

369 B.C.

*Theaetetus is an extended attack against the empiricistic idea that knowledge is constructed out of perception and perception alone.*

## Background:

It is set within a framing conversation between Euclides & Terpsion (142a-143c)

Theaetetus' discussion is "What is Knowledge? & is considered Plato's greatest work on epistemology.

It is an aporetic dialogue-it ends in an impasse. It reviews 3 definitions of knowledge; each proposal is rejected, & no alternative is explicitly offered.

We never discover what knowledge is. Rather, we discover only 3 things that knowledge is not (210c).

In the *Timeas* we have the claim that perceptible things are not stable; and for that reason there can be no knowledge of them; rather, only Forms can be known.

But the first part of *Theaetetus* argues that it is self-refuting to ascribe radical instability to perceptible things, and it proceeds to assume that we do know about them. But it nevertheless insists upon distinguishing this knowledge from perception, on the ground that knowledge requires belief (or judgment) while mere perception does not.

The second part professes to be exploring the claims that knowledge is to be identified with true belief, or with true belief plus an 'account.' But what is puzzling about this discussion is that it appears to focus not upon knowledge of facts (*savoir*) but upon knowledge of objects (*connaissance*), & on the face of it the latter does not involve belief or judgment at all. - David Bostock

## 1st Pt: KNOWLEDGE IS PERCEPTION:

Socrates' question: "What is Knowledge?"

143d-145e **Theaetetus's 1st response: Examples of knowledge (geometry, astronomy, music, & arithmetic (146a-c).**

But Socrates rejects the examples of knowledge since they are neither necessary nor sufficient for a definition of x (146d--147e).

*Theaetetus contrasts this difficulty to define knowledge with the ease to define mathematics terms (146c-148e). Socrates then compares himself with a midwife [reminisc. of theory of recollection?] stating that Theaetetus is in "intellectual labor" (148e-151d).*

**Theaetetus's 2nd Response: Knowledge is Perception:**

151d-e: *Example: I know I'm hot = I perceive that I'm hot.*

*Thus, perception is relative to the perceiver. Upshot: Knowledge is subjective, but no appearance/reality gap.*

Socrates Response: "Knowledge is perception" entails 2 theories: Protagoras & Heraclitus (151e-160e) & then criticizes it (160e-183c). **Protagoras: Man is the measure:** 152b1-152c8: X is to any human just as X appears to that human: (example of wind; it can be cold to the one who feels cold, but not cold to the one who does not feel cold)' **Heraclitus: All is Flux** 152c8-152e1: He offers at least 11 arguments.

### 3 Arguments against Protagoras:

(1) *If people are each a measure of their own truth, some can be wiser than others. But wisdom has nothing to do with truth; it is how they package their words (e.g., doctors; farmers) (167).*

(2) **Self-Refutation Argument:** two parts (a) False beliefs: (1) many people believe that there are false beliefs; therefore, (2) if all beliefs are true, there are [per (1)] false beliefs; (3) if not all beliefs are true, there are false beliefs; (4) Thus, either way, there are false beliefs (169d-170c). The existence of false beliefs is inconsistent with the homo-mensura doctrine, & hence, if there are false beliefs, Protagoras' "truth" is false. (b) actual validity of man-as-measure doctrine undermines Protagoras' own commitment to relativism, from within the relativist framework itself (170e-171c). Protagoras agrees, regarding his own view, that the opinion of those who think he is wrong is true, since he agrees that everybody believes things that are so. On this basis, he would have to agree that his own view is false. On the other hand, those who do not agree that they are wrong, & Protagoras is bound to agree, on the basis of his own doctrine, that their belief is true. If Protagoras' opponents think that their disbelief in man-is-measure doctrine is true & Protagoras himself must grant veracity of that belief, then truth of Protagorean theory is disputed by everyone, incl. Protagoras himself.

### [Digression 172-177c]

Dichotomy between judicial (legal practicalities: blind followers) & philosophical realm (unrestricted by temporal, spatial limitations are free to investigate true essence of justice: Justice as an absolute-not relativistic. Godlikeness requires a certain degree of withdrawal from earthly affairs & an attempt to emulate divine intelligence and morality.

(3) **Predictive Powers of Expertise is against moral & epistemological aspects of Protegorean Relativism:** Socrates exposes the flawed nature of Protagoras' definition of expertise, as a skill that points out what is beneficial, by contrasting sensible properties—such as hot, which may indeed be immune to interpersonal correction—and values, like the good and the beneficial, whose essences are independent from individual appearances. The reason for this, Socrates argues, is that the content of value-judgments is properly assessed by reference to how things will turn out in the future. Experts are thus people who have the capacity to foresee the future effects of present causes. One may be an infallible judge of whether one is hot now, but only the expert physician is able accurately to tell today whether one will be feverish tomorrow. Thus the predictive powers of expertise cast the last blow on the moral and epistemological dimensions of Protegorean Relativism.

