

# Socrates' Mythological Role in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Yip Mei Loh

**Abstract**—Plato, as a poet, employs muthos extensively to express his philosophical dialectical development, so the majority of his dialogues are comprised of muthoi. We cannot separate his muthos from his philosophical thought, since the former has great influence in the latter. So the methodology of this paper is first to discuss the dialogue *Theaetetus* to find out why he compares Socrates to the Greek goddess Artemis; then his concept of Maieutikē will be investigated. At the beginning of Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates first likens himself to the goddess Artemis, who, though unmarried, has a duty to assist women in labour. Socrates' role, as Plato portrays, is the same as that of Artemis; and the technē he possesses is Maieutikē, which is to assist his students in giving birth to their mental offspring. This paper will focus on discussion on the Socratic mythological role in Platonic interpretation and dialectics so as to reveal the philosophical meaning of Socratic ignorance.

**Keywords**—Artemis, Ignorance, Logos, Maieutikē, Muthos.

## I. INTRODUCTION

SOCRATES is a heroic and enigmatic figure in historical philosophy as evinced in the Platonic canon. Socrates himself does not write, but we know that he is a natural lover of wisdom by means of his student, Plato, who creates his own 'Socrates' characteristics within his philosophical oeuvre. By means of that craft, the Platonic Socrates can be seen not to be Plato himself, but the spiritual or divine midwife.

In the Platonic dialogues Socrates is depicted in two different ways. His physical appearance is described in the *Theaetetus* as remarkably ugly, having a snub-nose and protruding eyes [2, 143e]. But in terms of his peculiar qualities, in the *Gorgias*, he is said to prefer short answers to long ones [3], and in the *Protagoras* he is reported to have great influence over the youth. In the *Symposium* Alcibiades depicts him as a virtuous man, who saved his life in battle [4]. It seems that there is no precise term to encapsulate the man adequately, thanks to the sharp contrast between his individual characteristics and bodily looks.

Plato in the *Apology* says that Socrates was accused of 'inquiring for the things beneath the earth', (zētōn ta te hypo gēn) [1, 19b] and his student, Aristotle, says that Socrates disregards the physical universe and concentrates on questioning moral issues, trying to define what morality is. So he is the first to build the concept of definition [5]. The Roman rhetor Cicero tells that Socrates listened to Archelaus and is the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil [10]. Thus, it is clear that Socrates is the first philosopher to search for the truth and the meaning of life, looking after the soul, not physics. He is a pivotal philosopher, who finds the

values of humanity (to which no attention has been paid before) and broadens philosophical perspective. In addition, Socrates is depicted as the mythological goddess Artemis in the *Theaetetus* by Plato, who describes him as muthologos, to engage in the narration of muthos to reveal the truth of episteme. So, this paper divulges the Socratic mythological role, through which we see how he becomes the elenctic master in the Platonic exposition of dialectics.

## II. SOCRATES AS THE GODDESS ARTEMIS

It is not difficult to avoid death;

It is much more difficult to avoid wickedness,

For it runs faster than death [1, 39b].

Muthos is human thought towards the preliminary ladder of scientific method. According to Plato, the function of muthos is to elucidate the deep meaning of metaphysics, which our reason, because of its limitation, is incapable of understanding, and only the interpretation of the muthos through the aid of dialectical enlightenment is able to help us to effectively grapple with the connotations of the infinite within the range of our limited reason.

The development of episteme with the help of muthos forms a major breakthrough of the boundaries of reason in understanding the truth and implications of the unlimited. One of the roles of science is to reveal and clarify the irrational and the non-argumentative parts of the muthos. Muthos is an important milestone in the enlightenment process of human beings. Thus Plato's philosophical thoughts are essentially processes of 'muthologia'. He and his interlocutors, during the dialectical processes of thoughts, are 'using muthos to converse with each other rationally' (diamuthologōmen). Which is why Zeller points out that Platonic muthoi clearly show that he cannot only be regarded as a philosopher, he is a poet as well [11, p. 163], since a poet creates a muthos [6, 61b]. For instance, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates regards the pain-pleasure relationship both as a muthos and as a poem [6, 60c-61b]. Succinctly, he is a muthologos or scientist, the one who knows. He says that he is not a person who tells muthos (muthologos) [6, 61b], which is in his ironic style, since in the *Theaetetus* Euclides says that Socrates possesses the prophetic gift [2, 142c].

