

... What are the starry spheres woven upon warp and woof? Upon the spheres of the gods, Gargi. What are the spheres of the gods woven upon warp and woof? Upon the spheres of Indra, Gargi. What are the spheres of Indra woven upon warp and woof? Upon the spheres of Prajapati, Gargi. What are the spheres of Prajapati woven upon warp and woof? Upon the spheres of Brahma, Gargi. What are the spheres of Brahma woven upon warp and woof? He said to her: Gargi, push not thy questioning too far, lest thy head fall off.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

### *Structure*

The *Theaetetus* reads like a Platonic piece of masterful jazz improvisation. Or perhaps late Wagner. It is a dialogue dominated by transitions, weaving together in and around recurring leitmotifs. It is a simple three part structure, overlaid with playful riffs, clever and suggestive selections from countless possible argumentative variations on the repeating themes.

The *Theaetetus* is subtitled *peri epistemes*, on knowledge, and *peirastikos*, tentative. The theme of knowledge never resolves, yet, through the multiple peirastic beginnings that perish struggling to say something lasting about knowledge, this main theme ties together the dialogue's many subthemes—wisdom and character; sophistry and its relation to philosophy; Socrates' trial; intellectual midwifery, or Socratic dialectic; appearance and reality; Heracliteanism; Eleaticism; the Platonic theory of forms; unity and plurality; particularity and universality; identity and difference; memory and time; relations; the relation of resemblance. One could go on. The guiding question, how to define knowledge, is a theoretical one, and the reasoning becomes progressively more abstract as the dialogue goes on, while at the same time never straying far from signals to practical implications: the theoretical conception of knowledge holds consequences made manifest in human action and deliberation. The dialogue about knowledge is also a dialogue about wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, trans. Archibald Edward Gough, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads*, London 1882.

The reader is placed at several levels of distance from the original conversation by a prologue that presents it as a report from Euclides, who, though not present at the discussion, heard about it, recorded it, and now, several years later, has it read to him and his companion Terpsion. Thus, the prologue dramatically seeds the mind with questions regarding the original event, copies and reproductions, interpretation, representation and resemblance, veracity and inaccuracy—all issues associated with conceptions of knowledge. The conversation that is ours to read is an edited copy of a copy of a copy: Euclides heard it from Theaetetus (Socrates' young interlocutor, who, though smart, is young and portrayed as often clinging to an incomplete grasp of the arguments), then later wrote it down from his memory of Theaetetus' relation, then on later occasions made changes based on questions he chose to ask Socrates.<sup>2</sup> The prologue is equally significant for Plato's character choice: Euclides was the founder of the Megarian school, and Megarian-type arguments will be encountered at several points. This will include arguments that there are no false or contradictory thoughts, a notion that would annul any questions about interpretation and representational accuracy. Plato's dramatic settings are never unconsidered. Here, the opening prepares the way for one of the *Theaetetus*' major thematic tensions.

The dialogue proper revolves about Socrates' engagement of Theaetetus over the question, what is knowledge? Socrates, like his mother a midwife, but for the mind, not the body, will help deliver Theaetetus of ideas in him and check those ideas for viability. Theaetetus will deliver three theses in response to the question, but none survive.

So the *Theaetetus* divides rather neatly into three parts, corresponding to Theaetetus' three definitions: first, the thesis that knowledge is perception; second, that it is true opinion; third, that it is true opinion with an account. Three parts, but unequal parts: the second part is shorter than the first by more than one half, and the third part shorter than the second by roughly a third. The second and third definitions combined are given less time in discussion than the first. The first part on the thesis that knowledge is perception is given special prominence by the extent of its arguments, and by being set apart from the remainder of the dialogue by a transitional digression on the nature of philosophy. It is also the only definition Theaetetus produces unaided.

Despite the disproportionate length, in several respects each thesis is treated structurally in parallel: first, Theaetetus, with some prodding, produces a definition of knowledge; secondly, the definition is examined in a series of arguments that show it either to lead to contradictions or to be incoherent; third, the definition is finally rejected, not on the basis of the preceding arguments that are collectively a *reductio ad absurdum*, but on the basis of a new argument by coun-

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<sup>2</sup> As Chappell (2004), 29, points out, the dialogue is set at an even further distance by the device of having it read to Euclides and Terpsion by a slave boy, who would have been unlikely to understand much of what he was reading.

terexample; then fourth, Theaetetus begins the process anew, turning to a new definition, which, in each case suspends the results of the argument just concluded: the second thesis assumes a conception of perception that the first part repudiated, and the third thesis assumes a real distinction between true and false opinion that the second part failed to make.

There is some variation to this basic structure. In the case of the first thesis, that knowledge is perception, there is an extended elaboration to clarify the thesis and explain the meaning of the definition of knowledge as perception before Socrates declares that Theaetetus' first intellectual offspring has been fully delivered and is ready to be examined. For the second and third definitions, things work out a bit differently. If the first definition is delivery followed by examination and a finding of unfitness, the second and third are more like miscarriages. Neither the second nor third definition is ever successfully formulated: the thesis that knowledge is true opinion fails upon their inability to distinguish true from false opinion; the thesis that knowledge is true opinion with a *logos*, an account, fails upon their inability to formulate a coherent explanation of the meaning of *logos*. Also, the pattern for the counterexample is shifted in the third part: the definition of knowledge as true opinion with a *logos* is followed by an interpretation of *logos* that leads into contradiction, which is followed by a counterexample; however, the counterexample does not conclude the section—three alternative definitions of *logos* are suggested, and each proves to be incoherent.

The delivery-miscarriage-miscarriage pattern reveals something more. Theaetetus' first definition states that knowledge is perception, and, in Socrates' explanation of the definition, "perception," "appearance," and "opinion" are stated to be synonymous. So, we might also formulate Theaetetus' three definitions as: 1) knowledge is opinion; 2) knowledge is true opinion; 3) knowledge is true opinion with an account. In the *reductio* portion of the first part, the interlocutors conclude the thesis that knowledge is perception implies the utter unintelligibility of all thought, that is, that there is no knowledge, no opinion, and no meaningful speech or thought at all. The *reductio* portion of the second part is an argument that tries but fails to show that false opinion exists, as opposed to true opinion; and if there is no distinction between true and false opinion, then the second definition, knowledge is true opinion, reduces to the first, knowledge is opinion, which has been shown to reduce to unintelligibility. Finally, the *reductio* portion of the third part fails to give any meaning to the notion of a *logos* that could be joined to a true opinion, so the third definition, knowledge is true opinion with an account, reduces to the second, which reduces to the first, which reduces to unintelligibility.

The counterexample pattern is critical to moving the dialogue forward. They are brief, not subject to much discussion, and Theaetetus readily agrees to the points. Yet the counterexamples fulfill a function that the more extended *reductio* portions of the arguments cannot. Points in the analyses that precede the

counterexamples are often presented with a sense of incompleteness, manifest in the meandering speculation with frequent digression and transitional remarks: further arguments could still be generated, further avenues still explored. This shows the arguments as, in a sense, inconclusive; the argument of the *Theaetetus* as a whole requires this, because Socrates and Theaetetus cannot accept the conclusions as decisive: that perception is unintelligible, that there is no real distinction between true and false opinion, that an account is a collection of meaningless and indistinguishable parts. Each conclusion would prevent the next step, and together they lead closer to skepticism than to a revised definition of knowledge, so the implications from each thesis must be suspended to proceed with the next. The counterexamples provide a device to reject the definitions without accepting the conclusions that followed from examining the definitions.

### *Regress*

Like Socrates, Gargi, one of the few named women philosophers of ancient India, finds inquiry can provoke threats. Her offense appears to have been to call unwelcome attention to a regress. Gargi would not have been impressed by the only philosopher of India known to Locke: “Had the poor Indian philosopher (who imagined that the Earth also wanted something to bear it up) but thought of this word *substance*, he needed not to have been at the trouble to find an elephant to support it, and a tortoise to support his elephant.”<sup>3</sup> Whether positing ever more and varied creatures, or halting at a turtle, or an indeterminate sequence of turtles, sturdy though they be, a regress signals a conceptual inadequacy. Regress springs, to generalize, from a conception that some posited entity must, in order to be tenable or explainable, be referred to something else; regress arises when that “something else” cannot supply the function that is anticipated for it, which is often the case if that other entity is of the same relevant type as the entity that requires “support.” If, however, not of the same type, regress may be avoided, but at the price of introducing the problem of establishing a relation between the “support” and its “load,” between, as it were, the turtle, perhaps now transformed into some transcendent entity, and the magical elephant standing on its shell.

