

## Philosophical Breakdowns and Divine Intervention: Motivational conditions for philosophy in Plato

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Plato is persistently concerned with identifying necessary conditions for successful inquiry. Beginning from the *Meno*'s 'paradox of inquiry', contemporary commentators largely focus on the *objective* dimension, that is, how inquirers must be related to the object of inquiry for their investigation to succeed (see, e.g., Fine 2014, 31-177). Less attention is paid to the question's *motivational* dimension. How must inquirers relate to inquiry itself? What beliefs and attitudes must an inquirer have about philosophical inquiry if it is to get off the ground?

When scholars do ask what motivational conditions Plato thinks necessary for inquiry, they generally approach the question from the perspective of philosophical protreptic: once already engaged in inquiry, however tentatively, how can Socrates persuade his interlocutors to value philosophy correctly and orient their lives around it? But focusing on protreptic skips a step, since protreptic arguments are only possible when interlocutors are prepared to participate in them. To put the challenge bluntly: good luck protrepticizing an interlocutor through philosophical arguments if the protreptic target is entirely unmotivated to engage with them. Protreptic may have some role in fulfilling necessary motivational conditions for successful inquiry, but offers no help when potential inquirers are altogether unmotivated to philosophize.

One might think such a complete lack of motivation is not something Plato worries about—he wrote *dialogues*, after all, and participants in those dialogues must have sufficient motivation to inquire with Socrates, or there would be no dialogue. I have two aims: first, to argue *that* Plato is concerned with securing the necessary initial motivation for inquiry; second, to show *what* Plato thinks these conditions are and *how* potential philosophers are to satisfy them.<sup>1</sup>

My first section argues that Plato's concern is made clear through his depiction of *philosophical breakdowns*: moments when a potential inquirer refuses to inquire, or ceases participating before the inquiry concludes, or does not 'take seriously' its results by failing to live in accordance with them. These breakdowns occur when inquirers lack the necessary motivation to conform to key

<sup>1</sup> Following Plato's own usage, I will sometimes use 'philosophy' interchangeably with 'inquiry' *simpliciter*, and sometimes as indicating a particular form of inquiry—inquiry into the nature of virtue and how best to live one's life, or into foundational metaphysical truths. Crucially, I assume Socrates intends all his interlocutors to engage in the same general activity governed by the same norms, and that the same conditions of success apply to both inquiry in general and any specific form of inquiry. For a detailed discussion of the polysemous nature of *philosophia* in Plato's work and its historical origins, see Moore 2020.

zetetic principles, and their ubiquity demonstrates Plato's abiding worry concerning them.<sup>2</sup> Having demonstrated the importance of philosophical breakdowns to Plato, my second section presents his solution—divine intervention. To satisfy requisite zetetic motivational conditions, inquirers must trust that philosophy will benefit them overall, and this trust is justified by a divine guarantee. Because philosophical inquiry originates in a divine vocation, and because the gods desire our good, we can trust in its benefit.

The first section enriches current literature on protreptic by introducing the broader concept of philosophical breakdowns. Though commentators often present piecemeal discussions of particular zetetic failures when analyzing Platonic protreptic, my discussion is the first to provide a typology of breakdowns showing how characters as diverse as Polemarchus, Euthyphro, Nicias, and Callicles represent varying facets of the same phenomenon whose pervasiveness in Plato has not yet been fully appreciated.<sup>3</sup> Properly appreciating the problem's unified and ubiquitous nature will lead to the surprising conclusion that Plato offers a *single* solution to this multivarious problem, while also allowing us to see why protreptic alone cannot adequately respond to the challenge.

My second section also challenges scholarly agreement about the primacy of reason in Platonic epistemology. I argue against the subordination of revelation to rational inquiry's authority in Plato, instead suggesting that rational inquiry depends on divine justification to make such inquiry possible.<sup>4</sup>

My treatment is relevant to burgeoning contemporary discussions of zetetic norms (see Friedman 2020 and forthcoming, and Thorstad 2021). Plato is a promising interlocutor for epistemologists interested in zetetic norms. His response to the problem of breakdowns might also prove fruitful (however unexpectedly) for zetetic epistemology, as the need for extra-rational resources to get rational inquiry off the ground suggests new avenues of investigation for the contemporary conversation.

### I. The Problem: Philosophical Breakdowns

The spectre of zetetic failure haunts Socrates' every interaction. All too often,

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<sup>2</sup> I take no position on developmental chronology here. Both the problem of philosophical breakdowns and the solution of divine intervention play important roles in different kinds of dialogues, and I draw freely from various dialogues.

<sup>3</sup> The only author I have found who discusses a problem similar in scope to philosophical breakdowns is Gaiser 1959, 148-196, which argues that Socratic protreptic always occur 'in der "Mitte"' of discussion, 'da, wo das Gespräch stockt oder aus den Fugen zu geraten droht' (149). There is much to recommend Gaiser's study, and his idea of conversational 'stalling' identifies a key form of philosophical breakdown. However, I see breakdowns as an even more general phenomenon than Gaiser, with protreptic or paraenesis proving insufficient to respond to all their manifestations.

<sup>4</sup> Brickhouse and Smith 2005 helpfully identify four distinct strategies commentators employ to reconcile the role of the divine with that of reason in Socrates' epistemology. These strategies are united in defending the priority of reason over revelation: whatever subsidiary role the divine plays, it is derived from and dependent on reason. For defenses of this approach, see McPherran 1996, 175-246; Morgan 2010; Reeve 1989, 21-73; Vlastos 1991, 157-178; and the essays in Destrée and Smith 2005 and Smith and Woodruff 2000.

philosophical inquiry breaks down: Socrates' interlocutor dashes off in a huff, suddenly remembering some erstwhile commitment, or sits down ablush and abandons the argument. These failures are not the result of philosophical inability—Socrates never in dialogue gives up because his interlocutor is *simply too dull* to make progress. Nor are they caused by lack of inspiration—even with his co-inquirer at a loss, Socrates always has a new idea ready for examination. Rather, these failures consistently take the form of motivational breakdowns where interlocutors prove unwilling to inquire.

Philosophical breakdowns in Plato fall into the following categories: *Ab Initio Breakdowns*: When initially approached by an interlocutor, one might be unwilling to begin investigating. *In Medias Breakdowns*: After beginning inquiry, one might decide to cease investigating, opting instead to run away, assent to another's questions without conviction, or simply fall silent. *Ex Post Breakdowns*: After inquiring for a sustained period, one might forsake philosophical inquiry, or fail to accept and live according to the inquiry's conclusions.

In what follows, I offer a set of representative examples to show how a startling number of seemingly unrelated occurrences all manifest the same basic structure, where the absence of an adequate motivational background prevents inquiry from successfully occurring.

*Ab initio* breakdowns. I consider three examples of breakdowns at inquiry's outset: the jury's uproar in the *Apology*, Socrates' repartee with Polemarchus at the start of the *Republic*, and Alcibiades' response to Socrates in the *Symposium*.

In the *Apology*, Socrates' exhortation that his jurors not make an uproar forms something of a refrain: he tells his audience *seven times* not to drown him out with their cries (17d1, 20e4, 21a5, 27b1, 27b5, 30c2, 30c3). Interruption by an outcry (θόρυβος) seems to have been a regular event in Athenian oratory. Requesting that an audience not cause a clamour was a rhetorical commonplace, and θόρυβοι could arise for various reasons—to show approval or disapproval, to mock the speaker, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> Although Socrates worries such clamour may arise from surprise at his manner of speaking or disapproval of his apparently boastful claims, it is also presented as resulting from his jurors' unwillingness to listen to him: 'Do not make an uproar (μὴ θορυβεῖτε), men of Athens, but hold fast to what I asked of you earlier—not to make an uproar (μὴ θορυβεῖν) in response to whatever I may say, but to listen, for you will benefit, I think, from listening to me' (*Apology* 30c2-4).<sup>6</sup> The contrast is clear: either the jury will make an uproar, or they will listen. In urging them to listen, Socrates urges them to satisfy the minimum requirement necessary to begin shared inquiry, namely, being *willing to listen* to one's co-inquirer.<sup>7</sup> The jury's failure to do so would

<sup>5</sup> Plato also depicts the clamour of (dis)approbation (*Republic* vi 492b6-c3, *Laws* ix 876b2-5) and derision (*Protagoras* 319c1-7). For detailed discussions of the phenomenon, see Bers 2020 and Tacon 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own from the most recent OCT.

<sup>7</sup> Note Socrates' explanation of why the jury should not make an uproar about his way of speaking (*Apology* 17c6-d1): his jury is not to let this distract them from what is really important, namely,

mark a breakdown at inquiry's very outset.

But the *Apology* occurs in a judicial context. Why think Socrates is doing anything more than conforming to rhetorical norms, despite repeated insistence that he is ignorant thereof? The threat of θόρυβος obstructing inquiry is not, however, unique to the *Apology*, and is discussed independent of any rhetorical need to do so.<sup>8</sup> More generally, the possibility of potential inquirers deciding not to inquire *ab initio* is depicted at several other points in the dialogues.

Consider a curious episode at the start of the *Republic*, where Socrates and Glaucon are accosted by Polemarchus:

Polemarchus: Socrates, I think you're making to return to the city.

Socrates: Then you don't think wrongly.

P: Do you see how many we are?

S: How could I not?

P: So then, either overpower us or stay here.

S: Isn't there another way—could we persuade you that you should let us go?

P: And could you persuade us if we don't listen (δύνασθ' ἄν... πείσαι μὴ ἀκούοντας)?

Glaucon: There's no way!

P: Well, you should get it into your heads that we won't listen.

(*Republic* i 327c4-14).

In this passage, Socrates wants to argue for a normative claim, namely, that Polemarchus should (χρή) allow him and Glaucon to leave. But inquiring into whether Polemarchus should do so has a minimum motivational requirement: he must be ready to listen to Socrates. Otherwise, there is no possibility of persuasion—or more generally, of shared inquiry.<sup>9</sup> This being the first instance of dialogue in the *Republic* underscores the point. At the beginning of the dialogue, Plato dramatizes the danger of dialogue breaking down before it starts. Should Socrates' potential interlocutors plug their ears and refuse to listen, inquiry is impossible.

This is precisely how Alcibiades describes his reaction to Socrates in the *Symposium*. Socrates has repeatedly left him overwhelmed and in tears, compelled to admit that his present life is not worth living (*Symposium* 215d6-216a2). But he recognizes this only happens 'if I am willing to hand over my ears (ἐθέλωμι

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investigating (σκοπεῖν καὶ... τὸν νοῦν προσέχειν) whether what he says is just (18a1-5).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the θόρυβος of sophists in *Republic* vi 492b6-c9 compels young people to accept the masses' judgements about what is noble and shameful—and, presumably, abandon their investigation of such questions.

<sup>9</sup> Commentators generally ignore this exchange. A handful, however, read the passage in line with me, finding an expression of Plato's worry that: 'persuasion, or reason, can be effective only if all parties are reasonable, or agree to listen to reason' (Sesonske 1961, 33); 'no matter how reasonable one may be, everything depends upon the people's willingness to listen' (Bloom 1991, 311); 'reason is unable to overcome those who refuse to listen to reason' (Klosko 1983, 582, 594). Sesonske 1961, 32n1 even suggests that 'the scene epitomizes the life of Socrates—it is in brief the story of his life'.