In the *Symposium*, Plato has Socrates being stopped from doing something by his inner divine voice, i.e., a 'Socrates daimonion' or 'guardian daimon' [12, p. 39], through which Socrates' role serves as a midwife, differentiating him from Plato [12, p. 40]. And in the beginning of the *Theaetetus*, Socrates likens himself to the goddess Artemis, who is unmarried, her duty being to assist women in labour.

Artemis herself does not bear any children, and she delegates her duty to those women who have experience of

Yip-Mei Loh is with Chung Yuan Christian University, Taiwan (e-mail: luna.loh1129@gmail.com).

delivery but are past child bearing age. Socrates' role is as that of Artemis. He evokes the goddess to characterise his role and uses her as an analogy to describe how although being unable himself to bear babies, helps his students to do so; furthermore, he employs this analogy to explain the difference between this duty that god sends to him and that of his mother Phaenarete [2, 149a-c]. He states that he is similar to his mother and they both possess the *technē* from god, but his toil differs from hers, since he is an educator who assists his students, such as Plato, to be pregnant in their minds and to bear spiritual works, which he calls the *technē* of *Mäeutikē* (he *maieutikē*) [2, 210b-c]. Socrates says:

God compels me to attend the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom [2, 150c-d].

Thus, Socrates analogises himself to the goddess Artemis for the purposes of accenting his fulfilment of God's command, so that he is forbidden to create his own work. God enjoins him to help his fellow citizens to distinguish truth from falsity, i.e., to discover truth. He says that he himself is not a teller of *muthos* (*muthologikos*) nor creates any works [6, 61b]. He only either re-writes Aesop's *muthos* or applies the *muthos* created by someone else on hand [6, 61b]. Plato's *muthos* is sometimes used as an analogy, because *muthos* is akin to children's games, which assist the audiences to more easily grasp the deeper implication of the speaker's thoughts [7]. Also, Socrates calls himself ignorant, because he is frequently accused of not producing any wisdom, as he describes himself in the *Theaetetus*. But what people do not know is that he actually has obtained the *technē* of midwifery which helps his students to be fertile in their intelligence. At the proper time their intellectual foetus - he *dianoia* - will be delivered, resulting in, say, Plato, or miscarried, resulting in, say, Theaetetus [2, 149a, 151c]. Socrates says to Theaetetus:

But I do, believe me. Only don't give me away to the rest of the world, will you? You see, my friend, it is a secret that I have this *technē*. That is not one of the things you hear people saying about me, because they don't know; but they do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties (*aporein*) [2, 149a].

Thus, when Socrates calls himself ignorant, he is using irony to highlight his accusers' stupidity and absurdity. More directly, Socrates wants to separate himself from the sophists, because the method of education that he uses is *elenchus* (refutation), instead of the sophists' *eristic technē* (he *eristikē technē*) [8, 231d-e], that is, he is not a disputant (*ho antilogikos*) [8, 232b]. Moreover, when Socrates says he is ignorant, he is deliberately saying he is not a sophist, for the term 'sophist' in the literal sense signifies 'one who possesses wisdom'.

Since Socrates has adopted the goddess Artemis as an analogy to defend himself, he sets himself apart from the truly ignorant. At least he is the true heir to Artemis helping his students to fruitfulness, and he can criticize those who claim they have *epistēmē*, - Protagoras, for example - who after

charging his students excessive tuition fees [2, 161e], can only help them to be pregnant with an image (to *eidōlon*) which is a falsehood (to *pseudos*), he cannot assist them to be truly pregnant. Socrates, as a midwife, is able to point out that Protagoras only aids his students to fertilize false images, since god endows Socrates with the ability to pinpoint truth and untruth [2, 150e-151b].

The necessary condition for a spiritual midwife is that he has the ability to know clearer than anyone else he whose soul is truly pregnant with real offspring from he whose soul only fertilizes an image which is not actually fertile. Therefore, Socrates is true to his claim that he has acquired the *technē* of midwifery [2, 149a]; he is certainly not an ignorant man. With the aid of god, he is capable of helping his students to endure and mitigate the travail and the pain of miscarriage if they find out that their foetuses are false images [2, 151b].

