

## The Midwife as Matchmaker: Socrates and Relational Pedagogy

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In recent years, the study of teacher-student relations, also known as relational pedagogy or the pedagogy of relation, has received increasing attention. The majority of the work on the pedagogy of relation focuses on contemporary problems of education. While some foundational texts have been identified, the historical tradition of relational pedagogy has yet to receive much attention.<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to an edited volume on relational pedagogy, Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin write, “There is a long philosophical tradition of emphasizing relations, starting with Aristotle. Among the most obvious recent sources, one can mention Buber, Bakhtin, Dewey, Gadamer, and Heidegger.”<sup>2</sup> This is a cursory remark about the philosophical tradition, which I take as an invitation to pursue further scholarship on the issue, rather than a strong claim about the history of relational pedagogy. None of the authors in Bingham and Sidorkin’s volume examine the tradition in detail, as their concerns center on the contemporary importance of the subject rather than its historical foundation. Yet as the scholarship on relational pedagogy grows, there is good reason to look backwards. The identification of central historical figures for relational pedagogy may stimulate debate not only about those figures but about relational pedagogy generally, thereby deepening theoretical understanding of it.

In this paper, I argue that Socrates demonstrated deep appreciation for the importance of relations in education. Further, I hope to show that the lens of relational pedagogy can greatly enhance the scholarly understanding of Socrates’ educational practices. I make this argument indirectly by turning to a seldom-discussed claim made by that often-discussed philosopher — Socrates’ professed belief in the importance of educational matchmaking. I first offer evidence that Socrates not only believed that matchmaking was important but also that he practiced the art. I next consider why Socrates believed that matchmaking was so important. I conclude that Socrates genuinely believed that the teacher-student relationship was vital to education and, hence, Socrates might be anachronistically recognized as a chief proponent of relational pedagogy.

### MATCHMAKING AND MIDWIFERY

Several references to Socrates’ matchmaking appear in the Socratic dialogues. In *Laches*, Socrates is — because of his expertise in education — invited into a discussion of education among Lysimachus, Laches, and Nicias. Nicias mentions that Socrates has recently “recommended a man to me as music teacher for my son.”<sup>3</sup> *Protagoras* begins with Hippocrates visiting Socrates before daybreak, requesting that Socrates introduce him to Protagoras, who has visited the city and with whom Hippocrates hopes to study.

Xenophon wrote of Socrates,

Of all the people that I have known, he was the most concerned to know the extent of any of his associates' special knowledge, and the most enthusiastic to teach, so far as he was competent, the subjects which a truly good man should know; and where he himself was not well qualified, he put them in touch with experts.<sup>4</sup>

Further, in Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates claims that the thing of which he is most proud is his "skill as a pimp [*mastropos*]," claiming expertise in making people appear more attractive to one another.<sup>5</sup> Socrates later praises Antisthenes' practice of the art which follows from this, the actual matching of people (Socrates refers to Antisthenes as a *proagogos*). Antisthenes is troubled that Socrates has called him a mere procurer or pimp. Antisthenes is put at ease, however, after Socrates offers examples of Antisthenes' valuable matches of friends to friends and students to teachers. Socrates adds that matchmaking of all sorts is beneficial to the community: "It seems to me that a man who is able to recognize people who are likely to benefit each other, and who can make them desire each other, could develop friendship between States and arrange suitable marriages, and would be a valuable ally for both States and individuals to possess."<sup>6</sup>

In *Theages*, Demodocus approaches Socrates for advice because his son Theages has been asking his father to find him a teacher. Socrates responds, "There's nothing more divine for a man to take advice about than the education of himself and his family."<sup>7</sup> After Socrates questions Theages about his intentions, Theages suggests that if Socrates will agree to associate with him, he will not look for anyone else. This idea elicits great enthusiasm from Demodocus.<sup>8</sup> Although it is tempting to read Demodocus's and Theages' surprise as feigned — considering Socrates' grand reputation, who else could they have preferred for Theages? — there is reason to believe that people often consulted Socrates for matchmaking advice with full appreciation that Socrates himself would not teach them or their sons. Towards the end of *Laches*, Nicias says regarding matchmaking, "whenever I bring up the subject in any way, [Socrates] always recommends other people to me but is unwilling to take on the job himself."<sup>9</sup>

