AUTHORLESS AUTHORITY IN PLATO’S THEAETETUS

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Writing lacks independence. It depends on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities subject to their own laws; only writing is helpless and cannot live in itself. It is comedy and despair.

Franz Kafka, Diaries

1. INTRODUCTION

Few authorial absences from philosophical texts have been more frequently noted and lamented than that of Plato from his dialogues. The fashionable, if arguably unanswerable, question “who speaks for Plato?” betrays, among other things, a kind of anxiety over our inability to ascribe resolutely the author’s views to any of his characters.1 To some extent, this question concerns authority: which character is authorized to speak for Plato and why? What might it mean for a character to bear this kind of authority and how might he display it? In this paper, I undertake to answer these questions by looking at the way in which authority and authorial absence affect each other in Theaetetus, Plato’s most comprehensive treatment of knowledge. Over the course of Socrates’ discussion with two mathematicians, Theodorus and his student Theaetetus, the youth offers four definitions of knowledge, none of which survives scrutiny. The dialogue proper is prefaced by an exchange between Euclides and Terpersion. In what follows, I explore the issues of authorship and authority as they arise in the preface and in the investigation of Theaetetus’ definition of knowledge as perception.

1 See, for example, Press 2000.
2. Euclides and Socrates

The prefatory exchange between Euclides and Terpsion is shadowed by death.2 The two men meet in Megara and talk about Theaetetus who is being brought back home from the Athenian camp at Corinth dying of wounds and dysentery.3 They commend his conduct: he was a “fine man” (142b7) who distinguished himself on the battlefield. The incident reminds Euclides of a conversation that Socrates once had with Theaetetus – a reference to the dialogue proper – when the former was a few weeks away from his death, and the latter “little more than a boy” (142c6). Socrates then predicted that Theaetetus would distinguish himself, if he lived to maturity. In the fictional setting of the opening scene, Theaetetus is on the verge of death, Socrates has been dead for thirty years, and the dialogue celebrates Theaetetus’ brilliance and confirms Socrates’ prediction. The exchange is a nostalgic revisiting of the past made possible by Euclides’ painstaking work as its recorder and editor. Euclides heard Socrates narrate the discussion and jotted down memoranda. He then went home, recalled the conversation at his leisure, and transcribed it. On subsequent occasions, he corrected his account by questioning Socrates “about the points he could not remember” with the result that he “has got nearly the entire discussion in writing” (143a4–5).4 At present, Euclides and Terpsion have gathered at the former’s house where a slave reads out the written record to them.

Of all Platonic works, only Theaetetus calls attention to its materiality, its status as a written text. With a striking self-awareness Euclides presents himself as the diligent transcriber of Socrates’ words, thereby usurping Plato’s role as writer of the main dialogue. William Johnson remarks that “The text itself, if the reader allows the author’s voice to intrude, can be regarded either as Plato’s copy of Euclides’ text, or Euclides’ text as remembered by Plato, and retranscribed from memory.”5 Perhaps it is more

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2 These Megarians are also present at Phaedo 59c. Euclides and Terpsion are identified as natives of Megara where Plato was said to have visited them after Socrates’ death. See Diogenes Laertius 2.106, 2.108, 3.6. See further Guthrie 1969: 499–507 and Kahn 1996: 12–5.
3 The dramatic date of the prologue, and thus of the reading of the dialogue, is probably 369 BC. As alternative dates scholars have proposed 394 BC and 391 BC. For a discussion see Nails 2002: 275–7, 320–1.
4 Unless otherwise stated, translations of Theaetetus are Levett’s, revised by Burnyeat (1990); the Greek text used is the Oxford Classical Text revised in 1995 by Duke et al.