The *Theaetetus* contains little in the way of explicit regress, but much in the ingredients for regress, and that is a further key to its structure. It is reflected in

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<sup>3</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, xiii. A well known modern version of Locke’s story, in which the Brahmin has metamorphosed into a “little old lady,” opens the first chapter of Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*: “A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: ‘What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.’ The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, ‘What is the tortoise standing on?’ ‘You’re very clever, young man, very clever,’ said the old lady. ‘But it’s turtles all the way down!’”

the one-many problem, as captured in the *Theaetetus* by Plato's use of Protagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides.

### *Many and One*

A certain dynamic informs the opposition of Heraclitus' assertion that everything changes against Parmenides' that nothing does. The contrast of the extremes and their meeting point infuses the background of the *Theaetetus*, and illuminates much if kept in mind while reading the dialogue.

Pondering Protagoras' assertion, "the human being is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not, Socrates wonders, why not "the pig is the measure of all things"? He could have taken inspiration from Heraclitus' aphorisms asserting "the pig washes in mud," or "to the ass rubbish is worth more than gold."<sup>4</sup> Like Protagoras', Heraclitus' thought implies that every statement can equally be considered true, and so in the *Theaetetus*, Heraclitus and Protagoras are employed as representatives of Theaetetus' first definition, that knowledge is whatever appears. Protagoras' relativism can be read as a strategic attempt to legitimize the practice of sophistry; Heraclitus' conclusions follow from his fundamental metaphysical principle: universal flux.<sup>5</sup>

The root problem that characterizes presocratic philosophical inquiry, and to which Heraclitus and Parmenides both respond, is the problem designated by Plato and Aristotle and traditionally known as the one-many problem.<sup>6</sup> Aspects of this problem, whether by the same name or another, remain a perpetual source for philosophical reflection. The one-many problem in the presocratics is largely concerned with making sense of change, but it encompasses at least three distinct yet related questions.

These are: the identity of the individual through change; the unity of the individual; and the relation of particular to universal, of distinguishable individuals to common forms. We find ourselves, sentient beings, a part of an incalculably multiplicitous world of ever changing phenomena. How is it that this world can be intelligible to any degree, not just a "blooming, buzzing confusion"?<sup>7</sup> When something is recognized as changing, what accounts for its identity that permits "this" thing to still be known as "this" same individual and not another? In general, apart from change, what allows anything designated "this" to be recognized as one and distinct from multiple other things that the thing may be in contact or

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<sup>4</sup> Fr. B13, B9.

<sup>5</sup> The treatment throughout of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Protagoras, or Empedocles should be understood here to be concerned with these predecessors of Plato as interpreted by Plato for his philosophical purposes. I do not consider here the historical questions as to whether Plato misinterpreted any of his predecessors and whether, if he did, it was intentional or not.

<sup>6</sup> William James asserts it is the most central question of philosophy, *Pragmatism*, Lecture 4.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 490.

continuous with or that may be parts of it? Moreover, if this “this” stands in relation to others, as it must if it is one individual or unity among many and if it can be changing and yet the same, then how to account for the relation of “this” as a particular individual to the universal attributes in virtue of which it stands in relation to others?

In Plato, Heraclitus and Parmenides represent radical and opposed responses to, or rather repudiations of, the one-many problem. Both refuse to draw the connection. For Heraclitus there is no one, there is only change. “Changing, it rests”<sup>8</sup> asserts at once that the only metaphysical constant is change itself and that this implies the identity of opposites.

Change is understood as a transformation between opposites: if the hot (insofar as it is hot) changes, it becomes cold, the wet becomes dry. If, then, as Heraclitus asserts, everything changes always in all respects, then it is equally true (and equally false) to call anything hot or cold or 11 or 12 or anything else. Consequently, Heraclitus’ thought goes beyond jointly nominating the human and the pig for measure of all things. Going beyond Protagoras, the truth of a statement is not indexed to any belief.

While Heraclitean thought rejects the one-many problem by denying the possibility of unity, Parmenides does so by denying the possibility of plurality: for Heraclitus all always changes, for Parmenides nothing ever does.

Although Heraclitus writes in images and Parmenides in abstractions, the argument of Parmenides can be portrayed as following from a variation on Heraclitean themes. Parmenides identifies the thinkable with the real. At one level, the assertion agrees with Heraclitus: whatever a person can think is also real and true. But the real, for Parmenides, is far leaner. Where Heraclitus denies all sameness, Parmenides denies the possibility of difference: only being itself is real and thinkable—one, homogeneous, unchanging, without parts, eternal.

Eleatic stasis, the philosophical antipode to Heraclitean flux, is also its philosophical twin. The phenomenal world, the world that is a plurality of unities, is in the end for both utterly unintelligible. If for Heraclitus, this means that reality is unintelligible, but for the Eleatic, that this is not reality, it makes little practical difference. Either way, a phenomenal “reality” that is incoherent and unintelligible, or a transcendent “reality” fully disconnected from the unintelligible phenomena we are part of, leaves us in a meaningless world with nothing—apart, perhaps, from the strategic manipulations of a Protagoras—to rely on.

At one point in the dialogue, Socrates observes they have fallen between the two, Heraclitus and Parmenides (180e), and this pull between the many and the one is a tension that infects each of Theaetetus’ three definitions. All may be read as pursuing and failing to discover a way to relate the particularity of the phenomenal many to the oneness of form or nature that accords them unity. This

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<sup>8</sup> Fr. B84.

aspect of the one-many problem is the heart to the question of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*.

Throughout the dialogue, knowledge is taken to be, first and foremost, as elsewhere for Plato, and as in its primary sense for Aristotle, knowledge of being, knowledge of what something is, of a nature or essence. In the Platonic metaphysics of the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*, knowledge of reality means the apprehension of form by the intellect, and is distinct from opinions true and false, that is judgments, that are directed not to being as such, but to becoming, that is, to the phenomenal world of our lived experience. While Aristotle does not accept the Platonic distinction between being and becoming, locating being in the primary sense within and not apart from the sensible world, a similarity to the Platonic conception of knowledge remains: in the case of knowledge of incomposite reality, knowledge means, like for Plato, a direct intellectual apprehension. And in the case of knowledge of composite substance, it means knowledge of essence, of what it is to be *this* thing. For both Plato and Aristotle, then, knowledge involves the apprehension of form.<sup>9</sup>

The *Theaetetus*, it will be seen, shares the assumption that knowledge means knowledge of reality, but only hints at, and never successfully makes, a distinction between knowledge and opinion, reality and appearance, or common form and its multiple manifestations. It should strike the reader of the *Theaetetus* who is familiar with the *Republic* that all three attempted definitions undertake to define knowledge in terms of opinion. The only “realities” proposed as possible objects of knowledge in the dialogue are entities that otherwise in Platonic metaphysics are objects of opinion, but not of knowledge. All of Theaetetus’ definitions become entrapped in the problem how to know what a thing is, which is to say, generally, how to relate a particular thing (that is not in itself a form) to a form or nature that it has and in virtue of which that particular “is” (in whatever sense it can be said to be); which is to say, how, navigating between Heraclitean and Eleatic extremes, to relate many to one, the plurality of particulars to the oneness of form. From the wider standpoint of Platonism, because the *Theaetetus* dialectically pursues only an explanation that seeks to show how knowledge emerges from opinion, rather than how opinion is a derivative abstraction from knowledge, it is designed and destined to fail.