παρέχειν τὰ ὄτα)’ (216a2-6), that is, if he is willing to listen in the first place.<sup>10</sup> So instead of subjecting himself to such disturbances, Alcibiades refuses to cooperate: ‘With great effort I cover my ears and run away as though escaping from the Sirens’ (216a6-7). A few lines later, Alcibiades reiterates that he is *fleeing* from Socrates (216b5-6). Here again, we witness inquiry’s breakdown at its outset.<sup>11</sup> Alcibiades covering his ears and running away is a particularly acute form of the same breakdown we already saw looming in the jury’s θόρυβος and Polemarchus’ playful refusal to listen.<sup>12</sup>

*In medias* breakdowns. The first form of zetetic failure is thus to refuse to inquire in the first place. Such philosophical breakdowns occur when a potential inquirer lacks the requisite motivation to begin inquiring—they are *unwilling* to listen to Socrates. But even if Socrates’ co-inquirer is initially willing to listen, the threat of breakdown remains constant. At any point, Socrates’ interlocutor might interrupt the inquiry by deciding he no longer wants to engage in discussion.

This failure to persist in inquiry violates another of Socrates’ zetetic norms. One must not abandon an argument—no matter how embarrassing one’s epistemic shortcomings or unwelcome the argument’s conclusions—before its completion. Socrates famously asserts: ‘We must follow the argument wherever it, like the wind, may lead’ (*Republic* iii 394d8-9). We find the same principle obliquely articulated in the *Euthydemus*, where Socrates insists in a kidding-on-the-square way to Ctesippus that: ‘We should imitate Menelaus<sup>13</sup> and not let the two men go until they show themselves to be proceeding earnestly’ (288c1-2). Though this is presented jocularly, Socrates voices the same requirement as in *Republic* 394d—if the inquiry has any chance of success, his interlocutors must persist until they have earnestly carried it out to its end (cf. *Phaedo* 107b4-9).

Nevertheless, despite his repeated insistence on zetetic persistence, Socrates’

<sup>10</sup> The motivational dimension is made clear by Alcibiades’ emphasis on his *willingness* to listen. See also the breakdown imagined in the *Sophist*’s gigantomachy, where the giants respond to their opponent by ‘utterly disdain[ing] him and being unwilling to hear anything further (οὐδὲν ἐθέλοντες ἄλλο ἀκούειν)’ (246b2-3).

<sup>11</sup> Although Alcibiades’ reaction is an example of *ab initio* breakdown vis-à-vis the particular instance of inquiry, it is also an *ex post* breakdown when considered as part of his long-term association with Socrates, since he now forsakes inquiring with Socrates after having repeatedly done so. The categories of breakdowns presented here should not be viewed as mutually exclusive: many *ab initio* or *in medias* breakdowns might also qualify as *ex post* breakdowns when considered as part of the co-inquirer’s personal history.

<sup>12</sup> Like all breakdowns, *ab initio* refusals to engage in philosophy occur with varying degrees of acuity. Examples of less acute forms of *ab initio* breakdowns include Crito’s attempt to prevent Socrates from inquiring at the start of the *Crito* (46a3-8), the athletic rival’s dismissal of philosophy in *Rival Lovers* 132b8-10, and moments when an interlocutor’s conceit of wisdom makes him reticent to inquire because he believes he already knows the answers to Socrates’ questions. Throughout, I focus on the most acute form of breakdowns—moments when a potential zetetic partner outright refuses to inquire, rather than when the interlocutor merely stands in need of cajoling by Socrates.

<sup>13</sup> Who in *Od.* iv 382ff. refuses to release a metamorphosing Proteus until he agrees to tell the truth.

co-inquirers frequently run away, assent to his claims without conviction, or stop answering his queries altogether. In such cases, lack of sufficient motivation to persist in inquiry causes the investigation to break down *in medias res*. This general motivational deficiency might be prompted by any number of particular causes: embarrassment at being refuted, ill-will towards Socrates, despair at the possibility of successful inquiry, and so forth. These serve as countervailing motivational weights in the zetetic partner's practical deliberations, eventually outweighing whatever initial motivation he may have to inquire.

Consider how many dialogues end with Socrates' interlocutor running away. In the *Euthyphro*, just as Socrates deems it necessary to begin their investigation over (15c11), Euthyphro suddenly declares that they will have to continue another time (εἰς ἄθλις), for he is in a rush and really must be off (15e3-4). Protagoras employs the same lazy excuse, saying they can return to Socrates' questions at another time (εἰς ἄθλις)—whenever Socrates wants!—but that he really must attend to other business (*Protagoras* 361e5-6). Or again, as soon as Cephalus' understanding of justice is challenged in the *Republic*, he immediately leaves to attend to ritual sacrifices (i 331d6-7). And in the *Laches*, the discussion closes with Nicias bristling at the suggestion that he does not know what courage is, firmly declaring that 'I think I have adequately covered (ἐμοὶ...ἐπιεικῶς εἰρησθαι) the subjects we are now discussing' (200b2-3). Though the *Laches*' conclusion is neither as sudden nor as acrimonious as the *Euthyphro* (among others), Nicias gives no indication he intends to continue inquiring with Socrates.<sup>14</sup>

Nicias' declaration that enough has been said on the topic under investigation points towards another form of *in medias* breakdown: without physically leaving the stage, Socrates' co-inquirers can also draw the curtain by falling silent, refusing to respond to his questions. The *Lysis*' conclusion presents a light-hearted dramatization of this possibility. Just before Menexenus and Lysis' guardians break up the discussion (223a1-b8), their participation becomes markedly sluggish. Lysis is silent when his assent is needed (ἐσίγησεν, 222a4) and the boys are soon only barely able—with great difficulty—to nod their assent (μόγις πῶς ἐπενευσάτην, 222b1), leading Socrates to joke that 'we are acting as though drunk off the argument' (222c1-2). The same playful representation of a serious problem occurs when Meno makes the tongue-in-cheek observation:

You seem to me (if we're in need of a joke) in every way to most resemble a broad torpedo fish, both in your appearance and otherwise—for this fish also always numbs anyone who rubs up against it, and I think you've done the same sort of thing to me, for my soul and tongue really feel numb, and I have no answer for you. (*Meno* 80a4-b2)

Meno's comment is deliberately humorous: the verbs describing contact with the electric ray (and, accordingly, associating with Socrates) have sexual connotations, and the comparison of the notoriously-ugly Socrates to a torpedo fish

<sup>14</sup> Though Nicias is open to Socrates tutoring his children, note his emphasis that any further clarification of his own ideas will be made 'with Damon and with others', *not* Socrates (200b3-6).

emphasizes their physical similarities. However, we should not let these episodes' levity distract us from the urgency of the zetetic failure represented.

The gravity of such breakdowns becomes clear as the *Meno* continues. After Socrates refutes his claim that any Athenian gentleman could teach Meno how to be virtuous, Anytus issues a menacing warning to Socrates and falls silent (94e3-95a1). Some scholars take Anytus' absence from the subsequent conversation to show he has stormed off, fleeing like Euthyphro. Others think we should imagine him seated nearby for the rest of the dialogue, silently brooding. If this latter reading is correct,<sup>15</sup> Anytus represents a distinct form of breakdown. Rather than being at a complete loss for words, as Meno was, Anytus no longer has sufficient motivation to continue inquiring. He *refuses* to inquire further, choosing to insult ('I think you readily speak ill of people, Socrates', 94e3-4), threaten ('I would advise you to be careful...it is easier to harm people than to benefit them', 94e4-6), and then look on in silence while Meno and Socrates proceed. Socrates recognizes Anytus has stopped engaging because he has grown angry (*χαλεπαίνειν*, 95a2), but also seems powerless to reverse the breakdown—and we in the audience are all too aware of the disaster this portends, given Anytus' role in Socrates' prosecution.

Anytus is not alone among Socrates' co-inquirers in moving from engagement to insult to silence. In *Republic* i, Thrasymachus bursts into the argument like a wild beast ready to tear Socrates and Polemarchus to pieces (336b5-6), clearly motivated to participate in the present inquiry. As the discussion progresses, however, Thrasymachus' engagement sours. He calls Socrates disgusting (338d2), a sycophant (340d2), exceedingly simple-minded (343d2), and likens him to a snivelling child in need of a wetnurse (343a1-8). He then attempts prematurely to exit the conversation (344d1-3), a breakdown only narrowly averted by his and Socrates' audience, and eventually blushes in embarrassment upon being refuted (350c12-d3). When *Republic* i concludes, Thrasymachus—like Anytus before him—falls silent, only briefly to intervene once more, in v 450a5-b5.<sup>16</sup> Thrasymachus thus metamorphosizes from engaged co-inquirer to mute observer, clearly representing a zetetic failure.<sup>17</sup>

We witness the same form of breakdown in the *Gorgias*. Much like Thrasymachus, Callicles begins the argument disdainful of Socrates but ready to debate

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<sup>15</sup> The repeated reference to Anytus *here* (Ἄνυτος ὅδε, 99b7, e2; τόνδε Ἄνυτον, 100b8) seems intended to emphasize his presence, especially given the same demonstrative pronoun was used to signal Anytus' arrival at 89e10 and 90a1. For helpful discussion, see Bluck 1961 *ad* 99e3.

<sup>16</sup> Thrasymachus' brief intervention and Socrates' declaration that they have become friends (vi 498d1-2, on which see Zuckert 2010) signal Plato's optimism concerning philosophical breakdowns. Not all zetetic failures are absolute—progress can sometimes be made even after an interlocutor's refusal to continue actively inquiring.

<sup>17</sup> We witness another breakdown in *Rep.* i: Clitophon makes a brief cameo to support Thrasymachus' arguments (340a2-b8), after which he is silent for the rest of the dialogue. Roochnik 1984, 142 makes much of this episode, and though our readings diverge on various points, we both agree that it shows how 'philosophical discourse, the pathway to any truth, depends upon an unconditional and non-relative affirmation of one particular value: the goodness of such discourse itself'.

with him. As the discussion progresses, however, he grows increasingly petulant. He claims that Socrates speaks nonsense (489b7; 490c8-d1, e4), asks trivial and petty questions (497b7, c1), talks like a sophist (497a6), acts like a child (499b6), and should be ashamed of what he says (494e7-8). On the heels of these insults, Callicles tries to remove himself from the conversation, only to have Socrates reiterate the same zetetic principle we saw expressed in *Republic* 394d8-9 and *Euthydemus* 288c1-2: ‘They say it is not permitted (οὐδὲ...θέμις) for discussions to be abandoned mid-course, but a head must be put on so the conversation won’t go around headless’ (*Gorgias* 505c10-d3; cf. *Phaedrus* 264c2-5). Callicles suggests Socrates should proceed by himself, and Socrates does exactly that, supplying both questions and answers in a pantomime of genuine dialogic inquiry (506c5-507b4).

