted work in political theory, but as Dana Villa has effectively shown,³¹ her labors bore remarkably varied fruits. On the one hand, Socrates' commitment to philosophy and opposition to the *vita activa* earns disparagement in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt “wars on philosophy” and, indirectly, on Socrates.³² Arendt also casts the “Socratic conscience” aside in her essay on civil disobedience as “antipolitical,” where she contrast Socrates' fidelity to himself with a political relation to others, her preferred concept of civil disobedience.³³

But on the other hand, Arendt also devoted a substantive and laudatory section of *Thinking*, the first volume of the planned three-volume *Life of the Mind*, to Socrates as a “model for thinking.”³⁴ While politically relevant only in emergencies, Arendt speculates that

³⁰ I thank David McIvor for calling this fourth reading to my attention. Since his crucial suggestions came as I completed this essay, they could stand for further development.

³¹ Dana Villa, “Arendt and Socrates,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 204 – 218.

³² Villa, “Arendt and Socrates,” 205. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21.

³³ Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience” in Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 64.

³⁴ She called the section “The Answer of Socrates,” in Arendt, “Thinking,” Volume 1 of *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 166 – 179.

the presence of the kind of reflective thinking Socrates exemplifies could also “protect against the worst.”³⁵ In this more positive light, the midwife also appears along with the stingray and gadfly as metaphors describing the provocative action that Arendt saw as the heart of Socrates’ activity: “. . . arous[ing]” those around him to “thinking and examination,” “purging people” of their opinions, and “paralyzing” others while they surged with internal “winds of thought.”³⁶ Socrates shows “what thinking is good for”:³⁷ while it has a destructive side in calling into question what has hitherto lain untouched and unqueried, it also unsettles the language codes and ossified beliefs that may allow people to participate unknowingly in the greatest evil.³⁸

But what role does the midwife play? A lone essay in Arendt’s oeuvre seriously engages Socrates’ maieusis and its potential implications: a lecture from 1954 entitled “Philosophy and Politics.” While this lecture remained unpublished until after her death, it contains seeds of later published work on Socrates – ideas we find especially in *Thinking* but also in “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” an essay that appeared in *Social Research* in 1971. I will not attempt to adjudicate which Socrates constitutes Arendt’s authentic Socrates, nor how one version might inform our understanding of her thought in general. Instead, I propose to explore her use of Socrates’ maieusis in “Philosophy and Politics” as well as her later uses of the midwife in order to illuminate the political stakes of maieusis, how Arendt’s contemporary deployment of the midwife works with and against the multiple readings of

³⁵ Ibid., 167 and 192.

³⁶ Ibid., 172 – 173.

³⁷ Ibid., 173.

³⁸ Arendt famously describes such a situation toward the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*.” (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Revised and Enlarged Edition [New York: Penguin Press, 1964], 287.)

Socrates in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and how the midwife of the *Theaetetus* can in turn help us think through the possibilities Arendt proposes. All of this I suggest might help evaluate and potentially use the midwife today.

“The gulf between philosophy and politics,” Arendt begins the essay, “opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates. . .”³⁹ Arendt thus traces the diremption of philosophy and politics which began with the death of Socrates and provoked Plato, on Arendt's reading, into deep distrust of persuasion and opinion.⁴⁰ Persuasion – which “weakly” translates the Greek *peithein* – constituted “the specifically political form of speech” and the art of persuasion “the highest, the truly political art” (73-74). Yet Socrates' inability to convince his judges showed Plato the limits of persuasion and led to his condemnation of politics. Connected to this was Plato's “furious denunciation” of opinion, *doxa*, which Plato opposed with truth – Plato despised opinions and yearned for “absolute standards,” Arendt argued: “such standards, by which human deeds could be judged and human thought could achieve some measure of reliability, from then on became the primary impulse of his political philosophy . . .” (74). Philosophy, threatened by the “storm and dust” of political life,⁴¹ withdrew from it; as Frederic Dolan puts it: “Between philosophical ideas and political reality, Arendt sensed, lies an abyss.”⁴²

³⁹ Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring 1990), 73 – 103, at 73. I will cite the page numbers of this edition in the text of this section.

⁴⁰ I would, of course, contest this reading of Plato, as have many scholars. Arendt seems to draw the inspiration for her arguments from Plato's *Seventh Letter*, but S. Sara Monoson has shown the limits of any inferences on that basis that Plato was anti-democratic, in Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ As Socrates describes the philosopher in Plato's *Republic*, Book Six.

