

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 15 numbers 2 & 3

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# The *Theaetetus* and the Possibility of False Opinion

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The section of the *Theaetetus*\* that begins with Theaetetus' suggestion that true opinion might be knowledge is concerned instead, almost entirely, with the question of *false* opinion. Socrates will later refute Theaetetus' suggestion about what knowledge is by reminding him of the difference between an eye-witness' awareness of the truth and that of those jurymen who merely believe it. In the meantime, however, he and Theaetetus engage, unsuccessfully, in repeated attempts to discover how false opinion is possible. When he finally abandons these attempts, Socrates chides them both for having turned aside from the search for knowledge to investigate something else. And indeed, from Theaetetus' point of view, the search for false opinion had emerged as a diversion from that main inquiry (200c8–d2; cf. 187d10–11).

Socrates, however, had initially presented the search for false opinion as a kind of return to the earlier argument, and an attempt to do well what had been done inadequately before. Later on he hints more fully why they needed this return, by acting quite ashamed at the bizarre statements they would be forced to agree with unless it became clear how false opinion can exist (190e2–191a5). He won't even tell Theaetetus what these statements are until the danger of their having to agree to them is past. Yet despite Socrates' apparent shame and his air of mystery, which suffice to blunt Theaetetus' curiosity, it isn't hard to guess what statements he has in mind. He fears that they will be forced to agree, with Protagoras, that there *is* no false opinion, or that every opinion is true for the one who holds it. Socrates had already hinted, in fact, that their refutation of this unqualified Protagoreanism had left something to be desired. After completing it, he turned to a refutation of the further opinion that nothing is stable. And yet his conclusion to this further argument was that they were rid of Protagoras, and that they didn't yet have to agree with him that every man is a measure of all things (183b7–c4; cf. 179a10–c2). But why should Protagoras have cropped up again after this new argument? And why, especially, should Socrates say that they don't *yet* have to agree with him, unless he sees some deficiency in their earlier refutation?

There are, in fact, good reasons for Socrates' dissatisfaction. What he had argued was that everyone, including Protagoras, must agree that there is false opinion and that some men are wiser than others. But though these arguments appear convincing to Theodorus, they leave room for doubt. What Socrates claimed, in the first place, was that even Protagoras had to agree that there is falsehood—in particular, the falsehood of his own doctrine that all opinions are true—since

\* The text of the *Theaetetus* is Burnet's OCT. All translations are my own.

most people believe that the doctrine is false, and according to the doctrine itself their belief must be true. Protagoras might have replied, however, that though it is true for most people that his doctrine is false, his claim that all opinions are true remains true for him. And if others were to deny even this, Protagoras might have accepted their denial as true for them, while maintaining as true for himself that it's true for him that all opinions are true. And so on. Theodorus' failure to defend Protagoras in this manner owes as much to his fear of the reproach that he lacks seriousness as it does to his being convinced that Socrates' argument is decisive (168c9–e3 and 169c8–d2; compare 171c8 with 179b7–9).

The second part of Socrates' argument against Protagoras is his claim that some men, at least in questions regarding the future, are acknowledged by everyone to be wiser than others. Our reliance on the arts, including Protagoras' own art of forensic rhetoric, presupposes this belief in the superiority of some men's predictions over others' But even if everyone should believe, to take Socrates' chief example, that the beneficial, in the sense of the future good, is more than just a name (177d2–e2; 178a5–8; cf. *Republic* 505d5–506a2), this would show, indeed, how seriously we are concerned about our fates, but not that our belief and our hopes are well-founded. And our reliance on skilled men's predictions, though it helps confirm our trust that we perceive the same world, and a world with some fixity, is no more well-founded than that original trust. A Protagorean might contend that although he too lives, for the most part, *as if* sanity and common sense could distinguish true from false, that says nothing about the truth of things.

These difficulties in Socrates' refutation of Protagoras help to explain his later admission that the argument against him is still unfinished. The next argument, moreover, which leads to this admission, is not so sharply distinguished from the old one as it first appears. For the hypothesis that all is changing, and that nothing is stable, though it is presented as the ground for Theaetetus' claim that perception is knowledge, is more than that. For as Socrates shows, this hypothesis is self-destructive; it undermines the possibility of true or meaningful speech. But it isn't hard to see that someone suffering from the belief that speech is never true might come to contend that any speech is as correct as any other, or that all opinions are true (183a4–6). The hypothesis of unlimited flux, in other words, is the view of the whole that underlies Protagoras' denial of false opinion. Accordingly, Socrates is right to treat the whole argument as another refutation of Protagoras (183b7–c7). Yet couldn't a Protagorean still object that to dismiss such teachings as his on the grounds that they contradict themselves, or destroy themselves as speech, is to beg the question? Isn't Socrates presupposing that there *is* a nonself-contradictory truth? All of Socrates' arguments have assumed, more or less explicitly, the soundness of our ordinary belief that both true opinions and false ones exist by nature (cf. 187e5–8). Perhaps, however, the self-contradictoriness of denying false opinion might show the inadequacy of our language, with its trust in opposites, rather than the falseness of Protagoras' claim. Perhaps such seeming absurdities as his are as close as our language will allow us to the