Callicles, Thrasymachus, and Anytus all represent breakdowns where the refusal to continue investigating is marked not by a co-inquirer’s flight but by his continued silent presence.<sup>18</sup> Before Callicles and Thrasymachus fall silent, they also represent a related kind of zetetic failure: they fail to inquire with the necessary seriousness or sincerity. When Callicles rejoins the inquiry after Socrates’ monologic dialogue, for example, he only engages half-heartedly. He contemptuously responds to Socrates’ queries with a single word (‘yes’ (ναί) or ‘it is so’ (ἔστιν) or ‘I agree’ (φημί)) and tells Socrates explicitly that he is only assenting ‘so that you might wrap up your argument’ (510a1-2; see also 501c7-8). Similarly, Thrasymachus makes explicit his lack of conviction in the claims to which he assents immediately after blushing:

Thrasymachus: I’m not happy with what you’re saying now, and I can speak about it. If I were to speak, though, I know well that you would say I’m speaking as if I were in the assembly. So either let me say the things I want to say, or, if you want to ask questions, ask them! For my part, I’ll respond ‘quite so!’ and nod and shake my head as if listening to old women telling tales.

Socrates: Don’t you dare! At least, don’t speak contrary to your own opinion.

T: [I will respond] to make you happy, since you aren’t letting me speak. And what more do you want? (*Republic* i 350d8-e7)

Thrasymachus acts as promised, frequently responding to Socrates with terse statements of assent, and is clearly left unconvinced by the end of *Republic* i.

Thrasymachus and Callicles openly violate another of Socrates’ zetetic principles, namely, that his co-inquirers must be *serious* about their inquiry. Socrates

<sup>18</sup> Also see Hippias’ declaration that he would not speak (οὐ...διαλεγοίμην) with someone asking the sorts of questions Socrates, in the guise of his absent interlocutor, is asking (*Hippias Major* 291a3-4). However, not all silences indicate philosophical breakdowns. Socrates is, after all, a silent observer of discussions in the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Timaeus*. Some silences indicate one’s careful attention to philosophical conversation—others, one’s complete refusal to engage therewith.



explicitly demands such seriousness from Callicles: ‘By the god of friendship, Callicles, don’t think that you should play around with me, and don’t answer whatever you chance upon, contrary to your opinion—and don’t take what I’m saying as though I were playing around’ (*Gorgias* 500b5-c1). Vlastos 1994, 9n31 connects this need for zetetic seriousness to Socrates’ requirement that interlocutors only assert and assent to claims they believe.<sup>19</sup> If, with Vlastos’ critics, we see the requirement as a defeasible norm only sometimes operative in inquiry, we should still recognize that it flows from a more general requirement for zetetic sincerity. Socrates’ co-inquirer must say what he believes (either universally or in specific contexts) *because* this is a way of seriously and sincerely inquiring. Socrates thinks inquiry will not succeed if his interlocutor does not inquire sincerely. Callicles and Thrasymachus clearly fail to satisfy this requirement, marking a breakdown distinct from their falling silent—as is made clear by the inquiry’s persistent failure even after Callicles breaks his silence and re-enters the discussion. Callicles’ insincere assent resembles successful inquiry almost as little as his stonewalling silence.

We have now seen three distinct subspecies of *in medias* breakdowns: Socrates’ interlocutors flee from inquiry, insult Socrates and fall silent instead of continuing to inquire, or inquire without the requisite seriousness.<sup>20</sup> Socrates repeatedly identifies these breakdowns as *refusals* to continue inquiring. Following his discussion with Thrasymachus, for example, Socrates begins *Republic* ii by applauding Glaucon’s courage because ‘he did not accept Thrasymachus’ renunciation (ἀπόρρησιν) of the argument (357a3-4), characterizing Thrasymachus’ response as a deliberate decision not to persist with the inquiry. We see Socrates lament to Callicles that ‘you are not willing (οὐκ ἐθέλεις) to help me finish the argument’ (*Gorgias* 506b7). And at the end of the *Protagoras*, Socrates reports that Protagoras ‘was no longer willing (οὐκέτι...ἠθέλησεν) even to nod his head and kept silent’ (360d6). Similarly, Protarchus says at the start of the *Philebus* that he must take over the discussion because ‘noble Philebus has refused (ἀπείρηκεν) to continue (11c7-8). In all these cases, Plato emphasizes that the failure results from the interlocutor’s *unwillingness* to proceed—they lack the motivation necessary to continue inquiring.

*Ex post* breakdowns. I now discuss breakdowns where, after sustained periods of investigation, Socrates’ co-inquirers either abandon philosophy altogether or fail to live in accordance with their inquiry’s results. In the *Clitophon*, Plato highlights the danger of Socrates’ co-inquirers abandoning philosophy *after* several instances of inquiry.<sup>21</sup> Clitophon’s autobiographical résumé of his experiences

<sup>19</sup> For other moments where Socrates tells his interlocutor not to answer contrary to his beliefs, see *Rep.* i 346a3-4, *Crito* 49c11-d1, and *Protagoras* 331c5-d1. For discussion of the principle, see Beversluis 2000, 37-58; Benson 2000, 37-55; Irwin 1993; and Nails 1993, 286-88.

<sup>20</sup> The *Protagoras*’ conclusion is another *in medias* breakdown that highlights the close connection between all three subspecies. Protagoras falls silent and refuses to answer Socrates’ question (360d6). When pressed, he only assents to Socrates’ claim to gratify him (360e3-5)—and then abruptly ends the conversation (361e5-6).

<sup>21</sup> The *Clitophon*’s authenticity is of long-standing debate (see Bowe 2007; Roochnik 1984, 132-

with Socrates explains how Socrates first convinces him to philosophize by dint of protreptic arguments. However, Clitophon soon grows disillusioned. Socrates successfully persuades Clitophon it is of paramount importance to inquire into the nature of justice and the like, but he and his companions seem unable adequately to answer the questions motivating their inquiry—as Clitophon demonstrates during his imitation of Socratic elenchus in the dialogue. Concluding that Socrates must either not know what justice is or be unwilling to share his knowledge, Clitophon threatens to abandon philosophical inquiry and instead study with Thrasymachus unless Socrates should change how he interacts with him.

Three features of the dialogue are particularly important. First, Clitophon emphasizes the length of time he devoted to philosophical inquiry:<sup>22</sup> ‘Having endured these things not once nor twice but for a long time, I refuse to persist [in philosophizing]’ (410b3-4).<sup>23</sup> Clitophon’s breakdown is not the result of a one-off encounter—it follows *sustained engagement* with Socrates. Second, his breakdown is not the failure of a particular instance of inquiry, but the *wholesale abandonment of philosophy*. Until now, we have focused on breakdowns of individual conversations: Euthyphro fleeing from a particular discussion, or Thrasymachus falling silent in a single dialogue. Though we might suspect Euthyphro will never again inquire with Socrates, nothing in the dialogue makes this possibility explicit.<sup>24</sup> Now, however, Clitophon threatens to give up engaging with Socrates altogether.<sup>25</sup> Third, Clitophon’s abandonment of philosophy is not merely the result of unsuccessful inquiry, that is, of failing to find adequate answers to questions investigated. Clitophon worries that continued inquiry with Socrates might prove an *impediment to his happiness*: ‘For I will say that you, Socrates, are worth everything to someone who has not been protreptized; but

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38; and Slings 1999, 215-34). Even if one denies its authenticity, however, Xenophon reports similar criticism of Socrates (*Memorabilia* i 4.1), showing that such attacks were made in Plato’s lifetime and considered important by Socrates’ defenders. This gives reason to think Plato was worried about the sort of breakdown the *Clitophon* depicts, regardless of authorship.

<sup>22</sup> Clitophon also says he was with Socrates *repeatedly* (συγγιγνόμενος πολλάκις, 407a6-7), *often* heard him speak (ὅταν ἀκούω σοῦ θαμὰ λέγοντος, 407e3-4; cf. 408b5-7), and only questioned Socrates *at last* (τελευτῶν, 410a7; cf. 409d3-4), presumably having repeatedly investigated with him beforehand.

<sup>23</sup> I follow Slings 1999’s text. Note Clitophon says he *refuses* (ἀπειρήκα) to continue, just as Philebus refused (ἀπειρήκεν, *Philebus* 11c8) and Thrasymachus’ breakdown was characterized as a *renunciation* (ἀπόρρησιω, *Republic* i 357a4), a substantive noun derived from the same verb. The verbal echo is another clear sign Plato intends us to connect these episodes.

<sup>24</sup> Although I considered Euthyphro’s flight in isolation, it is not his only appearance in the Platonic corpus: in *Cratylus* 396d4-8, Socrates says he spent that morning with Euthyphro. Euthyphro’s flight thus comes after *several* interactions with Socrates (if we accept the two Euthyphros are the same person—cf. Nails 2002, 153), mirroring Clitophon’s breakdown in this important respect.

<sup>25</sup> Clitophon even says what he intends to do instead—go study with Thrasymachus and others. Of course, this means Clitophon is not abandoning inquiry altogether, but only philosophical inquiry with Socrates. However, it is unclear to what extent Clitophon will still be *inquiring* with Thrasymachus. I suspect Plato considers the abandonment of philosophy tantamount to the abandonment of all serious inquiry whatsoever.

for someone who has, you are almost an impediment (σχεδὸν καὶ ἐμπόδιον) to his reaching the end of virtue and becoming happy' (410e5-8). This articulates a key motivational condition for successful inquiry: inquirers must believe that inquiry will be conducive (or, minimally, not detrimental) to their happiness.

Through Clitophon, Plato shows how failing to satisfy this requirement leads to the sort of sweeping zetetic failure we see looming in the dialogue—Clitophon no longer thinks inquiring with Socrates will help him become happy, and so he abandons ship. Clearly, Socrates believes philosophical inquiry is not detrimental to one's happiness. Clitophon presents a simple challenge: *prove it*.<sup>26</sup> Why should Clitophon worry that inquiring with Socrates might not lead to *eudaimonia*? Explicitly, Clitophon argues that Socrates protrepticizes others to virtue without knowing what virtue is. Implicitly, however, Plato also acknowledges this worry through the character of Socrates' interlocutors.

Many of his philosophical partners form a decidedly motley crew, their biographies rife with violent delights and violent ends, and their ignominious lives suggest their interactions with Socrates offered little help in securing future happiness.<sup>27</sup> Long after the dramatic date of his discussions with Socrates, for instance, Critias became a leader of the Thirty Tyrants and 'the most greedy and the most violent of all those in the oligarchy' (Xenophon *Memorabilia* i 2.12).<sup>28</sup> Callias, infamous for his licentiousness (his third wife Chryssilla, for instance, being the mother of his second wife!), began life as one of the richest men in Greece and died in near penury after squandering his fortune.<sup>29</sup> Phaedrus, found guilty of profaning the Eleusinian mysteries in 415, was forced to surrender his property and flee into exile. Charmides,<sup>30</sup> Eryximachus,<sup>31</sup> and Alcibiades were also implicated in the sacrileges of that year. Alcibiades' involvement in sacrilegious acts in 415 was, of course, but one representative moment in a life of many

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<sup>26</sup> Commentators like Benson 2015, Bowe 2007, and Slings 1999 have suggested different responses to Clitophon's challenge, but all require Clitophon to willingly re-engage in inquiry. Such interpretations fail to recognize that Clitophon is an instance of philosophical *breakdown*. Telling him the solution to his problems with Socratic philosophy is to continue philosophizing would, presumably, fall on deaf ears. Unless Roochnik 1984 is correct that Plato abandons Clitophon as a lost cause, Socrates needs a way of persuading him philosophy is not detrimental to his happiness that does not depend on him philosophizing.

