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Abstract:

Scholars have always been troubled by the important role ascribed to erotic intimacy and demonic influence in the discussion of Socratic education in the pseudo-Platonic *Theages*. They have accordingly described this dialogue's educational model as mysterious, superstitious, and irrational. In this article I argue that the *Theages*' portrayal of both erotics and demonic power is compatible with cooperative rational inquiry as described in genuine Platonic dialogues. I show that there are strong clues that the *Theages*' erotics should be read against the backdrop of the speech of Diotima in the *Symposium*, while its demonology should be read against both the *Symposium* and the midwifery passage of the *Theaetetus*. Furthermore, these intertexts suggest that the most troublingly un-Socratic part of the *Theages*—the story of Aristides—should be read as a cautionary tale, not a straightforward representation of properly functioning education. Finally, since the Academy of Polemo and Crates has been plausibly identified as the origin of the *Theages*, I observe that recent research on this period assumes the same incompatibility between erotic intimacy, demonic influence, and cooperative rational inquiry as scholarship on the *Theages*. Yet the fragmentary evidence for this period does not justify this assumption. I therefore suggest we revise our understanding of “rational” education and inquiry in both this dialogue and the Old Academy from which it probably derives.

Rationality, Eros, and Daemonic Influence in the Platonic *Theages*
and the Academy of Polemo and Crates

Joyal opens his introduction to the *Theages* with the observation that “scholars have made the question of the dialogue's authenticity almost the exclusive focus of their endeavours and have thereby been led to ignore what should be of primary importance, namely the detailed interpretation of the work from beginning to end.”¹ Joyal's commentary of 2000, which was joined by Bailly's in 2004, effectively addresses this neglect by patiently tracing the movement of thought within the dialogue. Yet these commentators remain troubled by one of the elements which has always motivated debate about its authorship, namely its conclusion. Here Socrates issues a double warning to his

¹ Joyal 2000, 9.

would-be pupil Theages: first, he himself possesses no learning, though he excels in his understanding of eros; second, the *daimonion* and “the god” bear responsibility for his pupils’ progress, which appears to depend on physical proximity and bodily contact. It is this combination of erotics, divine intervention, and tactile influence which leads Pavlu to speak of “Wunderglauben an einen Zauberer Sokrates,” drives Vlastos to athetize the *Theages* “as a monument to the credulity to which some of Socrates’ superstitious admirers could sink after his death,” and most recently has led Tarrant to assign the *Theages* to the Academy of Polemo and Crates (ca. 314-260 BCE).² Joyal pinpoints elements of this same combination as “what is unsatisfactory about this dialogue,” and Bailly calls them “too long and too sensational” and “so mysterious as to be utterly frustrating.”³ In short, displacing the question of authorship from the center of the interpretive agenda has not cast much light on the thinking behind the *Theages*’ conclusion.

My primary aim in this article is to propose an interpretation of this enigmatic passage and its relation to the rest of the dialogue. The core of my proposal is nothing revolutionary: it is that we should understand the *Theages* in the light of the other Platonic dialogues to which it conspicuously alludes, most important of which are the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*.⁴ The conclusion toward which these allusions point is that, while the *Theages* accentuates the role of eros and the daemonic in Socratic education, it does not thereby eliminate the role of cooperative reasoning. To the

² Pavlu 1909, 24; Vlastos 1991, 282; Tarrant 2005, 131-55. See also Janell 1901, 429-31; Souilhé 1930, 129-32.

³ Joyal 2000, 53; Bailly 2004, 27.

⁴ In this respect the *Theages* resembles the *Clitophon*, for example, which most scholars believe should be read before, alongside, or after the *Republic*. See most recently Bowe 2007, 245-64; and Zuckert 2009, 332-6.

contrary, cooperative reasoning subsumes the influence of erotic impulses and daemonic agencies. Understanding the *Theages* in this way saves us from positing an author who, though he constantly and conspicuously engages with Platonic dialogues, somehow believes that Socrates' commitment to rational inquiry is just window-dressing for magico-religious emanations. It is more plausible that he takes the pervasive religious language of Plato's characters seriously, but combines his heightened sense of Socratic religiosity with Socratic reasoning.⁵

There are two reasons the *Theages* has not usually been read this way. The first is that despite finding the story Socrates tells to exemplify his educational powers very surprising, scholars have not considered that parts of it may be ironic. Yet I will argue that several clues in the dialogue suggest we are supposed to reflect critically on this story. The second is that many are hesitant to believe that the *Theages*' author could assign so much importance to daemonic intervention, but remain committed to rational inquiry. Yet I will argue that this is not only compatible with Greek ways of thinking about divine agency in general, but also with many passages in Plato's dialogues in particular.

I will not attempt to determine the *Theages*' authorship in this article, though I share the common opinion that it was written by an Academic author working some time in the century after Plato.⁶ This assumption is validated by the *Theages*' extensive

⁵ Regarding Socratic "piety" or "religion," see especially Morgan 1990, McPherran 1996, Bussanich 2006, and Vlastos 1991, 157-78.

⁶ For comprehensive overviews of the scholarship on the dialogue's authenticity, see Joyal 2000, 122-57; Bailly 2004, 49-71. An important supplement to these two is M. Joyal 2002, which establishes a *terminus ante quem* in the early second century BCE. Most recently, see Tarrant 2005.

references to Plato's early and middle dialogues and similarity to the *Alcibiades*,⁷ which I discuss below. Further specifying the authorship would require detailed arguments about the direction of influence in these references and about the characteristic style and beliefs of potential authors. If I intended fully to assess Tarrant's ascription of the dialogue to someone in the Academy of Polemo or Crates, I would also want to consider his detailed arguments about the terminology of Socratic education in the *Theages* and elsewhere. These tasks lie beyond the scope of this article. However, one element of Tarrant's position will lend itself to revision in the light of my findings. His depiction of philosophical education under Polemo and Crates shares the unhelpful compartmentalization of eros and divine intervention against which I argue in my interpretation of the *Theages*. My criticisms will therefore not undermine Tarrant's ascription of the dialogue, which I find plausible (though far from certain). If anything, they will tend to corroborate it, inasmuch as I will argue we can conceive of the interplay of eros, daemonic influence, and reasoning under Polemo and Crates along the same lines I establish for the *Theages*.

1. Initial Summary of the Dialogue

In order for the debate about the conclusion of the *Theages* to be intelligible, I must begin by offering a summary of the dialogue's dramatic framework, conversational topics, and investigatory or protreptic agenda. In the process I will also mention those parallel Platonic texts which can help us to reconstruct that agenda.⁸ Of course this

⁷ By (Plato's) *Alcibiades* in this article I always mean the *Greater Alcibiades*. Regarding its authorship and date of composition, see Denyer 2001, 14-26.

⁸ For concise analyses of passages in other Platonic texts with which parts of the *Theages* are clearly in dialogue, see Pavlu 1909 and Bailly 2004, 265-84.

summary already constitutes an interpretation, but I will signpost the most controversial issues and defer their consideration until the following sections.⁹

The dialogue opens with Demodocus asking Socrates' advice about the education of his son, Theages. Theages has conceived a desire "to become wise" (σοφὸς γενέσθαι, 121d1), and is eager for his father to hire "one of those wise men" (τινὶ τῶν σοφιστῶν, 121d5). Demodocus, who is a sort of rustic traditionalist, is afraid that his son will be "corrupted" by the wrong teacher (μὴ . . . διαφθαρεῖ, 122a4-5). The dramatic framework of a father seeking the right way to educate his son immediately recalls Plato's *Laches*. In case the reader fails to make this connection, the two youths requiring education in the *Laches*, Thucydides son of Melesias and Aristides son of Lysimachus, make important appearances at the end of the *Theages*.

Other prosopographical signposts provide further clues to the *Theages*' central concerns. For example, Theages also appears in Plato's *Apology*, where the charge of "corrupting the youth" recalls another way of viewing the influence of intellectuals on young men (reiterating Demodocus' fears). There Socrates mentions that Theages' brother will *not* testify that Socrates has done him any harm (33e7). The implication is that Socrates' company has not harmed Theages, and has probably benefited him. But the problem of education is not entirely dissolved by this reassuring information, since we learn in Plato's *Republic* that what saved Theages was not virtue, wisdom, or Socrates' purposive guidance, but the so-called "bridle of Theages": he happened to be too sick to sustain politicking (*Resp.* 496b6-c2). From these intertexts I conjecture that in

⁹ This interpretive summary has benefited from the three extended readings of the dialogue I have been able to consult: Pangle 1987; Bailly 2004, 8-28; and (especially) Joyal 2000, 9-58.

dramatizing the beginning of Theages' relationship with Socrates, this dialogue intends to provoke thought about the promises and risks of such educational relationships. It is therefore not coincidental that the *Theages* and the *Alcibiades* both highlight the unpredictable influence of the *daimonion* and "the god" in educational progress.¹⁰ For the two dialogues form a sort of doublet, each dramatizing the beginning of philosophy, but one pointing toward its tragic collapse, the other toward its fortuitous blossoming. Nor is it surprising that as many Neoplatonists make *Alcibiades* the first dialogue on their curriculum, others put *Theages* in that position.¹¹ Before beginning to learn, aspiring philosophers need to reflect on the mechanisms and conditions of learning.

To return to the details of the *Theages*, Socrates now insists that he must examine the youngster about the wisdom for which he is seeking a teacher. This will not amount to a full-blooded definitional inquiry into σοφία, although its thematic importance explains the subtitle reported in some of the manuscripts of both Plato and Diogenes Laertius: "on wisdom" or περὶ σοφίας (D.L. 3.59). (Other manuscripts give περὶ φιλοσοφίας, which fits better with my suggestion that the dialogue was used to provoke thought about undertaking philosophy.)¹² Socrates begins by getting Theages to agree that whoever is wise is so by possessing understanding, i.e. by being ἐπιστήμων, and that possessors of understanding must possess understanding *about* something (περὶ +

¹⁰ *Alcibiades* begins with Socrates invoking the daemonic sign to explain why he has waited so long to approach Alcibiades, and why he now hopes his philosophical intervention will succeed. Pavlu 1909 claims that the primary aim of the *Theages* is to explicate the phrase ἐὰν θεὸς ἐθέλῃ at *Alc.* 135d6. Cf. Bailly 2004, 279-84.

¹¹ Regarding the first *Alcibiades*, see Olympiodorus *In Alc.* 10.18-11.6 ed. Westerink; Anon. *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 219.26.18-20 ed. Westerink; Proclus *In Alc.* 11.3-17 ed. Segonds. Regarding *Theages*, see Alb. *Intr.* 149.5 ed. Nüsser. For both, see D.L. 3.62.

¹² The evidence is collected in Joyal 2000, 175 and 195. On the thematic importance of σοφία, see the thought-provoking comments of Pangle 1987, 147-50.

genitive) or understand *how to do* something (ἐπίστασθαι + infinitive, 122e5-23d13). Socrates asks Theages what he lacks understanding of, such that he needs an instructor. Is it the wisdom by which one guides a boat, for example? or a chariot? or a team of horses? Theages answers all of these questions in the negative. “So what is the wisdom you want?” Socrates asks. “What can we knowledgeably guide with this wisdom?” (ἤς δὲ δὴ οὐ ἐπιθυμεῖς ἢ σοφία τίς ἐστίν; ἢ τίνος ἐπιστάμεθα ἄρχειν; 123d15-e1). Here Joyal rightly remarks that Socrates is “reasoning *ad hominem*”: if he did not already have a good idea of the sort of wisdom Theages is after, he would have no reason to assume it involved “guiding” anything.¹³ But one purpose of this part of the dialogue is to make Theages aware of the vagueness of his conception of “wisdom” and the hastiness of his rush to pay someone who professes to teach it. Socrates guesses that Theages wants to enter politics, and so leads him to see that the relevant wisdom must be spelled out by the teacher, the student, or both in cooperation. And it makes a great difference how it is spelled out, as the next part of the conversation reveals.