unspeakable or chaotic truth. Objections like these have kept Socrates from feeling entirely free of Protagoras, and they compel him to wonder how false opinion is possible. For if there were no truth, or if all opinions were equally true, it would hardly make sense to be searching for knowledge.

The main difficulty in accounting for false opinion is that it seems to require one both to know and not know the same thing (cf. *Meno* 80d5–e5). Socrates shows that to believe, falsely, that one thing is another is to believe that something one knows is either something else one knows or something one doesn't know, or else it is to believe that something one doesn't know is either something else one doesn't know or something one knows. And unless it's possible to believe without having any knowledge—in which case we couldn't even use names (cf. 147b2–3)—false opinion always implies that one not know what one knows. Yet Theaetetus had already claimed, much earlier in the dialogue, that this was impossible, and Socrates goes along with him here (165b2–6; 188a7–c8).

Later, however, Socrates will suggest that one can, in a way, believe falsely that what one doesn't know is what one knows, without this being a case of not knowing what one knows (191a8–b10). He explains this paradox by equating knowing with remembering, or rather with having the imprint of a former perception stamped on the “wax tablet” of the soul. And it seems possible to believe falsely that a stranger, whom one perceives without knowing him, in this sense, is an acquaintance whom one knows. We can even mistake one acquaintance for another, although we know them both, as long as we also perceive one or both of them. But this account, which requires some present perception as an element of false opinion, fails to explain how we can make mistakes in pure arithmetic. When we add incorrectly, we seem to suppose that some number we know, or the right answer, is some other number that we also know, or the answer we give, and so we both know and don't know the same numbers. Theaetetus is again presented with this alternative: either there is no false opinion, or else it is possible for someone not to know what he knows (196b4–c9). Since Theaetetus regards this as an impossible choice, Socrates proposes instead a new account of what sort of thing it is to know. He calls it the “possession of knowledge” somewhere in one's soul, and he distinguishes this possession from actually having that knowledge ready at hand. Thus, when we make mistakes in arithmetic, we know the right answer, or the number we want, but that knowledge is not at hand. For instance, when we mistakenly add five and seven to make eleven, we know both the number eleven and the number twelve. But although both knowledges are in us, like two birds in an aviary, the knowledge we're looking for, namely that of twelve, isn't at hand when we want it, but we capture instead the knowledge of eleven. And by this account, there can be false opinion, even in pure arithmetic, without our not knowing what we know, since we never don't possess the knowledge we possess, even though it's not always available when we want it (199a4–c7).

One could object, however, that this apparent resolution hardly does more

than to paper over the difficulty with names. For the failure to add numbers correctly is surely a kind of ignorance about them. We hold false opinions about numbers we know because we somehow also don't know them. And Socrates' attempt to restrict the term "knowing" to the "possession of knowledge" somewhere in the soul doesn't alter this situation. Indeed, his earlier restriction of the term "knowing" to having a memory imprint of a former perception (or thought) had been another such verbal artifice. To fail to recognize an acquaintance, for example, implies a kind of ignorance about him. It is both to know and not to know him. And every false opinion, whether or not it involves perception, is an instance of not knowing what one knows.

But rather than pursue this line of criticism, Socrates comes to much the same result by a different route. He objects to their account of false opinion—as the failure to find the knowledge sought for from within one's soul, and the substitution of another knowledge—by claiming that this would make one's very knowledge of something responsible for being ignorant of it. Theaetetus, who is not ready to consider that knowledge and ignorance of something might coexist, tries to escape this difficulty by suggesting that birds of ignorance, as well as those of knowledge, may be flying around, as it were, in the aviary of the soul, and that the former birds are responsible for false opinion. But he then agrees that those who are ignorant, and who make mistakes, believe falsely that their ignorance is knowledge, and so the original dilemma soon shows itself again. To believe that one's ignorance is knowledge is to know, and not to know, both ignorance and knowledge, for even though one knows them both well enough to distinguish them in general, one fails to distinguish them correctly in this particular case. To believe something falsely, then, and to believe that one's ignorance is knowledge, is not to know what one knows, and if this should prove to be impossible, then perhaps Protagoras wasn't mistaken to deny that opinion can be false (198a2–4; 199d1–2; 200a11–b5).