The dialogue thus assembles the elements of regress from the first definition: the particular appearance, to be what it is and such as it is, requires a kind of anchor, the connection to the “stability” that will give intelligibility to appearances that are not intelligible in themselves. However, the combined efforts of Theaetetus and Socrates are able only to relate particular to particular, which, if carried further, will only repeat the problem, adding more turtles, as it were,

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<sup>9</sup> Taking “form” in a broad and not strictly Platonic sense, that is, in a sense that is neutral with regard to the issue of the separability of form.

while on the other hand any incipient efforts to relate particular to form fail for want of an adequate way to connect them. The *Theaetetus* is aporetic, and its main points indirect: apart from an account of the intelligibility of form in itself, there can be no account of knowledge; as a corollary, knowledge is neither a subset of opinions, nor is it opinion with some addition that will make it into knowledge—rather, there is a sense in which knowledge is prior to and first makes possible opinion, both true and false.

### *Progression in Reduction*

Regress dominates the cascading nested reductions of the definitions to unintelligibility, but at the same time the reduction is a progression. The following succinct sketch of that progression may remain somewhat obscure, but the path of the progression will take clearer shape over the course of the analysis.

Examination of the first definition will show not just that knowledge cannot be adequately construed as perception or opinion, but that opinion—or perception or appearance in general—cannot be made intelligible as such and on its own terms alone, that perception at its very simplest is not simple, but synthetic. The second will show not only that there is no way to distinguish true from false judgment when judgment is taken as the simple and direct apprehension of its object, but that truth, falsity, and judgment in general arise only as the product of such synthesis as implied by the demolition of the first definition, a synthesis which cannot be constituted apart from a temporal process through memory, discrimination, comparison, and the establishing of relations. The third will show not only that the elements of judgment, taken simply as parts of its objects, open up to no coherence whatever, and are ultimately indeterminate, undefined, and undefinable, but that the basis for discerning the differences and samenesses that can become the elements of judgment formation, that is, the foundation for technical knowledge and expertise, is not given from within the objects of judgment themselves but by reference to form. The course of Socrates' joint inquiry with Theaetetus will aim to establish how judgment is possible in relation to apprehension, and—against assumptions about the nature of wisdom that open the dialogue and shape its argument—the progression within the reduction will reaffirm a connection of a theoretical conception of knowledge to a practical conception of wisdom.

### *The Old Debate*

The *Theaetetus* has now long been a central text for scholarly disputes over the question whether the Platonic corpus reflects a largely unified metaphysics, or shows that Plato, in his later writing, either abandoned altogether or sharply revised the theory of forms of the middle dialogues. The suspicion that Plato eventually rejected the forms may be coupled with the suspicion that the episte-

mology and metaphysics to replace them tend in the direction of an Aristotelian theory of predication and substance ontology.

Parties to this debate have included and are not limited to Schleiermacher, Shorey, Diès, Cornford, and Cherniss, who reject the idea that there was a fundamental ontological turn, and Ryle, Robinson, Owen, McDowell, and Bostock, arguing for revision. Sedley offers an interpretation that seeks to give each its due, reading the *Theaetetus* as a dialogue assuming familiarity with Plato's "mature metaphysics," but one that shows it, using the device of Socrates portrayed as a midwife, not just to Theaetetus but to Platonism, not to be a reversal but a "natural outcome" of Plato's earlier thought.<sup>10</sup>

Much excellent scholarly work has been devoted to each side in this debate. It is not my intention to add more words to their numbers, to stomp down upon already well-compacted ground, or to attempt to improve on their arguments. Chappell gives a clear and concise summary of "unitarianism" as opposed to "revisionism," with particular attention to the *Theaetetus*.

On one level, my definite sympathies in that debate ought to be already clear, or, if not, will become evident in the following along with the reasons for them. But on another level, it is a debate that I think, at least in respect to the *Theaetetus*, might be set aside. The primary epistemological point of the *Theaetetus* pertains to the intelligibility of form, without which neither relations in general, nor relations of resemblance, of which the synthesis of "many" with "one" is an example, can be conceived. To that extent, the *Theaetetus* does not offer us an argument specifically for the theory of forms or against it: it is not an argument for a Platonic theory of forms against an emerging Aristotelian theory of substance or for the latter against the former. Rather, it is an argument that the primary sense of knowledge must involve apprehension of intelligible form—this, in a broad sense, is a commonality that precedes the metaphysical differences that distinguish Platonism.<sup>11</sup>

Plato's dialogues are often divided into early, middle, and late period dialogues, and the *Theaetetus* is generally acknowledged to belong in the late part of the middle or early part of the late dialogues. The dating and order of Plato's dialogues has been an irresistibly tempting thicket of troubles since antiquity: if we know their chronological order, then we may be able to infer the development of Platonic doctrine over his lifetime; on the other hand, if we think we discern a developmental order, we may unwittingly think that we know the chronological

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<sup>10</sup> Other scholars, notably Kahn (2007) and Gill (2012), argue nominally that the late metaphysics is a revision, not an abandonment of the theory of forms. However, both Kahn and Gill in effect eliminate any real ontological distinction between being and becoming, and eliminate the Platonic concept of participation, thus in fact eviscerating the middle period theory of forms, maintaining it in name alone.

<sup>11</sup> This is not, however, to say there are no details that support Platonism.

order that we only project.<sup>12</sup> The only thing that we really know with reasonable assurance is that the *Laws* was Plato's last, on Aristotle's testimony that Plato died while still writing it. And, given that one of the few things Plato ever seems to have told us straight, and not dialectically from the standpoint of a particular character in a particular situation, is the claim that only a fool would attempt to put matters contemplated by reason into a fixed form, especially, that is, a written form, then we might rightly wonder whether Plato would call us all fools for believing that knowing the dialogues' order would reveal anything of real importance.

Finally, a note is in order on two bits of shorthand. "Socrates," not some inconvenient expression such as "Plato's Socrates," is used in the commentary to designate the character in the dialogue, without any assumption that Plato has simplistically made this character a mouthpiece for himself or for the historical Socrates. Where and in what sense "Socrates" may refer to the historical Socrates should be clear from context. "Platonic metaphysics" is used to designate Plato's ontology and epistemology, the theory of forms and its implications in Plato's distinctions between being and becoming and between knowledge and opinion, as explicitly addressed in the dialogues, without any assumption that the *Theaetetus* is somehow describing a fundamentally revised metaphysical theory.

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<sup>12</sup> Burnyeat (1990), 1, offers a list of examples that make clear just how the *Theaetetus* in particular has been a receptacle for intellectual projection over hundreds of years.

## Problem and Method 142a – 151e

### The Dramatic Setting 142a – 143c

Eucleides and Terpsion, present also at the death of Socrates<sup>1</sup> meet at Eucleides' home in Megara, at the time of the imminent death of Theaetetus, wounded in battle. This would give a likely date for the recitation of the dialogue sometime during the Corinthian war (395 – 386 B.C.E). Theaetetus would presumably have been in his early twenties at the time of his death. The conversation closes with Socrates telling Theodorus that he is on his way to answer the charges Meletus had brought against him, (210d) placing the dramatic date of the conversation in 399. Like so many dialogues, the *Theaetetus* pointedly alludes to Socrates' trial and execution.<sup>2</sup>

Eucleides (c. 450-380) was a follower of Socrates, slightly older contemporary of Plato, and founder of the Megarian school. He wrote a logic, and seems to have been influenced by the monism and negative dialectic of the Eleatics as well as Socratic elenchus.<sup>3</sup> Eleaticism will lurk just beneath the surface throughout the *Theaetetus*, the single invitation to talk about Parmenides rebuffed by Socrates. Eleaticism will become an explicit and central topic in the *Sophist*, which is set dramatically on the day following the conversation related in the *Theaetetus*. Here, not Eleatic metaphysics, claiming that all being is one, but Heracliteanism, claiming there is no one but only many, no unity of being, but only the constant flux of becoming, will occupy the forefront.

The conversation is set at a remove from the reader: reported at a much later date, and neither Eucleides nor Terpsion were present to hear it firsthand. Nevertheless, it is not recited from memory, but read to them by Eucleides' slave (143a), and Eucleides, who initially wrote it out from Socrates' account, has verified it and made corrections on an unspecified number of occasions visiting Socrates in Athens (143a).