For under Socrates’ guidance, Theages now stipulates that he wants the wisdom by which one guides (i.e. rules¹⁴) humans – not the sick, for one rules them by medicine; nor those singing in choruses, for one rules them by musical expertise; and so forth. Rather, Theages wants the wisdom by which one rules “both all of these and also the farmers, the architects, and every kind of artisan and private citizens, both men and women” (124b5-8).¹⁵ Socrates now suggests five mythical and historical figures who match this description, including Aegisthus, the infamous adulterer of Argos, and

¹³ 2000, 21-2.

¹⁴ The Greek ἄρχειν may be used of both boats and humans, unlike English “rule.”

¹⁵ Souilhé 1930, 147 n. 1 observes that 123d8-124d closely parallels Plato, *Alc.* 125b-d.

Archelaus of Macedon, the outstandingly vicious tyrant from Plato's *Gorgias*.¹⁶ Theages grudgingly admits that these men share the name "tyrant," and the activity of "tyranny," so that "it seems from what I have said" that he desires the wisdom going by that name (124e10).¹⁷ Here Socrates histrionically exclaims, "You rascal! You mean you've been blaming your father for not sending you to a tyrant-teacher, because you wanted to tyrannize us?" (124e11-125a2). By now Theages has seen how slippery dialectic can be, and how careful you have to be when purchasing "wisdom." Not only will he have grasped this intellectually, but he'll be emotionally invested in better formulating his goal and finding an appropriate teacher, because Socrates' repetitive piling up of examples, his deliberately obtuse misunderstandings, and his histrionics are all provocatively frustrating. This frustration climaxes when Socrates asks whether Theages seeks a teacher with the same art as Callicrite, whom Anacreon, undoubtedly in an erotic metaphor, said to "understand matters tyrannical" (125d13-e2). "For some time now, Socrates," Theages interjects, "you've been making fun of me and playing around with me" (125e4). He "comes alive," as Bailly comments,¹⁸ and explains that though he might pray to become a tyrant, and even a god, still his desire is merely to rule by consent and not by force, like Themistocles, Pericles, and Cimon.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Grg.* 470d-71d. The other three are less obviously villainous. The reputation of Hippias of Athens was not good, but that of Periander of Corinth was mixed (elsewhere often numbered among the Seven Sages, but not by Plato; see Bailly 2004, 163). Achilles' father Peleus is the oddest choice here.

¹⁷ Pangle 1987, 157-8 suggests that Socrates intends to "shock" Theages into contemplating the real political consequences of believing in an "architectonic science" of ruling, which include the authoritarian rule of its practitioners.

¹⁸ 2004, 16.

¹⁹ Bailly 2004, 183 is probably right to call this prayer to become a god a humorous *reductio* of the aspiration to tyrannical rule (which is not to deny that it possesses a kernel of genuine wishfulness). Cf. Zuckert 2009, 488.

Now Theages is beginning to have a clearer and more urgent sense of what he does and does not want in terms of wisdom, but here the focus shifts from defining wisdom to exploring the possibility of learning it. (To put it another way, the topic remains the same—learning wisdom—but Socrates shifts the emphasis from the latter to the former term.²⁰) For Socrates proposes that if Theages wants to learn this sort of politics, he should simply associate with those who are versed in it; but Theages produces a Socratic counterargument to this suggestion: “I’ve heard people saying that you make the argument that the sons of politicians are no better than the sons of cobblers” (126d1-4).²¹ Theages then asks Socrates to undertake his education, thus moving the dialogue toward a comparison between Socrates and sophists or politicians as associates for young men. The conversation now concludes with several pages discussing whether and how young men make progress through Socrates’ company. In other words, it concludes with a consideration of whether and how Socrates helps his associates achieve wisdom. This is where the interpretive controversy really begins.

First, Socrates encourages Theages to learn from his father, or from the sophists “who profess an ability to educate young men,” since

I don’t understand any of these blessed and fine points of learning, although I’d like to. But I’m always saying that I happen to understand nothing, except for one small bit of learning, matters of eros. I think I’m terrific at this learning compared to anyone either past or present. (128b1-6)

Here we encounter the first important point of scholarly contestation. When Socrates says he “understands” eros (ἐπίστασθαι) and refers to this understanding as an object of

²⁰ Joyal 2000, 40 persuasively argues that what Socrates will actually offer is not the possibility—however uncertain—of becoming σοφός, which belongs only to the gods, but of becoming ὡς βέλτιστος (127d5) and a πολίτης ἀγαθός (127d7).

²¹ Souilhé 1930, 153 provides the following references: *Meno* 93e11-94a7, *Prt.* 319d7-20b3, *Alc.* 118c7-19a7.

“learning” (μάθημα), what sort of cognitive process or informational content does he have in mind? Will other elements of the conclusion contradict this implication that Socratic eros has a cognitive component? Even if nothing contradicts it, will the dialogue leave it unintelligibly vague?²² These questions are important to the overall interpretation of the *Theages*, since Socrates obviously puts forth his erotic “understanding” and “learning” as key elements of his educational impact.

Whatever Socrates’ intention, Theages objects again that Socrates is just “playing around with us” (128c1). He explains that he has seen many of his age-mates make extraordinary progress through Socrates’ company, by which he means to imply that Socrates has plenty of helpful “understanding” and “learning.” This prompts Socrates to add his second disclaimer about the idiosyncrasy of learning in his company:

“Do you know what sort of thing this is, son of Demodocus?”

“By Zeus I do: it’s that, if you’re willing, I too will be able to become the sort of person they are.”

“No, my good man, its nature has escaped you, but I’ll tell you. There’s a daemonic thing [δαμόνιον] that’s been following me by divine dispensation since I was a child. This is a voice that always issues a prohibition against something I’m about to do, but never urges me to do something. And if one of my friends is with me and the voice occurs, the same thing, it gives a warning and doesn’t permit action.” (128c6-d7)

Theages’ faith in Socrates’ ability simply to hand over wisdom belongs to an erotic *topos* in the Platonic corpus.²³ It therefore links the foregoing assertion of erotic expertise with the forthcoming discussion of the *daimonion*. While this discussion begins with a close echo of Plato’s *Apology* (31d2-4), it appends the assertion that Socrates’ *daimonion* also speaks on his friends’ behalf (cf. Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.4-5). This is a vital addition, since it

²² Cf. Joyal 2000, 40-6; Bailly 2004, 23-4.

²³ See especially *Smp.* 217a1-18b2, where Alcibiades conceives the plan to trade sexual gratification for Socrates’ wisdom; and *Alc.* 135c10-d6, where Alcibiades declares he can escape his slavish condition if Socrates so wishes.

enables Socrates to claim that divine intervention, like erotic understanding, is characteristic of education in his company. First he recounts three anecdotes about daemonic premonitions concerning his friends. These anecdotes do not pertain to education directly, but prepare Theages for Socrates' claim that "the power of this daemonic thing also has almighty influence over my associations with those who pass time with me" (ἡ δύναμις αὕτη τοῦ δαιμονίου τούτου καὶ εἰς τὰς συνουσίας τῶν μετ' ἐμοῦ συνδιατριβόντων τὸ ἅπαν δύναται, 129e1-3). This brings us to the second great interpretive controversy regarding the conclusion of the *Theages*.

At issue in this controversy is whether faith in this "almighty influence" of the *daimonion* substantially replaces cooperative critical reflection as a mode of philosophical progress. Has what we usually call "dialectic," i.e. elenctic testing of received beliefs, become unimportant to Socratic education in the *Theages*? Socrates' concluding words, which focus on daemonic intervention in education, may appear to supply an answer in the affirmative. He continues from the last quotation,

[This *daimonion*] is opposed to many, and these can't benefit from spending time with me, so I can't spend time with them. It doesn't prevent me from being with many others, but they aren't benefited. But whomever the power of the *daimonion* has assisted in their association [with me], these are the ones you've noticed, for they make progress immediately.²⁴ Some of those who make progress receive a firm and lasting benefit, but many make amazing progress so long as they're with

²⁴ The Greek reads οἷς δ' ἂν συλλάβηται τῆς συνουσίας ἡ τοῦ δαιμονίου δύναμις, οὗτοι εἰσιν ὧν καὶ σὺ ἤσθησαι· ταχὺ γὰρ παραχῆμα ἐπιδιδόασιν. I maintain the clause ordering of the Greek, although it is slightly awkward in English. As Cobb 1992, 276 argues, this clause ordering makes clear that what is immediately explained by "for these make progress immediately" is Theages' having noticed them. However, *pace* Cobb, the sentence also implies that what causes this progress is the power of the *daimonion*. For Cobb's translation is indefensible: "Yet there are some among those whom the power of the daemonic sign assists in our association who are the ones you have noticed, for they improve immediately" (ibid. 276-7). The words "some among those" requires us to invent an implied partitive genitive before οὗτοι, which nothing in the Greek text justifies.

me, but are no different from anyone else once they're parted from me. This once happened to Aristides, son of Lysimachus and grandson of Aristides. (129e3-30a5)

Much of this passage is compatible with the midwifery passage of Plato's *Theaetetus*, with which the *Theages* is clearly in some kind of intertextual dialogue. It is worth quoting that passage now in its entirety, since I will return to parts of it repeatedly in the course of this article:

I generate no wisdom, and the common accusation against me is true: I interrogate others, but myself assert nothing about anything, because I have no wisdom. The reason is this: the god forces me to be a midwife, but forbids me to procreate. So I'm not wise at all, nor do I have any such discovery which is the offspring of my soul. But though some who associate with me seem very ignorant at first, all whom the god permits make wonderful progress as our acquaintance continues, as both they and others believe. It's clear that they've never learned anything from me, but have found in themselves many fair things and have given birth to them. But the god and I are responsible for the midwifery. Many have failed to recognize this and believed themselves responsible for their progress, and accordingly disdained me, and left me earlier than they should have either on their own or through the persuasion of others. After leaving they miscarried their other offspring through bad company and killed whatever I had midwived because they nourished it poorly. They valued falsehoods and phantasms more than the truth, and ultimately appeared ignorant both to themselves and others. Among these were Aristides son of Lysimachus and many others. When these people come back and ask to renew our association, making extraordinary promises, my customary *daimonion* forbids me to associate with some of them, but permits association with others, and these once again make progress. (150c4-51a5)

Both passages begin from the insistence that Socrates is not himself wise,²⁵ and so achieves his educational influence through some sort of divine assistance. In the *Theages* this is the *daimonion*; in the *Theaetetus*, it is "the god" (ὁ θεός) in coordination with the *daimonion*. The *Theages'* *daimonion* may immediately refuse Socrates' association with someone, may permit association but fail to help, or may help with either temporary or lasting "benefit" and "progress" (ὠφελία, ἐπιδιδόναι). In the *Theaetetus*, the god may

²⁵ With the exception, in the *Theages*, of erotic understanding.

either permit progress or (implicitly) forbid it;²⁶ progress may be temporary for followers who leave too soon (or, implicitly, lasting for those who remain); and the *daimonion* may either permit or forbid a lapsed follower to return to Socrates' company. There are some divergences in detail up to this point, the most important of which is that the *Theages* attributes wholly to the *daimonion* what the *Theaetetus* distributes between the *daimonion* and the god. But if we temporarily set aside this distinction, clearly the two dialogues' depiction of divine involvement in education is broadly similar. This will turn out to be very important for the interpretation of the conclusion of the *Theages*.