"Either there is no false opinion, or it is possible not to know what one knows" (196c7–8). Our ordinary experience, or apparent experience, of false opinion would appear to rule out the first alternative, and yet the second one seems self-contradictory. Moreover, when Theaetetus complained, in the course of the argument, that there was no way to choose either alternative, Socrates even added to the difficulty by replying, "But yet I'm afraid that the argument won't allow both" (196c9–d2). Now this was a strange response. What we would have expected Socrates to say is that the argument won't allow us to *reject* both alternatives, or that we must choose at least one. For since a false opinion is always an instance of not knowing what one knows, to acknowledge that false opinion exists is to grant that there are *some* instances of not knowing what one knows, which there wouldn't be if this weren't possible. In other words, if we reject the first alternative, we must choose the second. Similarly, to deny the possibility of not knowing what one knows requires that we deny as well the existence of false opinion. If we reject the second alternative, then we must choose the

first. The argument won't allow us to choose *neither* of them. But why does Socrates suggest, instead, that the argument won't permit *both* alternatives? In particular, if we admit the second alternative, or the possibility in general of not knowing what one knows, why should the *argument* compel us to reject the first alternative, or to affirm the existence of false opinion? Why should it tell us not merely that false opinion hasn't been shown to be impossible—since it would belong, if it exists, to a class whose possibility in general has been admitted—but also that it does exist, and exists by a kind of logical necessity? To be sure, our ordinary experience suggests that the existence of false opinion is an obvious fact, but experience can't tell us that this fact, if it is a fact, emerges by any necessity. Couldn't there be a world in which the only knowing beings are able not to know, and indeed do not know, what they know, without their ever holding false opinions? Couldn't they have partial knowledge, for example, of some subject, like mathematics, which they would both know and not know, in a sense, and which they could learn more and more about, without their ever mistaking one number for another, and without any falsity in any of their opinions (144 b3–4)? Socrates apparently believes that such a case is impossible, or at least impossible as the only instance of not knowing what one knows, and we must wonder why. But for now, it is less important to see the grounds for this judgment than to see its implications for the argument as a whole. False opinion will necessarily exist, according to this stronger suggestion, if it is possible not to know what one knows. Socrates is not, then, treating this possibility merely as a condition of false opinion—though it is that—but also as a kind of cause, for it entails that false opinion must necessarily exist. And if someone were to understand the possibility of not knowing what one knows, and understand it as entailing false opinion, he would have a firmer trust in his very experience that false opinion exists. For by understanding why false opinion must necessarily exist, he would also know better that it does indeed exist. And he would then be more truly free of Protagoras' claim that all opinions are true.

Theaetetus, however, didn't notice this subtlety in Socrates' response to him, and indeed he could hardly have been expected to, at least not without reading the record of their conversation that Socrates will later help Euclides to write. And for the time being, Socrates apparently thought it unwise to insist upon this hint. Instead, he then offered his suggestion about knowledge being in us as in an aviary—a suggestion, as we have seen, which led back to the difficulty that Theaetetus had already understood, namely, that false opinion cannot exist unless it is possible not to know what one knows. Now Theaetetus' trust in his experience of false opinion, together with their earlier refutation of Protagoras, prevent him from denying that false opinion exists. On the other hand, his youthful concern for truth protects him from the facile “common sense” that would grant that we can not know what we know, though this seems self-contradictory to him, merely in order to retain his belief in false opinion. While he won't deny the existence of false opinion, neither will he say that we can know what we don't

know, or that false opinion is in any sense even possible, without understanding how this is true. And Socrates does not show him a way out of his perplexity. Yet this very perplexity may prove more fruitful to him than to be shown its resolution, for reasons that I can perhaps make clearer after trying to resolve the dilemma myself.

