

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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The Victory of Sophistry in Plato's *Theaetetus*

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Plato's *Theaetetus* is extremely philosophical. It consists largely of extensive theoretical disquisitions and challenging arguments about cosmological, metaphysical, and epistemological matters. Any thorough investigation of the dialogue must examine these long passages. The dramatic action of the dialogue, however, is no less important. The dialogues are plays, with plots. One must analyze the interlocutors, discover their motives, their strengths and weaknesses; what they really think, in case they are not openly saying it. The full meaning of the theoretical passages does not emerge until they are reconsidered in their dramatic context.

The provocative title of this essay does not mean that sophistry as such is closer to the truth or a better life than philosophy as such. What it names is a triumph that the sophist Protagoras¹ enjoys on this occasion, on the dramatic level, over a character in the dialogue, Theaetetus²—a triumph that Socrates abets. Now, the putative theme of this dialogue is “What is knowledge?” This is the question which Socrates raises and returns to despite the lengthy digressions. Thus, this essay will eventually relate Theaetetus's defeat to the question, “What is knowledge?”

Considerations of space preclude any detailed description of the course of the drama. This paper must focus tightly on three of its key features. Readers

¹ The picture of Protagoras presented here is indebted to Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 117 and n47, and *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 55ff.; Seth Benardete, “*Theaetetus* Commentary,” in *The Being of the Beautiful* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Robert C. Bartlett, *Sophistry and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

² The discussion of Theaetetus here is highly indebted to indications by Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*. A few points of especial relevance are referenced in notes below.

must familiarize themselves with the rest on their own; but it is a worthwhile and necessary project temporarily to resist immersion in the extremely rebarbative theoretical passages to ask oneself what is going on between the human beings.

Still, we now review the whole story, however fragmentarily, to help readers orient themselves. The dialogue is in two parts: much the longer part is a conversation between Socrates and two others—one Theodorus of Cyrene, a wandering teacher of mathematics, astronomy, harmony, and so forth; and Theaetetus, a student of his, a quite brilliant boy in his teens. This encounter takes place on the very day in which Socrates meets the indictment against him at the court.

This whole conversation is introduced by a brief frame whose dramatic date is much later; Theaetetus is dying, having been gravely wounded while fighting bravely in battle. Two old friends of Socrates meet and discuss the sad news. Now, history reveals to us that Theaetetus grew up to be a brilliant mathematician; some of his accomplishments are remembered to this day. One friend, named Euclides, recalls that Socrates had correctly predicted “noteworthy”³ things from Theaetetus on the basis of one conversation (*Tht.* 142d2). He says nothing as to the specific character of Socrates’s prediction, but, whether because of the prediction or not, he has actually made this particular conversation into a book. The two friends go to his house and the book is read aloud to them and us. Euclides’s comments on his editing of Socrates’s reports of the conversation (143b5–c6) reveal that he had no interest in its dramatic aspect—which the length and the dazzling character of its theoretical portions may explain, but do not excuse. We must remedy his lack of insight.

The conversation, thus semi-reproduced for us, runs roughly as follows. In a gymnasium Socrates accosts Theodorus and asks if he has any promising students; Theodorus says that Theaetetus is the best student he has ever seen. The boy then joins them, and after some preliminaries Socrates asks him to answer the question, “What does knowledge [*epistēmē*] seem to you to be?” (146c4). Considerable prodding and jockeying ensue; Theaetetus first offers a list as a definition; Socrates gives the midwife speech. Finally, Theaetetus says that knowledge is perception.

³ All translations from the Greek are by this author.

Socrates responds by claiming that Theaetetus is saying the same thing that the famous sophist Protagoras meant in a book of his when he wrote that “man is the measure of all things.” This is far from obvious, but Theaetetus accepts the assertion. It emerges that Theaetetus has read Protagoras’s book. Soon after, Socrates says that Protagoras in turn meant the very same thing that Heraclitus and all the other philosophers, including Homer, meant when they said that everything is in flux. Theaetetus does not follow but is willing to believe it. Two-thirds of the dialogue is then devoted to an exposition and refutation of these doctrines about flux—that is, not directly exploring the question “What is knowledge?”

In the middle of this comes a digression in which Socrates describes the philosophers whom he calls “the leaders” (173c6). Then there is a refutation of the flux doctrine, after which Socrates forces a return to the question of knowledge, although Theaetetus wants to linger over deep philosophical problems that have just been raised.

Having thus returned to the question of knowledge, they refute Theaetetus’s original definition. Theaetetus then tries two other definitions; but by the end of the dialogue (after one last, long, thorny, and fruitless digression on the possibility of false opinion) those too have been refuted, and the conversation ends with no positive conclusion whatsoever about the putative theme of knowledge.

At this point Socrates reveals that he must go to be indicted at the court. Some minutes after this he is having the conversation reported in the *Euthyphro* in the outer porch of the court building.

We will now examine two crucial features of the drama, comprising sections 1 and 2 below. The third feature and the relation of all three to the question “What is knowledge?” are treated in section 3.