Stewart holds that Socrates' midwifery causes his students, like Theaetetus, to suffer intellectual pain since the whole process of his dialectic method is fundamentally negative, so it cannot help them to establish positive theses [13, p. 268]. Such criticism is not really fair to Socrates, for Socrates' dialectics itself includes the process of negation, and during this he stimulates Theaetetus to be mindful of the problem of the foundation of knowledge of perception, since if knowledge is founded on perception, it cannot be defined correctly. During the process of dialectics Socrates must maintain a very firm attitude in order to correct and specify Theaetetus' mistakes, both for his benefit, and that of his friend, Protagoras [2, 167e-168a, 169a]. With Socrates's dialectics, the process of rational speculation is first, to stimulate Theaetetus to negate constantly, then to retain and finally to bring him to discover that the definition of his doctrine 'knowledge is perception' is unsound. Socrates tells Theaetetus:

So I chant incantations over you and offer you little tidbits from each of the wise till I succeed in assisting you to bring your own belief forth into the light. When it has been born, I shall consider whether it is fertile or a wind-egg [2, 157c-d].

In the dialectical process, Socrates employs his midwifery to cause Theaetetus to beget his new-born baby 'perception is knowledge' [2, 160e, 184b]. During this process Theaetetus has experienced a lot of intellectual pain. Finally Socrates enables him to realise the false image: 'perception is knowledge' and to remove it from his soul. Plato calls this whole process of intellectual pain the purification of the soul (he *katharsis*), that is, the getting rid of wickedness and ugliness [8, 227d]. Therefore, Socrates describes his task in such a way that he claims 'the midwife's greatest and noblest function would be to distinguish the true from the false offspring' [2, 150b], because his midwifery assists in separation of true from false and at the same time to remove falsehood, which is evil and ugly, from the souls. Hence, his task is to help people get rid of ignorance and to purify their souls.

For Socrates, ignorance comes when a soul in searching for the truth, deviates from reason; ignorance is ugliness and illness of the soul [8, 228c-e]. Therefore all people have to

accept education (*paideia*) to protect against ignorance or stupidity [8, 229c-d]. In a word, Socrates' midwifery is the enlightenment of thought. Everyone, after accepting a certain kind of education, should accept baptism of the spirit; and its method is *elenchus* (*ho elegchos*). Socrates' role as Artemis stimulates his followers to impregnate intelligently. Only the spiritual midwife who truly knows is able to meet this challenge.

### III. SOCRATIC ELENCHUS

In the *Meno*, Socrates is analogised as a flat torpedo sea-fish, which benumbs anyone who approaches and touches it [9, 80a]. While Socrates perceives himself as an electric ray, so that once his inquirers have been puzzled, he himself has been numbed at the same time. So the function of his *elenchus* is not to provide his inquirers with answers, but to converse with them, through which they are able to find out the universal definition of a concept, such as, what virtue is.

Furthermore, in the *Meno* he distinguishes the term '*elegchein*' from '*dialogesthai*'. He says,

If it is wrong, you can grasp my words (*lambanein logos*) and refute (*elegchein*) it. But if, like you and me on this occasion, we were friends and want to have a discussion together (*dialogesthai allēlois*), I should have to reply in more gentle tone and more proper to dialectic (*dialektitōteron*). By this I mean that the answer must not only be true, but in terms admittedly known to the questioner [9, 75c-d].

Socratic *elenchus* is palpably different from dialectics, which means two people, at least, conversing with each other in a non-combative way. In other words, dialectics is a kind of speculative activity of language, which does not appeal to sense perception, but purely to the faculty of nous. It attempts through mild, conversational, mutual cross-examination to reach the goal of definition and to understand each other for the sake of the discovery of truth. *Elenchus*, on the other hand, simply proceeds by refutation, leaving the interlocutors perplexed, both of them ignorant thanks to *aporia*, i.e. inaccessibility of conceptual definition. Therefore, *elenchus* and dialectics are two approaches in one. Thanks to *aporia* or being refuted, we have the desire (*Eros*) for conversation with each other to reach the universal concept and to discover the truth, *elenchus* being the stepping stone for dialectics to develop speculative reason. Hence, *elenchus* is the foundation and initial move of dialectics.

In the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates plays the mythological role of the divine, and is analogised in Artemis, his role and the function of his *elenchus* is different from that of him in the *Meno*. He is no more an electric ray, nor sea-fish to numb and puzzle the interrogated and himself, but a midwife to encourage the interrogated to examine their beliefs, which they have thought true. And he, like a scaffold, supports them through the pain of baptism of their thought, i.e., the rebirth of their thought by means of purification of the soul. In brief, Socrates' roles are to enlighten his followers' minds with his *elenchus* and to be a spiritual educator. The *technē* of his midwifery, just as he describes, is the 'practice of his

dialectics' (he *tu dialogesthai pragmateia*) [2, 161e], or the practices of his *elenchus* [2, 160e-161a], of which the main purpose is to 'remove the opinions that interfere with learning' [8, 230d] in order to be 'looking for what's true' [8, 246d].