The character and acuity of Theaetetus is attested by Eucleides at the time of his death and reiterated by Theodorus at the outset of the conversation. He ascribes to Theaetetus a rare combination of sharpness of mind with evenness of temper (144b) – a combination said in the *Republic* to be necessary to a philoso-

<sup>1</sup> *Phaedo* 59c.

<sup>2</sup> The dialogue is bracketed by the trial. Plato alludes to it at the outset, where Theodorus implies that association with Socrates improves the youth (146b).

<sup>3</sup> Campbell (1883), xxxiv.

phic nature.<sup>4</sup> This makes the purported resemblance to Socrates a double one: like Socrates, Theaetetus has the temperament of a philosopher, and like Socrates he is ugly, only less so (143e).

### Resemblance, Knowledge, and Wisdom 143c – 146c

Once Theaetetus has been called to join Socrates and Theodorus, Socrates initiates the discussion with remarks on likeness (*hoimoiotēs*, 144e). Likeness or resemblance will be a concept bearing directly on the subsequent explorations of the definitions of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Socrates also plays with the contrast between resemblance in visible and invisible qualities: as a geometer and wise man, but not a painter, Theodorus' remarks about their physical appearance carry less weight than his assertions about their character. There is a hint of irony in the remark: that the examination of character holds greater interest than appearance is attributed to the particular qualifications Theodorus happens to possess. Just how the attractiveness of a beautiful soul more than compensates for an ugly mug is a known Socratic attribute.<sup>6</sup> Also, the physical and visible in contrast to the invisible mark the first division in the divided line of the *Republic*, constituting the objects of opinion and knowledge respectively. In each of Theaetetus' attempts, knowledge will be defined in terms of opinion, and never successfully differentiated from it.

Praise of the soul for virtue and wisdom (*pros aretēn te kai sophian*) provides the occasion for Socrates to propose examining Theaetetus (145b). Theodorus is wise; he has praised Theaetetus (not explicitly for wisdom, but for a sharp mind and good memory combined with gentleness at 143e – 144b); wisdom is identical to knowledge (145e); but what, actually (146a), is knowledge?

In the *Republic*, wisdom is called a virtue (*aretē*), knowledge a power (*dynamis*) of the soul. The two concepts are not treated as synonyms. A virtue is a human excellence, the quality of character that shapes how a person acts and responds in particular human situations. A power is a faculty of mind that is instrumental to the soul's cognition of distinct types of object.

On the other hand, it is sometimes asserted that Plato identifies virtue with knowledge. If that is so, then it would follow that wisdom, as a virtue, is either identical with knowledge as Socrates proposes here in the *Theaetetus*, or is one particular type of knowledge.

However, the virtue – knowledge identity may be an overstatement. Numerous passages attest to the view that Socratic and Platonic ethics make knowl-

<sup>4</sup> *Republic* VI, 503c. Cf. Campbell, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Chappell (2004), 30, rightly finds fault with Cornford, Bostock, and McDowell for failing to see any philosophical content in this introductory section. Burnyeat (1990), 3-7, does not entirely disregard it, pointing out at least that the theme of expertise in relation to knowledge is raised by the dramatic setting.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* 214e ff.

edge a necessary and perhaps also a sufficient condition for virtue, but, even if both, the identification does not follow.

Crito, seeking to persuade Socrates to escape execution, urges that “your enemies are capable of the greatest evils.”<sup>7</sup> Socrates’ cryptic wish that Crito’s assertion were true is explained by the *Crito* as a whole. To be capable of the greatest evil, a person would first require knowledge of the greatest evil. If one had such knowledge, one would also know the greatest good. But that person, understanding good, evil, and the consequences of each, would never perform evil. For Platonic ethics as exhibited in the *Crito*, then, knowledge is a condition for virtue, but it is not virtue, because virtue is not like knowledge a power or capacity: the virtuous person would have the knowledge needed to do evil deliberately, but, precisely due in part to that knowledge, not the ability to do evil.

The text cited most commonly to support the claim that Platonic ethics identifies knowledge and virtue is the analogy drawn between virtue and art (*technē*) in the concluding arguments of the *Protagoras*. However, the argument is a dialectical one, and, as Allen points out, the analogy can also be taken to oppose the identification, since virtue, unlike art, is not only a means to an end but an end in itself.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Socrates’ statement that wisdom is knowledge, the *Theaetetus* like the *Republic* does not treat knowledge as identical to virtue. Virtue will remain a subtext, occasionally mentioned, yet never figuring in the definitions that will be examined.

The initial claim does, however, reverse the relation of knowledge to virtue implied by the ethics of the *Crito* and the *Republic*. Socrates states that wisdom and knowledge are the same, on the grounds that people “are wise with respect to the same things about which they are knowledgeable.”<sup>9</sup> However, to make knowledge, a power, a condition for wisdom, a virtue, would imply the converse, namely, if one is wise, then one is also knowledgeable in the same respect. The wise physician possesses medical knowledge, but the possession of medical knowledge, as had, for example, Josef Mengele, the notorious Auschwitz “angel of death,” does not make one wise in medicine.<sup>10</sup>

Allen relates the distinction to rational will:

That virtue is knowledge may be supported by the further premise that all men wish for the good (*Meno* 77b – 78a). For unless this were so, the knowledge which is virtue would be only a capacity or ability. The ability to be virtuous is not virtue, any more than the ability to play golf is golfing. The ability to be virtuous is actualized

<sup>7</sup> *Crito* 44d.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Allen (1996), p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> ἢ οὐχ ἄπερ ἐπιστήμονες, ταῦτα καὶ σοφοί, 145e.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sedley (2004), p. 18. Sedley is correct to emphasize that the *Theaetetus* has an important moral dimension, not only an epistemological one, but misleading in identifying knowledge as a virtue, rather than a condition for virtue.

due to the βούλησις, the true wish of the soul for its own good...and that wish is constant, a necessity of human nature.

This is a reason for claiming that virtue is analogous to an art, in that knowledge is a necessary condition for virtue. But it is also a reason for denying that virtue is an art. Art involves capacity to produce opposite effects: to know the good in a particular field is to know the bad and to be able to produce it. A doctor, skilled in healing, is best able to harm; a cobbler can artistically produce a pair of shoes that will not fit. But virtue is not a capacity to produce opposites: the virtuous man cannot be vicious. An art is an instrument, a means to attaining an end. Virtue is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Because this is so, virtue is not an art. Virtue has to do not only with knowledge but with true wish. Put otherwise, virtue pertains to the rational will.<sup>11</sup>

As illustrated in the *Republic*, arts, such as medicine, are goods, but goods only as means, whereas virtue is the greatest kind of good, namely that which is good both as a means and as an end in itself.<sup>12</sup>

Although references to Socrates' trial are many, the topic of wisdom, here identified with knowledge, receives little further attention. It is easy to view the *Theaetetus* as a dialogue purely about epistemological theory.<sup>13</sup> This, however, is a mistake, and the silent theme of the relation of wisdom to knowledge that opens the dialogue will reappear, significantly, at the very end.

### Requirements for Definition 146c – 148b

When *Theaetetus* accepts his dialectical assignment, he responds to the request for a definition of knowledge with a list of examples. The items on the list are drawn from Socrates' earlier illustrations that were used to first raise the issue of wisdom and knowledge as a topic. Knowledge is "those things one might learn from Theodorus, geometry and the things you just mentioned" (146c). These others are astronomy, harmony, and arithmetic (145d). To this *Theaetetus* adds "shoemaking and the arts of the other craftsmen" (146d).