However, the *Theages* adds an element which has no obvious parallel in the *Theaetetus*. This is Aristides' own account of how his "progress" disappeared after he departed from Socrates:

Before I sailed away I could talk with anyone and appear worse than no one in words, so I pursued the company of the wittiest people. But now, quite the contrary, I run when I see anyone educated. That's how ashamed I am of my mediocrity. (130c2-6)

Socrates asks where this power came from, and how it left him, and Aristides goes on,

It's unbelievable, by the gods! But it's true. I never learned anything from you, as you yourself know. But I made progress whenever I was with you, even if I was only in the same household, but not in the same room; more when I was in the same room; and much more, I thought, when I was in the same room and was looking at you, rather than when I looked elsewhere; and I made by far the most progress when I sat beside you holding and touching you. But now, this whole condition has flowed away. (130d4-e4)

This passage seems to eliminate the dependence of educational progress on cooperative critical inquiry, since Aristides credits looking, holding, and touching (βλέπειν, ἔχεσθαι,

²⁶ Bailly 2004, 272 argues that it is unclear whether the god "permits" (παρειακῆ) would-be learners to make progress or simply to associate with Socrates. But the distinction is not significant, since even if we take the god simply to permit association, this amounts to permitting progress.

ἄπτεσθαί) rather than speaking with the rapidity of his learning. The implication may be that as his “condition has flowed away” since his departure (ἡ ἕξις ἐξερρώηκεν), so previously the power of the *daimonion* simply “flowed into” him. The *Theages* would then be attributing to Socrates precisely the sort of conductive influence he denies in Plato’s *Symposium*, where he clearly implies that wisdom is not the sort of thing “to flow from the fuller of us into the emptier if we touch each another” (175d4-7).²⁷

Anyone inclined to read Aristides’ words as a straightforward account of the sort of education proposed by the *Theages* will find confirmation in the dialogue’s dénouement. Socrates concludes,

So that’s what association with me is like. If the god so pleases, you’ll make a lot of progress quickly. If not, you won’t. So consider whether it isn’t safer for you to be educated by someone who’s in control of the benefit he can offer, rather than to take your chances with me.

Theages responds,

What I think we should do, Socrates, is test this *daimonion* by being together, and if it permits, so much the better. If not, then right away we’ll deliberate about what we should do, whether we’ll be with someone else, or attempt to persuade this divine thing that happens to you with prayers and sacrifices and whatever else the prophets suggest. (130e5-31a7)

In the first part of this quotation Socrates seems to endorse Aristides’ description of how benefit and progress come about in his company. In other words, he seems to confirm that he benefits students through divine intervention without the mediation of critical inquiry. Theages goes a step further, apparently suggesting that this divinity in Socrates can actually be influenced by prayers or sacrifices, just like any traditional hero or god of cult. This could mean that Socrates’ followers make progress by slaughtering sheep, for example, rather than applying themselves to dialectical investigations. It is also

²⁷ This charge is made most concisely and vehemently by Tarrant 1958.

noteworthy that the agency involved here is renamed “the god,” as in the *Theaetetus*, as well as “the divine thing” (τὸ θεῖον). It is therefore a vaguely amalgamated divine agency that this passage highlights.²⁸

In the second part of Socrates’ response above, he provides a conclusion for the precautionary description he has been offering of education in his company. This description, to recapitulate, has comprised his confession of ignorance, profession of erotic understanding, and a series of anecdotes about the role played by his *daimonion*. He chooses to encapsulate this discussion’s lesson in a choice he presents Theages: either he may study with those who are “in control of the benefit” they offer (ἐγκρατεῖς . . . τῆς ὠφελίας), or he may submit himself to “chance” in Socrates’ company (ὅτι ἂν τύχης τοῦτο πράξαι).²⁹ This recalls the conjecture about this dialogue’s purpose with which I began, namely that it aims to provoke thought about the techniques and vicissitudes of the pursuit of excellence and wisdom through philosophical education. Socrates groups these techniques and vicissitudes under the heading of “chance” (τύχη), thus symbolizing the moral communicated also by the biographies of Alcibiades and Theages throughout the Platonic corpus: Socrates neither knows nor determines whether his educational efforts will meet with success. This too could be taken to undercut the rationality of Socratic philosophizing, since it could imply that it is the aleatory whim of the *daimonion* rather than the purposeful enterprise of cooperative reasoning which determines progress. The dialogue’s ending gives us no help in deciding its meaning. In

²⁸ This recalls the depersonalized philosophical god ascribed to Socrates by Burnyeat 1997.

²⁹ In this case πράξαι has the same sense as in εὖ πράττειν, “doing well.”

the face of Theages' unrelenting enthusiasm, Socrates simply acquiesces: "Well, if you think this is what we should do, then let's do it" (131a10).

2. Erotic Understanding

This article will culminate in a re-interpretation of what it means to say that the intervention of this amalgamated divine agency and narrowing of Socrates' knowledge to eros amounts to the predominance of chance in his associates' educational progress. First I must investigate the controversies regarding eros and daemonic agency in more depth, beginning with the former.

As we have just seen, the principal objection to erotic education in the *Theages* is that it is irrational or has no cognitive dimension. Although Socrates claims that erotics is his special field of "understanding" (ἐπίστασθαι) and an object of "learning" (μάθημα), it may appear that he exercises neither understanding nor learning in his erotic activity. Furthermore, it may seem that his students' progress is similarly void of reasoning. In this section I will argue that the *Theages*' prominent allusions to Plato's *Symposium* should predispose us to believe just the opposite: in that dialogue, Diotima provides a clear model for how erotic expertise works, which unambiguously involves cooperative rational inquiry. I will then suggest that parts of the story of Aristides in Plato's *Theaetetus* correspond closely to this model in the *Symposium*. This casts further light on why Aristides appears at this stage in the *Theages*, and corroborates our expectation that eros in this dialogue remains intimately connected to rationality. Finally, I will argue that nothing in the Aristides anecdote in the *Theages* requires us to reject the interpretation suggested by the allusions to the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*. To the contrary,

Aristides' should be read as a cautionary tale, which confirms the importance of making reflection on ethics central to educational eros.

Let me begin by reconfirming that the *Theages* does indeed allude to Plato's *Symposium*. The most important part of this allusion is not in Aristides' report of some capacity "flowing" into him, but in Socrates' claim of erotic knowledge. This is a close echo of Socrates' assertion in the *Symposium*:

I'm always saying that I happen to understand nothing, except one small bit of learning, matters of eros. (*Thg.* 128b3-4)

I say that I understand nothing other than matters of eros. (*Smp.* 177d7-8)

Similar statements appear in the *Lysis* and the *Phaedrus*,³⁰ the latter of which may also be helpful for understanding the *Theages*.³¹ However, the *Symposium* is likely to be the primary point of reference, since it is a much more exact verbal reminiscence. Readers who are familiar with the Platonic canon will therefore be primed to notice the second allusion in Aristides' report. Here are the key parallel passages:³²

I made by far the most progress when I sat beside you holding and touching you. But now, this whole condition has flowed away. (*Thg.* 130e2-4)

"Come sit down by me, Socrates," [Agathon] said, "so I can touch you and share the wisdom that came to you on the porch. ..."

³⁰ *Ly.* 204b8-c2: "I'm pretty mediocre and useless at everything else, but it has somehow been given to me by god to recognize quickly a lover and a beloved." Cf. *Phdr.* 257a7-8: (Socrates praying to Eros) "be propitious and gracious and neither take away the erotic craft you have given me nor mutilate it out of anger." There is also an intriguing parallel in Aeschines' *Alc.* (fr. VI A 53 in Giannantoni 1990), which Joyal 2000, 42-7 discusses. However, I argue elsewhere that we possess too little of Aeschines' dialogue to discern what he thinks about eros and education (Lampe 2010, 195-6).

³¹ Although I only briefly discuss the *Phaedrus* below, grounds for most of the arguments I make on the basis of the *Symposium* could also be found in the *Phaedrus*.

³² Tarrant 1958 and Joyal 2000, 92-3 and 289 see an allusion here to the *Symposium*. Cobb 1992, 281-3 disagrees. Bailly, 2004, 257-8 does not take a clear position on whether our author is responding to this passage in the *Symposium*.

Socrates sat down and said, “It would be great, Agathon, if wisdom were the sort of thing to flow from the fuller of us into the emptier if we touched one another, like water in cups that flows across a wool thread from the fuller to the emptier. (*Smp.* 175c7-d7)

These passages obviously share several elements. First, they both involve the transmission of “wisdom” (σοφία) in particular. This is explicit in the *Symposium* passage, and of course is the central concern of the *Theages* generally. Second, they both involve the transmission of wisdom by “touching” (ἄπτεσθαι). Third, they represent this transmission in terms of something “flowing” into or out of the learner (ῥεῖν or ἐκρεῖν). This is enough to justify adopting the hypothesis that our author intends an allusion to Plato’s *Symposium*. Furthermore, it should make us suspect that Aristides’ testimony is supposed to call into question how wisdom may be communicated in erotic relationships. However, we should suspend judgment for the moment about whether the *Theages* espouses the form of tactile transmission these two passages represent. It will better to answer that question after we have considered the significance of the first allusion to the *Symposium* and explored Aristides’ character both in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Theages*.

In the *Symposium* I will focus on the speech of Socrates, which is where our author would naturally look for an explanation of Socrates’ erotic expertise. There we find a model of eros as something that not only permits rational satisfaction, but indeed benefits from guidance that involves “understanding” and “learning.” Since this is familiar territory, I will be brief.³³ In this dialogue Socrates (and/or Diotima, whose words he supposedly communicates) describes eros as a universal human drive, which he formulates in several overlapping ways: it is the desire to possess the good forever

³³ My understanding of this part of the *Symposium* has been influenced by Nussbaum 1986, 165-99; Morgan 1990, 80-99; Halperin 2005; Sheffield 2006; and Hyland 2008, 27-63.

(206a11-12), or to be happy (205a1-3), or to be with and give birth in beauty (206e2-5 + 211e4-12a2), or to be immortal and beloved by god (212a5-7). Whether Socrates succeeds in reducing all of these to a single intelligible account of eros is irrelevant for my purposes; the important thing is that he presents eros as an educable unified drive. This unified drive finds substantial satisfaction through cooperative rational inquiry (at least for those who are “pregnant [ἐγκύμονες] in soul” as well as “in body”: 208e1-9a1), as a key passage reveals:

[The lover] embraces beautiful bodies more readily than ugly ones, since he is pregnant, and if he encounters a soul that is beautiful and noble and well formed, he certainly embraces both [body and soul] together. With this person he right away easily discovers many discourses about virtue and what a good man is like and how he behaves, and he tries to educate this person. For by touching this beautiful person and being with him, I think, he begets and gives birth to what he has long been pregnant with. He remembers the other in presence and absence, and brings up what he has borne in cooperation with him, so that these two share something much greater than children and have a firmer friendship. (*Smp.* 209b4-c6)

It is worth noting that this passage once again employs the language of “touching” (ἀπτόμενος) in order to describe an erotic relationship that is simultaneously educational.³⁴ It will also be important that the result of “touching this beautiful person and being with him” is that the lover “begets and gives birth to what he has long been pregnant with” (ἄ πάλα ἐκεί τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ). What he “has long been pregnant with” is “many discourses about virtue and what a good man is like and how he behaves.” The lover and beloved as a pair “bring up what [the lover] has borne” as their “children.” In other words, the lover responds to the touch and company of his beloved by engaging in ethical investigations, and the pair then cooperate in developing the results of those investigations. In fact, in the Socratic context we know that the ostensible “beloved”

³⁴ As Bailly 2004, 257 also notes.

typically becomes a lover in his own right, so that both members of the loving pair will be “giving birth to” and “bringing up” ethical discourses.³⁵ This passage thus presents cooperative critical inquiry as a natural outlet for the erotic drive.