⁴² Frederic Dolan, “Arendt on philosophy and politics,” in Dana Villa, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 261 – 276, at 262.

Yet Socrates inhabited this abyss. Plato's withdrawal was anti-Socratic because Socrates never withdrew from active life in the polis.⁴³ In contrast to Plato's designed "tyranny of truth," Socrates did not claim wisdom, and this led him to engage his fellow citizens. Socrates understood that "as soon as the philosopher submitted his truth, the reflection of the eternal, to the polis, it became immediately an opinion among opinions" (78).⁴⁴ In other words, Socrates saw himself as a citizen among citizens, and this recognition of the conditions of plurality in the public sphere led Socrates to question and investigate the opinions of his fellow citizens with the understanding that each opinion represented a unique perspective on the world as it appeared to someone. Here is Arendt:

The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it; and that the "sameness" of the world, its commonness . . . resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all difference between men and their positions in the world – and consequently their *doxai* (opinions) – "both you and I are human." (80)

Thus rather than impose his view of the truth, on Arendt's reading Socrates saw truth as existing only communicatively: among human beings where each possesses a particular and unique perspective on the truth of things. The role of maieusis lay first of all in bringing these perspectives to light.

What Socrates called maieusis, Arendt continues, was the art by which he sought to "help others give birth to what they themselves thought anyhow, to find the truth in their *doxa*" (81). The method of doing this, Arendt explains, is talking something through, a dialectic that does *not* destroy opinion – as Plato sought to do – but instead "reveals *doxa* in its own truthfulness" (Ibid.). This activity did not consist in education so much as collective

⁴³ Arendt: "The opposition of truth and opinion was certainly the most anti-Socratic conclusion that Plato drew from Socrates' trial" (75).

⁴⁴ As her readers surely know, Arendt employs masculine pronouns exclusively (to my knowledge) in her examples and descriptions. I will leave these as she has written but try to avoid mimicking her exclusions in my own language by varying the genders.

improvement; Socrates began by “making sure of the other’s position in the common world” and then “talked through” the other’s opinion, working under the implicit assumption that “nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion” (Ibid.).

To put it bluntly (and in Arendt’s words), “maieusis was a *political activity*”: “a give and take, fundamentally on the basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth” (81; my emphasis). The “truthful dialogue” that arose from Socrates’ maieusis established a common world of friends; “politically speaking, Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens’s citizens” and thus lessen the tensions inherent in Athens’s agonistic democracy (82 – 83). This dialogue also helped to develop the valuable political insight of “understanding the greatest possible number and variety of realities . . . [and] in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions so that the common-ness of this world becomes apparent” (84). Socrates saw his political function as facilitating the establishment of a common world, one built on such an understanding of friendship where rulership would be unnecessary.

Arendt continues by arguing that Socrates’ understanding of his purpose rested on insights about self knowledge and the need for harmony with oneself, insights that in turn led him to see the dialogues with others under conditions of plurality as mirroring a dialogue “between the two who I am.” “Living together with others begins with living together with oneself,” Arendt reminds us, and she begins to develop ideas familiar to any reader of her later work in *Thinking* or “Thinking and Moral Considerations”:⁴⁵ we cannot depart from ourselves; in our appearing to others we practice how we appear to ourselves; and our living together in the world changes us while we change the world. As Arendt puts it in stark relief:

⁴⁵ Similar ideas also appear in Arendt’s essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” in Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 17 – 48.

In other words, a murderer is not only condemned to the permanent company of his own murderous self, but he will see all other people in the image of his own action. He will live in a world of potential murderers. It is not his own isolated act that is of political relevance, or even the desire to commit it, but this *doxa* [opinion] of his, the way in which the world opens up to him and is part and parcel of the political reality he lives in. (88)

Socrates understood the deep interplay between the dialogues we have with ourselves and the dialogues we have with others. His maieusis, Arendt reminds us, constituted the latter: a political activity that “talked through” the opinions of others. Yet this also began from the realization that our plural selves give us the only company we must keep – this insight into the activity of thinking becomes a major leitmotif of Arendt’s later engagements with Socrates.