*Theaetetus* has not yet offered a definition, unless the reader wishes to un-Platonically acknowledge his statement as a rather indefinite extensional definition, but the introduction to definition serves two purposes. First, it allows Socrates to make a point about the requirements for definition. Socrates' observation that an enumeration of the kinds of clay does not define clay illustrates the claim that the different forms of cognition that might be labeled "knowledge" should be expected to be related through some essential character in virtue of which each is called knowledge. It indicates that Socrates is asking for a real or essential definition. The possibility that knowledge is not the sort of thing that

<sup>11</sup> Allen (1996), pp. 147-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Republic* II, 358a.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed most interpretations give little or no attention to the practical implications of the *Theaetetus*. An important exception to this can be found in Dorter (1994).

admits of such a definition is explicitly raised, but also immediately dropped (146e: *ē ouden legō*, “or does that [question] mean nothing?”). It is anticipated, therefore, that there should be one account unifying all instances of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Socrates is asking for an essential definition. As the very concept of essence has been beneath a philosophical cloud of ill-repute, especially, perhaps, since the ascendancy of Wittgenstein, it has not been uncommon for commentators on the *Theaetetus* to attack the assumptions governing Socrates' request for a definition. Burnyeat (1990), 5, observes “Socrates seems to exclude examples of any type,” referring to G. E. Moore's argument that some examples of knowledge “are *beyond* question examples of knowledge because they are much more certain than any philosophical principle used to impugn them could possibly be,” and views this as a grave challenge to Socrates. Yet, with Moore, Burnyeat (1990) misses the point, as does Bostock (1988), 32-33, who protests that examples in fact can be explanatory and informative. The indubitability or the utility of certain examples does nothing by itself to obviate the inquiry into the nature of that which the examples are examples of. Contrary to the implications drawn by the commentators, Socrates does not here deny either the utility or the importance of examples. Indeed, Theaetetus' account of his mathematical reflections with young Socrates gives a fine example of the collection of examples and division into kinds that makes clear use of examples in the process of defining (147d-148a), a process that Socrates then asks Theaetetus to imitate when trying to find a definition of knowledge (148d). Rather than exclude examples, Socrates points out that he is asking a different kind of question than the question that might be adequately answered by examples.

Here, too, Burnyeat (1990), 6, raises doubts: “would Plato have done better to separate off practical from theoretical knowledge...?” A counterpart of this suggestion of a possible philosophical misstep is Runciman's (1962) claim that Plato did not neglect a distinction he should have made, but never recognized there was a distinction that could be made: Plato's problem here lay in being oblivious, or at least never sufficiently clear, about such distinctions as those between knowledge how, knowledge that, and knowledge by acquaintance. (Chappell (2004), 31, convincingly shows Runciman wrong about this.) The notion that Socrates somehow abjures all examples, and the notion that Plato should treat different types of knowing as utterly separate, stem from kindred inspiration: it is the notion epitomized, as Chappell (2004), 35, rightly notes, by a “broad post-Wittgensteinian consensus.” Chappell cites *The Blue and Brown Books*, 201: “the idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation.”

Beneath the Wittgensteinian sentiment one might identify the (very un-Platonic and un-Aristotelian) view that there is nothing between univocity of meaning and sheer equivocality of meaning, that is, that there is no unifiable relation of distinct meanings, unified perhaps by a central or primary meaning (as, for example, exhibited by the Aristotelian concept of *pros hen* equivocality). If common terms do not capture common or significantly related meanings, then a unifying real definition is perhaps impossible or at least no more informative than a list of examples, and distinct types designated by the common term, such as distinct types of cognition, should be treated as separate and unrelated. Wittgenstein argued against the cogency of any conception of essential definition by metaphor: the metaphor of family resemblance. We may meaningfully assert that all members of a family resemble, even if there is no single feature that is common to each and every one. Yet Wittgenstein's metaphor begs the question, for the metaphor itself still rests on the assumption that there is real resemblance between any given two individuals, and, if that is the case, then that resemblance must be a resemblance *with respect to* some general feature shared by the individuals. It still necessitates some means to relate a general unified character or form to separable multiple individuals. This is precisely what Socrates is asking for when he says to Theaetetus: “just as you collected those many under one form, try to apply one account to the many kinds of knowledge” (148d).

If, however, there is real and not only nominal resemblance, then we must admit a space for something like real or essential definition. This very issue—how to relate one form to many appearances (which, again, may pertain to the Platonic theory of forms but can be construed as a question broader than Plato's response to it), how to understand and account for relations of resemblance—will be at the core of the argument of the *Theaetetus*.

Secondly, the lead-up to definition is the occasion to sketch a general, if vague, conception of knowledge, one that echoes assertions about knowledge in other dialogues but ultimately will show little connection to the upcoming definitions that Theaetetus will attempt and that will fail: he will not, in the dialogue, successfully imitate his accomplishments in mathematical definition.

This sketch is accomplished through a set of examples, and these are not picked at random. Examples of knowing were first introduced, not by Theaetetus when asked for a definition, but previously by Socrates (145d). Those will mirror in order the subjects of study prescribed for the philosophical guardians of the *Republic*, where the progression leads ultimately to the study of dialectic. This maps onto the two upper divisions of the *Republic's* divided line, representing knowledge (*epistēmē*) as contrasted to judgment (*doxa*).<sup>15</sup>

The further examples are all of the arts, *technai*, in general. While the contrast of *epistēmē* (knowledge) to *doxa* (judgment or belief) in the divided line borders on the introduction of sharply circumscribed technical terms, Plato also uses *epistēmē* outside of the *Theaetetus* more loosely, namely in connection with the arts. (As is generally recognized, Plato appears to studiously avoid technical formulations, taking care, when using a term that could be construed technically, to soon use the same term in a clearly non-technical manner.)

The reader is given, then, as a preliminary approach to knowledge, specific examples that point to knowledge as spoken of in other dialogues, and that in two senses in which the word is used: in a narrower sense, as the knowledge of unchanging reality (the objects of mathematics and the forms), and in a broader sense, as the knowledge of skilled expertise. While distinguishable, the two senses are nevertheless linked.

Knowledge is a capacity or power of mind, but not the soul's sole power. Where Plato distinguishes different cognitive faculties, the distinctions are drawn in terms of the distinct types of objects toward which different faculties are directed. Thus, in the Seventh Letter, knowledge is said to be of that which is truly real (*alēthōs estin on*, 342b) and acquirable only by means of word (*onoma*), account (*logos*), and image (*eidōlon*).

Where knowledge is more narrowly and precisely conceived, Plato likewise makes its proper object the real, and contrasts it with opinion or judgment (*doxa*). In the *Republic's* image of the divided line, knowledge is of that which is in and of itself, while opinion or judgment is of that which is only in relation to something else, that which is between being and not-being. The divided line subdivides intelligible reality into the realities that are known by the intellect (*noēsis*) through dialectic, the forms, and those known by understanding (*dianoia*) through hypothesis, namely geometry and the related arts (*Republic*

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<sup>15</sup> Hardy (2004), 19-20, observes how the characters of Theodorus and Socrates frame the dialogue in terms of and represent two types of knowledge most central to Platonic metaphysics: mathematics and dialectic.

VII, 510e) that Socrates uses in the *Theaetetus* to first broach the question of knowledge. These are arranged in a progression—arithmetic, geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, harmonics, leading finally to dialectic—in the program of study for philosophers outlined in the *Republic*.<sup>16</sup>

Opinion or judgment (*doxa*) as a distinct cognitive power is also subdivided on the line: conviction (*pistis*) which has for its object the material world—animals, plants, elements and things composed of them, artifacts—and imagination (*eikasia*), which is directed to images of the objects of conviction—shadows and reflections. This relation of image to original within the visible realm is analogous to the relation between opinion as whole and knowledge, and to the corresponding relation between their objects.

The central books of the *Republic* place knowledge in a double opposition, opposed in one sense to opinion, in another to ignorance. As illustrated by the divided line, these epistemological relations have an ontological correlate in the objects of cognition: being is opposed in one sense to becoming, in another to not-being. The object of knowledge is being, of opinion that which is between being and not-being, and ignorance, the absence of cognition, has no object at all.