1

Socrates decides to let Theaetetus be a mathematician: he does not try to convert him to philosophy as he himself lives it.⁴ As mentioned above, Theaetetus grows up to be a distinguished mathematician, but Euclides’s remark was unrevealing as to what in particular Socrates’s prediction was about, whether it was about mathematics, philosophy, or loyal civic bravery. Socrates’s old friends may be oblivious to any important distinction between

⁴ See Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*, 1:131.

being a mathematician and being a (Socratic) philosopher. We must not imitate them in this.

Admittedly and importantly, Socrates himself obscures this difference in the conversation. Socrates calls geometry “a philosophy” (143d4), and his later description of those engaging in “philosophies” clearly includes Theodorus (and perhaps Theaetetus) (172c4). Recall that Theaetetus has read Protagoras’s book; indeed, he has read a key part of it “often” (152a6). Thus he has intellectual interests and ambitions beyond mathematics in the direction of philosophy. Nothing in the conversation, however, would make Theaetetus draw a distinction between mathematics and philosophy, and so he leaves it thinking that mathematics is “a philosophy,” that he can further his aspirations to philosophy through mathematics. Furthermore, Socrates intimates here that mathematics is superior to Socratic philosophy in an important respect. Indeed, for all that he has been pushed around in arguments by Socrates, Theaetetus leaves thinking that in this important respect he, Theaetetus, is superior to Socrates—he is more likely to *attain knowledge*,⁵ and Socrates deliberately lets him go with that opinion.

In the midwife speech, Socrates in effect says to Theaetetus that every time he tries to advance in wisdom (“become pregnant”) he must come to Socrates. In the speech (150d2–e8) Socrates describes people who were entirely ignorant or unlearned (*amatheis*, from the same root as “mathematics”), but who then associated with Socrates and started becoming very impressive both to themselves and other people. Then they thought they did not need Socrates any longer, so they dropped the acquaintanceship. As a result, they started “having miscarriages”; they brought up unfertilized eggs instead of real infants (and so on), and presently they were once again *amatheis* in their own and others’ eyes. The speech seems like a rebuke to Theaetetus for never having sought Socrates out and a warning lest he suffer the same fate (150d–151c). It would be a stern one, given how intellectually ambitious Theaetetus is, and how much he turns out to have heard about Socrates without ever seeking him out (see below).

Thus the midwife speech; but there is a striking difference between all this and what Socrates says at the end of the dialogue. There he says, “If, after this, you attempt to become pregnant, Theaetetus, and do become pregnant, you’ll be filled with better [thoughts] than these thanks to the present search” (210b8–c1). He drops the insistence that if he becomes pregnant again,

⁵ See *ibid.*, 161, for a striking discussion of this.

Theaetetus must come back to Socrates. Does Socrates think that Theaetetus has become immune to false pregnancy “thanks to the present search,” such that he no longer needs someone to examine whether his offspring is an unfertilized egg or a real child? That is highly unlikely on the basis of the conversation as recorded. Theaetetus is extremely intelligent, but by no means is he beyond the need for a critical interlocutor. Socrates here is, subtly but firmly, dismissing Theaetetus.

Socrates is going to be dead soon, so perhaps there is little point in encouraging Theaetetus to associate with him. On this point, however, Seth Benardete says something worth recalling. If Theaetetus had turned out to be somebody that Socrates was more interested in—“someone for whom Socrates could have been of decisive help,” as Benardete specifies⁶—might Socrates have taken steps to delay his death? It goes too far to think seriously that Socrates would have gotten out of dying just to nurture Theaetetus, but the direction of Benardete’s remark is the right one: Theaetetus did not arouse in Socrates a desire to pursue him. And Socrates does not tell Theaetetus to be sure to find another midwife in case he should no longer be around, which he easily could have said. Instead, he leaves him with Theodorus and with his sense of self-sufficiency, an ungrounded one as regards philosophy. As regards mathematics is a different question.

As to what in particular Theaetetus knows about Socrates: just before the midwife speech Socrates asks Theaetetus whether he has heard that Socrates is an absurd person and drives people to impasses. Theaetetus acknowledges that this is indeed what he hears (149a8). But this is not all: Theaetetus has heard about Socrates’s questions and deliberately imitates him, but he has never sought him out (148e1–5). He thinks that he has already gotten all he needs from Socrates just from hearing that Socrates asks questions, obviously including “What is...?” questions. He thinks that anyone sufficiently intelligent knows how to ask those.⁷ The midwife speech does not convince Theaetetus that he was wrong in all this. He has believed the gossip about Socrates in concluding that he would be just as good at arriving at results. After all, Socrates seems never to arrive at positive results at all, and indeed proclaims to Theaetetus that he has never had a “[wise] discovery” born in his soul (150c8–d1). Theaetetus does acknowledge that his attempts at imitation

⁶ Ibid., 89. However, Socrates could still have found him an interesting object of study for a while. In the last sentence of the dialogue he agrees to come back the next day; and he does appear, thus setting up *Sophist*.