<sup>27</sup> Blondell 2002, 32-33, 93 helpfully describes the way Plato sets his characters against the backdrop of his audience's knowledge of their subsequent biography as 'historical irony'. The following biographical accounts are indebted throughout to Davies 1971, Nails 2002, and Traill 1994.

<sup>28</sup> For Socrates' interactions with Critias, see the *Charmides* and *Protagoras*, as well—possibly—as the *Timaeus* and *Critias* (scholars disagree whether the Critias represented is the same).

<sup>29</sup> Plato never shows Socrates and Callias directly engaging in elenchus. However, they interact at several points (see *Apol.* 20a-c and the *Prot.*), and other authors of Socratic dialogues present them as inquiring together (see Xenophon *Symp.* and the fragments of Aeschines' *Aspasia* and *Callias*).

<sup>30</sup> Charmides was eventually exonerated, but he was still left destitute, spent much time in exile, and by his association with the Thirty Tyrants died along with Critias battling returning democrats.

<sup>31</sup> The identification of the Eryximachus implicated in the mutilation of the herms in 415 with Plato's character is less certain than Phaedrus or Charmides, but the frequent association of the three in our extant literary sources inclines me to think it correct.

triumphs and reversals. This man's spectre haunts Socrates' activities in the Platonic corpus.<sup>32</sup> Meno is another example of the dissolute character of many of Socrates' co-inquirers (see Xenophon *Mem.* ii 6.21-29).

All these examples lend force to Clitophon's challenge: given the dissolute lives and shameful fates of Socrates' co-inquirers, why think philosophical inquiry leads to virtue and happiness? Indeed, the failings of figures like Alcibiades were already viewed in Plato's lifetime as an indictment of Socratic philosophy in general.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, regardless of whether these characters abandoned philosophy altogether like Clitophon, their failings are frequently evidence of a distinct but related form of *ex post* breakdown, namely, deciding not to accept or live in accordance with the results of inquiry.<sup>34</sup>

Again, Callicles provides an important example. Near the end of the *Gorgias*, Socrates makes a long speech critiquing Callicles' preference for rhetoric (511c7-513c3). When Socrates (perhaps—so we might imagine—after an awkwardly-long pause) asks if he has any response, Callicles says: 'I don't know—in one way or another you seem to me to speak well, Socrates, but I have experienced what many people experience (τὸ τῶν πολλῶν πάθος): I am not at all persuaded by you' (513c4-6). We have already seen Callicles refuse to continue inquiring. Now, he not only rejects the activity of philosophy, but also its conclusions. Though he acknowledges that Socrates makes compelling arguments, he remains unconvinced by them, and Plato emphasizes that *many others* have experienced this.

The discursive contexts within which Plato situates his flawed characters help explain why Callicles claims this breakdown happens to many people. Consider Critias, who spends the *Charmides* investigating temperance only to become a pleonectic and bloodthirsty tyrant—clearly failing to accept any insights gained

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<sup>32</sup> See Ellis 1989, Gribble 1999, and Hatzfeld 1951 for detailed accounts of Alcibiades' life and contemporaneous literary reception.

<sup>33</sup> This seems to have been part of Polycrates' strategy in his *Accusation* (see Chroust 1957 and Murphy 2019, 77-81), and this charge against Platonic philosophy persisted throughout antiquity (see, e.g., Athenaeus 11.508e-509b). Brickhouse and Smith 1987; 1990, 69-87; 1994, 166-175 discuss how Socrates' association with 'criminals and traitors' has often been thought the original motivation for his trial. Note, however, that this indictment of Socratic inquiry extends beyond the political concerns of Plato's immediate audience. The problem is not that Socrates associated with prominent oligarchs, and so was viewed with suspicion by democrats; rather, Socrates associated with many unsavory individuals, prompting the suspicion that he *caused* their flaws. To defend Socrates, Xenophon is at pains to sequester Socrates from the actions of Critias and Alcibiades (*Mem.* i 2.12-47), and Aeschines, Antisthenes, Euclides, and Phaedo likely all wrote Socratic dialogues featuring Alcibiades to challenge the accusation that he was responsible for Alcibiades' failings (cf. Chroust 1957, 174).

<sup>34</sup> One might object that failing to live in accordance with inquiry's conclusions is not a failure of inquiry itself. Yet, failing to live by the results of inquiry seems another way of failing to inquire seriously. If you sincerely accept an argument concluding that you ought all-things-considered to  $\phi$ , but do not  $\phi$ , either (a) something is profoundly amiss with your motivational profile, or (b) you do not in fact sincerely accept the argument. I must bracket discussion of *akrasia*'s role in philosophical breakdowns—but assume that not all failures to abide by inquiry's results are instances of (a).

by inquiring with Socrates.<sup>35</sup> Or think of Nicias. Though a man of upstanding virtue (Thucydides vii 86.5),<sup>36</sup> he nevertheless met an ignoble end while leading the ill-fated Sicilian expedition. Plutarch relates that when an eclipse occurred while the Athenians were attempting to retreat from Sicily, Nicias persuaded the army to delay a month while devoting himself to sacrifices and divinatory practices. The enemy was consequently able to besiege the camp, defeat the army, and execute Nicias (*Nicias* 22-24; *De superstitione* 169a). Set against this backdrop, Nicias' definition of courage in the *Laches* ('knowledge of what is to be feared and dared both in war and every other situation', 194e11-5a1) becomes brutally ironic: were he persuaded that this is courage, he might have better cultivated such knowledge and recognized the eclipse as not to be feared, so averting Athens' calamitous defeat. That Nicias' military decisions were governed by mere superstition is thus a consequence of failing to live in accordance with his inquiry's conclusions.<sup>37</sup>

Alcibiades' self-presentation in the *Symposium* is another helpful example, as he (unlike Nicias or Critias, whose breakdowns must be inferred from their biographies) explicitly describes such a zetetic breakdown.<sup>38</sup> Recall how Alcibiades responded to Socrates by plugging his ears and running away. Importantly, Alcibiades says *why* he flees from Socrates: Socrates causes him to be ashamed that he cares more about political success than his soul, and although Alcibiades recognizes what Socrates says is true while with him, he immediately loses his resolve upon leaving him, 'overcome by the values of the many' (216b5). Unlike Clitophon, Alcibiades does not think philosophy an impediment to virtue. He clearly continues to believe the conclusions reached with Socrates—but in his day-to-day activities, he fails to abide by them.

We have thus seen how the moral failures of Socrates' zetetic partners threaten

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<sup>35</sup> Danzig 2014 and Dušanić 2000 suggest a puzzle created by juxtaposing Critias' historical excesses with the *Charmides*, explaining Plato's generally-positive depiction as an attempt to rehabilitate Critias' legacy. Similar piecemeal explanations of Plato's character choices occur throughout the secondary literature, and are certainly not incompatible with my argument—Plato could intend both to rehabilitate Critias *and* highlight the problem of *ex post* breakdowns. However, a key upshot of my interpretation is that Plato's inclusion of these characters forms part of a larger philosophical project, namely, understanding why philosophical inquiry breaks down before successfully transforming the lives of Socrates' co-inquirers.

<sup>36</sup> For more on Thucydides' evaluation see Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover 1945 *ad loc.*; Hornblower 1991 *ad loc.*; Rood 1998, 183-204, and the literature referenced therein. I understand Thucydides' epitaph as an unironic report of Nicias' reputation, regardless of whether Thucydides shares that appraisal. Demosthenes iii 21 and *Athenaion Politeia* 28.5 confirm Nicias' widespread positive appraisal.

<sup>37</sup> One might object that Nicias' definition is rejected, so his death cannot show him failing to embrace the lessons of his inquiry (and the same with Critias, given the *Charmides*' conclusion). However, readers of the *Laches* inevitably feel that Nicias is *so close* to correctly defining courage, with Socrates signaling as much. I think Plato intends to give the impression that *if* Nicias had persisted he would have acquired—at least—true beliefs about courage, and *if* he had been persuaded and lived according to his conclusions, he would have acted differently in Sicily.

<sup>38</sup> *Symp.* 215d6-216c3. Socrates also foretells such a breakdown at the end of *Alc. I* 135e6-8.

to remove a necessary motivational condition for inquiry by giving compelling reason to think philosophy an impediment to happiness. At the same time, these failings are often themselves moments of *ex post* breakdowns where Socrates' co-inquirers either abandon philosophy altogether or fail to abide by their inquiry's conclusions.<sup>39</sup>

## II. The Solution: Divine Intervention

I have argued that a diverse and seemingly unrelated array of events in Plato are all instances of the same phenomenon: philosophical breakdowns, moments where Socrates' zetetic partners initially refuse to inquire, or cease inquiring before successfully reaching a conclusion, or abandon philosophy altogether, or refuse to abide by inquiry's results. We also saw that these breakdowns occur for various reasons: one might be overcome by shame at one's way of life (like Alcibiades), or at one's inability to answer Socrates' questions correctly (like Euthyphro), or one might become doubtful that engaging with Socrates is conducive to one's happiness (like Clitophon).<sup>40</sup>

A question inevitably arises: why are breakdowns so prevalent in Plato's work? He need not have written this way—he might have represented Socrates conversing only with engaged interlocutors of unimpeachable character, like Glaucon or Crito or Phaedo.<sup>41</sup> Instead, he chooses to rub our noses in the repeated failures of Socrates' co-inquirers. Why?

I believe Plato uses the ubiquity of breakdowns to impress upon his audience the constant danger they pose to philosophy, while also allowing him to diagnose their root causes and suggest a cure. Let us begin with the diagnosis. We have repeatedly seen breakdowns occur when Socrates' co-inquirers fail to satisfy certain norms of inquiry, which I call *zetetic principles*. Inquiry fails when Socrates' zetetic partners fail to: (1) Listen to their co-inquirer; (2) Persist until reaching a satisfactory conclusion; (3) Inquire sincerely and seriously;<sup>42</sup> (4) Live in accordance with their results; and (5) Trust that philosophy will benefit them overall.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Misology in the *Phaedo* is another example of *ex post* breakdown. See Miller 2015, whose focus on trust's role in misological breakdowns helpfully complements my discussion of Socrates and swansong below.

<sup>40</sup> Beyond those already discussed, other causes of philosophical breakdowns could include the derision of intellectuals in Old and Middle Comedy (cf. Chroust 1962; Imperio 1998; Patzer 1994; Konstan 2011; Bromberg 2017) and apotroptic arguments by intellectual rivals like Isocrates (cf. Gaiser 1959; Johnson and Hutchinson 2018, unpublished; Slings 1999, 59-93).

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps—Howland 2018 has argued even Glaucon's biography is not without blemish.

