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The Secret Doctrine and the Gigantomachia: Interpreting Plato’s Theaetetus-Sophist

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ABSTRACT:
The *Theaetetus*’ ‘secret doctrine’ and the *Sophist*’s ‘battle between gods and giants’ have long fascinated Plato scholars. I show that the passages systematically parallel one another. Each presents two substantive positions that are advanced on behalf of two separate parties, related to one another by their comparative sophistication or refinement. Further, those parties and their respective positions are characterized in substantially similar terms. On the basis of these sustained parallels, I argue that the two passages should be read together, with each informing and constraining an interpretation of the other.

Keywords: Plato; *Theaetetus*; *Sophist*; secret doctrine; battle of gods and giants; dunamis; kinêsis

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Plato, as is well known, presents the *Sophist* as a literary companion to the *Theaetetus*. Most conspicuously, the *Sophist*’s first line—Theodorus: ‘We’ve come at the proper time by yesterday’s agreement, Socrates’ (216a1)—directly answers the last lines of the *Theaetetus*—Socrates: ‘let us meet here again in the morning, Theodorus’ (210d3-4). In this way and others, Plato rhetorically flags the *Sophist* as a continuation of the recorded conversation begun at *Theaetetus* 143d1.

The *Sophist* does not merely pick up where the *Theaetetus* leaves off, however. The two dialogues are more intimately connected. In what is perhaps the most famous example, the *Sophist* fills out the *Theaetetus*’ discussion of false judgment. Rather than simply branching out in new directions, the *Sophist*, at least on occasion, is informed by, returns to, and supplements substantive discussions in the *Theaetetus*.

In what follows, I aim to highlight another such point of contact between the two dialogues. Specifically, I will present three comprehensively developed parallels between, on the one hand, the *Theaetetus*’ discussion of the flux theorists and their ‘secret doctrine’ and, on the other hand, the *Sophist*’s discussion of the giants in their fight against the ‘friends of forms.’ I will show that [1] both passages exhibit the same basic structure, in which two substantive positions are presented on behalf of two separate parties, related to one another by their comparative sophistication or refinement, and that [2] those parties and [3] their respective positions are characterized in remarkably similar terms (see Figure 1).