Let me now continue the argument where Theaetetus has given it up, and try to understand how it is possible not to know what one knows, and then to understand how this possibility not only allows for, but might even make necessary, the existence of false opinion. I will begin, however, with a certain detour. Since the dialogue examines perception at considerable length, it is helpful, and gives food for reflection, to take perception as an example of knowledge and ask how we can fail to perceive what we perceive. This procedure might, indeed, appear objectionable at first, since Theaetetus' suggestion that perception is knowledge has been refuted. But although perception is not an adequate response to the question "What is knowledge?," it can still be a sort of knowledge and thus serve as an example of it. Indeed, Socrates himself gives several hints that he believes this. For one thing, while arguing against Theaetetus' claim that perception is knowledge, he surprises us by saying that he too had said that it was (182e7–183a1; cf. 152c5–6). It's true that he later contends that there is no knowledge, or "touching of knowledge", in perception (186d10–e10). But this extreme claim involves such absurdities as that knowledge of the *being* of what is hard or what is soft is utterly distinct from the awareness, through the sense of touch, of their hardness or softness, as if their being could simply be separated from their being hard or soft (186a2–b9). Later, we will consider Socrates' reasons for suggesting such an impossible separation of perception from knowledge. But for now, it suffices to note that such separateness is unnecessary for his over-all conclusion that the two are not identical. A further hint that Socrates regards perception as a kind of knowledge is contained in his provisional account of knowledge as the preservation of memory-imprints in the "wax tablet" of our souls. For this account is untenable unless perception is also a kind of knowledge. Socrates shows his awareness of this fact when he says that we "forget and don't know" not only those perceptions whose imprints are rubbed away, but also those that can't be imprinted in our memory-tablets. For how can we forget what we never knew (191d9–e1; 188a2–4; cf. *Philebus* 33d2–34a1)? In other words, to know cannot mean to have a memory of our perceptions unless knowledge was already present in the perceptions themselves. It is for this reason, I think, that Socrates asks Theaetetus to say whether we can perceive without knowing, rather than affirming so himself (192e5–7). And this is also why he never repeats, in his later elaboration, the second of the three cases where false opinion had seemed possible, namely the case where one believes that something one "knows" is something else one "doesn't know, but perceives" (192c9–d1; 193b9–194b2). He doesn't repeat this case because it doesn't exist, because

there is no perception without knowledge. Perception is the awareness of what appears to our senses; what appears to us must be; and our awareness of it, however confused, is a kind of knowledge. It should no longer be surprising, then, that Socrates' refutation of the suggestion that true opinion is knowledge takes for granted that there is knowledge only eye-witnesses can have (201b7–c2). Therefore, to see how we can not know what we know, it will help if we understand how we can fail to perceive what we perceive.

To understand this possibility, it is useful, by way of contrast, to look at the dialogue's quasi-Protagorean account of perception, according to which not to perceive what we perceive is impossible. By this account, a perception is a kind of feeling that exists only in togetherness with its object, just as the object of a perception exists only along with it. Each of these pairs is utterly particular, and utterly distinct from every other. There is no perceiving being, other than or underlying each perception of its object. And neither is there any other being, apart from such pairs, that might appear one way at one time, or to one act of perception, and more or less differently at another, or to another. We can not, then, fail to perceive what we perceive, since there is nothing—or at least nothing with any stability, or no being—other than the object as it then exists for the momentary us, for us to fail to perceive. In contrast with this view, if we *can* fail to perceive what we perceive, the object of such perception must not be merely what it then is for us, or that appearance, but also something other. Now this suggestion about perception is in obvious accord with our experience, or what seems to be our experience. It is indeed possible for us to fail to perceive what we perceive, because we perceive the beings around us, but only from some particular perspective. And however favorable that perspective might be, it allows for only a limited awareness. We see a building, for example, but only its near side, and we touch only the outside of a stone. If we can fail to perceive what we perceive, we do so because each appearance of a being is only a certain aspect of that being.

This account of perception suggests how we can not know what we know. If perceiving is knowing, we could know the being that we perceive, insofar as it is its appearance to us, without knowing it exhaustively. Yet perception, though it may well be knowledge, is not all there is to knowledge, which we understand as requiring, or issuing in, true opinions about what we know. It would be helpful, then, to examine opinion, and in particular true opinion, and try to explain how knowledge and ignorance of the same thing can coexist in our opinions about it. And if we can do this in the case of opinion as such, or true opinion, we will then be better prepared to account for false opinion, which was our original concern. Moreover, we will also clarify our understanding of perception, since perception, as we know it from experience, never exists in isolation, but already implies the presence of opinion. Even in our most elementary perceptions, as in the perception of white, we are aware of it *as something white*, or *as a being that appears white* (compare 186d10–187a9 with 188e5–189c5). But it is the power of opinion that gives us awareness of the being as a being, or as something other

than mere white. Perception apart from opinion, if there could be such a thing, would grasp only white, and it is even hard to see how *this* white could be called white (184d1–e1; 186a9–b6; contrast 152b2–c8 with *Sophist* 264b1–3). Let me turn to opinion, then, and to the question of how, in opinion, we can fail to know what we know.