Evidently, Socratic *elenchus* entraps his students into a state of *aporia* during the process of their suffering the pangs of labour [2, 148e-149a, 155b-e] when they experience the whole procedure of deliverance of episteme. This is the process of helping his students to wake up from dogmatic slumbers in preparation for walking on the path of genuine intellectual curiosity [14, p. 17] and of distinguishing the real *eidola* from the false ones [2, 150a]; and his task is to look after the labour of their souls [2, 150b]. This is the educational method that he has taught Theaetetus; *elenchus* is, for Socrates, an educational tool, with which he stimulates his students to acquire intellectual enlightenment. Plato uses such a method to depict *elenchus* to Theaetetus:

Oh, Theaetetus, we have to say that refutation (*ho elegchos*) is the principal and most important kind of cleansing. Conversely we have to think that even the king of Persia, if he remains unrefuted (*anelegkton*), is uncleaned in the most important respect. He is also uneducated (*apaideuton*) and ugly, in just the ways that anyone who is going to be really happy has to be completely clean and beautiful. [8, 230d-e]

So in the *Sophist*, Plato claims that a man who does not experience purification of the soul by means of *elenchus* is uneducated. In the *Apology*, Socrates asserts that the unexamined life is not worth living, so that his *elenchus* is a *technē* by which to examine man's life [1, 38a] and is a necessary path for the soul to walk along towards the truth, the good and the beauty.

Socrates aids his students to fertilise their souls and beget their spiritual works. He uses the *muthos* of Artemis to explain that our souls are similar to the female womb by having the potential to give birth to babies; but they have immeasurable potential, which can be realised with the proper method, namely, his midwifery. He aims to help his students discover lots of beautiful things in themselves and so beget them [2, 150d-e], because the lover of wisdom is divine (*theios*) [8, 216b-c] and thus is able to complete this educational task. Socrates' role in the world of western philosophy is as Artemis. He is an educator and the purifier of souls (*ho kathairōn*). His educational method is *elenctic* dialectics, specifically, *die Mäeutik* (the midwifery).

The progress of pursuing episteme and the procedure of giving birth to episteme from the soul are difficult because the process has constantly to be negated, retained and transited. Socrates holds that if the soul lacks for seeking and learning the forgotten episteme because of the tomb of body, our soul and life will not grow, we are always deficient in episteme and so are the truly ignorant [2, 161a-b]. Socrates' midwifery is there to help us get rid of ignorance and to purify the evil and the ugliness in our souls. Hence, Socrates' task is arduous, he is a wholly intelligent man; otherwise, he would not be capable of playing the role of educator. Thus, he sets himself to enlighten people's minds and brings them to think and to

judge independently. Therefore the function of dialectics itself is intellectual enlightenment.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The goddess Artemis has been analogised to Socrates, who helps his followers to generate spiritual works with the aid of his technē of elenchus through muthos. His duty in time is to fulfil and carry out the command of his inner daimonian, so that he, in possessing the prophetic gift, is fated to be executed. His destiny is to embody the tragedy of the historic hero through the fulfilment of divine mission.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] *Apology*, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), English. *Plato: Complete Works*, edited with introduction and notes, associate editor: D.S. Hutchinson, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company). *Platon Werke*, Friedrich Schleiermacher (ed.), (1990). Griechisch und Deutsch. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- [2] *Theaetetus*, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [3] *Gorgias* 449b, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [4] *Symposium* 220 b-e, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [5] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b1-5. Jonathan Barnes (ed.) (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- [6] *Phaedo*, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [7] *Politicus* 268b-d, 308d, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [8] *Sophist*, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [9] *Meno*, Cooper, John M. (ed.) (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*.
- [10] Cicero (1950 reprinted), *Tusculan Disputations*, V. iv. 10-11, trans. by J.E. King (Harvard Press: William Heineman Ltd).
- [11] Zeller, Eduard (1888), *Plato and the Older Academy*, trans. by Sarah Frances Alleyne and Alfred Goodwin, (the UK: Lightning Source UK Ltd.).
- [12] Sedley, David (2002), 'Socratic Irony in the Platonist Commentators' in the *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient*, (Center for Hellenic Studies Trustees for Harvard University, London/England: Harvard University Press).
- [13] Stewart, Scott Robert (1989), 'The Epistemological Function of Platonic Myth' in the *Philosophy & Rhetoric*. Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 260-280 (1989).
- [14] Robinson, Richard (1953), *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press).