⁷ On the difficulty of asking a “What is...” question correctly, see Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*, 1:99.

have been barren so far, but the equally barren results of the present conversation can only strengthen his belief that Socrates will be of little positive help in attaining knowledge. And Theaetetus does not want to become a Socratic midwife. All this negates any effect the minatory examples of the midwife speech may have had. Reflecting on the extremely aporetic tenor of the conversation, especially the end, suggests that Socrates intended all of this.

By the end of the dialogue Protagoras is no longer an attractive model to Theaetetus either: there is no historical evidence that he pursued natural philosophy at all. Rather, he continued his mathematical studies, leading to his actually amounting to something. Socrates hoped for all this too, it seems, for nothing in the conversation seems to threaten Theaetetus's confidence in mathematics.

2

The second crucial feature of the drama is Protagoras's victory. It consists in this: for all the time Socrates spends on Protagoras, Theaetetus and Theodorus fail to see Protagoras's true doctrine. Socrates drops hints and warnings about it: he gives these two a chance to understand what Protagoras truly holds. He indeed supplies enough for us to understand what Protagoras truly holds. However, they fail to understand either his doctrine or his private reasons for his way of life: they fail to pierce deceptions which he has put forward in front of himself.

Recall that Socrates is dealing with a saying from a book by Protagoras, which he quotes as follows: "Man is the measure of all things, of the things which are, that [or: how] they are, of the things which are not, that [or: how] they are not" (152a3–6). Then Socrates unexpectedly asks, "Wasn't Protagoras all-wise, and didn't he speak in riddles to us, the common dust-heap, while saying the truth in secret to his pupils?" (152c6–8). There is a secret teaching behind the written utterance. Socrates soon points out the riddling falsehood in the famous saying: the word "*are*," as in "things which *are*." "Are" and "are not" are not truly applicable to things. Nothing "is" or "is not": everything is pure becoming (152d8–e1); the flux doctrine, as we have called it.

Thus we seem to have arrived at the secret teaching. But later, after a set of elaborate descriptions, with the full flux doctrine laid out, Socrates points out another perplexity. Their conversation has concluded that if the flux doctrine is correct, then every man's opinion is true—so then, why would anyone need a teacher? But Protagoras is a teacher. His doctrine conflicts with his profession.

Socrates says, “How shall we say that Protagoras was not just singing beguiling songs in saying these things?...[Aren't all attempts at teaching] immense foolishness if the *Truth* of Protagoras is true and he was not joking when it cried out from the shrine of his book?” (161d8–162a3). Is then the secret flux doctrine a joke? Or what? Somewhat later Socrates reveals that it is not even a secret doctrine. It *used to be* a secret doctrine: the ancients hid it from the many with their poetry. However, the moderns, including Protagoras, declare it openly (180d4–8). Is there then no secret doctrine? Or is there something even more secret? And how would an even more secret doctrine resolve the tension between the now-public flux doctrines and Protagoras's profession?

These questions are answered by a speech which Socrates puts into Protagoras's mouth. We must note that Socrates does not present anything that Protagoras actually said; nor does he give his own unvarnished interpretation of what Protagoras actually thinks; instead, he tells Theaetetus and Theodorus what Protagoras would say if Protagoras were here.

Here is what Protagoras would say (166d–167c). He does not teach the truth, as opposed to falsehoods; it is impossible to do that. Rather, he replaces worse perceptions with better ones. He gives an example or model: wine in itself is neither sweet nor bitter. Sweetness or bitterness is a property of an interaction between (evanescent states of) human being and wine. But sweet is a better perception of wine than bitter, because someone who perceives it to be sweet is healthy and someone who perceives it to be bitter is ill. So the doctor does not teach the patient truer perceptions but rather replaces worse perceptions with better perceptions. Protagoras applies this model to the sophist and the orator.

The wise and good orators make the good [*ta chrēsta*] things instead of the evil seem to be just to the cities. For as many things as seem just and noble to a city *are* just and noble to it, so long as it holds them to be so; but the wise man causes good [*chrēsta*] things, instead of things which are evil to them in each case, to be and to seem [just and noble]. And by the same rule the sophist, too, who is able to educate his pupils in this same way, is both wise and worthy of much remuneration from those thus educated. And *in this way* some men are wiser than others and, at the same time, no one thinks falsely and you, whether you want to or not, must endure being a measure. (167c1–d4; emphasis added)

In what way is it true that man is the measure of all things? Protagoras has just retracted the radical version of “man is the measure of all things.”⁸ Man

⁸ Prof. Bartlett suggests that Protagoras did include goods in his radical flux (thus secretly

is the measure of physical perceptibles, like sweet and bitter. Something called “the city,” on the other hand, is the measure of the just and noble. But neither the individual nor the city is the measure of the good. The good is good whether the city, the patient, or the student thinks so or not. There exist goods, but apparently that has nothing to do with that of which the city is the measure, namely, justice or nobility.