Despite this rosy – at least from the perspective of pluralist, democratic politics – account of Socratic maieusis, Arendt ends “Philosophy and Politics” with a baleful prophesy: political philosophy can never escape its “necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs” (103). Even Socrates’ maieusis led him into conflict with the polis: while dedicated to eliciting the truthfulness of opinions, the search for truth can also lead to the “catastrophic result that *doxa* is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared is revealed as an illusion. . . . Truth can therefore destroy *doxa*, it can destroy the specific political reality of citizens” (90). Socrates’ attempt to “make philosophy relevant for politics” provoked the conflict between philosophy and politics, a conflict which ended with the defeat of philosophy, the withdrawal of the philosopher, and the beginning of a time when “philosophers no longer feel responsible for the city. . .” (91). Now philosophers only desire with respect to politics is to be left alone (92), and the deeper contradiction between the man of action and the man of thought comes into relief. While Plato may have contorted Socrates, Arendt also suggests that Socrates’ own activity stands at the beginning of this progression.

In the wake of the diremption of politics from philosophy, political philosophy now begins from the exclusive perspective of the political philosopher; no longer do the opinions of others have any relevance. Yet the division within the philosopher herself, Arendt argues, generates the division between philosophy and human affairs. The philosopher's own divisions leads to the search for mastery of soul over body, which overshadows what Arendt regards as the "original experience of thought," the dialogue of the two-in-one (93). Once the philosopher has achieved such mastery, the common sense of the world no longer makes sense; it is as if it has been entirely subordinated to the philosopher's particular vision of reality. Arendt rereads the image of the cave from Plato's *Republic* to describe this alienating experience: "the allegory of the cave is thus designed to depict not so much how philosophy looks from the viewpoint of politics but how politics, the realm of human affairs, looks from the viewpoint of philosophy" (96). The philosopher reenters the cave of the polis as an endangered and endangering spectacle.

Moreover, Plato (and Aristotle after him) isolates the experience of wonder as uniquely philosophical and opposes it to the forming of opinions (*doxazdein*) which normally respond to human wonderings. Plato and Aristotle claimed speechless wonder as the beginning of philosophy and that ultimate truth lay beyond words (98). Thus the philosopher finds herself in a two-fold conflict with the polis: first, the philosopher sees speechlessness as the highest activity in contradistinction to the political realm where the faculty of speech is what makes humans political animals; second, the philosopher "will inevitably" fall into conflict with the opinions others form in order to respond to wonder because the philosopher will always resist forming a *doxa* lest it occlude the openness needed to experience wonder (100). Thus philosophers "turn the world upside down" by basing their entire existence on a singular experience of wonder (101). Anything less – and

especially politics and governance – the philosopher regards as reflecting human wickedness, an “unethical business” (102).

This may strike us as an intriguing – at times titillating perhaps – story about philosophers long dead and buried, but Arendt insists that the events set in motion by Socrates – his life and death, as we have seen – “deformed philosophy for political purposes” (102) such that the dilemmas of today require something entirely new. The tradition from Socrates through Marx has exhausted its “categories and hierarchy of values” and yet the world today – “a world in which not even common sense makes sense any longer” – requires thoughtful understanding. Political philosophy as it once existed – the “tradition” – has come to an end and has nothing to say any longer about politics. Thus, Arendt concludes, “the problem of philosophy and politics, or the necessity for a new political philosophy from which could come a new science of politics, is once more on the agenda” (103).

I have belabored “Philosophy and Politics” because it constitutes Arendt’s longest engagement with the description of Socrates as a midwife. But I should also note that the version of Socrates as midwife we encounter in “Philosophy and Politics” does not completely comport with Arendt’s later, published uses of Socrates. In these works Arendt shifts from treating Socrates’ maieusis as an activity and instead focuses solely on the midwife as a partial description of Socrates’ thinking and thus a withdrawal from politics.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ One partial exception to exclusive emphasis on Socrates as representing thinking (after the “Philosophy and Politics” essay) comes in Arendt’s Kant lectures, where she connects the image of the midwife with the critical thinking that Kant (and Arendt) argues lays the necessary foundation for the practice of judgment. While beyond the scope of this essay, I would argue that the treatment of Socrates in the Kant lectures exemplifies a synthesis of the interpretations in “Philosophy and Politics” and the those in “Thinking and Moral Considerations” and *Life of the Mind*. What results remains a mixed portrait, but one that emphasizes the important role Arendt imagines Socrates’ maieusis could play in developing a *sensus communis*, the common sense upon which Kantian judgment depends, while also acknowledging the ways in which the destructive side