Of course, Socrates admits that many people will not immediately recognize either the unified goal of eros or the possibility of satisfying it through philosophy. They will think of sex, glory, and power as more plausible forms of satisfaction. This is why education by an “expert” can benefit them. As Diotima’s famous ascent passage reveals, the erotic relationship should not remain on a single plane of inquiry and satisfaction. Rather, the combination of erotic drive and critical reflection should lead the lover toward ever purer and more satisfying intuitions of beauty – from bodies to souls, discourses, laws, systems of knowledge, and eventually to Beauty Itself (210a4-11b5). In fact, it turns out that bodily seeing and touching is merely a preparation for “seeing” and “touching” Beauty Itself with the soul. Visual and tactile language recurs with great insistence in the climax of the ascent passage:

“What are we to believe, if someone were able to **see** (ιδεῖν) Beauty pure, cleansed, unmixed, unfilled with human flesh and coloring and all that mortal nonsense, but rather could **glimpse** (κατιδεῖν) divine Beauty itself all alone? Do you think a man would have a bad life if he were **looking** (βλέποντος) at that and **watching** it with the appropriate part of himself (ᾧ δεῖ θεωμένου) and being with it (συνόντος)? Don’t you think,” she said, “that there alone, **seeing** Beauty with that by which it is visible (ὁρῶντι ᾧ ὁρατὸν), he’d be able to give birth to true virtue, not images of virtue, since he’d be **touching** (ἐφαπτομένῳ) truth, not **touching** (ἐφαπτομένῳ) an image?” (*Smp.* 211d8-12a5)

³⁵ See *Smp.* 222a8-b4 (Alcibiades speaking about Socrates): “I’m not the only one he’s done this to. He’s done the same to Charmides son of Glaucon and Euthydemus son of Diocles and lots of others. He deceives them as if he were the lover, but ends up as the boyfriend himself instead of the lover.” Compare *Alc.* 135d8-e3 (Alcibiades speaking with Socrates): “It seems we’re going to change positions, Socrates: I’ll take yours, and you mine. For I’ll certainly follow you around from this day onward, and you’ll be followed by me.” “Then, my noble friend, my love will be like a swan, since it’ll have engendered an eros in you and in turn be nurtured under its wing.”

Psychic touching does not necessarily render bodily touching extraneous, any more than loving Beauty Itself makes loving human beings extraneous.³⁶ But it is clear that the lover is supposed to use bodily contact and the love of individuals as a stimulus for achieving this transcendental intuition and communion. This can most readily happen if his erotic activity is guided by someone who has already undergone what Diotima calls “the rites and revelations” at which eros aims. This will be an expert who has grasped the educable structure of the erotic drive and knows how to guide it in its development. For Socrates, this was Diotima; for others, it is Socrates.

The question now is whether the model of erotic education I have just outlined, in which the understanding of an expert guides the rational inquiry of the lovers toward its true goal, is compatible with the experience related by Aristides in the *Theages*. I have already mentioned the origin of the story of Aristides’ failure in the midwifery passage of the *Theaetetus*. At this point I should emphasize that this midwifery passage, like Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium*, involves young men who are “pregnant in soul” bringing to birth philosophical discourses and then developing them through critical reasoning. In fact the passage begins when Theaetetus confesses that he is both baffled and troubled by the investigation at hand, and Socrates responds, “That’s because you’re having pregnancy pains, Theaetetus: you’re not empty, but pregnant” (148e6-7). All the components of the “mental pregnancy” trope in *Symposium* 208e1-9c7—being pregnant (κύω and ἐγκύμων εἶναι), begetting (γεννᾶ), and giving birth (τίκτω)—then recur throughout the interlude, for which they provide an occasion: Socrates’ critical

³⁶ Though this has been hotly contested in modern scholarship since Vlastos 1981, 3-42, it is clear that some ancient exponents of Plato attributed an ongoing role to both bodily proximity and individualized eros. See section 5 below.

examination of his friends' beliefs can only be figured as "midwifery" insofar as they are "pregnant." In fact, Socrates says that when young men are *not* pregnant, they "have no need of me," so he sends them to Prodicus or some other sophist (*Tht.* 151b1-6). Since Aristides was not sent away, it follows that he was pregnant, and that his association with Socrates involved his "discursive reason" (διάνοια) "bringing forth" (ἀποτίκτει) offspring under Socrates' guidance (*Tht.* 150c2). This was clearly a cooperative rational process. Socrates must then have "put to the test" whether each offspring was "a fantasm and falsehood" or "genuine and true" (150c1-3). This was clearly a form of expert guidance. Thus the details of the *Theaetetus* passage on which our author is drawing suggest that Aristides' experience corresponded in key particulars to the model of eros conveyed in the *Symposium*.³⁷

Next we must turn to the *Theages* itself and re-investigate Aristides' report of his education there. Let us begin by focusing on Aristides' description of how he learned, which is prompted by a question from Socrates: "When you had [this capacity], did you have it by learning something from me (μαθόντι παρ' ἐμοῦ), or in some other fashion" (130d1-2)? Aristides answers, "I never learned anything from you (ἔμαθον μὲν παρά σου οὐδὲν πώποτε), as you yourself know" (130d4-5). This is a clear allusion to the parallel passage in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates says those who made progress in his company "never learned anything from me (παρ' ἐμοῦ οὐδὲν πώποτε μάθοντες), but

³⁷ This is not to claim they correspond in *every* particular. For some important differences, see Burnyeat 1977, 8-9. For a detailed study of midwifery in the *Theaetetus*, see Sedley 2004. But they are close enough for an author intent on constructing a Socratic education from Platonic materials to assimilate them.

have found in themselves many fair things and have given birth to them” (150d6-8).³⁸ This intertext suggests that in the *Theages* as well we should assume Aristides was “giving birth to many fair things” during his time with Socrates. Socrates more or less confirms this by saying, “When he was passing time with me he had made a great deal of progress in a short time (πάμπολυ ἐπεδεδώκει ἐν ὀλίγῳ χρόνῳ)” (*Thg.* 130a5-6). It is unlikely Socrates would describe Aristides as “making progress” unless he were refining his beliefs through critical reasoning. The word for “progress” (ἐπιδίδωμι) here is the same one used in the *Theaetetus* (150d5, 151a5); it appears an astounding seven times in the conclusion to the *Theages* (129e9 [twice], 130a3, 130a6, 130d5, 130e2, 130e6). Admittedly, Aristides says nothing further about the cognitive content of his education. However, he does mention that Socrates was speaking (λέγοντός σου, 130d8) during their time together. The parallel texts we have seen give us every reason to surmise that this speech involved critical reasoning and was guided by Socrates’ expert understanding of the educable structure of eros.

This brings us to the real crux, which is Aristides’ excessive emphasis on erotic contact as an apparent conduit for irrational progress. If Socrates intended Aristides’ words as a perspicacious and trustworthy description of the education he offered, we would have to come to one of two conclusions: either our author misunderstood and accidentally distorted the forms of education represented in the *Symposium* and *Theaetetus*, or else he understood them and chose to emphatically signpost his disagreement. The latter is implausible, so it is not surprising that Joyal favors the former:

³⁸ Bailly 2004, 252-3 calls attention instead to *Meno* 72c6-d2. While our author may also intend that reference, it is far less obviously to the point, and contains nothing like the almost exact verbal echo of the *Theaetetus*.

What is remarkable about the use of these sources is, first, our author's apparent disregard of the fact that in *Smp.* the idea of education by contact is ridiculed ... and, second, the author's neglect of, and general lack of interest in, the probable dialectical context of the work or works in which he found further material for the story of Aristides (this neglect is of course in addition to his disregard of the dialectical activity which is integral to the *μαιευτική* passage in *Tht.*).³⁹

Joyal is right that this would be "remarkable." Moreover, it would undercut the explanation these contexts provide for Socrates' claim of erotic expertise, and once again render that claim unintelligible.

We should therefore consider the possibility that Aristides is not a reliable witness to the cause or nature of his own progress and corruption. After all, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates includes Aristides among those who "believed themselves responsible for their progress, and accordingly disdained me, and left me earlier than they should have." In the *Theages* it appears that Thucydides is about to fall into this group:

So when he saw me Aristides said, "I hear that Thucydides is acting arrogant and irritable toward you, as if he were really something." "That's the truth," I said. "Doesn't he know what a slave he was before he met you," he asked. "By the gods, he certainly doesn't seem to," I said. (*Thg.* 130b3-8)

Here Thucydides shares both of the characteristics of the failed students in the *Theaetetus*: first, they are arrogant (they "disdained" [καταφρονήσαντες] Socrates; Thucydides is "acting arrogant ... as if he were really something" [σεμνύνεσθαι ἄττα ... ὡς τὶ ὄντα]); second, they refuse to recognize Socrates' role in their progress (they "believed themselves responsible" [ἐαυτοὺς αἰτιασάμενοι]; Thucydides "doesn't know ... what a slave he was before he met you" [οὐκ οἶδεν ... πρὶν σοὶ συγγενέσθαι οἶον ἦν τὸ ἀνδράποδον]). Aristides shows much greater humility in the *Theages*, but that is because he has now reached the terminal condition Socrates ascribes to these failed

³⁹ 2000, 92.

students in the *Theaetetus*: “ultimately they appeared ignorant both to themselves and to others.” The reason Aristides so easily and eagerly diagnoses Thucydides’ mistake is because he has made it himself and now regrets it. That is why he goes immediately from criticizing Thucydides to lamenting the results of his own departure from Socrates:

“Well, I too am in a laughable state, Socrates,’ he said” (*Thg.* 130b8-c1).⁴⁰

Aristides now perceives that Socrates’ help was essential for his progress, but that does not mean he grasps what Socratic education is really about. In fact his troublingly un-Socratic description of what he had once achieved confirms that he remains an honor-driven young man like Thucydides, with an extremely superficial understanding of philosophy’s goals. The heart of this description is his statement that “before I sailed away I could talk with anyone and appear worse than no one in words, so I pursued the company of the wittiest people.” Here Bailly comments,

It strikes a bizarre note to hear *Socrates in an unsolicited explanation of what progress with him is like* quoting Aristides to the effect that he made progress at what looks like eristics or mere wit-banding without qualifying the quotation.⁴¹

Bailly is right that the Socrates we know from other dialogues would never call “appearing worse than no one in words” (μηδενὸς χείρων φαίνεσθαι ἐν λόγοις) an index of real progress. This sounds rather like the sort of superficial and competitive mastery of arguments criticized in the *Phaedo* (90b4-91a6). The title character of the *Clitophon*

⁴⁰ At *Theages* 130a6-7 we are told that Aristides left Socrates for a military expedition. Joyal 2000, 287 says that “the circumstances of Aristides’ departure from Socrates are different in the *Thg.* [than in the *Tht.*],” implying that leaving on an expedition is incompatible with leaving through the contemptuous belief that he no longer needs Socrates. In fact the two may well be compatible (so too Bailly 2004, 275). For example, Aristides may have decided that he was ready to begin his political career, and joined the expedition in the belief the hope of winning the prestige which would improve his prospects.

⁴¹ 2004, 250; italics in original. Joyal 2000, 287 notes that “some irony may be intended in Aristides’ misconceived boast,” but does not explain further.

(408d1-10a6) and Alcibiades in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (1.2.40-6) display precisely this sort of competence in Socratic argumentation without grounding in ethical transformation. This kind of verbal wrangling belongs to the same cultural complex as the arrogance of Socrates' failed students and Thucydides' irascibility. This complex can be loosely characterized as ancient Greek "honor culture."⁴² Whatever transformation Aristides had once begun to undergo, he certainly had not arrived at an accurate appreciation of the real goals of Socratic education. To the contrary, what he valued was primarily that it helped him to compete for attention and prestige. Theages' reference to "the company of the wittiest people" (τὰς συνουσίας τῶν χαριεστάτων ἀνθρώπων, *Thg.* 130c4) should be read against the backdrop of his assumptions about a community of peers competing for honor. The priorities of this community are incompatible with lasting philosophical progress. The "witty company" Theages sought thus recalls the "bad company" (πονηρὰν συνουσίαν) through which Socrates claims his educational "babies" have often been "miscarried" (ἐξήμβλωσαν) and "killed" (ἀπώλεσαν, *Tht.* 150e4-6).