<sup>42</sup> We already saw this principle has several subsidiary requirements, like not insulting one's co-inquirer and only assenting to claims one believes. I suspect this norm also involves an open-minded readiness to be refuted. Compare Philebus, who supports his refusal to continue inquiring by claiming he will never be refuted (*Philebus* 12a7), with Socrates' insistence that he would be refuted with pleasure (*Gorgias* 458a2-5). Of course, individual violations of these subsidiary requirements may not always prove immediately fatal to any given inquiry (e.g., the *Hippias Major*'s imagined interlocutor's insults do not instantly end the inquiry), but they are normally prompted by a more general disposition—an absence of sincerity or seriousness—that will eventually prompt inquiry's breakdown.

<sup>43</sup> I do not think this an *exhaustive* list of zetetic principles—there remain, *inter alia*, norms iden-

We have thus identified five zetetic principles governing how an inquirer ought to inquire, all of which have a motivational dimension.<sup>44</sup> To satisfy (1)-(4), the inquirer must be properly motivated to follow them,<sup>45</sup> and this intuitively depends (at least partly) on (5): I cannot be correctly motivated to inquire sincerely and seriously, for instance, unless I believe doing so will benefit me.<sup>46</sup>

Two points about (5) bear emphasizing. First, Socrates often leaves the precise benefit philosophy will provide unspecified, only making the general claim that engaging in inquiry will benefit or not harm his interlocutors.<sup>47</sup> However, he also sometimes specifies that inquiring will help co-inquirers acquire virtue and become happy, and philosophy's connection to virtue and *eudaimonia* is central to Plato's protreptic strategy throughout the dialogues.<sup>48</sup> Second, the downstream motivational dependence of (1)-(4) on (5) is explicitly articulated in the dialogues. Socrates justifies his injunction that his jurors listen to him (1) by claiming his jurors will *benefit* (ὀνήσεσθε) from listening.<sup>49</sup> And Clitophon only refuses to satisfy (1) and (2) after losing the trust required by (5). He originally believed Socrates would show him how to care for his soul and acquire virtue,

tified in the *Meno*'s discussion of the paradox of inquiry concerning the required connection between inquirers and objects of inquiry.

<sup>44</sup> One might wonder whether Socrates feels the need to satisfy all of (3)'s subsidiary norms (like saying what one believes). Socrates also sometimes threatens to leave an inquiry before its successful conclusion (see *Prot.* 335a9-c7 and *Phaedrus* 241e8-242a2). And, at least in the case of Alcibiades, Socrates seems to have spent a long time deliberately not engaging him in philosophy (*Alc. I* 103a1-6), violating the spirit if not the letter of (1). Yet, I believe that Socrates only ever violates these zetetic principles when his interlocutors either are not yet ready to begin inquiring (like Alcibiades) or have violated the norms of inquiry and disregarded the truth-directed aim of philosophy so that the activity they are engaged in with Socrates is no longer genuine philosophical inquiry (like Phaedrus and Protagoras at the points of Socrates' attempted exits). In the first case, waiting for the potential interlocutor to have the basic experiences and capacities needed for successful inquiry might itself be a requirement of successful inquiry. In the latter, given Socrates is no longer *inquiring* with his partner, his actions are not governed by the norms of inquiry—and so he can act contrary to the zetetic principles outlined.

<sup>45</sup> Recall Socrates' repeated emphasis that breakdowns occurred because his co-inquirers were *unwilling* or *refused* to continue inquiring.

<sup>46</sup> Non-constructivists about the elenchus, who think it prompts recognition of contradictions among one's beliefs without generating positive knowledge, might worry Socratic inquiry cannot guarantee all-things-considered *benefit* (Wolfsdorf 2012 surveys the constructivist/non-constructivist debate). However, both constructivists and non-constructivists agree successful elenchus always provides *some degree of epistemic improvement*. Even if Socrates' interlocutors only recognize contradictions among their beliefs, this still leaves them epistemically better off than before—and I assume Plato thinks this benefit outweighs any possible harms caused by their public refutation.

<sup>47</sup> Importantly, (5) requires trust both that inquiry will benefit and not cause harm (see *Alc. I* 114e10-11, *Gorgias* 475d5-7, and *Hippias Minor* 373a2-5). Even if Socrates' interlocutors believe inquiry provides some benefit, they may not trust its *overall* benefit—and thus have compelling motivation to satisfy (1)-(4)—unless they also believe it cannot cause harms outweighing this benefit.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Socrates' claim in *Phaedo* 68c5-69d2 that only those who philosophize truly possess the virtues.

<sup>49</sup> Hence the *gar* at *Apol.* 30c4 (καὶ γάρ...ὀνήσεσθε ἀκούοντες), indicating that the benefit provides the grounds for his request that they listen.

thereby benefiting him, but ends the dialogue fearing Socrates is instead an impediment to his virtue and happiness.<sup>50</sup>

Successful inquiry thus depends on inquirers being adequately motivated to satisfy (1)-(4), and this motivation derives in part from satisfying (5).<sup>51</sup> But how do we generate this motivation? How can Socrates cause his co-inquirers to trust philosophy will benefit them? One might think the obvious response is philosophical protreptic—exhortatory arguments persuading potential philosophers of philosophy's value. After all, the Platonic corpus is filled with such arguments, and their strategy is generally to demonstrate some necessary connection between philosophy and happiness.<sup>52</sup>

Although protreptic offers a response to certain forms of philosophical breakdowns in certain contexts, it cannot address the full range of breakdowns we have witnessed. Paraenetic responses are useless when the potential inquirer refuses to listen from the outset (as we saw in *ab initio* breakdowns) or decides to no longer listen (as with many *in medias* and *ex post* breakdowns). Any attempt to persuade such interlocutors must inevitably confront Polemarchus' challenge: *how will you persuade us if we won't listen?* The solution to zetetic partners refusing to philosophize cannot involve them philosophizing.<sup>53</sup>

Plato employs protreptic when appropriate—but I contend that he also identifies a distinct epistemic structure for securing the requisite initial motivation for inquiry in the *Theaetetus* and *Phaedo*, a structure dependent on a divine guarantee for philosophy's goodness. If Socrates' zetetic partners trust that god only desires good things for humans and desires they philosophize, this will guarantee that philosophy is conducive to their happiness.<sup>54</sup> Protreptic thus has an important but subsidiary role: *first* divine intervention secures foundational trust in inquiry's goodness, and then, once this trust is secured and initial breakdowns forestalled, protreptic can strengthen this trust (or even transform it into knowl-

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<sup>50</sup> See also *Gorgias* 458a2-b1 and 506c1-3, where Socrates justifies his readiness to be refuted (part of (3)) because of the benefit one derives therefrom.

<sup>51</sup> If one remains unconvinced that *all* breakdowns involve the failure to satisfy (5), the rest of my argument should be read as dealing only with philosophical breakdowns where (5) is at play.

<sup>52</sup> For general surveys of Platonic protreptic, see Alieva and Shichalin 2018; Callard 2017; Collins 2015, 45-170; Festugière 1973; Gaiser 1959; Gonzalez 2002; McCabe 2019; Slings 1999, 93-215. For recent work on protreptic in specific dialogues, see Ebrey 2017; Gallagher 2004; Larivée 2011, 2018; Michelini 2000; Rider 2011, 2012; Sprague 2008; Yunis 2007. Throughout, I employ 'protreptic' in a restrictive sense, limiting the term to arguments explicitly aiming to persuade the protreptic target to engage in philosophy. This is not to deny that everything in the Platonic corpus is, in a sense, protreptic—everything aims, in some way, at converting the reader to Plato's philosophical project. Crucially, the argument advanced against the ability of explicit protreptic to resolve breakdowns also holds against broader, implicit modes of protreptic. If Socrates' life is to persuade me to engage in philosophy, I must first be willing to engage with Socrates. If Plato's dialogues as a whole are intended to do the same, I must first be ready to read them.

<sup>53</sup> The discussion of *Gorgias* 513c4-6 and similar scenes in Scott 1999, 25 also recognizes Plato's worry about 'the ineffectiveness of philosophical dialogue on a certain kind of interlocutor', though it defends a different interpretation of the problem and Plato's solution than I propose.

<sup>54</sup> I use '(the) god(s)' and 'the divine' interchangeably.



edge) through philosophical argumentation.

Let us begin with the *Theaetetus*, which opens with three philosophical breakdowns in quick succession. The *Theaetetus* opens with three philosophical breakdowns in quick succession.<sup>55</sup> When Socrates first asks what knowledge is, his audience looks on in silence, no one daring to answer (145e8-146a8). After this general failure to engage, Socrates turns to Theodorus—who demurs, claiming old age and inexperience with dialectic leave him unfit to respond (146b1-7). Finally, Theaetetus twice insists he cannot provide a satisfactory definition of knowledge (148b5-7, e1-5). Prompted by these breakdowns, Socrates begins his celebrated description of his art of midwifery or maieusis. Two further forms of philosophical breakdowns feature in his discussion. First, Socrates describes co-inquirers like Aristides, who abandon him before they finish birthing their ideas, come to value falsities more than truths, and end up appearing stupid both to themselves and others (150e1-151a2). Second, Socrates says other patients respond to being refuted by ‘being sincerely prepared to bite’ him because they fail to trust that he acts with goodwill (151c5-d3).

Note how nearly all forms of philosophical breakdowns discussed above play a role either in the dialogue’s opening moments or Socrates’ speech. The silence of the young men and Theodorus’ refusal to inquire echo the initial refusals to inquire we saw previously. Theaetetus’ inability to provide a definition recalls Meno’s numbed state. Those who leave Socrates before giving birth represent *in medias* or *ex post* breakdowns, and their readiness to believe falsities rather than the truth evokes Callicles’ claim not to believe Socrates despite acknowledging the force of his arguments. Similarly, the interlocutors ready to bite Socrates mirror Callicles and Thrasymachus, who insulted Socrates before abandoning inquiry with him.

All this is compelling reason to think the description of Socrates’ maieutic method is intended to respond to the problem of philosophical breakdowns.<sup>56</sup> Repeated evocations of such breakdowns allow Plato to foreground the problem, leading us to expect a solution in Socrates’ speech. Then, tellingly, Plato emphasizes god’s maieutic role in the same way we see him directing our attention to philosophical breakdowns: insistent repetition. God is mentioned no less than *seven times* in just over a single Stephanus page.<sup>57</sup> Plato’s parallel emphasis on god and zetetic failures is a hint to his audience: the solution to the problem of

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<sup>55</sup> We might add a fourth, if we think Euclides’ actions in the frame-narrative—recording Socrates’ discussion without ever (so far as we know) trying to engage with the arguments—demonstrate his failure to engage seriously in inquiry. For a provocative discussion of the prologue, see Giannopoulou 2013, 20-26. Euclides is not the only example of a frame-narrative breakdown: consider Antiphon in the *Parmenides*, whose initial interest in Socrates’ philosophical conversation with Zeno has been replaced by a love of horses (126c6-8) to the extent that he initially balks (ὄκνει, 127a6) at the request to repeat the dialogue, a clear instance of an *ex post* breakdown.