Arendt's covering of the Eichmann trial prompted these later reflections on Socrates, and in "Thinking and Moral Considerations" and *Thinking*, Arendt introduces Socrates as an "ideal type" to help understand the role of thinking in moral life, in particular to understand whether "thoughtlessness" was the root of Eichmann's banal evil.⁴⁷ On this reading, Socrates exemplifies two things: first, his thinking "unfreeze[s]" language and thought codes by dissolving the restrictive categories that constrain thoughtfulness – the very same language codes and clichés which allowed Eichmann to proceed so insouciantly in his work murdering millions.⁴⁸ Second, and as we saw in "Philosophy and Politics," the experience of thinking gives rise to the conscience. Being unable to interact with one's conscience, Arendt's dialogue within oneself, makes one unable to do find opprobrious actions objectionable. If we do not live consciously with ourselves, we can easily live with ourselves as murderers. While conscience will not prevent wickedness, the inveterately evil among us, it will prevent the "nonwicked everybody" from committing evil unawares.

This extension of Socrates – and, I should add, a "maximal Socrates" and not just the midwife⁴⁹ – adds another layer, but not a contradictory one, to Arendt's treatment of Socrates. In a sense Arendt expands the thinking Socrates while not elaborating the acting Socrates. In terms of thinking, Arendt adds a new and potentially positive feature to her arsenal of concepts derived from Socrates – the ability of reflective thought to stand against the totalizing language and ideology experienced in totalitarian regimes. In terms of acting, she reiterates the purgative effects of Socrates' activity but does not remind us of the

of Socrates' activity can dissolve this same sense and thus negatively rebound on political life. Margaret Canovan has some suggestions along these lines in Canovan, "Socrates or Heidegger: Hannah Arendt's Reflections on Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research*, Vol. 57, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 135 – 165.

⁴⁷ Arendt, "Thinking," 4.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 252; Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 175.

⁴⁹ By "maximal Socrates" I mean that Arendt now combines different versions of Socrates without any argument for why and how these comport. I take the term maximal from Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

positive effects she found in “Philosophy and Politics.” But Arendt leaves the specifics of the midwife unelaborated, instead clumping the series of similes together as all bringing “the storm of thought.”⁵⁰ How these storms vary, their particular effects, and their intensity and duration Arendt leaves open.

But by limning her hesitations about Socrates, this hint of vacillation in Arendt’s treatment of Socrates also helps develop a more fruitful comparison with the midwife in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Put in conversation, these multiple versions of the midwife illuminate the terms on which Arendt views Socrates, terms which her later works extend in different directions, and terms which provide specific contrasts to the image of the midwife as we have it in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. Arendt allows us to see Socrates in light of the relationship between opinion and truth, the role of persuasion, the necessity of beginning from pluralist conditions, and the transformative *political* effects of maieutic activity. But illumination does not suffice entirely: How does Arendt’s use of Socrates encourage seeing the many (merry?) midwives of the *Theaetetus* differently? And how then does a potentially useful understanding of the midwife for democratic politics emerge?

IV.

We might first observe, that, like Shorris, Arendt emphasizes Socrates’ maieusis as explicitly a “political activity.” She politicizes the image of the midwife by placing it clearly in the “space of appearances,” leaving the readings of Socrates as isolated philosopher behind. Arendt’s Socrates stalks the agora, asking questions, drawing out the opinions of his interlocutors, helping them to see their opinions for themselves, potentially initiating the activity of a lifetime – political thinking and engaged citizenship. Arendt not only emphasizes

⁵⁰ Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 175.

the midwife's role in the space of appearances, but she even suggests that maieusis cultivates friendship – *philia* – among those who associate. The conversations that Socrates' maieusis elicits both intensify dialogues by focusing them on the creation of a communicable and communal world while also easing the tensions of agonistic life by occurring intimately and under amenable conditions. When the conditions of political life fail to meet those of the Athenian agora, such as in totalitarian regimes, the internal activity of maieusis dissolves the hold of language codes; in modern life, as Arendt understands it, maieutic activity holds the promise of developing the common world and advancing collective understanding.

On the other hand, Arendt does not fear the potentially sophistic Socrates, which we saw as another possibility arising in the *Theaetetus*. The *Theaetetus* withholds guaranteeing any ameliorative effects from Socrates' maieusis; Arendt simply assumes that more talk will make things better, and that the claims to maieutic expertise will not undermine the egalitarian preconditions of democratic life. While not anti- or apolitical, one reading of the midwife in the *Theaetetus* also depicted Socrates' selectivity, which like the sophists lessens the scale of what Arendt imagines possible. Socrates approached only those with whom his daemon permitted him to speak; he refused others who wished to return after abandoning him; he even passed those he considered non-pregnant to other sophists. Rather than friendship, Socrates stresses the associational quality of maieusis, as we saw. Arendt would turn this philosophical activity into a kind of coalitional politics, but we can read the *Theaetetus* to say Socrates' coalitions were exclusive and anti-democratic. Can we escape these exclusions as Arendt intimates?