This gives us a strong reason to doubt that we should take Aristides' report of his own experience as a straightforward account of the nature and mechanisms of Socratic education. I suggest instead that we are supposed to find his report "remarkable" (Joyal) and "bizarre" (Bailly). His is a cautionary tale, and one that is particularly germane for an ambitious young Athenian like Theages. Moreover, insofar as many students at the fourth and third century Academy are also aspirants to political office, Aristides' misunderstanding contains important lessons for them as well. Aristides fixated on his

⁴² See Cohen 1995, 61-86; Allen 1999, 50-72. On the importance of this honor culture to Plato's ethics, see especially Hobbs 2000.

progress in reasoning and argumentation, which are very useful skills in the agonistic arena of Athenian politics. However, he never appreciated the incipient transformation of character and intellect which had underlain that argumentative capacity and toward which that capacity was supposed to be oriented. It is therefore not surprising if he focused on the superficial aspects of Socratic eros as well, and overlooked its essential goal and fundamental driver. He remembers the erotic yearning to look and touch, which he rightly associated with learning; but he undervalued the cooperative critical refinement of his vision of beauty and goodness, which was the real content of that learning. To put it another way, he never realized that bodily contact between lovers does not simply open a conduit for wisdom; rather, it stimulates the lovers to use their words and souls for viewing and touching higher forms of beauty.

This brings us back to the metaphor of “flowing” and a final intertext. While it is true that this metaphor recalls Socrates’ banter with Agathon in the *Symposium*, it should also be noted that nouns and verbs from this root appear abundantly in the palinode of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.⁴³ What is flowing between lover and beloved there is not progress *tout court*, but an invigorating reminder of our higher nature and of the transcendent beings dimly recollected by our immortal souls – the ethical and epistemic goals of philosophical inquiry. By the logic of this passage we would say that Aristides felt the rush of this transcendental conduit, but once again failed to make the right connections

⁴³ There Socrates speaks of the “flow of beauty” (τὸ τοῦ κάλλους ῥεῦμα, 255c6), “off-flow of beauty” (τοῦ κάλλους τὴν ἀπορροήν, 251b1-2), and “nourishment flowing into” the soul (ἐπιρρυείσης τῆς τροφῆς, 251b5). He even goes so far as to fancifully etymologize “desire” (ἵμερος) as a compound of “coming” (ἐπίοντα), “particles” of beauty (μέρη), and “flowing” (ῥέοντα, 251c6-7).

between this sensation, seeing and touching Socrates, improving his techniques of reasoning and arguing, and learning about his true nature and proper aspirations.

In this section I have attempted to dispel the first accusation leveled against the conclusion of the *Theages*, which is that its ascription of erotic “understanding” to Socrates is either a misnomer (“understanding” is in no way involved) or simply a mystery (“understanding” is not explained). I have argued that our author’s emphatic allusions to Plato’s *Symposium* and *Theaetetus* give us everything we need to understand in what fashion Socratic education in the *Theages* is both erotic and rational. Furthermore, I have suggested that Aristides’ description of his own experience should be read as a cautionary tale, not a straightforward report of how Socratic eros is supposed to enable progress. There is more to say about both the parallel with the *Symposium* and the role of *Theages* in all of this. But that will take us into the discussion of the amalgamated *daimonion*-god, which is the topic for the next section.

3. Daemonic Influence

Notwithstanding what I have just said about the rationality of erotic education in the *Theages*, it might be objected that the greatest problem remains untouched: Aristides’ progress is supposed to exemplify the “almighty power” of Socrates’ *daimonion*, and that power has nothing to do with cooperative reasoning. Hence even if the educational power of eros cannot be reduced to tactile transmission, it may be that the power of the *daimonion* can. This suspicion might be amplified by modern secular assumptions about the autonomy of human reasoning, which could lead us to believe that if daemonic power is driving a student’s progress, to that extent reason is being supplanted. In this section I will first argue that those modern assumptions are anachronistic. Neither in the ambient

culture of fourth century Greece nor in Plato's dialogues in particular does daemonic intervention necessarily compromise the integrity of human reasoning. I will then argue that erotic influence and daemonic influence are interdependent, since the *Symposium* represents eros as a *daimôn* and Socrates as a daemonic individual. Finally, I will argue that the allocation of space within the dialogue, while it certainly testifies that this author attributes enormous importance to the *daimonion*, also speaks to the ongoing role of cooperative reasoning. These three arguments will allow me to conclude that according to the *Theages*, daemonic influence is actually part of successful human reasoning (and especially of philosophical reasoning).

The natural place to begin investigating daemonic influence in the *Theages* is in the existing scholarship on Socrates' *daimonion* and Socratic rationality. What we will find here, unfortunately, is a way of reconciling revelation and reason which actually makes the conclusion of the *Theages* look *less* compatible with traditional Socratic inquiry. (This may not be incidental to the prevalent way of interpreting the *Theages*.) In his influential book on Socrates, Vlastos argues that in dreams sent from the gods, poetic enthusiasm, and daemonic signs divine intervention is temporally and phenomenologically separable from the activity of reasoning.⁴⁴ For example, first Socrates experiences the daemonic sign or has a prophetic or admonitory dream, and afterwards he reasons out the meaning of the sign or the dream on the basis of his

⁴⁴ This is not the way Vlastos himself puts it, but it is clearly implied by 1991, 157-78 and 280-2. The exception is what Brickhouse and Smith 2005, 44-9 aptly call Vlastos' "reductionist" approach (referring to Vlastos 1991, 283-4). According to this the daemonic sign is simply a "subjective hunch" about the conclusion toward which the rational inquiry is moving. Variations on this interpretation appear frequently in the scholarship, for example in Villa's reduction of the "inner voice" to "the thinking individual's capacity to generate such prohibitions . . . not out of deference to such authorities but out of a nonexpert understanding of injustice" (2001, 41).

previously established beliefs and normal procedures of inference. Vlastos even goes so far as to argue that while the daemonic sign is occurring for Socrates, he is “out of his mind” (ἔκφρων) like the poets and rhapsodes Socrates describes in the *Ion*.⁴⁵ McPherran and Brickhouse and Smith have persuasively criticized Vlastos’ attempt to “disarm the irrationalist potential of the belief in supernatural gods communicating with human beings by supernatural signs.”⁴⁶ But notwithstanding their qualifications of his position, they and other scholars continue to assume that divine premonitions of all kinds are “information” upon which the critical intellect operates. Inasmuch as this scholarship focuses on the daemonic sign’s apotropaic activity, this makes fairly good sense. We can agree that Socrates typically experiences the daemonic sign as something foreign to himself, which he perceives, upon which he subsequently acts, and about which he reasons (e.g. *Euthd.* 272e1-4, *Phdr.* 242b8-c9, *Ap.* 31c4-d6 and 40a2-c4, *Tht.* 151a4-5).⁴⁷ But if we take this as our only model for the sort of divine influence which is compatible with Socratic philosophizing, then we will probably conclude that whatever is happening in the conclusion of the *Theages* is no longer Socratic philosophy. For nothing in the *Theages* suggests that when Socrates speaks of “the power of the *daimonion* assisting in the association” of some of his followers, he means that it intervenes with dreams or

⁴⁵ *ibid.* 167-71. The key sentence is *Ion* 534b3-6: κοῦφον γὰρ χρῆμα ποιητής ἐστὶν καὶ πτηνὸν καὶ ἱερόν, καὶ οὐ πρότερον οἶός τε ποιεῖν πρὶν ἂν ἔνθεός τε γένηται καὶ ἔκφρων καὶ ὁ νοῦς μηκέτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνῆ.

⁴⁶ Quotation from Vlastos 1991, 170-1. McPherran 1996, 175-207; Brickhouse and Smith 2005. The latter is particularly good at drawing attention to Vlastos’ partisan rhetoric, though others in the scholarly community continue to presume a collective duty to “disarm the irrationalist potential” of Socratic religiosity (e.g. Partridge 2008, 289: “Modern sensibilities bristle at the idea that Socrates adjusted his actions in response to strange signals received from a divine source” *Whose* modern sensibilities? Clearly those of the mainstream scholarly community. Compare the awareness of McPherran 1996, 11 that his portrayal of Socratic religion may be “unpalatable” or “disconcerting.”)

⁴⁷ These references are conveniently listed by Vlastos 1991, 284-5. For clear-headed speculation about the phenomenal character of this “sign,” see Long 2006, 63-74.

apotropaic signs, which he and his followers subsequently incorporate into cooperative critical reasoning.⁴⁸

However, this is not the only model for divine influence either in the ambient culture or in Plato's dialogues. The distinction between divine intrusion and normal processes of perception and reasoning is not always so clear. In her recent book *The Symptom and the Subject*, Holmes addresses daemonic incursion into what she calls the "the domain of the felt."⁴⁹ The key point for my purposes is that the boundary between self and other, between "one's own" normal phenomenal consciousness and foreign intrusions into it, is culturally negotiated and may be ambiguous. What constitutes an intrusion, i.e. what will be registered as foreign to the subject's integrity, is determined by how she interprets her experience in the light of the phenomenological vocabulary available to her. With reference to Homer, Holmes focuses on the nearly untranslatable apparatus including *thumos*, *êtor*, *kêr*, *kradiê*, *phrenes*, *prapides*, *menos*, *atê*, *noos* and *psuchê*. For example, in *Iliad* 16 Glaucus knows that Apollo has heard his prayer not only because the god heals his wound, but because he "cast *menos* into his *thumos*" (16.528-9). These words describe a sudden alteration in Glaucus' phenomenal consciousness, which the hero will interpret as the trace of divine influence.⁵⁰ In fact—to go beyond Holmes' analysis—divine influence is often invoked even when the intrusion is too subtle to be picked out of the normal phenomenal field, provided that later evidence points to

⁴⁸ The anecdotes about Charmides, Timarchus, and Sannion should not be taken as evidence of apotropaic signs contributing to education (*Thg.* 128d8-29d8), since in their cases philosophical progress is not at issue.

⁴⁹ 2010, esp. 41-83.

⁵⁰ Homer vouches for Apollo's action with his authorial voice, but of course that voice is not audible to Glaucus.

something uncanny in the subject's functioning. Hence when Homer's Agamemnon finally returns Briseis to Achilles, he begins by saying,

I am not responsible,
but Zeus, and Destiny, and a mist-walking Erinys,
who in assembly cast savage *atê* into my *phrenes*
on that day I myself took Achilles' prize from him. (*Il.* 19.86-9).⁵¹

Nothing in *Iliad* 1.101-87, where Homer narrates this incident, suggests a divinity has impinged on Agamemnon's *phrenes*. Nevertheless, Agamemnon's words are only partly in bad faith: certainly he manipulates religious beliefs in order to save face, but at the same time his decision looks so catastrophic in hindsight that it is easy to believe the gods, whose purposes impact all parts of the war,⁵² must somehow have been at work in this momentous error.⁵³ Agamemnon offers a catalog of possible agents of this *atê* ("ruin" or "delusion"), but elsewhere such imperceptible intervention is often simply attributed to "some god" (θεός τις or θεῶν τις) or "a *daimôn*."⁵⁴ For example, at *Iliad* 17.792-3 Nestor urges Patroclus to speak with Achilles: "Who knows whether, with daemonic help (σὺν δαίμονι), you might stir his *thumos* with your persuasion?" Nestor is not counting on some divinity making an epiphany, as Athena does to Achilles in *Iliad* 1.188-222, or "tak[ing] away his *phrenes*," as Zeus does to Glaucus in *Iliad* 6.234. The

⁵¹ translation adapted from Lattimore 1951.