This is more sinister than the more radical version of “man is the measure.” If some decent man on the street hears, “Protagoras thinks there’s an objective good or objective advantage, but no objective justice or nobility,” he would reply that Protagoras thinks like a criminal. By contrast, after Socrates finishes this speech he tells Theodorus that he has given a very weak defense of Protagoras, but Theodorus loves the defense. He says that Socrates must be joking, for the defense was *neanikos*—that is, “very [perhaps excessively] vigorous” (168c8). And Theaetetus is silent. Theodorus and Theaetetus lack a kind of suspiciousness or touchiness about these matters that less sophisticated, decent people have. But there is wisdom in the suspiciousness of the decent people.

Now, if there *is* a true good, an objective good, why cannot justice be based on it? Why cannot one say that it is just for the orator to serve the good of the city, whether or not this seems “just” to the city itself? One could obviously ask the same question about the good of the student. And why was Protagoras’s speech so reticent about the bare existence of an objective good, let alone what it might be? Why is its indication of this fact so begrudging and unclear? The answer to all these questions is that there is a good, but there is no *common* good. There is no objective ground for a common good, either between orator and city, or between sophist and student.

Consequently, another part of the final doctrine behind the speech is that the good and wise orator pursues what is objectively good for himself and makes it seem just and noble to the city; and similarly, that the sophist pursues what is good for himself and makes it seem just, wise, noble, and good to and for the student. Interests can converge accidentally, but there is no guarantee of that. When they do not converge, orators and sophists follow

repudiating the speech that Socrates puts into his mouth here), and also that Socrates hinted at this somewhat later in the dialogue. Prof. Bartlett lays out profound reasons why Protagoras would want to do this. See Bartlett, *Sophistry and Political Philosophy*, 184ff., 200–203. All this is very powerful, but the present essay is less interested in Protagoras’s thought than in Socrates’s testing of Theaetetus, and it is difficult to see how Socrates could have expected Theaetetus to get the faintest inkling of any of this from Socrates’s later comments, let alone from the speech itself.

their own good. And why not? There is no “good of the city” to set against them. In fact, Socrates earlier had denied in Protagoras’s name that there was any such thing as “the city” (157c), and we now see the relevant sense in which that is so. There is a group of people, but each of them has a set of individual selfish goods: the good orator naturally prefers his own selfish good to that of others.⁹

Taking the thrust of the speech as definitive, we arrive at this: Protagoras’s subjectivism, which he first pretends to extend to the good, covers up an objective conflict of interest. This is why his true opinion is hidden. What would the objective good be in Protagoras’s true opinion? There is a tradition that Protagoras died the wealthiest man in Greece, and there are various references in the dialogue to the vast estate that he left. This must weigh heavily in reflecting on what he thought truly worth pursuing. At least tentatively, one is inclined to conclude that in his true opinion the objective good is—vast wealth and great fame for wisdom. That is what he pursued, and that is what he got. Socrates intimates this at 180:

Isn't this so: we have received it from the ancients (although they concealed it from the many by poetry) that as it happens the genesis of all other things is Oceanus and Tethys—streams—and nothing is at rest; but also from the moderns who, being wiser, display it openly, so that even cobblers, having heard it, may know of their wisdom and, no longer thinking foolishly that some beings are at rest and others in motion but having learned that all of them are in motion, may honor them. (180c8–d8)

Here Protagoras cares about universal honor and wants the many, even cobblers, to think that he is wise. Notice that Socrates says that the moderns make the teaching public because they *are* wiser than the ancients. They are wiser because they know more fully what is good about the radical doctrine of flux. They have realized that this good does not consist in opining or contemplating the doctrine but rather in getting great honor from it. From this point of view, the difference between the sophist and the philosopher is their answer to the question of what is the highest good. They both believe that they possess human wisdom, but the content of that wisdom is different. For the philosopher the content of human wisdom is (among other things) that seeking wisdom about the beings is the highest good or the core of the best

⁹ We should note that Prof. Bartlett’s interpretation does not reinstate any ground for a common good. See *ibid.*, 185–86.

life. For the sophist, the content of that wisdom is that fame and wealth are among the highest goods if not indeed the highest simply.

There is a comical indication that Protagoras does not believe the flux doctrine in its radical form. Socrates's first refutation of "man is the measure of all things" runs roughly as follows. Grant that everyone's opinion is true; but most people do not agree with Protagoras: *their* opinion is that not every opinion is true. Socrates draws the inevitable conclusion:

SOCRATES: Then...when he concedes, to someone who has the opposite opinion, that he is saying the truth—then even Protagoras himself will agree that neither a dog nor some random person is a measure of even one thing which he has not learned. Or not?

THEODORUS: Yes, it is so.

SOCRATES: So, since it is disputed by everybody, the "truth" of Protagoras would be true to nobody, neither anyone else nor him.