The most detailed articulation of the importance of Socrates' practice of matchmaking, and of matchmaking in general, occurs in *Theaetetus* amidst Plato's famous education metaphor. In that dialogue, young Theaetetus and Socrates conduct an inquiry into knowledge. After an unfruitful first attempt to define knowledge, Theaetetus becomes frustrated. He tells Socrates that he does not know how to define knowledge, but admits that he "can't stop worrying about it."<sup>10</sup> Socrates tells him that his worry and frustration are "pains of labor"; Theaetetus is not void of a definition of knowledge but pregnant with one. Socrates then explains that he is the son of a midwife and that he is a midwife as well, except that he delivers young men of brain-children instead of delivering pregnant women of babies.<sup>11</sup> He offers to relieve Theaetetus's pains by delivering him of a definition of knowledge. As an educational midwife, Socrates teaches through questions, drawing knowledge out of his interlocutors just as a midwife draws a baby from a pregnant woman.<sup>12</sup>

In Plato's description of Socratic midwifery, Socrates lists several skills that midwives possess, such as the ability to "tell better than anyone else whether women

are pregnant or not” (*Tht.* 149c). One element of Socrates’ midwifery that is frequently overlooked, however, is his discussion of matchmaking. Socrates tells Theaetetus, “There’s another thing too. Have you noticed this about [midwives], that they are the cleverest of match-makers [*promneistriai*], because they are marvelously knowing about the kind of couples whose marriage will produce the best children” (*Tht.* 149d)? Theaetetus tells Socrates that he had never heard this before and Socrates replies, “But they are far prouder of this, believe me, than of cutting the umbilical cord” (*Tht.* 149d). Socrates adds of this important art, “reliable matchmaking is a matter for no one but the true midwife” (*Tht.* 150a).

Not only does Plato insert a strong statement about the importance of matchmaking into his famous educational metaphor, but he also has Socrates elaborate upon it in two ways. First, Socrates argues by analogy that just as there must be a single art “which is concerned with the cultivation and harvesting of crops” and “which prescribes the best soil for planting or sowing a given crop,” in midwifery there must be just one art of both “sowing” and “harvesting” (*Tht.* 149e). Socrates claims that education is not only about questions and answers (or any other methods that a teacher might employ) by which the student’s thinking is refined. It is just as much about creating the right conditions for education. Specifically, Socratic midwifery entails the principle that chief among those conditions that “prescribe the best soil for planting or sowing” is the match of teacher and student — their relationship. One has not attended to a student’s education if one has not attended to the match of the student and his teacher.

Second, Socrates goes on to say that midwives “are very reluctant to undertake even lawful matchmaking” because some might confuse this with “procuring” (*Tht.* 150a). Socrates worries that his matchmaking might be mistaken for pimping — that is, arranging discrete educational favors for the right price (perhaps the same charge that Antisthenes feared in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, discussed previously). The participation in the commerce of education distinguishes Socrates from the sophists. Just as Socrates’ teaching is not tarnished by payments, neither is his matchmaking.

Following these statements about the matchmaking expertise of midwives, Socrates says,

at times, Theaetetus, I come across people who do not seem to me somehow to be pregnant. Then I realize that they have no need of me, and with the best will in the world I undertake the business of match-making; and I think that I am good enough — God willing — at guessing with whom they might profitably keep company. Many of them I have given away to Prodicus; and a great number also to other wise and inspired people. (*Tht.* 151b)

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF MATCHMAKING

Why does Socrates send “a great number” of young men to Prodicus and others? Why does Socrates believe that matchmaking is an integral part of his educational practices? I now turn to three theories that could account for Socrates’ comments about and practice of matchmaking, each of which builds on the previous theory: (1) any statement about the virtues of sending students to other teachers was ironic, (2) Socrates felt that there were some specialized skills that others could teach effectively, and (3) Socrates believed that a necessary aspect of education was the

relationship between teacher and student, a mutual attraction or desirability which provided the bedrock for learning.

It is perhaps most tempting to dismiss Socrates' claims about sending young men to other teachers as ironic. Regarding the comment in *Theaetetus* about sending students who are not pregnant to Prodicus and others, Myles Burnyeat writes "The ironical implication, which Socrates refrains from spelling out, is not kindly: an empty mind which has no conception of its own (cf. 148e) is fitted only to be sown with another's seed."<sup>13</sup> That is, Socrates may have sent off many students to Prodicus or others, but he does so only because he finds those students undesirable, as their minds have nothing valuable within them which Socrates may draw out.<sup>14</sup> On this ironic reading, matchmaking is a euphemism for Socrates' rejection of undesirable students.