⁵² Of course, the entire *Iliad* is "the plan of Zeus" (Διὸς βουλή, 1.5), and Homer depicts various gods both fighting and helping their favorites throughout the epic.

⁵³ Cf. Williams 1993, 52-5.

⁵⁴ On the invocation of a *daimon* where the speaker cannot specify any particular deity, see Nilsson 1967, 216-222; Burkert 1985, 179-81; Brenk 1986, 2071-82; Padel 1995, 138-41; Holmes 2010, 52.

phrase “with daemonic help” tends rather to anticipate the ubiquitous but hidden or enigmatic involvement of divinities in the world.⁵⁵

It may be objected that this is all very well for Homer, but Plato’s Socrates does not think of the visible world or human consciousness as domains in which divinities regularly act. Yet it is Socrates who advises Timaeus to “duly call upon the gods” before beginning his cosmogony (*Tim.* 27b8), which Timaeus accordingly does:

Indeed, Socrates, everyone with even a little temperance shares the invocation of a god before the beginning of every undertaking, whether great or small. And we . . . must call on the gods and goddesses and pray that everything we say will be pleasing to them and agreeable to us. (27c1-d1)

It may seem odd for Timaeus to mention “temperance” (σωφροσύνη) rather than wisdom or piety, for example; but it is by temperance that humans recognize their limitations and need for divine assistance. The form of assistance for which Timaeus prays, and which Socrates invokes elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, is of the enigmatic or even imperceptible kind I have just described in Homer. For example, near the beginning of the *Philebus* Socrates has already guided the comparison between pleasure and intelligence into deep metaphysical waters. When Protarchus declares his inability to proceed further, Socrates reassures him that “some god seems to have given me a recollection” that will further the discussion (20b3-4). Of course Socrates is being ironic; invoking divine intervention is entirely in keeping with his characteristic diffidence. But this does not mean he doubts that gods are (sometimes) responsible for thoughts that advance an inquiry. Slightly later, when he has sketched the first two metaphysical genera, he asks Protarchus to describe the third. “You’ll tell both of us, I think,”

⁵⁵ See the preceding note. Compare the phrase πρὸς δαίμονα, interpretations of which are canvassed by Brenk 1986, 2075-6.

Protarchus responds. “A god will tell us,” Socrates replies, “if any of the gods gives ear to my prayers.” “Pray then, and keep watch,” Protarchus answers. This “watching” (σκοπεῖν) is within Socrates’ power, but there is room for “any of the gods” (τις θεῶν) to affect whether a helpful thought or “recollection” (μνήμη) wells up before his mind’s eye. Compare *Charmides* 172e4-73a8, where Socrates implies that the thoughts which “appear” (προφαίνεσθαι) to him “after focusing his [mental] gaze” (ἀποβλέψας) are like a god-sent dream.⁵⁶ As the conceptual machinery of *phrenes*, *thumos*, *menos*, *atē* and related words leave a Homeric hero some leeway to conjecture whether an experience testifies to foreign incursion, so does that of *skopein*, *apoblepein*, *prophainesthai*, *mnēmē* and their congeners. One can never be sure whether “some god” has had a subtle hand in the success or failure of an inquiry.

This lesson is communicated in several ways during the midwifery interlude of the *Theaetetus*.⁵⁷ For example, after denying he possesses the wisdom to which his students give birth, Socrates nevertheless insists that “the god and I are responsible for the midwifery” (τῆς μέντοι μαιείας ὁ θεός τε καὶ ἐγὼ αἴτιος, 150d6-e1). In the previous section I emphasized Socrates’ expert guidance in “midwifery,” i.e., in the extraction and rational testing of beliefs. At this stage I would like to focus instead on the involvement

⁵⁶ “Listen to my dream,” he goes on, “whether it has come through the horns or through the ivory” (*Chrm.* 173a7-8). The reference is to *Od.* 19.560-7, where Penelope wonders whether her dream was sent through the gates of ivory, and so is false, or those of horn, and so is true. Compare also *Resp.* 432b7-c2, where Socrates compares the inquiry to a thicket and its solution to prey. He says he and Glaucon must περιίστασθαι προσέχοντας τὸν νοῦν, and urges Glaucon to ὄρα καὶ προθυμοῦ κατιδεῖν. On metaphors of seeing in Platonic philosophy in general, see Nightingale 2004.

⁵⁷ In addition to the examples discussed in this paragraph, note that at 150c7-8 Socrates says that the god forces him to be a midwife, but prevents him from begetting any wisdom himself; and at 151b4, he implies that it is “with god’s help” (σὺν θεῷ εἰπεῖν; cf. *Prt.* 317b6-c1) that he successfully pairs young men he cannot help with other teachers.

of “the god,” who is said to share “responsibility” for the enterprise’s success. This union of human reasoning and divine inspiration has attracted surprisingly little attention from scholars,⁵⁸ but the foregoing survey of modes of divine influence has put us in a position to conjecture what this co-responsibility involves: god enables the right thought to occur to Socrates and his interlocutor at the appropriate time, thus permitting their cooperative examination of the latter’s beliefs to make progress.

In fact Socrates optimistically anticipates divine help in the very inquiry which Theaetetus is undertaking. He asks Theaetetus to “try again from the beginning, Theaetetus, to say what understanding is. And never say you’re not able: if god is willing and you persevere manfully, you’ll be able” (*Tht.* 151d5-6). The word I have translated “persevere manfully” (ἀνδρίζη) is cognate with “manliness” (ἀνδρεία), which we often translate as “courage.” The intellectualist focus of Plato’s *Laches*, which attempts to define “courage” as a virtue, may lead us to forget that “manliness” also comprehends vigor, strength, and aggressiveness – in short, heroic qualities.⁵⁹ Socrates is playing with the motif of “some god” assisting a hero, though in this instance there can be no question of charging into a melee. Theaetetus’ heroics will be intellectual; the god’s benevolence will affect his ability to sustain and succeed in recollection, investigation, or intuition.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Cf. Joyal 2000, 87: “to account for this otherwise inexplicable efficacy of ἔλεγχος and for the fact that some people make progress while others do not, Plato employed the notion of divine intervention.” While Joyal suspends judgment regarding “whether or not Plato is to be taken *au pied de la lettre*,” I am suggesting the author of the *Theages* takes him literally. See also Burnyeat 1977, 13, who compares the marriage of inspiration and reasoning in the midwifery passage with *Phdr.* 249b ff.

⁵⁹ Homer uses ἀγνηορίη (from ἀγα-, “very,” + ἀνήρ) rather than ἀνδρεία. On its meaning, see Clarke 2004, 74-86.

⁶⁰ On Socratic philosophy as heroism, see Eisner 1982; Seeskin 1987, 72-95; Hobbs 2000.

This brings us back to daemonic intervention in the *Theages*. As we saw in section 1, Socrates claims that “the power of this *daimonion* also has almighty influence over my associations with those who pass time with me” (129e1-3); and, “whomever the power of the *daimonion* has assisted in their association [with me], these are the ones you’ve noticed, for they make progress immediately” (129e7-9). As we also saw, Socrates has adapted the second of these sentences from the *Theaetetus*, substituting “the *daimonion*” for “the god.” It is worth juxtaposing these sentences schematically, so that their parallelism becomes graphically obvious:

<p>Whomever the power of the <i>daimonion</i> has assisted in their association [with me], these are the ones you’ve noticed, for they make progress immediately (<i>Thg.</i> 129e7-9).</p>	<p>All whom the god permits make wonderful progress as our association continues, as both they and others believe (<i>Tht.</i> 150d3-6)</p>
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Part of the phrase “All whom the god permits” (πάντες ... οἷσπερ ἂν ὁ θεὸς παρείκη) is reiterated later in the *Theages*, again with the god replaced by the *daimonion*. Theages says, “What I think we should do, Socrates, is test this *daimonion* by being together, and if it permits (ἐὰν μὲν παρείκη), so much the better” (*Thg.* 131a1-3). Finally, Socrates shifts without comment from “the *daimonion*” to “the god” at the end of the dialogue: “If the god so pleases (ἐὰν μὲν τῷ θεῷ φίλον ᾖ) , you’ll make a lot of progress quickly” (*Thg.* 130e5-6). This conflation of god and *daimonion* in allusions to the *Theaetetus* is important for our understanding of divine intervention in the *Theages*. It frees the

daimonion from its merely apotropaic role and permits it to appropriate the more expansive and subtle interventions of the god in the *Theaetetus*. That god does not compromise human reasoning, but rather helps those he favors—Socrates and (some of) Socrates’ interlocutors—to reason successfully. In the same way I suggest that the “the almighty influence” of the *daimonion*-god in the *Theages* does not replace dialectic, but rather oversee its results.

There are at least two additional considerations which corroborate this reading of daemonic intervention in the *Theages*. The first concerns the interdependence of erotics and daemonic agency. At *Symposium* 202d7-203a8 Diotima explains to Socrates that Eros is neither a god nor a mortal, but a being “between mortal and immortal”: a “great *daimôn*” (202a11-13). The function of *daimones* is said to be communication between gods and humans (202e3-203a4; cf. 188b6-d2). Joyal rightly emphasizes the pertinence of this text to the fusion of eroticism and daemonology in the *Theages*,⁶¹ but does not bring out its consequences for the question of rationality. The Eros of the *Symposium* is a daemonic intermediary because He presides over the impulse of our unified erotic drive to bring mortal beings into association with eternal Forms and friendship with god. Socrates resembles this daemonic intermediary (both are poor, barefoot, always in search and need of wisdom, etc.) precisely because he shares His characteristic activity: he guides those who love him toward better understanding and more effective satisfaction of their drive to be with and give birth in Beauty. This Socratic capacity is also

⁶¹ 2000, 97. However, Joyal goes slightly too far in asserting that the *Theages’ daimonion* simply is the *daimôn* Eros of the *Symposium*. Clearly Eros must preside over every erotic relationship, while Socrates’ *daimonion* presides over very few. We should say instead that the *Theages’ daimonion*, which is a singular entity, exercises the function of the *Symposium’s* Eros, which is a mythical generalization.

communicated by the language of initiation in the ascent passage, which is borrowed from the Eleusinian and Bacchic mysteries.⁶² These are the elements which justify the inference that Socrates is a “daemonic man” (δαιμόνιος ἀνὴρ, *Smp.* 203a5).⁶³ Thus the daemonic thing about Socrates is not any magico-religious power to transmit learning by sheer bodily contact, but rather his involvement in the erotic impulse to transcend our mortal nature. This impulse is most fully satisfied through cooperative rational inquiry. It is only a small step from here to saying that the function of Socrates’ *daimonion* in the *Theages* is to preside over this “daemonic” philosophical enterprise.

The second corroborating consideration for this view of daemonic influence concerns the allocation of space in the *Theages*. On the one hand it could be argued that the sheer amount of time spent on Socrates’ *daimonion* (128d5-30e4, approximately 2.5 Stephanus pages) conveys an adulatory fascination inconsistent with commitment to sober reasoning. Joyal notes that the series of anecdotes which precedes Aristides’ report provide only tangential support to Socrates’ argument, since they have nothing to do with education.⁶⁴ We can add that these tangential anecdotes form a dramatic crescendo, beginning with Charmides’ mishap at Nemea, amplified in Timarchus’ assassination attempt and death, and concluding with two examples involving mass loss of life: first, a passing claim that Socrates predicted the spectacular military disaster in Sicily, and second, a prediction that Sannio’s current expedition will meet a similarly bad end. We

⁶² μύησις and ἐπόπτεια, the two stages of the Eleusinian mysteries, appear as μυηθείης and ἐποπτικά at *Smp.* 210a1. For deeper correspondences, see Nightingale 2004, 83-93. On Bacchic mystery elements, see Morgan 1990, 93-9.