<sup>56</sup> For reflections on maieusis, see Burnyeat 1977; Giannopoulou 2007; Sedley 2004, 1-37.

<sup>57</sup> 150c7-8, 150d4, 150d8, 151a4, 151b4, 151d1, 151d5 (note also θεσπεσίως at 151b6). The only commentator I have found who fully appreciates god’s importance in Socratic midwifery is Giannopoulou 2007, 76-83; 2013, 51-54.

philosophical breakdowns lies in the divine dimension of Socratic midwifery.

However, despite its prominence, god's role is difficult to determine precisely. Particularly puzzling is Socrates' assertion that: 'God and I are responsible for maieusis' (τῆς μέντοι μαιείας ὁ θεὸς τε καὶ ἐγὼ αἴτιος, 150d8-e1).<sup>58</sup> Crucially, the divine is not assigned a minor role in Socratic obstetrics—Socrates and god are presented as *co-responsible* for the activity. Why?

God's responsibility might be explained by Socrates' earlier report of his divine compulsion to engage in midwifery, with any further responsibility deriving indirectly from Socrates' own actions. However, this cannot account for Socrates' next claim that 150d8-e1 'is clear from *the following*' (ὥδε δὲ δῆλον, 150e1) if we assume that the demonstrative adverb *hōde* refers to what follows (as it nearly always does) rather than what precedes, since Socrates' reference to divine compulsion comes *before* this claim (150c7-8). The same reasoning rules out explaining god's responsibility by Socrates' earlier assertion that those whom god permits make amazing progress through maieusis (150d3-6)—whatever the nature of this permission, it does not explicitly feature in what follows 150d8-e1. Finally, we might turn to god's role in Socratic matchmaking and the daimonion's gatekeeping function after Socrates' co-inquirers abandon him precipitously. This cannot fully explain god's responsibility, however, on the reasonable assumption that 150d8-e1 claims god and Socrates share responsibility for *all* instances of maieusis: the divine would be left with no role whenever Socrates' patients are already pregnant and persist in maieusis without interruption.

We therefore still need to identify a role for god in successful midwifery, and this role only emerges at the end of Socrates' description. While discussing one form of maieutic breakdown, when patients are 'ready to bite' after he tries to remove their children, Socrates tells us this occurs because: 'They are far from knowing that no god bears ill-will towards humans (πόρρω ὄντες τοῦ εἰδέναι ὅτι οὐδεὶς θεὸς δύσνους ἀνθρώποις), or that I do nothing of this sort with ill-will (δυσνοίᾳ), but it is in no way meet (οὐδαμῶς θέμις) for me to yield to the false and conceal the true' (151c8-d3). Socrates identifies two causes for the breakdown. His co-inquirers are unaware that: (a) God cannot feel enmity towards humans; and (b) Socrates does not engage in maieusis with animosity, but because he is obligated not to tolerate falsities. Furthermore, Socrates suggests

<sup>58</sup> Levett's translation ('But it is I, with God's help, who deliver them of this offspring') misleadingly subordinates god's role to that of Socrates. I have difficulty understanding why she favoured a hypotactic rather than paratactic reading of τε καὶ, given a paratactic non-subordinating construal seems obvious. Levett's translation may be motivated by Socrates' subsequent claim that 150d8-e1 'is clear from the following' (ὥδε δὲ δῆλον, 150e1). From her translation, Levett thinks the justification ends at 151a5, involving only Socrates' description of patients who leave prematurely. This shows Socrates' indispensability (since his patients stop progressing when they leave) but fails to explain god's. We should, however, understand ὥδε as having broader scope. Most clearly, δὲ δὴ at 151a5 directly links 151a5-b6 to 150e1-151a1, serving as a contrastive connective (as if a μὲν opened the preceding discussion, with δέ thus acting like a δέ *solitarium* (cf. Denniston 1954 on δὲ δὴ)). δὴ at 151b6 can also have connective/progressive force ('and furthermore...', Denniston 1954 s.v. IV.2), meaning 151b6-d3 would also justify 150d8-e1. If ὥδε covers 150e1 to 151d3, it is easier to understand how what follows also pertains to god's role.

that *if* his co-inquirers recognized (a) and (b), the breakdown would not have occurred, implying that their ignorance directly prompted the breakdown.<sup>59</sup> This should not surprise us, since their ignorance amounts to their failure to satisfy (5). By failing to believe (a) and (b), they fail to trust that Socratic midwifery will benefit them.

I suspect knowledge of (b) is supposed to follow from knowledge of (a), perhaps in conjunction with knowing other facts (like Socrates being called to philosophy by the gods). Socrates' claim that he cannot abide falsities because doing so is not *θέμις* signals this, given that being *θέμις* has connotations of being sanctioned by the divine.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, despite Socrates only explicitly claiming he and god feel no *ill-will* towards humans, I understand (a) to imply that god also desires to *benefit* them.<sup>61</sup> It would be exceedingly odd for Socrates to emphasize the benefits derived from sophists (151b4-6) while only claiming he and god avoid harming them. Further, Socrates implies knowing (a) and (b) should generate the belief that he engages in *maieusis* out of goodwill (151c7-8), but merely recognizing that he and god do not wish to harm his patients would be insufficient to do so—after all, he might be utterly indifferent to their well-being.<sup>62</sup> Thus, 151c8-d3 identifies a role for god operative in all instances of *maieusis*: god wards off philosophical breakdowns by acting as guarantor of inquiry's goodness, allowing Socrates' co-inquirers to satisfy (5).

The importance of this divine guarantee is confirmed in the closing line of Socrates' speech. Socrates there forbids Theaetetus from claiming he cannot say what knowledge is: 'For if god is willing and gives you courage, you will be able' (*ἐὰν γὰρ θεὸς ἐθέλῃ καὶ ἀνδρίζῃ, οἷός τ' ἔσῃ*, 151d5-6).<sup>63</sup> Once again, repe-

<sup>59</sup> I assume *δντες* (151c8) has causal force. Socrates may also imply that breakdowns occur because his interlocutors hold the opposite opinion, that he engages in midwifery because he desires to harm them—hence the claim that they are *far* (*πτόρω*) from knowing (a) and (b).

<sup>60</sup> For connections between being *θέμις* and being divinely sanctioned, see *Apol.* 21b6-7; *Phaedro* 82b10-c1, *Phaedrus* 250b8-c1, *Symp.* 188d2-3, and cf. Proclus in *Timaeum* i 397.22-398.3.

<sup>61</sup> In this, I am joined by the Anonymous Commentator on the *Theaetetus*, who reads 151c8-d3 as claiming Socrates and god are alike insofar as both feel goodwill and care for humans (LVIII.42-LIX.2).

<sup>62</sup> As if to allay residual doubts about divine benevolence, Socrates also discusses god's nature in his subsequent digression, arguing the divine is superlatively just, wise, and virtuous (176a5-177a8)—which allows us to believe more than just that the gods do not desire to harm us.

<sup>63</sup> *ἀνδρίζῃ*, which I render 'gives you courage' (we might also translate as 'makes a man out of you'), poses a problem. The form might be the third-person singular present active subjunctive with *θεός* as subject—but it might also be a second-person singular present middle/passive subjunctive with an implied 'you' = Theaetetus as subject, meaning 'if god is willing and you have courage'. My non-exhaustive survey found the majority of translators understand a second person middle/passive (Apelt, Bernadette, Cornford, Cousin, Jowett, Kennedy, Levett/Burnyeat, LSJ (s.v.), McDowell, Narcy, Rowe, Schleiermacher), while a minority agree with me (Chambray, Chappell, Fowler, Sachs). Interestingly, this divergence stretches back to the earliest Latin translations: Ficino sides with me (*si enim Deus voluerit, adiueritque, poteris*), Jean de Serres with the majority (*si enim et Deus voluerit et viriliter te geras, illud etiam poteris*).

I see five relevant considerations when translating. First, the parallelism of the two verbs (*ἐθέλῃ καὶ ἀνδρίζῃ*). Second, the abruptness of an unmarked change in subject to an unexpressed 'you' if we

tion earlier in the *Theaetetus* primes us to pay close attention. During their brief interactions before his excursus, Socrates urged Theaetetus *twice* to be courageous in his responses and persist in inquiring (145c5, 148c9-d2). When Socrates returns to the topic, Plato intends us to recall his previous exhortations, understand that being courageous means persisting in inquiry, and recognize a key lesson in Socrates' shift from urging Theaetetus to be courageous to telling him god will *give* him courage. We see that Theaetetus' courage—his trust in philosophy's goodness—depends on god, and that this courage makes successful inquiry possible.

But how will god give Theaetetus courage? I have argued god provides courage by guaranteeing inquiry's goodness, thereby ensuring inquirers can satisfy (5) and persist in inquiring. For this to work, it must not only be the case that god in fact guarantees philosophy's goodness—Socrates' co-inquirers must also *trust* this is so. How can Theaetetus develop such trust? As we saw, the answer cannot be protreptic exhortations (like Socrates' discourse on *maieusis*), because protreptic is inadequate when a potential inquirer refuses to begin or continue listening to Socrates. Here, I think it crucial that 151c8-d3 says *god* will make Theaetetus courageous. The solution to philosophical breakdowns is not (or not merely) protreptic exhortation. Divine intervention is needed.<sup>64</sup>

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read ἀνδρίζει as second-person singular. Third, the seven occurrences of the verb contemporaneous to Plato: single-word fragments of a middle/passive infinitive and participle attributed to Aristophanes and Hypereides by Pollux (*Onomasticon* ii 20.9-10); two middle/passive occurrences in Aristotle (*NE* iii 6.1115b4) and Ctesias (in Photius' *Bibliotheca* 72.43a26); and three in Xenophon, two middle/passive (*Anabasis* iv 3.34, v 8.15) and one active (τοὺς δὲ τῇ ἐπιμελείᾳ γεωργοῦντας ἀνδρίζει, *Oeconomicus* 5.4). Fourth, the fact that examples of the verb are exclusively middle/passive between Xenophon and a single active occurrence (ἀνδρίζουσι σε) in a fifth-century text connected to St. Ephrem the Syrian as part of the *De panoplia* (CPG 4020) and St. John Chrysostom as part of the *De patientia* (CPG 4693), sometimes also attributed to Ephrem (CPG 4007). Finally, the fact that the active voice occurrences in Xenophon and later Patristic sources include an explicit accusative direct object, which is absent in our text.

I think the parallelism of the two verbs and the abruptness of the change in subject on the alternate translation should incline us to read ἀνδρίζει as playing a parallel syntactic role to ἐθέλη. That the verb is used in the active voice in Xenophon and post-classical authors also helps secure the *possibility* of reading ἀνδρίζει as active—and I see no reason, given the relative paucity of evidence, to think using the verb in the active voice would require an expressed object. We might think the verb was used in the active voice with some frequency in Plato's time (as evidenced by Xenophon), a use that subsequently almost entirely disappeared when the verb's middle/passive employment became standardized. Ultimately, even if one disagrees with my translation, we can still see the passage as pointing back to god's role as guarantor of *maieusis*' goodness. On this reading, Theaetetus needs divine co-operation and to act courageously—and Socrates has shown that such courage ultimately derives from a divine source.