To answer this question, it is helpful again to contrast the opposing claim that Socrates attributes to Protagoras. Perhaps Protagoras neglected, or perhaps he refused, to distinguish perception from opinion. But at all events, that most extreme claim about perception, which we have already sketched, is presented also as a claim about opinion (158e5–6; 161d3; 167a6–b4). According to this claim, what a sick man eats appears bitter to him—i.e. he believes that it is bitter—and for him it is so, while it appears to be, and is, the opposite to one who is healthy. And not only do both of these men hold true opinions, but neither of them can be made wiser, at least not about what he eats (166e3–167a1). Each of them, in other words, knows all there is to know about *his* food, presumably on the grounds that the bitter food exists only for the sick man, who believes it to be bitter, while the healthy man's pleasant-tasting food exists only for him. On this view, the same food couldn't have the power to taste different to the two men, and so neither of them can be ignorant of such a power. Neither of them can be also ignorant of what he knows. On the other hand, each of them *could* be ignorant about what he knows if the same food is of such a nature as to taste different to different men. More generally, if we can fail to know what we know, the subjects of at least some true opinions must not be merely what they seem to be, or what they show themselves as being, in those opinions, but also other than that. And this suggestion about opinion is also in obvious accord with our experience. For the beings that we think about have the power, or so we assume, to show themselves in various ways, and not necessarily all of them together. The same stone, for example, that someone now knows, or truly believes, to be white might also show itself to another as being hard, or as being heavy, while still being the same stone. If we can fail, in our opinions, to know what we know, this is because those opinions reveal only certain aspects of their subjects.

We understand better why opinion can be thus limitedly revealing—and indeed why it is unavoidably so limited—if we examine more closely the character of our opinions. Opinions are silent statements to oneself, and they have the same form as the spoken kind. To believe is to believe something about something (cf. 189e4–190a6). Now what is believed about the subject, or the predicate, is that it possesses some feature (or features) in common with other beings, some feature in terms of which it belongs to a certain class. To believe that a stone is white, for example, is to believe that it possesses, along with other bodies, the character of whiteness. Our thought of it *as white* has not distinguished it from those other bodies. And if further opinions can distinguish that subject from the other members of its class, this must be through other predicates, or in terms of other features that it possesses. But that it *possesses* certain features means,

among other things, that it is not identical with those features. Accordingly, there must be more to the subject than can be thought as any predicate. Now to see this more clearly, let us consider in particular those primary opinions that state the very being of a subject, as distinct from its other actions or attributes. To believe about a tree, for example, that it is a tree is to think of it only insofar as it belongs to a certain class—the class of trees—along with other beings that have similar characteristic features. For it to *be* a tree is to possess the characteristics that it possesses as a member of that class. Yet the characteristics in terms of which it belongs to its class, and which we have in mind when we think about it as a tree, are no more than important aspects of the particular tree. Even in this case, then, there must be more to the subject than is known or thought about it as the predicate. There must be more to it than what it is. And nothing that we can think about is so simple or incomposite that it lacks such otherness. Even “elements” themselves, if we can think about them, are what they are by their belonging to various classes and their capacity for being parts of various wholes (cf. 203b2–5; 207d3–208a8). And so even they are also other than what they are thought to be, or than what they are. Every subject of opinion, then, is also other than any or all of its possible predicates, including those predicates that are presupposed in our very names of the subjects as the kinds of beings they are.

This limitation to our opinions is one that Socrates doesn’t shrink from acknowledging. For he asks Theaetetus, as if in passing, the following question: “Secondly, to believe this [to be] other, and the other this, how is this not much unreasonableness, that the soul, with knowledge present, knows nothing and is ignorant of everything?” (199d2–5). Now the simpler argument, within which Socrates sandwiches this odd question, asks instead how knowledge can make us ignorant, and it is in response to that question that Theaetetus posits birds of ignorance, together with those of knowledge, in the soul. There, however, there was no question of our being ignorant of everything, but only of some things. This more extreme suggestion, which Theaetetus never seems to notice, reveals Socrates’ awareness that in all our thinking, knowledge and ignorance of the same beings must go together. Already in grasping a being enough to know that it is a being, or a kind of being, let alone in any further thoughts or predications about it, our thinking must suppose “this [to be] other, and the other this.” And however true this supposition may be, however much a being may be what it is believed to be—and it must somehow be this, if it is somehow known—it is also other, and to an extent unknown. There is an unavoidable recalcitrance of things to their being fully known, a recalcitrance that is not so much “unreasonableness” as it is a limit to reason.