This epistemology and its metaphysical underpinnings bear upon the analysis of the *Theaetetus*. First, insofar as the objects of opinion and of knowledge are distinct, we do not and cannot, by definition, have knowledge of the same things that we have opinions of. This means that any given opinion, though it may be made more probable and secure, will never through the addition of evidence or some other justification become something known as opposed to something believed. Secondly, although what is known and what is believed are mutually exclusive classes, they stand in a proportional relationship as illustrated by the image analogy. As the image is a dependent and deficient resemblance of its original, without which it could not have such existence as it does, so too opinion and judgment are dependent and derivative. For reasons ontological, knowledge is prior to opinion. The second point is connected to the first: while, as the Seventh Letter attests, opinion may be an indispensable tool in the human acquisition of knowledge, it is an instrument and not a component; knowledge is not opinion with something added. In the *Theaetetus*, none of the attempted definitions will succeed, and none are compatible with Platonic metaphysics.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Plato also speaks of knowledge, *epistēmē*, in a looser and less technical voice. And this voice often shifts casually between the terms *epistēmē* (knowl-

<sup>16</sup> *Republic* VII, 524d – 541b. In the *Republic* Socrates passes over solid geometry as an art that has not been developed (VII, 528b). Its development will come largely through *Theaetetus*. Cf. Allen (2006), p. 245.

<sup>17</sup> This will become evident independently of the question whether Plato in the *Theaetetus* endorses a theory of forms as conceived in the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*: the investigation of each of the definitions will raise as problematic issues that Plato elsewhere treats as trivial.

edge) and *sophia* (wisdom).<sup>18</sup> When not related to its proper object and contrasted with opinion, knowledge is often mentioned in conjunction with the arts, *technai*, in general. The association is also echoed in the *Theaetetus* when Theaetetus adjoins to Socrates' list of mathematical arts "shoemaking and the other arts of craftsmen" (146d). Socrates accommodates, adding carpentry as a further example (146e). The objects of mathematical thought may have a plausible claim to status as eternal realities, yet it would seem troubling to crowd the class of realities by adding shoestrings and clogs. Instances of a broader and more colloquial use of *epistēmē*, one that does not seem to explicitly exclude opinion, are thus many: most *technai*, after all, deal with material existence and work in physical media, and all deal with phenomenal existence. Nevertheless, as Plato's contrast of art to the absence of art shows, this broader employment of the term *epistēmē* does not conflict with distinction of knowledge as directed to reality from judgment as directed to appearance, for 1) the arguments Plato makes for the distinction<sup>19</sup> rest on a claim that knowledge of the non-phenomenal realities make an understanding of phenomenal existence possible and 2) artful is distinguished from artless practice not by the media it works on, not, that is, in dealing with phenomena, which both clearly do, but rather in *how* it deals with phenomena, that is, by the understanding of principle on the basis of which skilled activity is possible. In other words, both skilled and unskilled practice are empirical, but unskilled practice is *only* empirical. That understanding of principle, as becomes clear from Plato's explanations of *technē*, is, at some level, a knowledge of reality as opposed to appearance.

Art, *technē*, whether shoemaking or surgery, is a practice performed through skilled expertise, and as such contrasted by Plato to trial and error (*tribē kai em-peiria*). The frequent Platonic rebuke expressing the sophist's ignorance of and disregard for truth accuses the sophist of having no art, only a knack (*tribē*). Gorgias, extolling the power of rhetoric to persuade the ignorant many if not the knowledgeable few, makes knowledge of truth unnecessary for the power of persuasion.<sup>20</sup> By divorcing persuasion from truth, Gorgias removes sophistry from the arts.

In the *Gorgias*, art is distinguished from knack by possessing an understanding of the nature (*physis*) of its object and the causes (*aitiai*) of its methods, making it possible for the art to have an account (*logos*) (*Gorgias* 501a). As a result, the products of art are good because regular and well-ordered (*Gorgias* 503e). The physician, restoring proper order to the ailing body, brings about health, which can only be done systematically with an understanding of human nature, unlike cosmetology, which creates only an appearance of health.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout the *Apology*, for example.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Republic* VII, 523c-524d.

<sup>20</sup> *Gorgias* 465b ff., cf. *Phaedrus* 260a.

Thus, the possibility of all art, and its qualification as knowledge, far from conflicting with the account of the divided line, is grounded in the distinction between reality and appearance, between truth and opinion, precisely because art is born out of the understanding and imitation of nature. The *Timaeus* underscores the connection of art with knowledge by making the creator of the cosmos a divine craftsman (*demiourgos*) who creates by looking to eternal reality and then fabricating an image of what he has beheld.<sup>21</sup>

The shoemaker (*qua* shoemaker) is not intimately concerned with eternal realities, but, analogous to the physician healing the sick or the demiurge fabricating the whole universe, his occupation with appearances relies on an understanding of nature, order, and pattern. And so, the selection of examples distinctly illustrates a broad Platonic epistemological background against which *epistēmē* in the strict sense of knowledge of form and in the general sense as knowledge exhibited in the arts are closely related: the former, knowledge as “pure” knowledge, or knowledge spoken of exclusively with respect to the proper object of knowledge, the latter, knowledge as it relates to and is employed in human activity.<sup>22</sup> Both depend on a fundamental ontological distinction between reality and appearance. The *Philebus* states that the ability to pass properly between the one and the many by intermediates is the source of all *technē* (*Philebus* 16c), and, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates’ question about the nature of knowledge indicates particular interest in this proper passage, asking Theaetetus for a definition that relates many to one (148d). The subsequent conversation will make many references to the distinction between one and many, between reality and appearance, while none of Theaetetus’ definitions will successfully incorporate any such distinction into the account.

It is for a failure to pass from many to one that Socrates faults Theaetetus, not for his connection of knowledge to the arts. A definition requires a formulation of what knowledge itself is (*auto ho ti pot’ estin*), not the enumeration of things knowledge is of (*tinōn hē epistēmē*) (146e). It is an abbreviated version of the lengthy lesson in definition given in the *Meno* (71e – 76e) where Socrates stipulates that a definition of virtue should supply the real nature (*ousia*, *Meno* 72b) or the character or form (*eidos*, 72c) shared by different kinds of virtue. Theaetetus, neither slow nor willful like Meno, understands and responds with his own example of generalizing from a series of particulars. Theodorus had proven the irrationality of  $\sqrt{3}$ ,  $\sqrt{5}$ , up to  $\sqrt{17}$ . The proof that  $\sqrt{2}$  is irrational was a known proof from the Pythagoreans. Plato may be crediting Theaetetus, not for further continuing Theodorus’ enumeration with proofs of greater irrationals, but rather for realizing that the number of irrationals is unlimited (*apei-*

<sup>21</sup> *Timaeus* 29a.

<sup>22</sup> Note, for example, how the divided line and subsequent cave analogy in *Republic* VII, or, for that matter, the *Republic* as a whole, illustrate the intellectual direction of the theory of forms, as ultimate primary realities, is not toward the attainment of some sort of highest transcendental insights, but toward its bearing on the phenomenal world in which we live.

*roi*, 147d) and generalizing a theory of the irrationals,<sup>23</sup> that is, for successfully relating many to one.

### Maieutics 148b – 151e

The character of Theaetetus makes for a contrast with the depiction of Meno for his lack of the latter's cockiness and bravado, and Theaetetus is reticent to offer a definition, not because he does not wish to bother with the task, but because he doubts his own abilities. Socrates encourages him with a novel account of the Socratic method.

Socrates practices the intellectual counterpart of his mother's art (*technē*, 149a), midwifery. His maieutics is analogous in all respects save one: pregnant women deliver only real babies, while Socrates' charges, their souls pregnant with ideas, deliver sometimes real (*alēthina*) offspring, sometimes only images (*eidōla*), and the images can be difficult to distinguish from the real (150b). This makes the most important part of Socrates' art not the delivery, but the subsequent separating of the true from the false.<sup>24</sup> In all other respects (apart from separating reality from image, being practiced on men rather than women, and on the soul rather than the body) the Socratic art is analogous to the midwife's (150b).

On one level the introduction of Socratic maieutics prepares the ground for an aporetic dialogue: the ideas that Theaetetus brings forth may be shown false, leaving the reader to contemplate in what, if any, ways they are images of the truth.<sup>25</sup> And the passage again alludes to the trial of Socrates. Ignorance of his role in delivery, leaving him too early, miscarriage due to bad associations, and being disabused by Socrates of false notions (150e, 151d) all contribute to the

<sup>23</sup> This is the view of Heath, who gives a close analysis of the mathematics of this passage. Heath (1921), pp. 203 – 209.