Arendt also extends the image of Socrates as a midwife by connecting the faculty of thinking to the faculty of judging; this perhaps promises another avenue by which maieusis could have political effects, and one that resonates with Socrates as we saw him in the

Theaetetus. The seed of this idea in “Philosophy and Politics” – her description of maieusis as a way of developing a common world together – appears momentarily in “Thinking and Moral Considerations”⁵¹ only to bloom in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. There Arendt assimilates Socrates’ maieusis to critical thinking, calling it “the origin of critical thought,”⁵² which “always has political implications.”⁵³ In fact, political freedom depends on making public use of one’s reason, and thus Socrates becomes the model of thoughtful, critical activity, the very kind of activity which opens space for judgment, the ground of freedom and responsibility toward which she gestured in her final work. Recall Shorris, who writes that for a citizen to be free, that person must see the “need for reflective thinking as the precursor to the political life.”⁵⁴ Socrates as midwife does not exemplify this judging, for which Arendt turns to Kant, but he does stand at the beginning of the tradition of critical thinking fundamental for such judgment.⁵⁵

The multiple readings of the midwife in *Theaetetus* do not necessarily encourage such a connection – but neither do they deny it. In its various possibilities, Socrates’ maieusis in the *Theaetetus* initiates a way of critical thinking, but he also does so while under opaque motivations. Is it directed solely at a singular notion of truth? Does that undermine the openness of maieusis on which Arendt (and Shorris) rely? Does this remove Socrates from the space of appearances as Arendt implies that Plato suggests with the image of the cave? How necessary is Socrates as an agent of this activity?

⁵¹ Thus in “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (189), Arendt writes: “If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to think.”

⁵² Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 42.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁴ Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 11.

⁵⁵ *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 42.

Another way of approaching these questions might lie in Arendt's egalitarian interpretation of maieusis. Arendt, as we saw, insists on the value of every person's opinion. Each human being has the capacity to think – hence Eichmann's responsibility for failing to think – and therefore each person has the need to converse with others as a way of experiencing her plurality of thought among others. Along these same lines, every human being has the capacity to judge, the faculty which begins with or rests on thinking.⁵⁶ As Arendt writes in "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship":

The precondition for this kind of judging is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking.⁵⁷

If every person can think and then judge, each person can contribute to the common world; thus if one were to interpret Socrates' "true and fruitful" in Platonist terms as speaking to an ontological logos which stands above all opinions (as Arendt would seem likely to do), such an interpretation would *contradict* the premise of truth in the first place. If we believe that each of us can think, then each of us has a stake in the world and its truth; truth depends on plural, democratic conditions and no tyranny of truth could logically exist.⁵⁸ We all have the maieutic capacity; recognizing the implications of this would seem to come through engaging in dialogue with ourselves and others, for which Socrates is a model but not a necessary component. Yet again a reading that underscores Socrates' selectivity and his lack of concern for those not pregnant troubles this extension of Arendt's argument; at the same time, this is not the only possible reading.

⁵⁶ It remains unclear to me exactly what Arendt thinks the relationship between thinking and judging is. While she connects the two in her Kant lectures, the absence of the final volume in *The Life of the Mind* leaves these two faculties' connection obscure to my mind. I would welcome being enlightened otherwise.

⁵⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 17 – 48, at 45.

⁵⁸ This would seem to follow Arendt's argument in "Truth and Politics," in Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 227 – 264.

Wonder might offer one final point of commonality and contention. Philosophy begins in wonder, Socrates tells Theaetetus, and in the course of his description of maieusis, Socrates wonders at Theaetetus. Wonder began the movement from the paralysis of perplexity to the enthusiasm of investigation; every human being has the capacity of wonder. Moreover, even when this investigation elicited wind egg after wind egg, Socrates suggested at the dialogue's end that the participants would advance by it (as Theaetetus had); knowing the limits of their knowledge and moderate in their claims, "wonderers" would offer more thoughtful citizens, freed from the benighting veil of arrogance.⁵⁹