⁶³ Cf. Morgan 1990, 83; Bussanich 2006, 208. Also relevant here is the so-called “shamanic” paradigm for ancient philosophy, as Morgan 1990, 97 and Bussanich 2006, 210 both remark. On ancient philosophy and shamanism, see especially Burkert 1972, Kingsley, 1995.

⁶⁴ 2000, 51.

have no independent evidence about any of these events except the Sicilian expedition, but we should assume that the nature of Charmides' misfortune was known to our author's audience, and that Sannio's campaign did indeed end badly.⁶⁵ The anecdotes thus provide little information about the sign's relevance to education, but convey with tragic finality the weightiness of the *daimonion*'s intervention in other circumstances. All of this certainly amplifies the prominence of the *daimonion* beyond anything seen in other Platonic dialogues.

However, our author's lavish treatment of the *daimonion* need not compromise the integrity of critical reasoning. First, it should be noted that these anecdotes are not irrelevant to Socrates' persuasive aim here: they contribute to his goal of tempering Theages' unreflective enthusiasm, since they document the reality of this unpredictable educational force. They also communicate a warning about its fallibility: like the mythical prophets Cassandra and Tiresias, in all four of these examples it speaks in vain. Moreover, while a lot of room is devoted to Socrates' description of the *daimonion*, significantly more is devoted to the dialectical exchange between Socrates and Theages (122e1-27b1, approximately 4.25 Stephanus pages). This dialectical exchange is essential to Socrates' pedagogical aim. Theages comes to Socrates asking for someone to make him "wise," and hoping in this fashion to advance in politics. The questions Socrates directs at Theages encourage him to reflect more carefully on the complex relationship between the "wisdom" he is pursuing, which possesses a dangerously vague appeal, and Theages' personal goals of becoming "better" in general and politically influential in

⁶⁵ See the commentaries of Joyal 2000 and Bailly 2004.

particular.⁶⁶ Not only do Socrates' questions challenge Theages to think about the teachable content of personal and political wisdom, but they also dramatically exemplify how a master of dialectic can frustrate an inexperienced interlocutor. This lesson blends naturally into Socrates' questions about finding an appropriate teacher. Thus the dialectical component of the *Theages* raises questions which anticipate subsequent reconsideration in greater detail. What is wisdom? How is it related to goodness? How is either related to politics? How can these things be taught? These questions suggest a curriculum for Theages' future conversations with Socrates. If daemonic influence made this further thinking unnecessary, it would simultaneously threaten to make the first two-thirds of this dialogue superfluous. On the other hand, if we accept that this author attributes importance both to cooperative reasoning and to daemonic influence, then we will be able to appreciate how all parts of the dialogue serve his purposes.

In this section I have attempted to dispel the second accusation leveled at the conclusion of the *Theages*, which is that the role it attributes to Socrates' *daimonion* renders human reasoning superfluous. I have argued that the ambient culture, Plato's dialogues in general, and the *Theaetetus* and *Symposium* in particular provide us with increasingly specific clues for understanding how daemonic intervention cooperates with human reasoning. This reading not only follows the signposts established by our author's allusions, it also allows us to make better sense of the dialogue as a whole. I am thus in a position at last to offer an interpretation of Socrates' claim that limitation of his knowledge to erotics and the intervention of this amalgamated divine agency amounts to the predominance of "chance" in his associates' educational progress.

⁶⁶ Joyal 2000, 40. Pangle 1987, 52-8 offers a thought-provoking reading of the political aspects of Socrates' interrogation of Theages.

4. Interim Conclusion: Taking Your Chances with Socrates

If my interpretation of eros and daemonic influence in the *Theages* is correct, it should be possible to offer an interpretation of the end of the dialogue which is in harmony with it. This, we remember, is Socrates' conclusion:

So that's what association with me is like. If the god so pleases, you'll make a lot of progress quickly. If not, you won't. So consider whether it isn't safer for you to be educated by someone who's in control of the benefit he can offer, rather than to take your chances with me.

It should now be obvious that I believe Socrates' first sentence is slightly ironic: "So that's what association with me is like." We must remember that Socrates' intention is not only to exemplify how eros and the *daimonion* function in his educational relationships, but also to shake up Theages' faith that his progress lies entirely in Socrates' volition. It is therefore not coincidental that he chooses the examples of Aristides, who failed to make any lasting progress, and Thucydides, who (at the time of the anecdote) is finding Socratic education very uncomfortable. Socrates wants Theages, and our author wants his readers, to reflect critically on these difficulties. Theages will require further conversations with Socrates to understand what went wrong with Aristides, but the dialogue's original readers could consult Plato's dialogues, to which our author emphatically alludes, and the pedagogical activity going on all around them in the Old Academy. They would then come to realize both that daemonic influence is essential for progress and that that this influence is inseparable from active engagement in ethical reflection.

This is by no means to deny that Socrates' daemonic power takes on an entirely new importance in the *Theages*. Socrates is not only saying that the success or failure of his companions depends on the gods, which would be a rather conventional piety. He is

stipulating that it depends on his own tutelary divinity, which is particularly concerned with the philosophical progress of his friends. Yet this divinity does not simply transmit understanding into the souls of those friends through visual or bodily contact. It invigorates their own intellectual efforts, which Socrates directs with “understanding” and “learning.” The distinction Socrates draws between “taking your chances with me” and learning with “someone who is in control of the benefit he offers” is thus a complex one. It is not a matter of either learning doctrines from a sophist or cuddling with Socrates, waiting for an epiphany. Rather, the distinction begins with a familiar one from other dialogues: unlike the sophists, Socrates disclaims knowledge, and therefore cannot teach any doctrines. His role is to elicit his interlocutor’s beliefs, examine them critically, and help them evolve toward a better understanding of Beauty and Goodness. This already introduces an element of uncertainty in Socratic education, since Socrates does not possess the truth himself; he must wait to see whether the mental offspring of his companions are “genuine and true” or “fantasms and falsehoods.” This uncertainty is heightened through the involvement of the divinity, who permits some companions to succeed in this endeavor but not others. This is what Socrates means by saying Theages must “take his chances with me”: with a sophist like Prodicus Theages is sure to learn some doctrines, but with Socrates he can come away with nothing, either because his mental offspring are worthless, or because the divinity has not helped him to nourish them. Yet the key point for us is that his education will remain a rational one: the only way to discover whether his offspring have any value or the divinity is willing to help is to engage in dialectic with Socrates and hope for the best.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Possibly we should also read “take your chances” with the understanding that “chance”

It may be asked whether Theages himself shows any understanding of this lesson. It would not be a decisive objection to my interpretation if he did not, since Theages' failure to pick up on Socrates' hints would not prevent readers of the dialogue from doing so. But I would like to suggest that Theages has at least an inkling of Socrates' meaning – as much as we should expect in the first moments of what will be an enduring relationship.

In order to detect this possibility, it is important to remember that the first few pages of the dialogue have prepared Theages to approach Socrates' statements as a kind of verbal game. After politely answering Socrates' questions for several pages, Theages exclaims, "For some time now, Socrates, you've been making fun of me and playing around with me" (125e4). We also saw that he had the same reaction to Socrates' declaration of ignorance: "He's playing around with us when he says this" (128c1). Here Theages clearly implies that Socrates is speaking ironically: Socrates does not mean what he initially appears to mean. Theages' outbursts aim to cut through this irony and encourage Socrates to speak "seriously." But since Socrates remains as evasive as ever, and Theages' enthusiasm for studying with him remains undiminished, in his final words Theages surrenders his demand for plain speech and joins Socrates' ironic game. He suggests they "test this *daimonion* by being together," and if necessary, "deliberate about what we should do," possibly including "persuad[ing] this divine thing that happens to you with prayers and sacrifices and whatever else the prophets suggest" (130e5-31a7).

(*tuchê*) denotes the providential will of the deity, not random events. See McPherran 2005 on *eutuchia* in the *Euthydemus*.

There is no need to assume that Theages means these words absolutely at face value.⁶⁸ He simply accepts the verbal handles Socrates supplies by representing philosophical progress in terms of daemonic influence. The self-consciousness with which he does so is indicated by his conspicuous use of an ionic dative, which casts the phrase “with prayers and sacrifices” into the heroic meter of Greek epic poetry: εὐχαῖσι τε καὶ θυσίαις.⁶⁹ This communicates to Socrates both his enthusiasm and his awareness that they are not speaking in a transparent, everyday idiom. Theages senses that these anecdotes have an informational or psychagogic content he cannot yet perceive. He wants to show Socrates that he is willing to collaborate with him in order to reveal this content and learn how to learn. That is why all the verbs in his final sentence are in the first person plural.

Whatever precisely Socrates means by talking about this daemonic thing, Theages is ready not only to submit to its inscrutable influence, but also to engage with it actively on whatever level turns out to be possible. Of course, this active engagement will turn out to be Socratic dialectic.

5. The Academy of Polemo and Crates

I have now completed my interpretation of the *Theages*. However, at the outset of this interpretation I suggested that it is unlikely our author both knows Plato’s dialogues well (as he obviously does) and presents us with a Socrates who replaces dialectic with tactile magic. Yet in a recent article Harold Tarrant suggests that the *Theages* was written in the Academy of Polemo and Crates (ca. 314-260 BCE), which

⁶⁸ As Vlastos 1991, 282 does. Cobb 1992, 278; Joyal 2000, 293-4; and Bailly 2004, 264 suggests that *Socrates* would never speak of worshipping the *daimonion* in this way, but none of these scholars questions whether Theages is in earnest.

⁶⁹ First noted by Friedländer 1965, 329, followed by Joyal 2000, 293 and Bailly 2004, 264. The meter could also be anapaestic, but in any event is markedly poetic.

might have been promoting an education in which physical proximity was idealised, progress (and even entry) was controlled by daimonic forces beyond the teacher's control, Socratic *erôs* was a major catalyst, conventional teaching and learning were not decisive, and dialectic was all but forgotten as a means of moral improvement.⁷⁰

If this were taken to mean that touching and loving began to replace cooperative critical inquiry, it could undermine part of my argument. As I said in my introduction, I consider Tarrant's ascription of the *Theages* to an author in this period plausible, and have no intention of addressing the full range of arguments he brings to bear. With regard to the foregoing quotation in particular, I readily grant the importance of erotics and physical proximity under Polemo and Crates. There is also (more limited) evidence for Tarrant's thought-provoking suggestion that scholarchs of the Academy in this period represented themselves as "divinely inspired individual[s]" like Socrates.⁷¹ The point I wish to query is Tarrant's claim that "dialectic was all but forgotten as a means of moral improvement" under Polemo and Crates. This, I will argue, is far from proven by the evidence.

I shall proceed from daemonic influence via erotics to dialectic. Tarrant's case that under Polemo and Crates "progress (and even entry [to the Academy]) was controlled by daimonic forces beyond the teacher's control" comes down to a single anecdote and some verses from Antagoras' epitaph for these two scholarchs.⁷² Here are the verses from Antagoras and both versions of the anecdote, which probably goes back to Antigonus of Carystus:

Stranger, as you pass by say that god-like Crates and Polemo
are hidden by this memorial,
men concordant in their mighty spirits, from whose daemonic mouth[s]

⁷⁰ 2005, 142.

⁷¹ Tarrant 2005, 144.

⁷² Tarrant 2005, 144 cites the quotations from Antagoras and Diogenes Laertius below, but not Philodemus' version.

a holy discourse rushed forth . . . (Antagoras in D.L. 4.21)

Arcesilaus, who went over from Theophrastus to Polemo and Crates, says that they were gods or remnants of the golden race. (D.L. 4.22).