<sup>24</sup> Cornford, following the ancient Anonymous Commentator, reads the exposition of midwifery as an allusion to the doctrine of recollection depicted in the *Meno*. Based only on a general structural parallel, there appear to be no compelling reasons to make the connection. See the discussions in Sedley (2004), 28-30, and Chappell (2005), 46.

<sup>25</sup> It is a statement of the element of Socratic dialectic that pervades the Platonic dialogues: here, Theaetetus' offspring, and the ideas he may have heard that have shaped them, are being examined, complete with implicit assumptions that cannot fruitfully be blindly accepted as literal Platonic doctrine. Cf. Chappell (2005), 47: "The midwife passage can also tell us something important about the limitations of the *Theaetetus*' inquiry. The limitations of the inquiry are the limitations of the main inquirers, and neither (the historical) Socrates nor Theaetetus was a card-carrying adherent of Plato's theory of Forms. Perhaps the dialogue brings us only as far as the threshold of the theory of Forms precisely because, on Socratic principles, one can get no further. To get beyond where the *Theaetetus* leaves off, you have to be a Platonist." A kindred sentiment is found in Sedley's approach, which takes the maieutics as framing the entire dialogue: "the external midwifery consists partly in the dialogue's power to bring us to the point where we are ready to abandon the written text and continue the dialectic for ourselves, our puzzlement at the inquiry's failure being really our birth pangs as we struggle to bring to birth a better definition of knowledge—a definition which Plato nowhere formulates in the dialogues, but leaves to his readers to work on." (Sedley (2004), 11).

animosity some bear toward Socrates. Socrates repeats here an explanation for his public image offered in his defense speech.<sup>26</sup> Yet beyond this, the midwife analogy as a whole presents an inversion of depictions of Socratic elenchus from the early dialogues.

Socrates describes traditional midwifery in some detail. The art is practiced only by women past childbearing age out of deference to Artemis (149b), but not by barren women, since an art cannot be acquired by a person inexperienced in its matter. Midwives are able to verify pregnancy, to induce labor with drugs and charms, and to make it easier or more difficult. Socrates also deems them the best matchmakers, an undertaking midwives avoid, so as to guard their reputations.

Socrates too is a matchmaker, able to discern whose soul is with intellectual child, and, when the Socratic art would be of no benefit, to find good associates for young men. The Socratic sign he hears or feels, his *daimonion* (151a), is a guide in proper associations and conduct, as in the *Apology*, where Socrates speaks of the *daimonion* as holding him back from some but permitting other courses of action.<sup>27</sup>

In the *Charmides*, Socrates claims to possess a drug to cure a headache, which will be effective only with a charm, since the body cannot be treated apart from the whole person. This charm, it turns out, is the Socratic examination of the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Socrates, like the midwife, can only help another deliver, neither conceive nor bear himself. Yet in the *Theaetetus*' portrayal, the Socratic profession of ignorance diverges from the other extended account of it in the *Apology* (21a – 23c). Curiously, the exposition of the midwife analogy emphasizes that only a woman past childbearing, not a barren woman, may practice the art. However Socrates, it appears, is sterile (*agonos*, 150c). Were the analogy to match, it would entail Socrates having lost a capacity he once possessed.<sup>29</sup> More curious still, Socrates practices an art, which, from the preceding exchange, implies that he is wise and knowledgeable in that art, yet simultaneously possession of the art

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<sup>26</sup> *Apology* 23a.

<sup>27</sup> In the *Apology* Socrates call it a kind of voice (φωνή τις) that began in early childhood and only turns him away from something he is about to do, but never encourages him (ἀεὶ ἀποτρέπει με τοῦτο ὃ ἂν μέλλω πράττειν, προτρέπει δὲ οὐποτε, 31d). Cf. *Phaedrus* 242b. Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, I.1) claims that Socrates' sign was not only negative, but also gave positive encouragement.

<sup>28</sup> *Charmides* 155e – 157d. Cf. *Phaedrus* 270c.

<sup>29</sup> Chappell (2005), 43, suggests “perhaps Plato is hinting to us not to take Socrates' claim to be sterile at face value.” Becker (2007), 257, suggests a resolution to the paradox: Socrates in the past may have gone through comparable deliveries himself, but always had to discard the result. Yet Becker's resolution would not resolve the underlying paradoxical implication of simultaneous possession and lack of wisdom.

implies lack of knowledge and wisdom.<sup>30</sup> Socrates asserts his ignorance, and, if that assertion accords with the Socratic profession of ignorance from early dialogues, it conflicts with the explicit claim to be master of an art.<sup>31</sup>

The Socratic profession of ignorance as depicted in the *Apology* and early dialogues has nothing paradoxical about it. While the boundaries of Socrates' ignorance are no more clearly defined in the *Apology* than in the *Theaetetus*, and while the Socrates of the *Apology* also acknowledges others are *in certain respects* wiser than he, namely, wiser in the many arts not mastered by Socrates, he is the wiser, because he alone recognizes his ignorance of anything "fine and good" (*kalon kagathon*, *Apology* 21d), of the most important things (*ta megista*, *Apology* 22d), an ignorance shared by all.

Even if we surmise that Plato, certainly by the time of writing the *Theaetetus*, may have thought he knew some of those fine and good things Socrates did not, and consequently allowed for that to be reflected in the character of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, the fundamental sense of Socratic wisdom, not simply as expertise in a field, but as a virtue, is evidently present as an issue underlying the overarching epistemological question. Thus, the paradox that Socrates should seem at once to possess and to lack knowledge in a way that is not possible serves to underline the issue raised earlier with the perfunctory identification of knowledge with wisdom.

The *Theaetetus* has earlier identified wisdom and knowledge and now Socrates repeatedly asserts that he is altogether without wisdom (*sophia*, 150c). In the *Apology* the Socratic profession of ignorance is, on the contrary, evidence *for* his wisdom. The Delphic oracle's assertion that none is wiser than Socrates means that Socrates is aware of his own ignorance.<sup>32</sup> Others, if not wise, do possess knowledge that Socrates does not—at least knowledge of particular arts (22d)—but Socrates alone understands his own ignorance in matters of genuine impor-

<sup>30</sup> The implicit paradox, of course, applies only to Socratic intellectual midwifery: it is not contradictory for Socrates' mother to understand the principles of her art while being physically no longer able to conceive a child.

<sup>31</sup> Hardy (2001), 19, would treat Socratic maieutics as a distinct type of knowledge, a "dispositional knowing" (*dispositionales Wissen*) how to skillfully investigate others' opinions, but not a knowledge that can be formulated in assertions. This does not remove the puzzle attending the extent of Socrates' knowledge. Nevertheless, the limited knowledge contained in the Socratic art of midwifery is explicitly made an exception to Socrates' general lack of knowledge at 161b and again at the conclusion at 210c, about which Sedley (2004), 33, notes: "these passages make it clear that Socrates does count his maieutic expertise as knowledge. On the other hand, beyond this single exception, his barrenness has turned out to manifest itself, not merely in the avoidance of knowledge claims, but in his not making assertions at all. And that corresponds to a relatively strong interpretation of the disavowal of knowledge." Still, it is not evident that qualification by stating an exemption to the rule of general ignorance really clarifies Socrates' game: it remains most curious that he possesses an ability (a knowledge how) to distinguish true from false beliefs without himself understanding that the true are true or the false false. And yet the issue of real interest here, is not what Socrates does or does not know, but whether or not Socrates is wise.

<sup>32</sup> Precisely this aspect of Socratic wisdom is introduced at the conclusion of the dialogue (201c) with respect to the effect of the Socratic art on *Theaetetus*.

tance. The maieutic paradox relies on the simple identification of knowledge with wisdom, and would be resolved by drawing that important distinction.