Arendt, as we saw, suspected wonder, and accused Plato of setting in motion a philosophic monopoly dedicated to it. Arendt's criticisms rested on seeing wonder as part of communing with the ineffable forms, which would both isolate and alienate philosophers from everyday life and the *sensus communis*. But listen again to Arendt's final paragraph, where she seems to offer an alternative:

Philosophy, political philosophy like all its other branches, will never be able to deny its origin in *thaumadzein* [wonder], in the wonder at that which is as it is. If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs – in its grandeur and misery – the object of their *thaumadzein*. Biblically speaking, they would have to accept – as they accept in speechless wonder the miracle of the universe, of man and of being – the miracle that God did not create Man, but “male and female created He them.” They would have to accept in something more than the resignation of human weakness the fact that “it is not good for man to be alone.”⁶⁰

Arendt imagines another possibility for political philosophy. This means going beyond the mere “fact of pluralism” – I take Arendt to intend this when she says that acceptance must

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Green takes this one step farther by suggesting that “they [the collection of duties borne from wonder] point to the possibility of grounding liberal values not in reason, but in ignorance and the wonder engendered from knowing such an ignorance” (Green, “The Morality of Wonder,” *Polis*, Vol. 21, no. 1 [2004], 43 – 69, at 69). I would add that they also “point to the possibility” of anti-liberal values as well – Socrates’ “grounding[s]” are not always agreeable from a liberal perspective. George Kateb explores this last point in Kateb, “Socratic Integrity,” in *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 2006), 215 – 244.

⁶⁰ Arendt, “Politics and Philosophy,” 103.

occur “in something more than . . . resignation” – and indeed in celebrating it, *wondering* at it. Such a political philosophy might wonder not at some ontological logos but instead at “the plurality of man” exemplified by God’s creating not Man but “male and female.” Such wonder might participate in a maieutics like Socrates’ prior to Plato, one dedicated to developing opinions publicly, creating a common world that remains always incomplete – open to another question, another insight, another person’s contribution – a maieutics dedicated to inspiring political thinking in everyone who can wonder – that is, *everyone*. And the pursuit of such wonder might also comport with the open-ended, aporetic reading I advanced of the *Theaetetus*.

But such a moment in Arendt remains a moment, as ephemeral as the moment at creation when darkness turned to light; a deep distrust of philosophy pervades her work, which must dampen any call for a new “philosophy” or “philosophic citizenship.” Coming at the end of an account of the ineluctable diremption of philosophy and politics, to imagine a “true political philosophy,” a reconciliation of what must remain by definition at odds, strikes me as utopian; Arendt, it seems, gropes toward a New Jerusalem as the only hope she has. Similarly, in a dialogue whose central discussion described the aloof and foolish philosopher, completely oblivious of political life, an open-ended reading of the *Theaetetus* which points to an Arendt- and Shorris-inspired maieutics of democratic citizens hangs by a thread.

Yet we have also seen that maieutics need not tie itself to the mast of philosophy. The human capacity to think, to have dialogue with oneself entails the ability to practice maieusis – philosophy or the wonder of philosophy is not necessary to this basic capability. In other words, while Socrates in the *Theaetetus* claims the art of maieutics as entirely to himself, Arendt suggests an alternative through her two uses of the midwife image: first,

maieusis's relationship to political dialogue and persuasion; and second, its place in the thinking of all human beings. We can avoid Socrates' potential exclusivity or the necessity of a Socrates figure by recognizing these potential capacities. A politics of wonder may strike Arendt (and me) as unlikely, but wonder could potentially supplement maieusis by showing both the effects of curiosity and inquiry released by maieusis and its realization as well as the joy of such an undertaking, regarding the miracle of an abundant and diverse world. Maieusis need not require a "true political philosophy" nor philosophy or philosophers at all.

V.

What then would it mean to midwife democracy? Earl Shorris suggests and has set out to prove that "the way out of poverty and into successful, self-governing life" relies on "reflection" that begins with engaging Socrates.⁶¹ Engaging Socrates begins a process of transformation from disempowered, apolitical, impoverished, wandering inhabitant to powerful, community-oriented, rich with reflection, wondering citizen. Shorris does not act as Socrates; rather, the encounter with Socrates and the promise of the midwife image precipitates recognizing the maieutic capacities of everyone. Socrates also stands at the beginning of this process. As Shorris describes his first class meeting:

It was the beginning of a love affair, the first moment of their infatuation with Socrates. If it is true that he was the first one to bring philosophy down to earth, it is also true that he was the first one to raise these students up to seriousness. Once he told them that the answer, the truth, was inside them and had only to be brought forth through dialogue, they were never again to see themselves in the same way. The humanities became a mirror in which they saw their human worth, and, like all lovers, they were transformed by love.⁶²

Socrates "raises these students up" not so much as an agent of change but through his empowering image, one that gives their thoughts, "brought forth through dialogue," the

⁶¹ Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 255.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 138.

value and attention they deserve. Abel Lomas, homeless and a budding Kantian, told Shorris later that “it was the first time anyone had ever paid attention to their opinions.” Shorris adds this: “Keeping to metaphor Socrates preferred, they were born.”⁶³

Reading and rereading Socrates’ image of the midwife in the *Theaetetus* casts a euphoric description such as Shorris’s in different lights. We could see Socrates’ seduction – “their infatuation with Socrates” – as a dangerous challenge to the egalitarian conditions of democratic knowledge. A midwife may empower these students, but it may also foretell the domination of expertise and the sapping of citizens’ epistemological and political power – not far from Wolin’s “managed democracy.” It may promise something – a better life, truth, happiness, and so forth – it cannot deliver, just like the sophists who sold quick solutions to life’s intractable problems.

While the feckless philosopher seems distant from Shorris’s use of Socrates, we could also criticize the midwife for its lack of attention to power. While giving those inspired by it a sense of agency and purpose, perhaps Socratic maieusis actually creates an “island of freedom” in the “surrounding sea of necessity,” as Hannah Arendt described the council system.⁶⁴ In this light, maieusis may only construct the illusion of freedom, like the freedom promised by consumer choice, in an otherwise disciplined, dominated, disempowered political life. Perhaps if we follow the image of the midwife we will find ourselves fallen in the well of inverted totalitarianism, oblivious to the incorporation of political power by an ever-shrinking elite.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press: 1965), 276. Mattson describes a similar concern in his essay: “Reflections,” 69.

⁶⁵ Arendt warned us of yet another danger, one which I have not elaborated in this essay – the degrading of the *vita activa* and the political that Socrates represents in the tradition of political philosophy. From Socrates’ maieusis to Plato’s “tyranny of truth” did not strike Arendt as distant.

These are real possibilities. And this also seems an appropriate place to voice my own misgivings about the midwife. The blatant misogyny – not to mention falsity– of Socrates’ suggestion that only men can give birth to ideas gives me reason to reject the description altogether, despite the ways in which we might explain away “the Greeks” and their inveterate sexism (which Arendt ignores). Moreover, the emphasis on ethos, which a focus on the midwife entails, discounts deeper political economies and structural factors that may prevent one inspired by Socrates’ maieusis – assuming it is a good thing – from inhabiting the spaces or speaking the languages of those who need him most. As one commentator put it, “Could Thucydides put bread on the table?”⁶⁶ Finally, I am uncomfortable with the implicit condescension of “bringing the humanities” to “the poor.” I think of William Vollman’s criticisms of James Agee’s *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*: we should not approach “the poor” as “the poor” but as “poor *people*”⁶⁷ – people just like us, people who may or may not find inspiration in the “great books” that have inspired the past, people who should have the freedom to choose the content of their education. For as much as I want to believe that engaging Socrates will prove useful for democracy, such a claim can appear both hubristic and arrogant.⁶⁸

But I still want to insist that engaging Socrates has some use for democracy today, and that these doubts about maieusis can inform its practice rather than eliminate it *a priori*. The end of Shorris’s description of the effects of engaging Socrates on the students in the

⁶⁶ This is Ray Suarez, host of “Talk of the Nation,” in a program dedicated to poverty: “Talk of the Nation,” *National Public Radio*, December 29, 1997.

⁶⁷ William T. Vollman, *Poor People* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), xii – xiv. This is Vollmann’s criticism, although I cannot say that he completely escapes it in his own work.