THEODORUS: Socrates, we're attacking my old friend too much. (171b6–c8)

But Socrates is simply stating the facts as they had emerged from the earlier speech: no one believes the most radical version of "man is the measure of all things," starting with Protagoras himself.

Theaetetus and Theodorus remain blissfully unaware of all of this. They think to the end that Protagoras believes that man is the measure of all things; and they also think that in Protagoras's opinion the good orator pursues the good of the city and the sophist pursues the good of the student. This is exactly what Protagoras wants them to think about him: this is his triumph. He gets what he wants: he succeeds in manipulating their opinions.

Socrates refutes "man is the measure of all things": both Theodorus and Theaetetus are convinced that Protagoras is wrong about this. But Protagoras does not want irrefutability, he wants great fame and great wealth. Now, how does one get fame for wisdom? Not by irrefutability: the most seriously intended and wise doctrines are open to very difficult objections. Protagoras's alternative tactic is worth reflecting upon: he broadcasts elaborate, wonderful, bold, utterly radical cosmic doctrines, doing violence to ordinary language, flirting with self-contradiction, boldly stating things in the face of seemingly inextricable difficulties. In the end, any worked-out refutations are rare and do not gain wide attention. The doctrines are impressive to the vast majority. Some are impressed merely by the grandeur of the talk, which is all they see or care to see. As for the more analytical or intelligent, they tie themselves in

knots with the paradoxes, and they finally conclude, "This is beyond me—by Zeus, what a dazzling intellect Protagoras possesses!" Consider Theaetetus's reaction to the flux doctrine as Socrates expounds it (157d8–10). Theaetetus belongs to and is a kind of emblem of the stratum of the "intellectual" many that is vulnerable to the charm of this kind of talk. The same must be said of Euclides, Socrates's old friend from the introductory frame, who painstakingly preserved Socrates's reports of the conversation, but only the parts that dazzled him. Now, Protagoras has other skills, connected with teaching. Those are his main sources of income and another source of fame; and as to them, the grandeur and apparent depth of the doctrines on nature help cast the suspicious aspects of his pedagogy into the shade.

However, it would not be right to wonder how Protagoras can enjoy fame for a wisdom which he knows he does not possess; Protagoras does think that he is wise. The fame he gains from his exoteric doctrines is based on his hidden wisdom. His true but imperceptible wisdom is the secret source of the flux doctrine—just as imperceptible motions are the secret source, according to the flux doctrine, of the play of perception.

3

What is the relation of this drama to the question of what knowledge is? The answer to this begins with observing that Socrates has more in common with Protagoras than he does with Theaetetus and Theodorus: both Socrates and Protagoras seriously question the goodness of knowledge as such. At a certain time in his life Socrates began to ask, What kinds of knowledge are really worth having, and why? In the *Apology of Socrates* (22c–e) he goes to the artisans, and he finds out that they know many things while he knows nothing. Thus they are wiser than he is, and he has refuted the Delphic Oracle, the putative motive for his philosophizing in the first place. But he says that when he considered what he knew that he did not know, and what the artisans thought they knew but did not know, he decided that he was better off. As a result, he continued examining people, and the continuation of Socrates's career is premised on this belief, that the knowledge Socrates is seeking is more worth having than the knowledge the artisans already have.

For Theaetetus the first question is "What is knowledge?" whereas for Socrates the question became "What knowledge is really good?" or put more trenchantly, "What does wisdom about the good consist in?" Thus the real theme of the drama of the Theaetetus is "What does wisdom consist in?" or more narrowly, "What is the relation of wisdom to knowledge?"

Before Socrates raises the question of what knowledge is, Theaetetus accepts very easily that “wisdom and knowledge are the same thing” (145e). The whole discussion of “What is knowledge?” is carried out under the supposition that this question is identical with the question “What is wisdom?” In fact, however, this is denied twice in the dialogue, once implicitly and once explicitly.

In the flux doctrine, we have on one hand the claim that knowledge is perception, and on the other hand the claim that imperceptible agencies are the true source of perceptions (156a–157b). It follows that these true causes are unknowable. Nevertheless, let us imagine that the flux doctrine is true, and furthermore that it is wise to hold that the flux doctrine is true. In that case, wisdom would include opinion or hypothesis.¹⁰ That would be an opinion which, because of the nature of the case, one could never convert into knowledge, but it would nonetheless be wisdom. There is no guarantee to human beings that the truth about the most fundamental causes will turn out to be knowable.¹¹

Much more explicitly, Socrates in his own name says the following about wisdom:

God is nowhere and in no way unjust but is as just as it is possible to be, and there is nothing so much like him as whichever of us should become the most just in turn. The true cleverness of a man, and also his nothingness and cowardice, concern just this matter: for the cognition [*gnōsis*] of this is wisdom and true virtue, while the ignorance of it is stupidity and manifest vice; and the other sorts of seeming cleverness and wisdom that arise in political power are crude, and in the arts low. (176c1–10)

Wisdom is not the same as knowledge (or “cognition”) but is rather knowledge of certain very important things. Not all kinds of knowledge are worth having. Now, this speech is a myth (see below), but it very clearly raises the problem, and Theaetetus never catches on to it.