Now it is true, however, that what we know of the subjects of our opinions is not limited to any, or all, of their predicates. Yet the remainder of what we do know, in the case of particular beings, is only their appearances to our perception, at least if we extend the term perception to include such awarenesses as that of the particular oneness of each being, as well as our inner awareness of our

own thoughts and feelings. And since all opinions are ultimately opinions about particular beings—even if their immediate subjects are aspects of those beings, or classes of them, or relationships among them, or images deriving from them—we can treat perception in this wider sense as our only original access to that in beings which cannot be grasped as their common features. Yet we have already contended that sense-perception, which must always be from some particular perspective, perceives only limited aspects of beings. Moreover, further sense-perception can never overcome this limitation, if only because a body, as body, reveals only its surface, at least when it is still, and conceals what is beneath. And as for inner “perception” or self-awareness, it suffices to note that in every one of our thoughts and feelings, the act of thinking or feeling is other, at least in some sense, than its object. Yet our primary awareness is of the object, and we are only somewhat aware of the act, or the happening, itself. This limitation, moreover, in our awareness of that act could only be overcome, if at all, by regarding it as the object of still another, still somewhat mysterious, act of awareness. We may indeed come to know the character of these acts as of any others, and be sufficiently aware of them to know that they are somewhat dark to us, but they remain somewhat dark for all that. Our self-awareness, then, like our awareness of all other beings, can never be exhaustive. The subjects of our opinions are more than we can ever grasp of them, and our knowledge of them is necessarily accompanied by ignorance.

Since the subjects of true opinion possess certain characteristics—in terms of which we know them as what they are—while also being other than we are aware of them as being, then it is possible not to know what one knows. And this means that false opinion is also possible, at least in the sense that it need not yet be ruled out as self-contradictory. Now to further understand the possibility of false opinion, we should note that the possession of even one characteristic implies the possession of more than one. A being that is a tree, for example, is also one and a being. It is also similar to other trees and dissimilar to whatever is not a tree, while being the same as itself and different from everything else. A number of characteristics, in other words, must be present in any subject. Yet our very awareness of characteristics presupposes that not all of them are compatible with one another. For a number to be odd is incompatible, for example, with its being even; someone who is standing cannot simultaneously be sitting; and what is at rest cannot simultaneously be in motion, at least not in the same respects. Now with these considerations in mind, let us consider how false opinion might exist. To do so, we may take, as an example of it, Socrates’ own example, namely that of someone who adds five and seven to make eleven. When a person does this, his mistake is not to suppose, as Socrates pretends, that twelve is eleven (196b4–6). The subject of his false opinion is not twelve, but rather “five and seven,” and these numbers are not merely what they are thought to be when we think of them as five and as seven. They have more characteristics than that. And in particular, they have the characteristic, when added together, of be-

ing twelve, just as twelve units do. Yet this characteristic is incompatible with that of being eleven. We can be ignorant of five and seven, then, even though we know them, if we fail to know that they are also twelve. And we can be ignorant of the character of being eleven, even though we know it well enough to know that eleven units possess it, if we think that the sum of five and seven can also have this character. It is thus not inconceivable that someone could hold the false opinion that five and seven are eleven. In general, we can hold false opinions, even though we know their subjects and even though we know what we mean by their predicates, because these subjects and predicates are multifaceted, and our knowledge of them can thus coexist with ignorance.

The argument has made some progress, now, in showing how false opinion is possible. It has done this by first showing how it is possible, and even to an extent unavoidable, to fail to know what one knows. And it has then suggested how there might be false or mistaken opinions. But even though the argument has helped to explain the possibility of false opinion, it has not yet shown, as Socrates has also led us to expect, that false opinion must *necessarily* exist. After all, it isn't clear that there have to be mistakes, just because there might be. And though knowledge may be unavoidably limited, a limited knowledge of something is not necessarily false opinion about it, at least not evidently. It is still not clear, then, why the only knowing beings couldn't be such flawless knowers or learners that they avoid all false opinion. Though this couldn't happen, of course, while there are humans, why couldn't it happen at some other time?

Further reflection, however, suggests that if knowledge is necessarily limited, then there must be false opinion for there to be true opinion. For opinion can be false, in a sense, even without its being mistaken, that is, even without our attributing to a being something incompatible with its actual characteristics. For as we have seen, any opinion about anything states that its subject has some character, in common with other members of its class. Yet however true the opinion may be, or however much its subject may be what it is thought to be, that subject is also other than, and so it is also *not*, what has been thought about it. And this is true in particular of the fundamental opinions about the being of things, or about what they are as distinct from what attributes they have. A particular tree, to take our earlier example, is not merely those aspects of itself that belong to its character as a tree. To think, then, that it is a tree is to think that what it is is something that it is also not, or to think that it is the same as what it is also other than. And this means, in other words, that the true opinion about it is also false (cf. 189d4–190d2; *Sophist* 262c5–263d5). Indeed, all our true opinions about the being of things, or those true opinions implied in the common nouns with which we name beings, are not only true but also false. And even if this falsity may be overcome, to an extent, through more careful reflection about what it means to be something, it cannot be overcome at all without first being recognized as such. False opinion, then, emerges as a kind of necessity if there is to be truth, and not just an accidental fact.

