

Knowledge in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Human beings as essentially “knowing” creatures is central to the Platonic concept of self. But what is knowledge, what are we trying to know and what faculties do we have to know them? The *Theaetetus* is an important examination of these questions. The dialogue recounts a conversation between Socrates and a young geometrician, Theaetetus, who is said to resemble Socrates, at the behest of another geometrician Theodorus. This entire event is recounted by Socrates to Euclid, who writes it in a book, which is read by an associate of his, Terpsio.

The dialogue starts with some examples of knowledge before trying to come up with three definitions of it. Plato seems to have two criteria for judging whether the definition is correct: The reality of the object we are trying to gain knowledge of, and the infallibility of said knowledge. Plato doesn't seem to be arguing that there is no type of cognition of things which are less “real” but is definitely looking for the best form of knowledge humans can possess and a type of knowledge that is infallible.

The first definition is that knowledge is sense-data. He looks at two philosophers of the time and sets out to disprove them. The first of these is Protagoras's relativism: this states that we can only have knowledge of things in terms of ourselves and hence everyone experiences their own truth- and therefore a person is the measure of all things. When we make a judgement, it is only the truth of our own experience that we have knowledge of, and all judgements are correct. If you say something is cold and I say that same thing is hot we are both right. Plato sets out to show that this is not the case as some judgements are demonstrably false. The second is the flux theory of Heraclites: the essential characteristics of everything are always moving from one to another- there is no yardstick to measure anything against. This is stated in contrast to the Parmenides doctrine that there is no change at all.

In the section we are going to read he draws in arguments to examine whether the perception we have of objects is the whole of knowledge and if physical objects of our sense-perception are infallible enough to be called knowledge.

The second definition is that knowledge is true belief: he examines this by going back to the two ways judgements can be false, in response to Protagoras' stance that all judgement is correct. The first is thinking that one thing is another; and the other, thinking that a thing is not. He looks at the concept that knowledge is the acquaintance with something, a memory of it and then recalling this to our consciousness. He uses an analogy of memory being like an aviary of birds- when we try and recall something, we sometimes mistake one piece of knowledge for another, and this is how we can make false judgement. The section we will read looks at this concept of knowledge being examined and how true judgement cannot be knowledge, in response to this examination of true and false belief.

The third is that knowledge is belief with an account or explanation. This seeks to correct the problems in the previous definition. He examines and refutes three theories to what this account could mean. The first he dismisses quickly – expressing a thought in speech: everyone can do this but not accurately. The second is that the account of a thing exists in knowing its constituent parts – but this does little more than increasing the amount of true beliefs we had. The third is the way that our normal sense of definition works – the account shows us in what way this object is distinguished from others. This is the final section we will read.

"knowledge is sense perception"

184b Socrates: Well then, Theaetetus, here is a point for you to consider. The answer you gave was that knowledge is perception, wasn't it?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: Now suppose you were asked: 'When a man sees white or black things or hears high or low tones, what does he see or hear with?' I suppose you would say 'With eyes and ears'.

Theaetetus: Yes, I should.

c Socrates: To use words and phrases in an easy-going way without scrutinising them too curiously is not, in general, a mark of ill-breeding; on the contrary there is something low-bred in being too precise. But sometimes there is no help for it, and this is a case in which I must take exception to the form of your answer. Consider: is it more correct to say that we see and hear *with* our eyes and ears or *through* them?

Theaetetus: I should say we always perceive through them, rather than with them.

d Socrates: Yes; it would surely be strange that there should be a number of senses ensconced inside us, like the warriors in the Trojan horse, and all these things should not converge and meet in some single nature – a soul,¹ or whatever it is to be called – with which we perceive all the objects of perception *through* the senses as instruments.

Theaetetus: Yes, I think that is a better description.

Socrates: My object in being so precise is to know whether there is some part of ourselves, the same in all cases, with which we apprehend black or white through
e the eyes, and objects of other kinds through the other senses. Can you, if the question is put to you, refer all such acts of apprehension to the body? Perhaps, however, it would be better you should speak for yourself in reply to questions, instead of my taking the words out of your mouth. Tell me: all these instruments through which you perceive what is warm or hard or light or sweet are parts of the body, aren't they? – not of anything else.