True, it was Socrates who first asked, “What is knowledge?” here. But investigating that question is not Socrates’s motive for asking it: for here we

¹⁰ “Wisdom” in this matter must include a judgment as to the goodness of holding the hypothesis. On this latter point, consider Leo Strauss’s claim that for Xenophon’s Socrates the good is an object of *phronēsis*, not of *sophia* (and so, presumably, not of *epistēmē* either). Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 119–20.

¹¹ Prof. Bartlett’s interpretation of Protagoras centers around this lack of any guarantee. Consult the passages cited in note 8 above.

have the third important facet of the drama. Socrates comes to the gym to ask that question because he has heard that one of Theodorus's brightest students is going about asking it and making himself offensive to people. This emerges after Socrates rejects Theaetetus's first account of knowledge (which, it will be recalled, is a list). In response to this rejection, Theaetetus gives a long mathematical example of the kind of answer that he thinks Socrates wants. At this point Socrates suggests that Theaetetus try to imitate that example in defining knowledge. Theaetetus responds: "But know well, Socrates, I have tried to look into that many times, hearing reports brought back of questioning [lit. "questionings," plural] by you. But on my part I can't convince myself that I have anything adequate to say, *nor can I hear anyone else speaking the way you demand*—nor, still, can I stop being concerned about it" (148d5–e5; emphasis added). Does Socrates's question here merely happen to touch upon the very matter that Theaetetus has been pressing upon other people? This concurrence is explained more reasonably by assuming that Socrates has gotten wind of Theaetetus's activities.

When Socrates first asks the question about knowledge, he does not address it exclusively to Theaetetus: he addresses it to a whole group of youths accompanying him, adding, "What do you (plural) say?" What ensues is a thundering silence. Socrates then says, "Why are you (plural) silent?" and continues, "I hope I haven't been boorish in my eagerness" (146a). The youths received his question not only with silence but with sullen looks: they are sick of the question, and they do not want to give Theaetetus another chance to be annoying about it.

Socrates is not surprised by this. Theodorus had said that Theaetetus is both very courageous and "exceptionally gentle [*pra(i)on*]" (144a), but Socrates has heard otherwise. At the very end of the dialogue, in a sentence already quoted in part, Socrates says to Theaetetus, continuing the midwife metaphor: "If you remain barren, you will be less harsh and gentler/civilized [*hēmerōteros*] with your companions" (210c). Theaetetus exhibits no signs of harshness in the conversation we see;¹² but Socrates has heard about it and has just confirmed it with the reaction of the other youths.

In sum: as discussed in section 1 above, Theaetetus hears reports about Socrates asking difficult questions, plural, and considers himself capable of asking them on his own. As he intimates here, he thinks that from the

¹² See Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*, 1:182. On Theaetetus's tendency to ingratiate himself to his elders, see *ibid.*, 93.

beginning he knew, and was seeking, the right way to speak in response to them, that is, the way that Socrates insists upon. On top of that, the one question he himself has fastened on is what knowledge is. Socrates comes to discover why. What kind of person thinks that this is the first Socratic question to ask? Or why does Theaetetus think this? There may be more than one type of person who thinks this.

Theaetetus's attraction to this question is connected to his inability to see through Protagoras: it is a wider inability or unwillingness to narrow in on important questions concerning knowledge—including but not limited to questions about its worth.

Theaetetus strongly presupposes that knowledge is one thing, and that a definition of it is extremely revealing. This, however, is not true. Consider *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 6 (1139b15), where Aristotle says: “The things by which the soul possesses truth by affirming or denying are five in number,” and then he lists instances. The phrase “that by which the soul” etc. sounds like it could be a definition of knowledge; but in the sequel what is of real interest is the list (*technē*, *epistēmē*, *phronēsis*, *sophia*, and *nous*). Perhaps one can give a global definition of knowledge, but it is not as interesting or important as examining the various kinds of knowledge.

In our dialogue there is an indication of this multiplicity in the “false opinion” section. With the famous “wax tablet” image, Socrates and Theaetetus explain to their complete satisfaction false opinion concerning perceived things. But there is another kind of false opinion that seems not to involve perception (thinking that $7 + 5 = 11$, for example). Clearly the wax tablet model is not going to explain this kind. Socrates says: “But then it's necessary, isn't it, to show that opining false things is anything whatever rather than a mismatch between thought and sense: for if it were that we would never be deceived in thoughts by themselves. As it is now, however, false opinion does not exist, or it is possible for someone not to know that which he knows” (196c). But it does not follow that false opinion does not exist if they cannot explain nonperceptual false opinion: they have already explained false opinion that arises from perception quite adequately. They have in fact just discovered that there are at least two different kinds of false opinion. The reason Theaetetus does not see this is that he does not expect there to be two kinds of false opinion, just as he assumes that there are not two kinds of knowledge. For, as Aristotle says somewhere in the *Posterior Analytics*, it is likely that a word has two meanings if its opposite has two meanings.

