

Are Plato's Characters Caricatures?

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In “Plato’s *Theaetetus*: Formation over forms?” Deron Boyles presents a compelling reading of *Theaetetus* as, primarily, a dialogue about formation – both the formation of young Theaetetus in the dialogue, and the dialogue’s readers’ formation as well. Boyles puts Plato’s educational project at the center of his reading of the dialogue. I am entirely in agreement that education is central to *Theaetetus* (and to Plato’s dialogues generally). Plato’s dialogues represent Plato’s remarkable effort to compose educational writings. Indeed, when Plato has Socrates critique the practice of writing in *Phaedrus*, Socrates ultimately creates a space for an educationally valuable kind of writing, a kind of writing that very much resembles Socratic dialogues.¹

Perhaps it will be of little surprise that a respondent in the Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook endorses a fundamentally educational reading of *Theaetetus*. Nor will it surprise anyone that I also support Boyles’s interpretive principle that Plato’s use of characters is essential to understanding the dialogue and to understanding the reader’s education. But in the midst of my general agreement, I think it’s worth considering one specific aspect of Boyles’s interpretive strategy with respect to the dialogue’s characters.

Boyles argues that Plato crafted his four characters in *Theaetetus* so that his readers will readily recognize, and in the case of Theaetetus identify with, the characters. Theaetetus symbolizes a bright young student who struggles and stumbles when responding to Socrates’ questions. Yet Theaetetus perseveres, modelling for Plato’s readers precisely the kind of attitude that Plato hopes all young readers will develop. Theodorus, on the other hand, is curious about philosophy, but “his formation is essentially complete.” That is, he is “settled.” Unlike Theaetetus, he is content with the state of his soul and does not take up the project of self-formation. Socrates “is emblematic of the search for wisdom

and virtue” and is a “mouthpiece for Plato.” Protagoras serves as “the antithesis of philosophy,” a “foil” symbolizing the sophists who “relied on recitations or lectures that effectively blunted inquiry and, thus, formation.”

Boyles rightly notes that I have interpreted Plato’s Protagoras in *Theaetetus* quite differently. I have argued that the portrayal of Protagoras in *Theaetetus* is, on balance, positive. I hesitate to offer a defense of my position. After all, we are discussing Plato, and I would be a poor reader of the corpus if I did not model myself upon Socrates and offer gratitude to someone who pointed out my errors. Socrates says that “[I am] one of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute.”² Socrates’ statement in *Gorgias* models precisely the kind of attitude that Boyles thinks Plato’s Socrates and Theaetetus demonstrate in *Theaetetus*. Nevertheless, I would argue that our differences actually point to an important interpretive principle for understanding Plato’s educational project.

At issue, I would argue, is whether Plato uses “characters as caricatures” as Boyles suggests. If Plato attempted to teach his readers by utilizing caricatures, one could appreciate his purpose. A reader’s identification with a character can indeed be motivational in that it can model ideal or problematic responses.³ Theaetetus is an exemplary young man – curious, bright, and willing to persevere in the face of difficulties; Plato must have intended him to show the kind of philosophical progress one can make with the right disposition and intellect. (Surely, the fact that Theaetetus returns the next day, in Plato’s dramatic chronology, to subject himself to the questions so the Eleatic Visitor further suggests what an excellent student he is.⁴) I grant that some of Plato’s characters, like Theaetetus, might have been intentionally crafted to serve as models. But I think that one would seriously neglect an important part of Plato’s educational plan if one treated all of his characters in that way. And I think that *Theaetetus* demonstrates why this point matters.

The Protagoras of *Theaetetus*, I would argue, is portrayed as the most serious sophist in the Platonic corpus.⁵ He comes off as more intelligent and

more principled than the Protagoras of *Protagoras*. That latter Protagoras is more concerned with winning and with his reputation. Perhaps, in support of Boyles, one might note that, in *Theaetetus*, Protagoras is already dead, and the “Protagoras” debated there has been recreated by Socrates. Perhaps the damning implication is that the only way that one can have a philosophical conversation with a sophist is for that sophist to be absent! But each of Plato's Protagorases is more serious than the most contemptible sophists in the corpus: Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Those two are avaricious clowns who have no commitment to education or intellectual inquiry, and are merely preying on the young to turn a quick profit.

But the vast gulf between Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, on the one hand, and Protagoras, on the other, raises a question: If Plato's sophists are mere foils, why does Plato present his readers with such different sophists? Perhaps Plato wants his readers to think about whether there might be something of value that a sophist could offer.⁶ What makes Plato's dialogues so powerful, and so rewarding for repeated study, is that the more one thinks about the characters he presents, the more one must struggle with the nature of philosophy and philosophical education. Boyles notes that sophists taught through lectures and recitations. Protagoras did indeed do so, but he was also credited with inventing the question-and-answer method that came to be called “Socratic.”⁷ Additionally, in the lengthy digression in the middle of *Theaetetus*, the philosopher and the courtroom orator are contrasted. If Protagoras is supposed to be the antithesis of philosophy, he should resemble the orator who is described as unfree, always in the courtroom with an eye on the clock. A person who “can't make his speeches on any subject he likes” (172d-e).

But Protagoras actually differs quite a bit from the orator.⁸ Protagoras made speeches on anything he liked – he investigated a wide array of topics. The digression challenges readers to consider whether the description in the digression fits Protagoras. Furthermore, Boyles's identification of Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece ends up undermining much of the complexity of Plato's portrayal of Socrates, and the difference between the philosopher of the digression, Socrates, and Plato himself. The philosopher of the digression cannot

find his way to the marketplace, *agora*. But Socrates knew very well how to get there. Is Plato's philosopher Socrates? Is it Plato himself? Or is it an ideal type different from Socrates and Plato, those very real historical philosophers?

In conclusion, I agree with Boyles that Plato uses his characters to educate his readers. Our only difference is that Boyles suspects that the characters symbolize important archetypes, and I view the characters as carefully crafted enigmas designed to draw readers into questioning the nature of the topic under investigation among which, in the *Theaetetus*, includes the nature of philosophical education and sophistry.

1 Avi I. Mintz, "Response: Writing and Pedagogy in Plato's Phaedrus," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2015*, ed. Eduardo Duarte (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2016).

2 Plato, *Gorgias*, 458a, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

3 The identification with characters' argument has recently been developed at length in A. K. Cotton, *Platonic Dialogue and the Education of the Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4 Plato, *Sophist*. He is also present, though no longer the main interlocutor, in *Statesman* as well.

5 The other top candidate is Prodicus, who Socrates describes as his own teacher, and who shared with Socrates a passion for making conceptual distinctions. See David D. Corey, *The Sophists in Plato's Dialogues* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 69–95.

6 For an excellent recent treatment of the subject, see Corey, *The Sophists in Plato's Dialogues*.

7 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Vol. II*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), IX.53.

8 I argued this point in Avi I. Mintz, "Four Educators in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45, no. 4 (2011): 657–673.