The ironic reading of Socrates' remarks about sending students to other teachers seems consistent with other dialogues. Xenophon describes an incident that occurred when Dionysodorus, a sophist, visited Athens and offered to teach the art of military command. Socrates adamantly encouraged one of his companions to enroll as Dionysodorus's student: "You know, my boy, it's a poor thing for one who wants to be a general in the State to neglect the opportunity of instruction when it's available."<sup>15</sup> After Socrates' companion returned from the lessons, Socrates questioned him about his experience and praised some of the military arts he had learned. However, Xenophon concludes this story as follows: "'You certainly ought to go back and ask him more questions,' said Socrates. 'If he knows his subject and has a conscience, he will be ashamed to send you away with gaps in your knowledge after taking your money.'" This episode lends support to the ironic reading by attesting to Socrates' practice of matchmaking while simultaneously demonstrating Socrates' disdain for the ineffectiveness of paid teachers.

Likewise, Socrates' praise of the sophists in Plato's *Apology* may be dismissed as ironic, further casting doubt on Socrates' sincerity in bequeathing young men to their tutelage. After Socrates tells the jury that he has never accepted fees for teaching, he states, "Yet I think that it is a fine thing to be able to teach people as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis."<sup>16</sup> Before one might deem Socrates' statement a genuine appreciation for the profession of those sophists, he goes on to say, "Each of these men can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides."<sup>17</sup> The tone of this statement casts doubt on whether Socrates truly respects the work of those who sell knowledge for a fee. Socrates implies that these sophists have played a trick on their students, convincing them not only to leave behind the gratis company of others but also to pay and express thanks for the opportunity to do so.

One could go on in this manner, arguing away all of the praise that Socrates lavishes on the sophists and casting doubt about whether Socrates could have genuinely believed that he was providing a service to the young men he sent to

sophists. Donald Morrison, however, argues against simplistically dismissing the line about Prodicus in *Theaetetus* as ironic, and I take his argument to be valid regarding Socrates' other claims about matchmaking as well. Morrison notes that if one reads the *Theaetetus* line as ironic, one must decide what specifically is ironic about it:

[T]he objector must decide how much to take ironically: Socrates' claim to send young people to others or only his claim that those he sends them to benefit them. If only the second claim is meant ironically, then Socrates is knowingly sending young people to those who will not benefit them, and so he is pandering, not matchmaking. Taking the first claim ironically runs afoul of all the other testimony that Socrates gave educational advice.<sup>18</sup>

Morrison's argument is compelling. One cannot deny that Socrates actually sent young men to study with other teachers (evident in the examples cited above). If the irony is that being sent to those men was not beneficial to their students, a fundamental premise of Socrates as educator is fractured, as Socrates does not genuinely care about educational matters, except for the very few men with whom he personally associates. But this would render matchmaking an optional activity for the true midwife, which runs counter to Socrates' claim that it is vital to the practice of midwifery. Hence, one must accept Socrates' claims about matchmaking as sincere on some level, even if one concedes that there is also some ironic treatment of the sophists.

While there is clearly irony present in some of Socrates' remarks about matchmaking, irony alone does not sufficiently explain Socrates' apparent interest in matchmaking. A more nuanced explanation might be as follows: Socrates generally held the sophists in contempt but recognized that each teacher might effectively teach specific skills. As I noted previously, Plato has Nicias claim that Socrates recommended a music teacher for his son. Hence, Socrates may well have recognized that certain people may have been talented teachers of music, shoemaking, medicine, or rhetoric. Socrates' matches of students to sophists are both ironic, in that he believed that many paid teachers might not be able to teach all that they claim, and genuine, in that they still might be able to teach important skills.

This theory of reading Socrates' statements about matchmaking squares with the evidence that Socrates actively engaged in matchmaking and retains Socrates' educational superiority to the other teachers of the day, as Plato, Xenophon, and others surely intended. Yet, just as the first theory of obvious irony is problematic, I believe that this second theory insufficiently explains Socratic matchmaking. It is surely right to say that Socrates had great concern for matters of education and sought to match students with teachers who would best benefit them.<sup>19</sup> However, I believe that this theory fails to capture an element of Socrates' matchmaking — his concern that students and teachers desire each other.

Socrates' concern about the mutual desirability of teacher and student suggests that a third reading of Socratic matchmaking is necessary. To return to *Theaetetus*, the young man that Socrates finds "pregnant" there seems in many ways an ideal student. He is very bright and he is modest.<sup>20</sup> One could argue that it is these qualities that make him pregnant, that is, intellectually generative and attractive enough for