Plato's *Meno* points in the same direction, for in it Socrates asks Meno what something is (namely, virtue), Meno answers with a list, and Socrates rejects the answer. Soon past this point, Socrates tells Meno to look for that one thing which runs through all the virtues in just the way that something runs through health, and Meno responds, "Somehow it seems to me, Socrates, that this is no longer the same kind of thing" (73a). Meno does not think that any one thing common to all the virtues is substantial or important. Socrates must prod him into continuing the investigation as though it were. Theaetetus, by contrast, goes right along with the same demand. Is Theaetetus right and Meno wrong? The following, from the *Politics* of Aristotle, is relevant here:

The moderation of a woman and of a man are not the same...and it is similar with the other [virtues] too.... Those who speak in general terms, that "to have a soul in good condition is virtue"...or some such thing, deceive themselves. Those who enumerate the virtues, as Gorgias did, speak in a much better way than do those who define [in general terms]. (1260a20)

Meno should have stood his ground, and reflecting on Aristotle's example both here and in the *Ethics* suggests that one is better off looking into the different kinds of knowledge than belaboring the question "What is 'knowledge'?"

To investigate the different kinds of knowledge is to be faced with the question as to which is the most important.¹³ Theaetetus very much *wants* knowledge to be truly one thing, for he very much wants it all, as such, to be wisdom and to be equally valuable, which (once again) is linked to his inability to see through Protagoras. Revealingly, the actual refutation of Theaetetus's definition of knowledge as perception happens very quickly and spontaneously: Theaetetus grants that sense-perception does not attain all the way to *ousia* ("essence" or "substance," 182b1–c7), and he immediately refuses to rank as knowledge anything that does not. This refusal obviously happens because he thinks it self-evident that any such thing is not exalted enough to merit the term.

All this is connected to a certain cowardice that dogs Theaetetus. This is not physical cowardice: recall his conduct in battle. Rather, he has a kind of philosophic cowardice. This cowardice is pointed to by the praise of philosophy in the middle of the dialogue, whose specific grounds reveal a great deal about Theaetetus. Socrates is in the middle of a complicated argument when

¹³ See *ibid.*, 175.

he suddenly stops and exclaims over how many more arguments are facing them. Theodorus says, "Aren't we at leisure, Socrates?" Socrates responds: "We seem to be. And often indeed at other times, O inspired one [*daimonie*], I have thought, but also right now, how plausible it is that those spending a lot of time in the various kinds of philosophy [*en tais philosophiais*] should appear ridiculous as orators if they enter the law courts" (172c). Theodorus asks him what he is talking about, and with that as an excuse Socrates starts praising philosophy.

He does so in somewhat the following terms. First, because it is leisured. People brought up in philosophy get to take up whatever argument pleases them and put it down again; the arguments are there at their command. These leisured people are contrasted to those who frequent the law courts from their youth. The latter are un-leisured, and not only because they are always rushed by court procedures. Much more importantly, "Great dangers and fears [are thrust] upon their souls while these are still tender [because they are dealing in life-or-death things], which they cannot bear with justice and truth; so they turn straight to falsehood and returning injustice for injustice...so that they become grown men from being lads having nothing healthy in their thought" (173a–b).

Next, Socrates paints a vivid portrait of what he calls the "leading" philosophers. (He says, "Why would anyone speak about those who spend their time philosophizing badly?" [173c].) The leading philosophers do not know their way to the agora, the courtroom, or the assembly. They never see or hear laws, debates, or decrees. They do not know that they do not know this. They do not even know whether their neighbor is a human being or some other kind of animal. They think about the things "below the earth and...above the sky" (173e).

In these respects the leading philosophers resemble the Socrates of the *Clouds*. But they also think about "what a human being is, and what is proper for such a nature to do or undergo differently from other things" (174b). Now, how can one do this last if one does not know whether one's neighbor is a human being or not? Two possible ways come immediately to mind: look at oneself, make oneself the measure of all human things; or, look at the nonhuman whole, the heavens and the earth, and make them the measure.¹⁴ And, indeed, the leading philosophers despise three kinds of people: they despise the rulers because they are not leisured, that is, because they are not

¹⁴ Ibid., 131–32.

like themselves; they despise the rich, because their estates are small compared to the entire earth; and they despise the nobly born, since seven or so noble ancestors are very few compared to the total number of ancestors every human being has (174d–175b).

Socrates does know the way to the agora. He does listen to political speeches (he remarks in *Gorgias* that he heard Pericles advising the Athenians to rebuild the Long Walls). He certainly knew that his neighbors were human beings. At the beginning of this dialogue he says the only thing he investigates is which youths are really promising (143d). This is an exaggeration; but it is clear that in Socrates's opinion one primary way to get to know human nature is to examine not only yourself but also your neighbors.

