

Socratic Method II: Midwifery (Maieutics)

Introduction. Socrates compares his philosophical work as midwifery (ἡ μαιευτικὴ τέχνη, *he maieutikê technê*), in a famous passage in *Theatetus*; of which here is an extract (148e–151d; sentences numbered for ease of reference):¹

[150b] SOCRATES: “[1] Well, my midwifery has all the standard features, except that I practice it on men instead of women, and supervise the labour of their minds, not their bodies. [2] And the most important aspect of *my* skill is [150c] the ability to apply every conceivable test to see whether the young man’s mental offspring is illusory and false or viable and true. [3] But I have *this* feature in common with midwives—I myself am barren of wisdom [ἄγονός εἰμι σοφίας, *agonos eimi sophias*]. [4] The criticism that is often made of me—that it is a lack of wisdom that makes me ask others questions, but say nothing positive myself—is perfectly true. [5] Why do I behave like this? [6] Because the god compels me to attend to the labours of others [μαιεύεσθαι με ὁ θεὸς ἀναγκάζει, *maieuesthai me ho deos anagkazei*], but prohibits me from having any offspring myself. [7] I myself, therefore, am quite devoid of wisdom; [150d] my mind has never produced an idea that could be called clever. [8] But as for those who associate with me—well, although at first some of them give the impression of being pretty stupid, yet later, as the association continues, all of those to whom the god vouchsafes it improve marvellously, as is evident to themselves as well as to others. [9] And they make this progress, clearly, not because they ever learn anything from me; the many fine ideas and offspring that they produce come from within themselves. [10] But the god and I are responsible for the delivery. [150e]

[11] There is clear evidence of this. Often in the past people have not been aware of the part I play; they have discounted me, and thought that they themselves were responsible for the delivery. [12] Either of their own accord, or under the influence of others, they left me sooner than they ought to. [13] Then, because they kept bad company, they proceeded to have only miscarriages, and they spoiled all the offspring I had delivered with wrong upbringing. [14] They placed more weight on counterfeits and illusions than on the truth. [15] Eventually, they gained a reputation for stupidity, and thought themselves stupid too. [151a] [...]

[16] There is another experience which those who associate with me have in common with pregnant women: they suffer labour-pains. [17] In fact, they are racked night and day with a far greater distress than women undergo; and the arousal and relief of this pain is the province of my expertise. [151b]

[18] So it is with them, *Theatetus*. [19] As for people who strike me as not yet pregnant and therefore as having no need of me, this is where my skills as a kindly matchmaker come into play. [20] Though I say to myself, I am pretty good at guessing whose company would be beneficial for them. [...]

[21] Now, why have I gone on at such length about all this to *you*? [22] Because I suspect, as you do yourself, that you are in pain, and that this is due to pregnancy.

¹ Translation R. Waterfield (1987). *Plato: Theatetus*. London: Penguin (pp. 25–9).

[23] So let me take on your case: remember, I am a midwife's son and [151c] practise the art myself. [24] When I ask a question, set about answering it to the best of your ability. [25] And if, on examination, I find that some thought of yours is illusory and untrue, and if I then draw it out of you and discard it, do not rant and rave at me, as a first-time mother might if her baby was involved. [26] In the past, my friend, when I have removed some piece of nonsense of theirs, people have often worked themselves up into such a state that they have been ready literally to bite me! [27] They do not believe that I am acting out of goodwill; [151d] it does not even cross their minds that no god bears ill-will against men, and that I am not motivated by ill-will either. [28] I do what I do because it is my moral duty not to connive at falsehood and cover up truth."

Study & Discussion Questions.

1. What are the key features of the analogy between real and Socratic midwifery?
2. And what are the key differences?
3. How does Socrates's avowal not to be wise himself fit the analogy?
4. What is the contrast between learning and maieutics?
5. What happens once ideas are 'delivered' (cf. esp. [24]ff.)? Is this compatible with Socratic ignorance?

Further Background. (1) Maieutics suggests that Socrates first enables and then criticises other people's ideas; *aporia* or perplexity is hence analogous to the labour of childbirth.² (2) People cannot be forced to be virtuous or happy; the maieutic process starts where they are, so to speak, and goes where they lead (cf. *Euthyphro* 14c)—perhaps to *aporia*. Socratic midwifery takes people seriously. (3) In an intriguing passage in the *Sophist* (231b), the Eleatic Visitor suggests that the 'noble' sophist cleanses the soul insofar as he examines pseudo-wisdom and the mere appearance of knowing. If so, Socrates is a 'noble' sophist. (4) In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades compares Socrates with a *silenos*: a bald, opulent, and snub-nosed demon with the tail and ears of a horse (215b ff.; 221d). But this appearance is deceptive: Socrates's words only seem comical (or ironical); yet, if penetrated, they reveal their significance. (5) According to the midwife analogy people 'deliver' what they find, or produce, in themselves. This relates to Plato's theory of recollection or *anamnēsis* (*ἀνάμνησις*): learning amounts to uncovering in oneself, or recovering, what is already there. This is developed in the famous slave boy passage in *Meno* (81d ff.)³, and also in *Phaedo* (72e–77a). The core idea is that the soul is already informed by general truths when it gets embodied, but this information needs to be recovered. Hence, the theory of recollection is connected to the immortality of the soul and the theory of Forms. More of this in *Phaedo*. (6) A related puzzle: if the philosopher has knowledge of these Forms, Socrates is not a philosopher.

2 Matthews, G. B. (1999). *Socratic Perplexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3 *Meno* 85d: "Without anyone having taught him, and only through questions put to him, he will understand, recovering the knowledge out of himself?": οὐκοῦν οὐδενὸς διδάξαντος ἀλλ' ἐρωτήσαντος ἐπιστήσεται, ἀναλαβὼν αὐτὸς ἐξ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπιστήμην; (oukoun oudenos didaxantos all' erôtēsantos epistēsetai, analabōn autos ex hautou tēn epistēmēn?).