Socrates to want to pursue an inquiry with him. One might believe that Socrates would match himself with brilliant, humble young men like Theaetetus and match other, less gifted students with other teachers. Yet it is not true that brilliance and humility were necessary to warrant Socrates' attraction. There are ample descriptions of Socrates desiring and matching himself with other types of young men. Intellectual attractiveness was surely something that Socrates valued in a student, but physical attractiveness was important as well. Hence, when Socrates returned to Athens from battle, one of the first things that he asked of the city's young men, "whether there were any who had become distinguished for wisdom or beauty or both."<sup>21</sup> For Socrates, matchmaking was not about specialized knowledge alone. The mutual attraction of the teacher and student is something to which Socrates gave much attention. It is a prominent theme in his relationship with Alcibiades, who is the near opposite of Theaetetus. While Theaetetus is ugly (he looks just like Socrates, Theodorus says), patient and modest (*Tht.* 143e), Alcibiades is gorgeous, arrogant, and politically ambitious.<sup>22</sup>

I mention the examples of Alcibiades and Theaetetus because they provide a study in contrasts. These two young men demonstrate that there was no single list of criteria that determined what made students desirable for Socrates. In the Socratic dialogues, Socrates can be seen pursuing relationships with many different types of young men. Perhaps one young man appealed to Socrates because of his intellectual qualities, another because of his beauty, and another because of his moral character. Each of these factors may have been important. Yet Socrates' concern extended beyond any single quality or group of qualities to a general sort of mutual attraction that grounded the educational relationship.

In the Socratic dialogues, Socrates' interactions with young men always occur in the context of his concern for the relationship that the two will have. Even the midwife analogy can be read as an elaborate attempt to make Theaetetus more comfortable in his relationship with Socrates so that the conversation can proceed. Recall that Theaetetus becomes frustrated and is unsure of whether he has anything to offer to the conversation. Instead of letting Theaetetus recede into the background and continuing the conversation with the others present, Socrates backs away from the inquiry and essentially says to Theaetetus: Forget about knowledge for a moment and let me tell you a story about myself. Having successfully engaged Theaetetus in this discussion about midwifery, Socrates has established a relationship of trust and goodwill, and the inquiry into knowledge can then proceed once again.<sup>23</sup> Examples of Socrates' use of flattery, humor, or stories to entice young men to converse with him can be found throughout the Socratic dialogues. Though Socrates conversed with many with whom he did not have a friendship (or with whom he had an antagonistic relationship, such as Thrasymachus, Callicles, and others), and these conversations could be deemed educational in some sense, the portrait of Socrates in the Socratic dialogues leaves little doubt that the lack of a friendly relationship with his associates *precluded* the possibility of genuine Socratic education.

Hence, descriptions of the "Socratic method" which focus only on the logical structure of Socrates' questions and answers fall short of capturing the essence of

Socratic educational encounters. As one scholar has put it: “This means that the maieutic art [midwifery] is not something one can just learn through so-called ‘education’ courses. It is not one more method one can add to one’s repertory.”<sup>24</sup> Socratic education is not merely a method of questioning but also, I contend, the reality of being face to face with another human being with whom one must desire to spend time.

I close this section with an example from *Theages* of how Socrates tested one of his own matches, refusing to commit to a student until he felt assured that their relationship was such that it would make a good match. I believe that this example demonstrates that it was neither a particular specialized subject that was key to the match, nor were there clear criteria that determined the attractiveness of a student to Socrates. In short, *Theages* shows that the first two theories are insufficient explanations of Socrates’ concern for matchmaking. Previously I discussed how Socrates is approached by Demodocus for a recommendation about which teacher would be a good match for his son Theages. After asking Theages what he wanted to learn (which turns out to be political rule), Socrates encourages him to associate for free with his own father or other noble citizens. If that solution is not sufficient, then Socrates says that he could choose a proper match for Theages among Prodicus, Gorgias, Polus, or other professionals.<sup>25</sup> However, by this point in the dialogue, Theages has decided that it is Socrates, above all, with whom he wants to associate. Socrates responds to Theages’ request by describing in detail his divine sign, which prohibits relationships with certain people at certain times. Theages closes the dialogue, with Demodocus’s support, by proposing that he and Socrates should spend some time associating with each other to see if the divine sign will intercede. Socrates replies, “If it seems that this is what we ought to do, then let’s do it.”<sup>26</sup> Socrates, by means of the divine sign, argues that he cannot proceed into an educational match until a positive relationship is established.<sup>27</sup> In the absence of such a relationship, *Theages* suggests, there are not sufficient grounds for genuine education.

#### CONCLUSION

I have argued in this essay that part of Socrates’ expertise as a matchmaker had to do with his recognition of the importance of relations for education. Despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact, that other educators were willing to accept students indiscriminately, Socrates viewed his role of making propitious matches as even more important. Socrates had to do the guesswork about matches because others would proceed recklessly into educational relationships without paying sufficient attention to the appropriateness of the teacher-student match. For his recognition that relationships are essential to any educational experience worthy of the name, Socrates deserves a prominent place among classical philosophers who emphasized relations in education.