### Argument Against Heracliteans:

Question: How radical does Flux must be in order for definition of knowledge as perception to emerge as coherent & plausible? His answer is that nature of Flux must be very radical, indeed too radical for the definition itself to be either expressible or defensible. *Motion and Change: If everything is undergoing change, then the referents of discourse would be constantly shifting, depriving us of the ability to formulate words at all about anything. no single act can properly be called perception rather than non-perception, a definition is left with no definition.*

### DECISIVE ARGUMENT: 184-7:

**Mind makes use of a range of concepts that it could not have acquired & which don't operate through the senses: e.g., "existence," "sameness," "difference."** So, there is a part of knowledge, which has nothing to do w/ perception. In fact, All of these are ascertained by the soul through its own resources, w/ no recourse to senses. Theaetetus adds that soul "seems to be making a calculation within itself of past and present in relation to future" (186b) Thus, knowledge is not perception.

## 2nd Pt:

## KNOWLEDGE IS TRUE BELIEF:

In 187a10e4:

Theaetetus proposes "Knowledge is True Belief."

Socrates Response: One can't make proper use of notion of "true judgment," unless one can explain what a false judgment is.

5-Fold attempt to come up with an account of false belief:

(a) *false judgment as "mistaking one thing for another" (188a-c); (b) false judgment as "thinking what is not" (188c-189b); (c) false judgment as "other-judgment" (189b-191a); (d) false judgment as the inappropriate linkage of a perception to a memory—the mind as a wax tablet (191a-196c); and (e) potential and actual knowledge—the mind as an aviary (196d-200c).*

All 5 attempts fail, & appears to be the end of topic of false belief. They fail because they've not settled question of the nature of knowledge.

Then in 2006d-201c7, Socrates returns to "Knowledge is True Belief" & dismisses it arguing that accidental beliefs can't be called knowledge, giving Athenian jurymen as an ex. of accidental true belief (hearsay):

Forming a true opinion about x by means of persuasion is different from knowing it by an appeal to the only method by means of which it can be known—in this case by seeing it—and thus knowledge and true judgment cannot be the same.

3rd Pt: KNOWLEDGE IS TRUTH BELIEF W/ AN ACCOUNT:

Theaetetus "remembers having heard" that "Knowledge is true belief with an account" (logos): 201c-d.

**The Dream of Socrates:** 201d-206b: Knowledge of O is true belief about O plus an account of O's composition. if O is not composite, O cannot be known but only perceived (202b6).

(a) *The world is composed of complexes & their elements. (b) Complexes have Logos, while (c) elements have none, but can only be named. It isn't even possible to say of an element that "it is" or "it is not," because adding Being or non-Being to it would be tantamount to making it a complex. (d) Elements can't be accounted for or known, but are perceptible. (e) Complexes, on the contrary, can be known because one can have a true belief about them & give an account of them, which is "essentially a complex of names" (202b).*

Socrates Objection against Dream Theory: (202d8-206b11):

*According to dream theory, the world is composed of complexes & elements. Socrates objects appealing to a (a) dilemma & (b) experience: (a) Dilemma: How can a complex of unknowable elements be itself knowable? For if the complex is simply the sum of elements, then the knowledge of it is predicated on knowledge of its elements, which is impossible, if, on the other hand, the complex is a "single form" produced out of the collocations of its elements, it will still be an indefinable simple. Rather, what is reasonable is to say that the elements are much more clearly known than the complexes. (b) 206a-c2: The thesis that complexes are knowable, the elements unknowable, is false to our experience, in which "knowledge of the elements is primary."*

**What is Logos? 3 Interpretations:**

(1) **Does logos mean "speech or statement?"**

(206c-e)? Giving an account of something is "making one's thought apparent vocally by means of words and verbal expressions" (206c). Prob: Logos becomes "a thing that everyone is able to do more or less readily," unless one is deaf or dumb, so that anyone with a true opinion would have knowledge as well.

(2) **Eyes of O an enumeration of the elements of O (206e4-208b12)?** To give an account of a thing is to enumerate all its elements (207a). Hesiod said a wagon contains a 100 timbers. If asked what a wagon is, the average person will likely say, "wheels, axle, body, rails, yoke." But that is ridiculous, Socrates says, because it would be the same as giving the syllables of a name to someone's asking for an account of it. The ability to do that doesn't preclude possibility that a person identifies now correctly & now incorrectly the elements of the same syllable in different contexts.

(3) **The "sign" or diagnostic feature wherein O differs from everything else (208c1-210a9)?** "being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things" (208c). Ex. Socrates uses the def. of sun as brightest of heavenly bodies that circle earth. But def. of knowledge as true judgment with *Logos* is not immune to criticism. For if someone, who is asked to tell what distinguishes, say, Theaetetus, a man of whom he has a correct judgment, from all other things, were to say that he is a man, & has a nose, mouth, eyes, & so on, his account wouldn't help to distinguish Theaetetus from all other men. But if he had not already in his mind the means of differentiating Theaetetus from everyone else, he couldn't judge correctly who Theaetetus was & couldn't recognize him the next time he saw him. So to add *Logos* to true judgment is meaningless, because *Logos* is already part of true judgment, & so can't itself be a guarantee of knowledge. To say that *Logos* is knowledge of the difference doesn't solve the problem, since the definition of knowledge as "true judgment plus knowledge of the difference" begs the question of what knowledge is.