The possibility of not knowing what one knows has now emerged as a true cause, and not merely a condition, of false opinion, and so the argument has fulfilled Socrates' demand that it explain why false opinion must exist. It might seem, then, that we have transformed the status of false opinion from that of a mere fact, and a precarious "fact" at that, one whose very existence is even doubtful, to that of an intelligible necessity. But this isn't entirely true. For our argument has assumed from the beginning that Protagoras is wrong, or that false opinion *does* exist in fact. Trust in this assumption is what compelled us to acknowledge the possibility of not knowing what one knows, and thus to suggest that the subjects of opinion both are, and are other than, what we are aware of them as being. Accordingly, to use this last suggestion to show that false opinion must exist is to argue in a circle, and it would be ridiculous to suppose that we have dispensed with the need for that initial trust. It should hardly come as a surprise, however, to discover this weakness of the argument. For the existence of false opinion is presupposed by any argument, even an argument that intends to uncover the so-called absurdity of that presupposition. No matter, then, how much we learn about what false opinion is and why it exists, our knowledge can never be completely independent of trust in its existence as a fact. Facts, in general, can never be fully explained, they can never be fully understood as being necessary, by any possible knowledge of their causes. Even knowledge of the "highest" causes must assume the existence of some mere facts, such as the fact that there is false opinion. Instead of escaping the need for these assumptions, all we can do is to deepen and clarify the knowledge that is already present in them, by showing that their consequences, or presuppositions, are not self-contradictory and that they even make sense (cf. *Phaedo* 101d3–e3). We know that false opinion exists because we understand that it is possible not to know what one knows, and we understand that this is possible because we know that false opinion exists.

This account has been only a very limited, though necessarily limited, explanation of false opinion. Yet if it has helped at all, and if, as I have suggested, Socrates had something like it in mind, there remains the question of why he didn't say so more explicitly himself. Why, after leading Theaetetus into the impasse we've been discussing, didn't he show him the way out? Now to answer this question, it helps to begin by looking more closely at why Theaetetus was so perplexed. For in fact, his trouble is not simply with the apparent contradiction in the phrase "not knowing what one knows." He is aware that words have various senses, and he doesn't hesitate to grant that someone with one eye closed, who sees with the one eye what he doesn't with the other, does not see what he sees. His refusal to allow this possibility, in the case of knowing, comes, rather, from an implicit belief that knowledge is so high and pure a thing that only perfect knowledge is really knowledge (cf. 188a1–b2; *Phaedrus* 247d6–e2). He not only believes, in other words, that there *is* a perfect knowledge, or a complete

knowledge that is free of all taint of ignorance, but also that nothing less can genuinely count as knowledge. To be sure, Theaetetus does not know that he thinks this, and he would probably even deny that he does, if asked. After all, he says that he's learning some geometry, which means that he knows it, but imperfectly (145c7–9; cf. 146c7–d2). And yet he betrays his hidden belief not only when he calls it impossible not to know what one knows, but also when he speaks of the difference between true opinion and a reasoned account. What he agrees to there, and only partly at Socrates' suggestion, is that to *know* something, or to have an account of it, one must know all of its parts, or elements, and each of them so perfectly that one never fails to recognize it, wherever it might appear. According to this view, someone who is ever mistaken about any of these parts, even in other contexts, doesn't even have an imperfect knowledge of the whole, but only true opinion. For example, if someone misspells *The-o-do-rus* as *Te-o-do-rus*, he can't *know* how to spell the name *The-ae-te-tus*, or even its first syllable, no matter how correctly he happens to spell it. In Theaetetus' words, such a one doesn't *yet* know how to spell it (207d10–208a5). The only genuine knowledge, for Theaetetus, is perfect knowledge, and it is this view of knowledge that leads him to deny that one can fail to know what one knows.

Theaetetus' belief in the purity of genuine knowledge helps to explain, moreover, his weakness for the Protagorean doctrine. For his belief implies that what something really is, or the thing itself, is completely hidden from us, no matter how much we learn about it, unless we know it perfectly. Consequently, despite his awareness of knowing something about all kinds of things, he is never quite free from the painful suspicion that he doesn't really know anything at all. Now Protagoras assuages this pain, after a fashion, with his claim that there are no beings, apart from one's own particular thoughts or feelings, to fail to know. This claim even suggests, in fact, at least at first hearing, that we can have a kind of perfect knowledge, a knowledge untouched by any ignorance (cf. 151e6–152e10). There is, then, a deep kinship between Theaetetus' lofty dream of knowledge in its purity and Protagorean relativism. And it is this kinship that Socrates plays upon when he leads Theaetetus to the impasse that there is no false opinion unless one can not know what one knows.