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1. On the Association of Relational Pedagogy’s website (<http://www.teachingrelations.org>), three foundational texts are currently included; Pierre Bordieu’s *Practical Reason*, Nel Noddings’s *Caring*, and Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*.

2. Charles Bingham and Alexander M. Sidorkin, "The Pedagogy of Relation: An Introduction," in *No Education without Relation*, eds. Charles Bingham and Alexander M. Sidorkin (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 1.
3. Plato, *Laches*, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague, in Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 180d. All subsequent Platonic references will also use the translations from this edition.
4. Xenophon, *Memoirs of Socrates*, 4.7 (emphasis added), in Xenophon, *Conversations of Socrates*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Penguin, 1990).
5. Xenophon, *The Dinner-Party*, 3.10, in *Conversations of Socrates*. "The Dinner-Party" is Waterfield's translation of the Greek title "Symposium."
6. *Ibid.*, 4.5–4.6.
7. Plato, *Theages*, trans. Nicholas D. Smith, 122b.
8. *Ibid.*, 127b–c.
9. Plato *Laches* 200d.
10. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M.J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat, 149e. This work will be cited as *Tht.* in the text for all subsequent references.
11. Whether or not this metaphor was Plato's creation has been a subject of scholarly debate. Myles Burnyeat wrote a seminal piece arguing that the metaphor was Plato's invention. See Myles F. Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, no. 24 (1977). For responses to Burnyeat's piece, see Harold Tarrant, "Midwifery and the *Clouds*," *Classical Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1988), and Julius Tomin, "Socratic Midwifery," *Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1987). For the purposes of this essay, it is not essential to argue that the historical Socrates was known as an intellectual midwife in his lifetime. I am less concerned with determining whether particular arguments can be attributed to the historical Socrates than with the surviving composite portrait passed down by Xenophon, Plato, and others.
12. I use the word "teach" to refer to Socrates' practices, but whether Socrates' practices should be called teaching is debatable. Socrates explicitly disavows having been anyone's teacher in Plato's *Apology* (33a). Yet there is certainly a sense in which Socrates is a teacher, even if he does not teach in the same way as the other professional teachers of his time. For a fine discussion on Socrates and teaching see the first chapter of Gary Alan Scott, *Plato's Socrates as Educator* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 13–49.
13. Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," 9.
14. Timothy Chappell similarly notes that the line about Prodicus is *obviously* ironic. He writes, "This remark, of course, is hardly complimentary to Prodicus and the other savants. Socrates plainly means that they trade in illusory ideas." T.D.J. Chappell, *Reading Plato's Theaetetus* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 45.
15. Xenophon *Memoirs of Socrates* 3.1.
16. Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 19e.
17. *Ibid.*, 19e–20a.
18. Donald R. Morrison, "Xenophon's Socrates as Teacher," in *The Socratic Movement*, ed. Paul A. Vander Waerdt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 201, n. 32.
19. In Xenophon's version of Socrates' defense, Socrates says "at least where matters of education are concerned, people know that I have made a special study of the matter," in Xenophon *Conversations of Socrates* 46.
20. His intellect and character are praised at length by his teacher Theodorus (*Tht.* 143e).
21. Plato, *Charmides*, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague, 153d.
22. Plato, *Alcibiades*, 103b–104a.
23. On the midwife analogy as a device to persuade Theaetetus to continue the inquiry see David T. Hansen, "Was Socrates a 'Socratic Teacher'?" *Educational Theory* 38, no. 2 (1988), esp. 214–8.
24. Ignacio Götz, "On the Socratic Method," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), 86. Götz believes that the role of Socrates'



daimon, or divine sign, was the spiritual dimension of his educational practices that complemented the logical questions.

25. Plato *Theages* 127e.

26. *Ibid.*, 131a.

27. Others have interpreted the end of the dialogue differently. For example, Thomas Pangle argues that after Theages requests that Socrates be his teacher, Socrates launches into the discussion of the divine sign to avoid explicitly accepting or rejecting Theages as a student: "it would seem that Socrates is confined to one of two disagreeable options: either he must take on responsibility for a headstrong and very unpromising student, or else he must admit — by speech or by silence — his unfavorable opinion of the boy. Whichever he chooses, he is likely to wind up antagonizing a proud father who is very influential in Athens." Thomas L. Pangle, "Socrates on the Problem of Political Science Education," *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (1985), 130. I am not convinced, however, that Theages is as unappealing to Socrates as Pangle claims.