It would be difficult to doubt that the reader is expected to take note. Apart from the contrast with the *Apology's* depiction of Socratic wisdom, the immediately preceding passage alludes directly to the reasons stated in the *Apology* for the inability of many to understand Socratic elenchus as anything other than sophistic manipulation. And apart from the passage detailing Socratic midwifery, the virtue of wisdom, as distinct from knowledge, is described in the digression on philosophy at 177a, and again in the conclusion at 210c, where Socrates tells Theaetetus that, as a result of the inquiry, he will be “wise enough not to think you know something that you do not know.”<sup>33</sup>

Wisdom in this sense is not the knowing of all manner of things; rather, the pursuit of virtue for its own sake, not for the sake of appearance, is called “true wisdom and virtue” (176c).<sup>34</sup> The identification of knowledge in general with wisdom is only an appearance and ties the *Theaetetus* into the *Sophist*: the sophist *appears* to be wise by appearing to know everything, but it is only an image. If wisdom is not all manner of knowledge and cleverness, it is nevertheless deeply connected with knowledge, for it is not won without some knowledge of the distinction between reality and appearance and of the ontological root of that distinction. Thus the paradox in the characterization of the wisdom in Socratic maieutics is at the heart of the dialogue’s aporia: is Socrates wise or not? Without clarifying how appearance is distinct from and related to reality, the nature of Socrates’ wisdom also cannot be clarified, and understanding this distinction and relation is the key to any chance for a tenable definition of knowledge.

The *Theaetetus* neither assumes that Socrates’ awareness of ignorance is a kind of wisdom nor that all others, without the same self-awareness, share that ignorance. So the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* can assert that his art includes the skill to distinguish the true offspring from the false,<sup>35</sup> raising again the question,

<sup>33</sup> σωφρόνως οὐκ οἰόμενος εἰδέναι ἃ μὴ οἶσθα.

<sup>34</sup> ἢ μὲν γὰρ τούτου γνώσις σοφία καὶ ἀρετὴ ἀληθινή...

<sup>35</sup> The apparently novel claim that by intellectual midwifery Socrates distinguishes true from false opinions is of significance for Sedley’s (2004) reading, according to which maieutics is central to understanding the dialogue, and constitutes not only delivery for Theaetetus, but for Plato as well. It is a device that makes possible a very rich reading of the dialogue, and Sedley gives an excellent account of the various ways in which the features attributed to midwifery inform and shape the conversation (see pp. 30-37). That midwifery is being practiced on Plato is a thought that Sedley, 37, bases on an “anomaly...of inclusion...according to which some of Socrates’ patients’ give birth to many fine offspring.” Nowhere in the early dialogues does Socrates meet an interlocutor who is, as a result of his services, seen doing anything of the kind. Is there nevertheless some interlocutor, absent from the early dialogues, whom Socrates does bring to successful intellectual childbirth? I can see only one plausible answer: *Plato himself*. Yet this notion, while fruitful for framing a novel approach to the dialogue, remains rather speculative, since: 1) the unnamed interlocutors who gave birth to “many fine offspring” are plural (ἔνιοι), not just the one Plato; 2) if this were a self-reference, it would seem rather un-Platonic, insofar as, given the reticence of Plato to give any kind of doctrinaire formulation to his insights, as is also suggested by the claim in the Seventh Letter that it would

crucial to the issue of defining knowledge, about just what it is, in virtue of which true can be distinguished from false. Theaetetus has received encouragement to pursue the definition of knowledge along with notice of the likelihood that the best attempt will be only an image of real understanding.

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be foolish to attempt to put that which is contemplated by reason into a fixed written form, it seems unlikely that Plato would label his own intellectual offspring simply "true"; and 3) there is no definite indication that these "fine offspring" must in fact also be true: Socrates indicates that all who associate with him make progress during their association, and at the conclusion indicates that Theaetetus has made fine progress, even though all his definitions turned out wind-eggs to be discarded, but in that case, an interlocutor giving birth to fine offspring is no longer such an anomaly.

## Theaetetus' First Thesis: Knowledge is Perception 151e – 187a

### Perception 151e – 152a

Duly encouraged, Theaetetus ventures a second response, one that now qualifies as a definition. Knowledge is identified with *aisthēsis*, perception (151e). Standing alone, Theaetetus' statement that "knowledge is nothing other than perception" is neither implausible nor specific. Out of its vagueness, his hunch will gain a more defined clarity when Theaetetus is confronted with a series of conceptual leaps as Socrates dialectically further identifies perception with appearance in general, opinion or judgment, and motion.

*Aisthēsis* means "sensation" and "sensory perception" and has this connotation in the *Theaetetus*. But *aisthēsis* can also mean, like the English "perception," or the German "Wahrnehmung" (literally, "taking as true") "to take notice of," or "to understand."<sup>1</sup> In *De Anima* Aristotle opposes *aisthēsis*, sensory perception to *dianoia*, understanding, as distinct powers of soul. Yet even in a stricter sense, an association with knowledge is not a distant reach, as indicated in the opening sentences of the *Metaphysics*:

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves, and above all others the sense of sight...The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Séguy-Duclot (2008), 42, suggests that for αἴσθησις, "sensation" would be the preferable translation to "perception," on the grounds that, like Kant's distinction between *Wahrnehmung* and *Empfindung*, "perception" indicates more an objective representation, while "sensation" designates what is purely subjective and therefore not falsifiable. Séguy-Duclot adds that it could be said that the point of Protagoras' argument is that there are only sensations, no perceptions: "ce que montre Protagoras, c'est que toute représentation sensible est irréductiblement subjective." However, "sensation" in this sense is not falsifiable, because it is bare feeling and, like feeling cold or feeling warm, not the sort of thing that can be true or false. While that type of sensation is the starting point with the example of the wind, and while the Protagorean defense of relativism does assert the subjectivity of everything that is αἴσθησις, Socrates also identifies αἴσθησις with appearing, φαντασία, in a broad sense, so we are to understand αἴσθησις not only as feeling or impression, but also as encompassing appearance, opinion, and judgment in general, giving the translator now a reason to prefer "perception" to "sensation." The upshot: there are passages for which "perception" would seem the most fitting translation and passages where "sensation" would seem most fitting; αἴσθησις in Theaetetus' first definition bridges both. Here I have adopted "perception" throughout.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 979b – 980a.

Plato as well, where not entertaining the equivalence of perception and knowledge, will make perception a human condition for the attainment of intellectual, non-perceptual knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

### **Anthrōpon Metron 152a – b**

Theaetetus' second answer and first definition, then, if ambiguous, is not therefore thoughtless. Socrates immediately equates the claim to Protagoras' thesis that "man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not" (152a).

Protagoras was among the most successful of the sophists, active in Athens and close to Theodorus, who later in the dialogue will resist being drawn into criticizing his deceased friend. Protagoras was appointed to write a law code for the Athenian colony of Thurii at its founding in 444. He composed a work by the title "Truth" that has not survived, but is understood to have defended the philosophical relativism expressed by the *anthrōpon metron* thesis: the human being is the measure. If Plato in general expresses a low regard for sophistry, that does not always extend to a low regard for sophists. Protagoras, certainly a man of good repute at large, is spoken of in the *Theaetetus* with some indications of respect, despite a modicum of Socratic irony and ridicule.

Whether or not all that Plato reads into and derives from Protagoras is historically true to Protagoras, it may be said that the sophists had a professional interest in adopting some form of philosophical relativism. Plato's objections to sophistry rest on the claim that, as the teacher of rhetoric and persuasion, the sophist deals only in appearances, not reality, and so willfully ignores any standard of truth. The sole criterion of sophistic success is the ability to persuade the audience, whether or not the view to which the audience is swayed is true. Genuine knowledge of the matter upon which one would undertake to discourse becomes irrelevant. Some sophists would attract students by public demonstrations of how they could persuasively answer any question on any topic. But that simply means that the persuasiveness of sophistry is empty appearance, and Plato compares its claims to those who would claim ability to make all things in the world by carrying around a mirror.<sup>4</sup>

If, however, anything any person perceives to be true is true, and consequently no real distinction can be drawn between truth and falsity, then there is also no distinction to be made between reality and appearance, and the Platonic objections, not sophistry, are empty.

The sophist's distinction between nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) affords such a defense of the practice of persuasion for the sake of persuasion: some matters—the sky is blue, grass is green—are true because they are so in the

<sup>3</sup> As in *Epistulae* VII, 342b, cf. *Rep.* VII, 523a – 524d.

<sup>4</sup> *Rep.* X, 596d.