

## Brill's Plato Studies Series

### *Editors*

Gabriele Cornelli (*Brasília, Brazil*)  
Gábor Betegh (*Cambridge, United Kingdom*)

### *Editorial Board*

Beatriz Bossi (*Madrid, Spain*)  
Luc Brisson (*Paris, France*)  
Michael Erler (*Würzburg, Germany*)  
Franco Ferrari (*Salerno, Italy*)  
Maria do Ceu Fialho (*Coimbra, Portugal*)  
Mary-Louise Gill (*Providence, USA*)  
Debra Nails (*Michigan, USA*)  
Noburu Notomi (*Tokyo, Japan*)  
Olivier Renaut (*Paris, France*)  
Voula Tsouna (*Santa Barbara, USA*)

## Thinking, Knowing, Acting: Epistemology and Ethics in Plato and Ancient Platonism

### *Edited by*

Mauro Bonazzi  
Filippo Forcignanò  
Angela Ulacco



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

## The *Theaetetus* Digression: an Ethical Interlude in an Epistemological Dialogue?

Emanuele Maffi

### Abstract

The so-called Digression (172a1–177c4) is probably the least discussed part of the *Theaetetus*, perhaps because it is not easy to get the point of this part of the dialogue. In this paper my purpose is to give a plausible answer to the following questions: what is the role played by the Digression within the dialogue as a whole? And could we consider it merely an ethical interlude in an epistemological context?

From the point of view of content, the Digression doesn't introduce anything new, beyond what Plato said in his middle dialogues. All the ideas the Digression points out have already been explained elsewhere: (1) the freedom of the philosopher, as opposed to the slavery of the orator, is a topic of the *Gorgias*; (2) the philosopher's care for the soul rather than the body and the thesis that there is no virtue without wisdom are claimed in the *Phaedo* as well in the *Republic*; (3) that this wisdom is the knowledge of Forms and that it is a kind of purification and assimilation to god as far as possible is argued in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic*. What conclusion can be drawn from that?

The only conclusion we may draw is that the importance of the Digression consists exactly in the fact that it does not add anything new to Plato's philosophy and in this way it actually shows that the onto-epistemological background of the *Theaetetus* is the same background in play in the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. Through the Digression, Plato warns us that the metaphysical and epistemological framework which we must use to make sense of the *Theaetetus* is still that of the middle dialogues, for the very good reason that every topic Plato accounts for in the Digression has already been explained in a more detailed way in his previous works. I think that, if rightly understood, the Digression states explicitly that the horizon of the middle dialogues is still in place and therefore that the Two-World Theory is still alive. If I am right, the Digression is not a mere ethical interlude, barely integrated to the rest of dialogue. Rather it plays a central role in marking the continuity between the *Theaetetus* and Plato's middle dialogues. This continuity makes the *Theaetetus* not an indirect confirmation of Plato epistemology but a pivotal work in understanding the best human knowledge

(*alethes doxa meta logou*) as philo-sophia and, consequently, the true goal of Plato's epistemology.

### 1 Introduction

"It would be hard to think of a passage that is at the same time as widely admired and as infrequently discussed as the self-declared Digression (172a1–177c4) that stands at the heart of the *Theaetetus*."<sup>1</sup> With this statement David Sedley opens his analysis of this part of the dialogue. It is true that no other part of the dialogue has been so underestimated by contemporary readers. Compared to all the others passages of the dialogue, the Digression is really the least discussed part of the *Theaetetus*.<sup>2</sup> Why? Probably because it is difficult to get the point of this part of the dialogue. Therefore, the task I will fulfill in this paper is to give a plausible answer to the following questions: *what is the role played by the Digression within the dialogue as a whole?* And *could we consider it merely an ethical interlude in an epistemological context?* Before answering these questions, I shall examine some of the most detailed interpretations of this part of the dialogue.

### 2 Some Readings of the Digression

On the one hand, some commentators see *no* substantial point to the Digression. For example, Ryle writes that it is "philosophically quite pointless."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, McDowell argues that the Digression is tangential to the main purposes of the *Theaetetus*. As a matter of fact, he suggests that although the Digression is "on the face of it quite irrelevant to the dialogue," it serves "a purpose which, in a modern book, might be served by footnotes or an appendix."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, some others try to integrate the Digression into the dialogue as a whole. I shall consider the main attempts at this second kind of reading.

1 Sedley 2004: 62.

2 This does not mean that this famous passage of the dialogue has not been studied at all. But if we consider that fact that *Theaetetus* is an 'over studied' dialogue, the Digression is really the most 'under studied' part of the dialogue. Among the most recent studies on this topic, I would mention here Rue 1993, Bradshaw 1998, Spinelli 2002, Giannopolou 2002 and Ibáñez-Puig 2007.

3 Ryle 1994: 158.

4 McDowell 1973: 174.