Arcesilaus said that when he went over from Theophrastus those around Polemo appeared to him as gods or remnants of those ancient people molded from the golden race . . . (Philodemus, *Academica* 15.3-14)⁷³

Clearly Arcesilaus' comment could testify to his belief that Polemo and Crates were, like Socrates, especially daemonic figures. Among the qualities of the Hesiodic "golden race" to which Arcesilaus alludes is that they were "friends of the blessed gods" (Hes. *Erg.* 120). Although Antagoras' relation to the Academy is unclear,⁷⁴ his description of both men as "godlike" (θευδέα) and of their mouths as "daemonic" (δαμονίου στόματος) could also speak to these men's semi-divine status within the school. However, these worshipful attitudes do not specifically suggest that Polemo and Crates determined entry to the Academy by daemonic signs or communicated progress by tactile transmission. When Arcesilaus alludes to Hesiod he is probably thinking also of Polemo's renowned imperturbability (D.L. 4.17, Phil. *Acad.* 13.11-41), since the golden race "lived like gods with carefree minds, free from suffering and distress" (*Erg.* 112-3). Indeed, the uniformity of Polemo's composure—exemplified by his impassivity when bitten by a dog—approaches Socrates' "daemonic" imperviousness to cold, alcohol, fear and fatigue. Moreover, the affectionate unanimity between Polemo and Crates again recalls the golden race, who "willingly and peacefully shared out their works along with many good things" (Hes. *Erg.* 118-9). In short, there are many grounds for calling these scholarchs

⁷³ I use the text of Gaiser 1988. The sentence I have quoted goes on for 3 more lines in the papyrus, but these are so lacunose, and Gaiser's reconstruction so conjectural, that they do not bear reprinting here.

⁷⁴ See Gow and Page 1965, vol. 2 pp. 29-30.

“godlike” and “remnants of the golden race” without implying that daemonic forces had begun to displace reasoning in their teaching.

The evidence for erotic education under Polemo and Crates is equally inexact. It is clear that Polemo, Crates, Crantor and the young Arcesilaus placed unusual emphasis on collective living and affectionate relationships. For example, Diogenes tells us that Polemo and Crates “loved each other (ἐφιλείτην) so zealously that they not only shared their activities in living, but almost even resembled each other in expiring, and when they were dead shared the same tomb” (D.L. 4.21).⁷⁵ Moreover, Tarrant is surely right that “they learnt by the example of their teacher.”⁷⁶ Polemo emulated (ἐζηλωκέναι) Xenocrates and therefore “put on (ἐνεδέδυτο) the man’s openness, austerity, and gravity” (D.L. 4.19); and we have just seen that Crates and Polemo shared every aspect of their lives. But admiration and imitation are normal elements of philosophical conversion narratives. In fact, the verb “emulate” (ζηλόω) and the noun “emulator” (ζηλωτής) are regular terms for students’ relationship with teachers (e.g. D.L. 2.56, 4.32-3, 4.36, 6.3, 8.55-6). This emulation is philosophical inasmuch as the initial impression made by the fascinating teacher is subjected to rational analysis.⁷⁷ In practice it seems that many would-be philosophers failed to move past slavish imitation to critical appropriation.⁷⁸ But even if Polemo were one of these, that would not mean that the Academy approved in theory of education by proximity and role-modeling without rational corroboration.

⁷⁵ Other anecdotes repeatedly address eros. See esp. D.L. 4.19-22 and Philodemus, *Academica* 13.10-11, 14.37-45, 15.31-46 with Tarrant 2005, 143 and Kulevski 1984, 18-25. While one must be extremely wary of anecdotes about ancient philosophers, the evidence here is consistent and abundant enough to carry weight.

⁷⁶ 2005, 143, italics in the original.

⁷⁷ Hadot 2002, 29-32.

⁷⁸ I have discussed representations of this problem in Socratic literature at Lampe 2010, 199-206.

Nor is Polemo's recorded definition of eros as damning as Tarrant implies: "Polemo used to say that eros is service to the gods for the care <and salvation> of the young [θεῶν ὑπηρεσίαν εἰς νέων ἐπιμέλειαν (καὶ σωτηρίαν)]" (Plut. *Mor.* 780d). Once again Tarrant is probably right that Polemo intends to correct Pausanias' ideal of eros in the *Symposium* (esp. 184d5), where eros involves "serving" (ὑπηρετεῖν) the beloved. For Polemo it is the god, not the beloved, who receives service.⁷⁹ But this is consistent with the lover and beloved reasoning together, which amounts to "care and salvation" for the latter. Vlastos has convincingly shown that the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* support an understanding of Socratic piety as "service to god" (ὑπηρετική τις . . . θεοῖς, *Euthphr.* 13d7; τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ λατρείαν, *Ap.* 23c1; τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν, *Ap.* 30a6-7).⁸⁰ Since god wants what is best for humans, "service to god" means helping others to recognize what is truly good through elenctic inquiry.⁸¹ Even if Polemo and Crates have abandoned Socrates' strong emphasis on revealing their own ignorance to his interlocutors their own ignorance, their form of "service to the gods" probably still involves cooperative reasoning with their young students in order to help them realize what is truly good.

This brings us to dialectic. Tarrant asserts that "Polemo is well known for his insistence that practical ethics has no need for a dialectical foundation."⁸² Once again, the evidence is scarce and far from clear. There is one key report, which again probably goes back to Antigonus of Carystus, and comes to us in two variations:

⁷⁹ Tarrant 2005, 144.

⁸⁰ Cited by Vlastos 1991, 174-5 n. 85 and 91.

⁸¹ 1991, 174-6.

⁸² 2004, 142.

Polemo always used to say that we ought to exercise in deeds and not in dialectical investigations, as if we had greedily consumed some little manual of harmonics but never practiced, so that we're admired for answering questions, but divided in our own character. (D.L. 2.18)

He used to be annoyed with people who reduce questions to impossibilities, since he thought we should exercise in deeds. Therefore he was without barbarisms in his handling of positions and avoided every sort of witticism and, as one might say, was a Pindaric celebrant of harmony. (Phil. *Acad.* 14.3-12)

The report in Diogenes that “we ought to exercise in deeds and not in dialectical investigations” (δεῖν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασι γυμνάζεσθαι καὶ μὴ ἐν τοῖς διαλεκτικοῖς θεωρήμασι) could indeed be taken to suggest that Polemo advises refraining from cooperative rational inquiry into ethics. We might imagine, for example, that he simply advises his students to model themselves on the leaders of the Academy. This role-modeling could be energized through eros and informed by a certain amount of dogmatic instruction.

However, further details in our sources suggest a different way of interpreting Polemo's meaning. First, in Diogenes' testimony Polemo compares the use of dialectic he opposes to that of an aspiring musician who devours a manual but never picks up an instrument. Polemo is surely not suggesting that someone will make beautiful music by picking up a lyre and simply imitating a lyre-player. The problem is rather one of emphasis: like a would-be lyre-player who is fascinated by theories of harmony but never practices, a would-be philosopher who is fascinated by ethical arguments but never applies them will make little progress. Hence Sedley describes this passage as “an eloquent plea that practical ethics should not be reduced to dialectical argument.”⁸³ Polemo is not eliminating dialectic so much as objecting to its overemphasis. His

⁸³ 1999, 146.

opponents here may include not only his one-time student Zeno of Citium, as Sedley convincingly argues, but Polemo's renowned contemporaries (and competitors for Zeno's tutelage), Stilpo the Megarian and Diodorus Cronus the Dialectician.

Philodemus' testimony is slightly harder to interpret, both because the papyrus is lacunose and because his explanation for Polemo's stance is unclear. But it seems compatible with the reading I have just offered. Philodemus begins by saying that Polemo "used to be annoyed with people who reduce questions to impossibilities" ([ἐ]δυσ(χ)έραινε δὲ κα[ι] τοῖς εἰς [ἀδυ]νάτ' ἀνάγουσι τὰς ἐρωτήσεις). Although the word "impossibilities" is conjectural, it is clear that Polemo objects specifically to people "reducing" or "leading" (ἀνάγουσι) questions in some undesirable direction. We could flesh this out in at least three ways. The first would involve the logical paradoxes for which the Megarians and Dialecticians were well known. Polemo could be arguing that these paradoxes channel mental effort in a direction that has no positive impact on ethical character. The second and third would reiterate what Diogenes Laertius has already told us. On the one hand, Polemo could be objecting to Zeno's systematizing approach to "appropriate actions" (καθήκοντα), which he considers arid and pedagogically ineffective.⁸⁴ On the other, Polemo could be criticizing overemphasis on the aporetic discussions of some Platonic dialogues. This could be what Polemo's avoidance of "every witticism" (παντὸς . . . ἀστει[σμο]ῦ) hints at: in particular, Polemo may be avoiding Socrates' ironic wit and his associated tendency to insist on his own ignorance.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Sedley 1999, 146-7.

⁸⁵ One of the meanings for ἀστεισμός LSJ offers (apparently with reference to this specific passage) is "ironic self-depreciation, *mock-modesty*."

None of these interpretations of Philodemus' testimony would impute to Polemo complete avoidance of dialectical reasoning. The first would simply be an objection to ethically useless arguments. The second, as I have already stated, would be an objection to over-investment in ethical arguments as a distraction from practical exercises. The third would be an objection to arguments that dissolve conceit without replacing it with the teacher's own healthier beliefs. Although Polemo discouraged attempts to systematize ethics, he almost certainly held strong opinions about its broad framework. Indeed, scholars have recently argued that Polemo had substantial influence on Zeno's Stoic ethics and theology.⁸⁶ There is no reason to doubt that Polemo's students were encouraged to apply their own intellects in order to liberate themselves from their acculturated prejudices before learning this new ethical framework.

The upshot of all these arguments is that we have no good reason to believe that under Polemo and Crates critical reasoning had been replaced by erotic and daemonic influence. Clearly both erotics and other forms of affection and intimacy had become extremely important. It is also possible that the leaders of the Academy were representing themselves as Socrates' daemonic successors. But nothing we are told about either eros or the godlike nature of these scholarchs suggests that cooperative reasoning was being supplanted. We might be tempted to read this into the evidence if we presumed that either erotics or daemonic influence were generally incompatible with reasoning. But I have argued that these three are compatible in both Greek literature generally and Plato's dialogues in particular. We are therefore left with a Polemonian Academy in which erotics, reasoning, and possibly daemonic influence were allowed to intertwine without

⁸⁶ Sedley 2002, 41-83; Dillon 2003, 159-77.

any feeling that their integrity was being damaged. Thus education in the Academy of this period does not undercut my arguments about the *Theages*. Rather, I suggest that we revise our understanding of education under Polemo and Crates along the same lines as I have laid out for the *Theages*.

6. Conclusion

If I am correct that the *Theages* is intended to initiate reflection about the various components of education, then it is not surprising it has always provoked a certain amount of puzzlement. Part of its aim is to begin discussions that will be taken up again later in the educational process, probably with the help of other dialogues. It is also unsurprising that its emphasis on the frailty of mortal reasoning and the need for divine assistance perturbs many readers. Socrates' *daimonion* and general religiosity in other Platonic dialogues have also created intense controversies among modern scholars committed to the independence of human reasoning. But if we allow ourselves to supplement the *Theages*' elliptical suggestions with the dialogues to which it alludes, we can see that its lesson is by no means outlandish for a fourth-century reader of Plato. Its author believes both in cooperative reasoning and in the ubiquitous and substantial influence of daemonic/divine forces. It is true that he puts more emphasis on the daemonic than any of Plato's uncontroversially authentic dialogues. However, his original audience could readily use Plato's own dialogues to explain how daemonic intervention and reasoning both contribute to philosophizing without impeding one another. Moreover, they would have the enormous advantage of contextualizing their discussions against the practical backdrop of teaching within the Academy. However "superstitious" this may appear to some modern readers, it is safest to allow that in the

Theages reasoning about ethics coexists harmoniously not only with an emphasis on its emotional contexts, but also with profound belief in the need for divine assistance.⁸⁷

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⁸⁷ This article began life at a workshop at the University of Bristol in 2009. I wish to thank the participants of that workshop as well as the editor and anonymous referees at *AJP* for their help in developing these ideas.

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