<sup>64</sup> One might worry 'god-willing' is as much a stock phrase in Plato's Greek as contemporary English, and equally contentless in both. It is true that some form of the phrase εἰν θεὸς ἐθέλη occurs repeatedly in Plato (*Alc. I* 127e5, 135d5; *Hippias Major* 286c3; *Ion* 530b4; *Laches* 201c4; *Laws* 632e6, 688e1, 739e5, 752a7, 778b6, 799e4, 841c8, 859b3; *Phaedo* 69d5, 80d7-8; *Timaeus* 41a4). However, the modification of the formulaic phrase with a verb occurring only here in Plato, along with its prominent position at the end of a discussion where the divine figured prominently, suggests it is more than a routine off-hand invocation.

Plato's dialogues suggest divine intervention in mortal affairs occurs in a remarkable variety of ways. The multiple realizability of god's involvement in our lives explains why Plato does not precisely articulate how god will provide courage: he intends to leave open the various forms of divine guidance found in his work. I briefly suggest several ways god might directly or indirectly intervene to guarantee the goodness of inquiry for Theaetetus.

First, the divine might provide courage by directly intervening in inquiry, or Theaetetus' life more generally, in the following ways: (a) Participating in inquiry;<sup>65</sup> (b) Watching over Theaetetus and intervening if he is about to do something harmful, like Socrates' divine sign (for discussions of the *daimonion*, see n4); (c) Communicating inquiry's goodness through prophecy, whether Theaetetus receives the prophecy directly or indirectly;<sup>66</sup> (d) Inspiring true beliefs about philosophy in Theaetetus, or in people who will transmit them to Theaetetus;<sup>67</sup> (e) Otherwise ensuring the results of Theaetetus' inquiry are always ultimately true.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, rather than directly intervening, god might indirectly provide courage through the macroscopic structuring of Theaetetus' life, community, or world. God could ensure that: (i) Theaetetus has character traits that indirectly promote such trust;<sup>69</sup> (ii) There are always midwives around like Socrates to

<sup>65</sup> Giannopoulou 2007, 77; 2013, 52 argues direct divine participation in inquiry is nowhere attested in Plato, and so cannot be the sort of intervention Plato intends—but recall Socrates' openness to a 'god of refutation' appearing and refuting him (*Sophist* 216b3-6, and cf. *Philebus* 25b5-12) and the imagined speech of the Laws in the *Crito*.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Socrates' dreams in the *Crito* and *Phaedo*, the *Phaedo*'s discussion of swansong, the role of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology*, and Socrates' general avowal that he has been called to philosophize 'by oracles and dreams and in every way whatsoever that some divine allotment or other ever ordained that a man should do anything' (*Apology* 33c5-7).

<sup>67</sup> See Socrates' discussion of true beliefs acquired by divine allotment (θεία μοῖρα) at *Meno* 99c7ff., the magnetic chain of inspiration in *Ion* 533d1-535a1, and the reference in the midwife passage to divinely-inspired wise men impregnating individuals. On θεία μοῖρα in Plato, see Berry 1940 and Souilhé 1930.

<sup>68</sup> Prayers at *Timaeus* 27c1-d4 and *Laws* x 893b1-4 (among others—see Jackson 1971) ask god to ensure the *truth* of the discourse without specifying how this will be done. In the *Critias*, by contrast, Timaeus prays that god will ensure his inquiry's truth by providing understanding (ἐπιστήμην εὐχόμεθα διδόναι, 106b5-6). Giannopoulou 2007 argues that god's role in maieusis is exclusively to guarantee the veracity of Socrates' second-order judgments concerning the truth of an inquiry's conclusions, but this cannot fully explain god's role. For one thing, god guaranteeing truth is never explicitly discussed by Socrates. It is also unclear how Socrates' claims would warrant this conclusion. How does the truth of Socrates' judgments follow from, e.g., god bearing no enmity towards humans? And if one agrees that maieusis is advanced in response to philosophical breakdowns, why would Socrates' ability to judge the truth of their discoveries have decisive bearing on whether Alcibiades or Callicles should continue inquiring? Minimally, we would need a much more complicated story to connect the necessary truth of maieusis' conclusions to what is necessarily good for the patient. Plato may well think these things connected (and I suspect he does), but even then, this situates god's role as guarantor of truth downstream from god's role as guarantor of goodness. One way of ensuring philosophy's goodness may well be ensuring the truth of its results, but we have no reason to think Plato believes this the *only* way.

<sup>69</sup> See *Phaedrus* 253a2-5 and Socrates' prayer at the end of the dialogue (279b8-c3).

encourage Theaetetus;<sup>70</sup> (iii) Theaetetus lives in a properly-structured political community, again indirectly generating trust;<sup>71</sup> (iv) The universe is teleologically ordered so that Theaetetus and others will acquire this trust.<sup>72</sup> Note how many of these interventions are non-discursive—they do not consist (or, at least, do not necessarily consist) in god making *arguments* about philosophy's goodness. Ensuring Theaetetus grows up in a community that encourages inquiry, for instance, does not require that he ever engage in inquiry himself before acquiring initial confidence in its goodness. And we might think belief in oracular statements sometimes comes before we can provide *arguments* for why we should believe them. Divine intervention thus presents a unique opportunity to prevent breakdowns. Even when a breakdown is immanent, god can still restore confidence in inquiry's goodness in a way protreptic cannot, because god can do so without requiring the person undergoing the breakdown to engage in philosophy.

This is Plato's ultimate solution to the problem of philosophical breakdowns. At those moments when an inquirer fails to trust in philosophy or satisfy one of the other downstream zetetic principles depending on this trust, and in particular when the possibility of protrepticizing that individual is ruled out by the breakdown itself, we must rely on divine intervention. Our ability to persist in inquiry with such breakdowns looming on the horizon depends on god giving us courage. After securing this initial courage, trust might be buttressed by protreptic—but such exhortations rely on a divine foundation.

I now consider a representative case of divine intervention in the dialogues that confirms the response to breakdowns just identified. The example comes from the *Phaedo*, just before Socrates' discussion of misology (84c1-85e2). There, in a pattern that should be familiar, Socrates' co-inquirers are on the verge of yet another breakdown. After working through several arguments for the immortality of the soul, the argument stalls. A long silence descends, broken only when Simmias and Cebes—at Socrates' prompting—confess they are hesitant to voice their doubts. Seeing how close Socrates is to death, they fear lest their counterarguments discomfit him by successfully challenging his confidence in the soul's immortality.<sup>73</sup> Note how the discussion's faltering fits into the structure of philosophical breakdowns discussed earlier. The inquiry stumbles

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Socrates' claim that god might send other gadflies to Athens (*Apol.* 31a2-7).

<sup>71</sup> *Laws* i 624a1-6 attributes Crete and Sparta's legal codes to Zeus and Apollo.

<sup>72</sup> Every person in the Myth of Er, even the one selecting her lot last in the distribution of lives, has the possibility of a happy life (*Rep.* x 619b2-6), and Plato discusses the general beneficent structuring of the universe at *Timaeus* 29d7-30c1. However god guarantees the goodness of the universe and each human life, such mechanisms might also be used to generate trust in inquiry.

<sup>73</sup> One might object that the long silence does not show the argument breaking down, but rather the situation's gravity. Socrates' interlocutors would thus be silent because they are reflecting on his argument, as the dialogue's narrator says *most* of those present were (84c1-3)—not because their resolve has faltered. However, when Socrates encourages Simmias and Cebes to voice their objections, he tells them to not shrink from speaking (μηδὲν ἀποκνήσητε, 84c9), and Simmias admits they have been hesitating for a long time already (84d5-7). The emphasis on Simmias and Cebes' hesitation shows the silence is caused (at least in part) by their unwillingness to continue inquiring.

because Socrates' interlocutors fail to follow the argument wherever it leads, and this happens because they lack trust that continued inquiry will be conducive to Socrates' happiness—or their own, assuming that causing Socrates to die unhappy would also harm them.

Socrates' response is exactly what the *Theaetetus* led us to expect: he turns to the divine. In his famous description of dying swans (84d9-85b9), Socrates says swans sing most right before they die, rejoicing since they know they will soon join the god they serve. Socrates, a fellow-servant of Apollo, has no less of a prophetic art (μαντική) than swans, meaning he is equally untroubled by his impending death. He knows death is cause for rejoicing, because his mantic gift leads him to trust that his soul will persist after death. The story of the swans—and, more generally, Socrates' prophetic ability<sup>74</sup>—provides a divine guarantee for his soul's immortality, which also serves here as guarantee for the benefit of inquiry. Because Socrates trusts his soul is immortal, he also trusts that continued inquiry into its immortality cannot harm him in his final hours. This guarantee allows Simmias and Cebes to regain the necessary motivation to persist with inquiring, as they need not fear their discussion will harm either them or Socrates.

After Socrates finishes, we see Simmias explicitly articulate the epistemic structure I just sketched: everyone must rely on divine guarantees when human arguments produce doubts threatening our ability to continue investigating. Concerning difficult questions like the soul's immortality Simmias claims:

We must do one of the following: either (i) learn or discover how things are; or, if this is impossible, (ii) sail through life, taking hold at least of the best and most difficult to refute of human arguments and riding on it as though risking the journey on a raft, (iii) unless one can get through more safely and with less risk on a more secure craft, or in other words,<sup>75</sup> on some divine argument (ἢ λόγου θείου τινός, 85c7-d4).

Simmias suggests the following roadmap for philosophical investigation. First, acquire knowledge whenever possible.<sup>76</sup> If knowledge proves impossible, turn to divine justification.<sup>77</sup> Finally, if divine justification is unavailable, make use of

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<sup>74</sup> In addition to moments involving the *daimonion*, Socrates is presented as a prophet in *Apol.* 33c5-7, 39c1-3, *Crito* 43d7-44b4, *Phaedrus* 242c3-5, and *Theaetetus* 142c3-5.

<sup>75</sup> Scholars since Heindorf have excised ἢ at 85d4, despite its presence in all our manuscripts. We have three options: (a) excise against the manuscripts, (b) retain the word and try to explain the contrast Simmias presents ('relying *either* on a more secure craft, *or* on some divine argument'), or (c) understand ἢ epexegetically (cf. Verdenius 1958 *ad loc.*). My translation opts for (c), but the same sense is preserved with (a).

<sup>76</sup> There are two possible construals of Simmias' ordering: (a) First seek knowledge, then seek a divine argument if knowledge is impossible, then seek the best human argument if a divine argument is inaccessible. Or (b) First seek a divine argument, then seek knowledge if a divine argument is inaccessible, then seek the best human argument if knowledge is impossible. I assume (a) is correct, given Simmias shows few signs of thinking some sort of revealed truth should trump all other forms of epistemic justification.

the most dependable human argument (or collection of arguments) one can find.<sup>78</sup> Simmias connects this general schema to his present situation directly, saying he will not shrink from investigating *since Socrates has said these things* about the swans and his prophetic ability (85d4-7).<sup>79</sup>

Of course, we can now appreciate why Plato, through Simmias, wants to prioritize divine over human arguments.<sup>80</sup> Divine arguments can avoid some of the whirlpools and shoals where the raft of human arguments runs aground, namely, the kinds of breakdowns that cause people to refuse to participate in human arguments. Through Socrates' revelation, Simmias now has a divine ship to sail on—and this secure vessel enables him to avoid the zetetic breakdown that had previously threatened.