This fuller account of the source of Theaetetus' perplexity now allows us to understand better why Socrates didn't try to show him the way out. For if Socrates had simply told him that it is possible, and even necessary, not to know what one knows because the subjects of opinion both are, and are other than, what we are aware of them as being, Theaetetus might well have agreed too easily. For this new opinion would still coexist in him along with the contradictory one that the only real knowledge is perfect knowledge. And if Socrates had begun instead by explaining that knowledge doesn't have to be perfect knowledge, in order to be knowledge, Theaetetus would have thought that he already knew that. Even when his own responses in the dialogue have betrayed that he doesn't know it well enough—or that he doesn't “really” know it, as I was about to

write—Socrates couldn't use these words as proof, since Theaetetus would still have supposed that they were just slips of the tongue. It is practically impossible to tell others what they themselves unconsciously believe, especially when those beliefs offend both common sense and public opinion. Socrates, like a good midwife, knows better than to try to force his way out of this difficulty, and he cares too much for Theaetetus to pretend that it doesn't exist.

Instead of trying to tell Theaetetus that he holds the opinion, and the false opinion, that only perfect knowledge, or a "knowledge" he doesn't have, is really knowledge, Socrates leads him to where he might see this for himself. Rather than attack his hidden belief, Socrates' approach is to encourage in him the hope that he might actually acquire, in their present inquiry, the kind of knowledge he believes in (cf. 202d1–5). Thus, he suggests that the knowable aspects of the beings around us can be grasped in complete separation from their merely perceptible features. And when Theaetetus suggests that the soul grasps these intelligibles "itself by itself," independently of any bodily organs, Socrates encourages this belief—a belief which is, or rather used to be, his own as well—by calling him "beautiful, and not ugly" for saying so, even though his body is visibly ugly. Socrates wants Theaetetus to hope, then, that his pure soul, or his true self, which is beautiful, might come to grasp the knowable essence of things—and of knowledge, in particular—without any reliance on the senses at all, or without any admixture of bodily imperfection on the part of the knower or the known (185d7–186e8; 189c5–7; cf. 176a5–177a8). But while feeding this hope, Socrates also takes away any safety net by promoting Theaetetus' illusion that only such perfect knowledge is really knowledge at all. For when Theaetetus' suggestions about what knowledge is are shown to be faulty, incomplete, or perhaps just insufficiently clear, he treats them as if they were mere wind-eggs, or stillborn children, who must be completely rejected. Thus, for example, he says that neither (a) perception, nor (a) true opinion, nor (a) reasoned account together with (a) true opinion is (a) knowledge, as if something that wasn't complete knowledge, or that could coexist in any way with ignorance, was simply not knowledge. He invites Theaetetus to think that his fruitful suggestions are not even "worthy of nurture" (209d4–210b10; cf. 187b9–c2; but contrast 201c4–d4, and consider 150c3 and 151e6).

By promoting in Theaetetus the hope for a perfect knowledge of knowledge, while supporting his belief that only this is really knowledge of it, Socrates leads him towards feeling that he doesn't know anything about knowledge at all. Yet this feeling, which is a belief in which no one can have much trust (cf. 187c2; 210c3), might turn out to be a fruitful one. For Socrates' earlier arguments have already foreclosed the Protagorean escape, or pseudo-escape, from this perplexity. And yet the argument has also forced Theaetetus to see, if only he will, that his acknowledged belief in the impossibility of not knowing what one knows, which follows from his concealed belief that knowledge must be perfect, is equivalent to the Protagorean absurdity that there is no false opinion. If he faces

his situation, then, he might notice that his belief, which he also doesn't believe, that he's completely ignorant about knowledge comes from the same illusion about it as does his weakness for Protagoras' denial of false opinion. He might come to understand for himself how it is possible not to know what one nonetheless also knows, and for there to be false opinion. He might come to know, and to know that he knows, that it is equally faulty to identify knowledge with perfect knowledge as it is to try to circumscribe it as being mere opinion. He might come to know, in other words, and to know that he knows, that being is neither wholly other than, nor wholly the same as, we are aware of it as being, that it is neither just its back side nor just its front side. And if he knew this well enough, he might more truly begin to philosophize. There is, however, no evidence within the dialogue that Theaetetus will be able to go so far. Yet Socrates can not compel him to succeed. He can hardly do more for Theaetetus than what he does here, except, perhaps, what he does later when he helps Eucleides to remember, and to record, their conversation (cf. 143a1–4).