However, the most crucial contrast between Socrates and others is between Socrates and those who frequent the law courts. It is this: Socrates's soul was able, without turning to falsehood and injustice, to bear the burden of fears and dangers associated with philosophizing. He did have something healthy in his soul, in spite of the fears and dangers with which he lived.

Obviously Socratic philosophy is fearsome: it got him killed. Obviously Socrates had whatever kind of courage could face that danger. Theaetetus's philosophic cowardice is different. He has a high opinion of himself, based on his great intelligence and his budding mastery of mathematics. At 155c–d Socrates implies that he has the temperament of a philosopher. He obviously considers himself (and indeed resembles) a member of Socrates's band of leading philosophers. More than that: in Socrates's praise at 176c–177a of God and the godlike, he hints that if Theaetetus continues philosophizing in the same way that he is now, he will resemble God. Theaetetus can go from high opinion of himself as a brilliant boy straight to high opinion of himself as godlike. What is the significance of this? Theaetetus would be able to face bravely the danger that the city would put him to death for philosophizing. What he could not face bravely is losing his self-respect. If Theaetetus adopts the self-understanding provided by Socrates, he does not have to go through any process of self-doubt or self-criticism, let alone self-contempt or self-condemnation.

Theaetetus wants and needs knowledge to be sought with no further motive, and this motive to need no further justification. At 155d4 Socrates famously says that “feeling perplexed wonder” is the *archē* of philosophy, and he attributes just that feeling to Theaetetus. Theaetetus needs that wonder to be the *source* underlying *all* philosophizing, not merely the “beginning,”

and to be self-evidently just. He inarticulately feels that the only legitimate good to be gained through philosophy is knowledge—that is, *certainly*—for its own pure sake: therefore, for him the first question that must be answered is “What is knowledge?”—that is, “How do I *know* that I know?”

By contrast, Socrates’s way of maintaining, or continually reestablishing, a firmly grounded self-esteem occurs via repeatedly raising questions (although not in front of everybody!) that his society has told him only contemptible people raise. And he raises them honestly: Socrates faces squarely the possibility that something about himself that he was proud of may turn out to be trivial or even contemptible. In fact, it seems certain that he has had this experience. Indeed, he takes seriously the possibility that Socratic philosophy as such, he himself *qua Socratic*—a dialectical, independent seeker after truth in a critical relationship with every familial, moral, political, and theological authority—is contemptible and damnable, and maybe irretrievably so. If it seems self-evident to someone that there is no danger that this project is contemptible or damned, if that possibility has never struck home for someone, then he or she does not really understand what it is for philosophers to raise radical questions in a world with so many prior claims on them. Socrates spares Theaetetus all of this. Theaetetus would not want to do this; he would be worse off if he were forced to try—he would be a sort of haunted Socratic and not a happy man.¹⁵

There is something very impressive about this Socratic daring, the willingness, even compulsion, to run any risk and question any taboo if the stakes are high enough. If what is at stake is his true happiness, his happiness based on truth, there is nothing Socrates would not dare. This daring has a kind of exhilarating, slightly vertiginous character, but it might nevertheless be a great vice, one peculiar to the most lavishly endowed natures. But if—and perhaps only if—Socratic philosophizing really is the best life, then it is a crucial component of philosophic courage.

In the end, then, we must conclude that Socratic philosophizing is not for everybody, not even everybody with a very powerful intellect and aspirations to philosophy. This helps explain why Plato occasionally presented Socrates surrounded by a wider field populated by persons seeking what we might call “knowledge” or “wisdom,” with the more or less conscious attitude (whatever the deeper situation) that they were seeking it “for its own sake”—persons who, while more reputable than Socrates, were willing to be identified as

¹⁵ For an unhappy Socratic, see Apollodorus in Plato’s *Symposium*, especially 173d1–e3.

philosophers. There are several dialogues where Socrates is elaborately polite to such people. *Theaetetus* is one of them, and *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Timaeus* are as well.

Plato's concern for the future of Socratic philosophy itself, its survival in later times, also led to this. It led to a wide presentation of "philosophy" which could gain the approval of several kinds of people who were not attracted to some striking surface facets of Socrates's own philosophizing as Plato reports it. This clarifies Plato's reluctance to stake the survival of philosophy either on the Theory of Forms or on the edifying myths that his Socrates sometimes recounted. Not everyone is drawn to the Forms; not every aspiring philosopher will have anything but contempt for those myths. The Forms are crucial in the Callipolis of the *Republic*: they serve as politically authoritative paradigms accessible only to philosophers. By contrast, Plato can entirely omit the Forms from *Theaetetus* because they are not needed in the drama, being irrelevant to Theaetetus's and Theodorus's extremely apolitical concerns.

And, after all, these concerns in themselves do have deep sway over them and, though not Socratic through and through, are genuinely intellectual. Protagoras's victory over Theaetetus in this drama does not mean that he led a better life than Theaetetus did; and there is little point in denying that mathematics is a kind of knowledge.

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