⁶⁸ To be fair, I think Shorris avoids this. *New American Blues* chronicles the many years he spent talking to people in poverty throughout the United States, discussions that the conversation with Viniece Walker only crystallized. Shorris never appears patronizing. The potential problem, I would argue, lies in the program’s implementation or interpretation. But just as the study of the “classics” or the “canon” have often been taken as patronizing, this should not preclude a humble and critical engagement with them. On this last point, see J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Education, and Political Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

first Clemente Course intimates some of what I see as maieusis's promise: the image of the midwife inspires those who encounter it to see the merit of their opinions, as well as to see that these opinions can find full development only in dialogue. Yet this isn't also "mere talk": not seeing themselves in the same way, people instead recognize their own human dignity and the dignity of others, proceeding with a new care for themselves as well as for the world. The agency of Socrates in the *Theaetetus* or Arendt's account translates to the agency of these students who engage Socrates, a moral agency that inflects existing communities and creates new ones. We could add to this the new consciousness of mutual vulnerability and interdependence that the midwife metaphor denotes in a literal sense. While ignored by Arendt and within the dialogue of the *Theaetetus* such an emphasis on the physical risks of maieusis seems appropriate in an age of disembodied liberal subjects. Taking all of this together, I would finally agree with Shorris that the process inspired by engaging Socrates *could* lay the groundwork for reflective democratic citizenship: practices of listening, a sense of responsibility, the embrace of community, and the valuing of friendship.

Engaging Socrates in the Clemente Course has often led to such democratic vistas. At 16, Diana Bridges of North Philadelphia dropped out of high school and began to work when her father became ill with cancer.⁶⁹ At 49, she began the Clemente Course, writing a paper on Frederick Douglass, who became her hero, and enjoying history, art history, and the rigor of philosophy. "The more you know, the more of an asset you become," she says. "It gives you a more secure feeling about yourself and more leverage in dealing with those in power." Now Bridges has her sights on greater things, both for herself and for her community: for the neighborhood, a performing arts center for its talented children; for herself, a degree in social work at Temple.

⁶⁹ This paragraph draws on a profile of the Clemente Course in Philadelphia: "Wealth of Ideas," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Magazine), Wednesday January 24, 2001.

Julio Pina used to consider himself only a professional at cleaning bathrooms. But since beginning the Clemente Course, the Mexican immigrant have begun joining friends at a cafe after work to discuss the great thinkers of the past.⁷⁰ For Pina and his classmates, considering the idea of the free will provokes questions about the immigrant-rights marches in Chicago during March and May 2006. Now Pina is more than an expert at mopping floors and scrubbing toilets: he too has an enlarged imagination, seeing the classes not as a completed task but as a beginning. “I have aspirations, my friend,” Pina says. “I am not quitting here.”

Rosana Rodriguez is a victim of domestic violence still haunted by her abuser, but the Clemente Course in New York City gave her the chance to regain control and self-esteem.⁷¹ She learned to “make a difference and to shift power,” and to confront her life just as she confronted the challenges in class. Not just the texts, but the creation of a community initiated these changes: “Anyone can receive an education from books . . . but here we also received an education from people, people who became our friends.” Born from her own vulnerability about herself as a victim, these friends and connections gave Rosana Rodriguez a limitless sense of the mind’s capabilities, and the ability to think through what previously seemed like insurmountable problems as she approaches the new duties of citizenship.

These stories, and the many others in addition to them,⁷² give grounds for democratic hope. Nonetheless, as Shorris reminds us, politics is unpredictable. Neither he

⁷⁰ This paragraph draws on a story about a Spanish-language Clemente Course in Chicago: Oscar Avila, “Doing hard work of the mind: immigrants see life is more than labor,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 19, 2006.

⁷¹ This paragraph draws from Rosana Rodriguez’s graduation speech, part of which is published on the Clemente Course web site: <http://www.clemente.bard.edu> (accessed July 30, 2008).

⁷² The Bard website (*op. cit.*) has extensive stories from students as well as poetry, speeches, and a short film. It also has links to dozens of newspaper stories on various Clemente Course programs. In addition to these resources and Shorris’s books, two National Public Radio stories on specific Clemente Courses, one in Holyoke, MA (“Clemente Course” on “All Things Considered,” *National Public Radio*, November 2, 2000) and one in Brooklyn (“Classics for the Poor” on “Morning Edition,” *National Public Radio*, June 24, 1999), have interviews with students and staff involved in the program.

nor I can guarantee that reflective capacities will emerge from the alchemy of any given classroom, nor that these will in turn lead to the empowerment of the many disempowered, the formation of democratic knowledges, and the eventual transformation of beleaguered poor people into active citizenries. Yet the students recount bringing their discussions to the dinner table, the new-found power of questioning, and the ways in which reflecting and looking inward brought them outward into political relationships and action. Maieusis can, in the best case, escape the necessity of a Socrates or the tyranny of philosophy that worried Arendt and instead inspire such democratic change. The promise, it seems, is there – the promise of engaging Socrates and midwifing democracy.