This episode allows me to make three brief clarifications about the nature of the divine justification in question. First, one may wonder why Socrates should bother inquiring about the soul, given he already has divinely-justified trust in its immortality. However, Simmias' schema emphasizes that divine argument is never as choiceworthy as knowledge. Divinely-inspired trust is only a springboard to knowledge—it is a necessary precondition for inquiry, but not its end result.<sup>81</sup> This explains why Socrates' investigation with Simmias and Cebes continues after his revelation, and why his audience is still debating his arguments even as he prepares to drink hemlock at *Phaedo* 116a4-5.

Second, despite my emphasis on the non-discursive nature of some divine grounds for confidence in philosophy, it is not as if reason never enters the pic-

<sup>77</sup> Two forms of impossibility seem relevant: knowledge may be impossible for a particular agent in a particular zetetic context, or it might be impossible for humans *tout court*. Either impossibility warrants turning to divine justification.

<sup>78</sup> The word used for raft (σχεδία) has two important connotations: it frequently refers to something cobbled together from disparate elements (cf. Herodotus' description (iv 88) of the σχεδία of boats the Persians used to cross the Hellespont), and is decidedly worse than a proper ship (see Odysseus' comparison at *Od.* v 173-176). Plato surely intends both properties to apply metaphorically to the human arguments discussed.

<sup>79</sup> Simmias' application of a general principle to the specific situation is marked by καὶ δὴ καὶ νῦν at 85d4.

<sup>80</sup> This epistemological structure flies in the face of scholarly consensus about the primacy of reason in Plato's epistemology (see n4), which I assume is one reason this passage has never been taken seriously in interpretations of divine justification in Plato. Another is Simmias' perceived unreliability. If we accept Sedley 1995's understanding of Simmias' role in the *Phaedo*, 85c7-d4 cannot articulate Plato's own position. However, Socrates does not disavow Simmias' method, so long as we read Socrates' response to Simmias (ἴσως γάρ... ἀληθῆ σοι φαίνεται, 85e1-2) either as affirming Simmias' claims (with ἴσως expressing affirmation), or as expressing skepticism only about Simmias' doubt in their previous conclusions about the soul. If Plato disagreed with Simmias' schema, Socrates ought to have more explicitly expressed his disagreement. Indeed, Simmias seems merely to be articulating the epistemic *modus procedendi* Socrates just modelled when discussing his prophetic gift (a point Sedley 1995, 18-20 misses, asserting Simmias' trust in the divine is instead derived from Philolaus, not Socrates).

<sup>81</sup> We might think divinely-inspired trust plays the same epistemic role as a hunch: it licenses further inquiry, and carries important weight when forming beliefs, but a hunch will never be a satisfactory *terminus* for inquiry.



ture. Simmias can describe his surer vessel as a divine *argument* (λόγος) because, though divine intervention may initially generate trust non-discursively, philosophical investigation will eventually be necessary for its interpretation and proper incorporation into one's beliefs.<sup>82</sup>

Third, this divine ground is not infeasible. Breakdowns still threaten insofar as trusting is still up to us. We might incorrectly interpret the divine guarantee, as Socrates forewarns when discussing common misunderstandings of the swans' song (85a3-5), or we might fall back into mistrust about the truth itself. Simmias demonstrates this second possibility later in the *Phaedo*, when he appears of two minds about the soul's immortality: on the strength of what was said (presumably both Socrates' arguments and his prophetic vision) Simmias trusts in the soul's immortality, but because of the subject's importance and because he 'disdains our human weakness' (107b1), he nevertheless retains some distrust. There is a constant need to return to the divine ground and renew one's trust when doubts arise, lest this distrust again stymie inquiry. Socrates emphasizes this by encouraging his audience to repeat certain claims about the soul to themselves *as though singing incantations* (ἐπῳδεῖν, 114d6-7).<sup>83</sup>

Theaetetus makes clear the need for mortal co-operation with divine encouragement in his response to Socrates' description of maieusis: 'Of course, with you exhorting like that, it would be shameful not to put one's whole heart (παντὶ τρόπῳ προθυμείσθαι) into saying what one can' (151d7-e1). Theaetetus recognizes that his philosophical involvement does not depend *solely* on god: he must also resolve on inquiring himself. Even with divine encouragement, our serious and sincere engagement is still required for successful inquiry—and is still up to us (cf. Vlastos 1991, 173-175 about god's need for human co-operation).

This recognition becomes even clearer when we set 151d7-e1 against an earlier exchange between Theaetetus and Socrates:

Socrates: You must put your whole heart (προθυμήθητι δὲ παντὶ τρόπῳ) into what we are doing—in particular into this matter of getting a statement of what knowledge really is.

Theaetetus: If putting one's heart into it is all that is required (προθυμίας μὲν ἔνεκα), Socrates, the answer will come to light. (148d1-3, Levett/Burnyeat trans.)

Immediately after this, Theaetetus teeters on the brink of an *in medias* breakdown, thinking himself unable to say anything satisfactory about the nature of

<sup>82</sup> Plato models this approach to revelation through the dialogues—consider Socrates' report of his efforts properly to understand the oracle in the *Apology*, or his interpretation of his dreams at the start of the *Crito* and *Phaedo*. Socrates trusts these divine signs immediately, but still must inquire to fully grasp their meaning.

<sup>83</sup> In a somewhat humorous interlude in *Phaedo* 77c3-78a9, Socrates also urges Cebes to sing incantations to himself to keep away fear of the soul's mortality. Elsewhere, Socrates includes singing incantations as part of the midwife's role in *Theaetetus* 149c9-d3, Clitophon likens Socrates' protreptic speeches to a god singing hymns in tragedy (*Clitophon* 407a8-b1), and incantations play prominent roles in the *Charmides* and *Laws*. On the rational and non-rational dimensions of incantations in Plato, see Bobonich 1991, 373-375; McPherran 2004; Morrow 1953.

knowledge.<sup>84</sup> His own desire to participate, emphatically stated, is not enough to avoid this breakdown. Putting one's heart into inquiring is not, it turns out, all that is required. Indeed, it is only following Socrates' discussion of *maieusis* and god's involvement therein that Theaetetus' inquiry can proceed, because his general eagerness has been joined by the other necessary element—divinely-grounded trust in inquiry's goodness. By directly echoing their earlier exchange in his declaration of his renewed readiness to inquire after Socrates' excursus, Theaetetus shows his newfound awareness that *both* a prior trust in the benefit of inquiry *and* willingness to engage is necessary to get inquiry off the ground.<sup>85</sup>

### Conclusion

The results of this study may, at first, seem rather startling. I began by identifying philosophical breakdowns as a unified phenomenon manifested in various forms throughout Plato. I then argued these breakdowns originate in failures to satisfy various zetetic principles, and, ultimately, the failure to satisfy the central motivational condition of trusting that philosophy will be conducive to one's happiness. We also saw how such apparently-protreptic problems resisted protreptic solutions. One could not persuade inquirers experiencing such a breakdown to engage in philosophy by way of philosophical argument, as their breakdown led them to refuse to engage in philosophy altogether.

Having diagnosed the problem, I suggested Plato had an unexpected solution: divine intervention. In Socrates' description of *maieusis*, we saw how the courage to philosophize was originally given by god, and this model of divine intervention was confirmed in the *Phaedo*. My reader may still feel skeptical, however, about the alleged centrality of non-rational motivational grounds for rational investigation in Plato—I have, after all, suggested that Platonic philosophy depends on a foundation many modern readers are inclined to think decidedly *unphilosophical*.

But Plato is not alone in suggesting a divine ground for rational inquiry. Consider the following passage from Aristotle's *Eudemean Ethics*:

For one does not deliberate after having deliberated, and having deliberated about deliberating, but there is some starting-point, nor does one think having thought before thinking *ad*

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<sup>84</sup> Note that Theaetetus falters (148e1-5) not because he is at a complete loss for words, but because nothing that comes to mind seems *adequate* (ικανός). He certainly has other ideas, like the claim that knowledge is perception with which he recommences the investigation. What holds Theaetetus back from sharing this before Socrates' exhortation, despite his eagerness? Perhaps he is restrained by fear of saying something silly, or believes inquiry will never succeed, and is therefore hopeless—in short, he fails to trust that inquiry will benefit him *come what may*.

<sup>85</sup> One might worry: if inquiring is still up to us even after receiving a divine guarantee of its goodness, what work is the guarantee doing? I submit that this divine guarantee gives Socrates' co-inquirers overwhelming reason to believe inquiry will benefit them. Having such powerful grounds to pursue a course of action does not render it automatic—I might yet lose confidence in my reason over time, as Simmias foreshadows, or I might decide not to do what I have overwhelming reason to do. When philosophical breakdowns are not instances of *akrasia*, however, this divinely-derived reason should play a decisive role in resolving them.

*infinitum*. So thought is not the starting-point of thought, nor deliberation of deliberating... This is what is sought: what is the starting-point of motion in the soul? This is clear: as god [is the starting-point] in the whole [universe], so in each [individual]. For in a way the divine in us moves everything. And reason is not the starting point of reason, but something greater. What then would be greater than knowledge and intellect except god?<sup>86</sup> (viii 2.1248a18-22, a24-29)

Without entering the various interpretive quandaries concerned here,<sup>87</sup> it should be clear that the general problem Aristotle articulates is isomorphic to the problem we saw Plato confronting in section 1. Just as Socrates cannot first use protreptic arguments to convince some potential interlocutors to engage in inquiry, Aristotle worries we cannot begin deliberation by deliberating about whether to deliberate, on pain of infinite regress. And Aristotle's solution is the same as we found in section 2: we need a divine starting-point for rational inquiry.<sup>88</sup>

Is *EE* 1248a18-22 directly inspired by the Platonic insight elaborated in my account? Are both Aristotle and Plato articulating, in different ways, an idea common in the early Academy? Such questions must await another time—but I am convinced the parallelism of Aristotle's discussion and the justificatory structure here sketched cannot be merely accidental. For both Aristotle and Plato, rational inquiry depends on a divine origin.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> I follow Walzer-Mingay's OCT with minor changes, trusting the general structure of Aristotle's argument is apparent regardless of how one resolves the passage's textual issues.

<sup>87</sup> For recent discussion, see Buddensiek 2012, Gabbe 2012, and Grgić 2019. Kenny 1992, 79-81 and Bodéüs 2000, 161-168 argue that it discusses forms of divine intervention like those in section 2.

<sup>88</sup> One might object: is Aristotle not here concerned only with *practical* starting-points? If so, seeing *EE* 1248a18-22 as discussing starting points for *theoretical* inquiry would take the quote out of context. Yet, note that Aristotle mentions *both* thinking (νοῆσαι) and deliberation (βουλευσασθαι), showing this passage should pertain to all human intellectual activity, both theoretical and practical.

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