¹ The word used here is *psyche* – although Cornford translates this as *mind*, presumably because Socrates is looking for some thinking agent which we might call mind, we have given the more literal translation of *soul*.

Theaetetus: Of nothing else.

185a Socrates: Now will you also agree that the objects you perceive through one faculty cannot be perceived through another – objects of hearing, for instance, through sight, or objects of sight through hearing?

Theaetetus: Of course I will.

Socrates: Then, if you have some thought about both objects at once, you cannot be having a perception including both at once through either the one or the other organ.

Theaetetus: No.

Socrates: Now take sound and colour. Have you not, to begin with, this thought which includes both at once – that they both *exist*?

Theaetetus: I have.

Socrates: And, further, that each of the two is *different* from the other and the *same* as itself?

b Theaetetus: Naturally.

Socrates: And again, that both together are *two*, and each of them is *one*?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: And also you can ask yourself whether they are *unlike* each other or *alike*?

Theaetetus: No doubt.

Socrates: Then through what organ do you think all this about them both? What is common to them both cannot be apprehended either through hearing or through sight. Besides, here is further evidence for my point. Suppose it were possible to inquire whether sound and colour were both salty or not, no doubt you could tell
c me what faculty you would use – obviously not sight or hearing, but some other.

Theaetetus: Of course: the faculty that works through the tongue.

Socrates: Very good. But now, through what organ does that faculty work, which tells you what is common not only to these objects but to all things-what you mean by the words 'exists' and 'does not exist' and the other terms applied to them in the questions I put a moment ago? What sort of organs can you mention, corresponding to all these terms, through which the perceiving part of us perceives each one of them?

d Theaetetus: You mean existence and non-existence, likeness and unlikeness, sameness and difference, and also unity and numbers in general as applied to them; and clearly your question covers 'even' and 'odd' and all that kind of notions. You are asking, through what part of the body our mind perceives these?

Socrates: You follow me most admirably, Theaetetus; that is exactly my question.

Theaetetus: Really, Socrates, I could not say, except that I think there is no special organ at all for these things, as there is for the others. It is clear to me that the

e mind in itself is its own instrument for contemplating the common terms that apply to everything.

Socrates: In fact, Theaetetus, you are handsome, not ugly as Theodorus said you were; for in a discussion handsome is that handsome does. And you have treated me more than handsomely in saving me the trouble of a very long argument, if it is clear to you that the mind contemplates some things through its own instrumentality, others through the bodily faculties. That was indeed what I thought myself; but I wanted you to agree.

Theaetetus: Well, it is clear to me.

186a Socrates: Under which head, then, do you place existence? For that is, above all, a thing that belongs to everything.

Theaetetus: I should put it among the things that the mind apprehends by itself.

Socrates: And also likeness and unlikeness and sameness and difference?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: And how about 'honourable' and 'dishonourable' and 'good' and 'bad'?

Theaetetus: Those again seem to me, above all, to be things whose being is considered, one in comparison with another, by the mind, when it reflects within
b itself upon the past and the present with an eye to the future.

Socrates: Wait a moment. The hardness of something hard and the softness of something soft will be perceived by the mind through touch, will they not?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: But their existence and the fact that they both exist, and their contrariety to one another and again the existence of this contrariety are things which the mind itself undertakes to judge for us, when it reflects upon them and compares one with another.

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Socrates: Is it not true, then, that whereas all the impressions which penetrate to
c the mind through the body are things which men and animals alike are naturally constituted to perceive from the moment of birth, reflections about them with respect to their existence and usefulness only come, if they come at all, with difficulty through a long and troublesome process of education?

Theaetetus: Assuredly.

Socrates: Is it possible, then, to reach truth when one cannot reach existence?

Theaetetus: It is impossible.

Socrates: But if a man cannot reach the truth of a thing, can he possibly know that thing?

d Theaetetus: No, Socrates, how could he?

Socrates: If that is so, knowledge does not reside in the impressions, but in our reflection upon them. It is there, seemingly, and not in the impressions, that it is possible to grasp existence and truth.

Theaetetus: Evidently.

Socrates: Then are you going to give the same name to two things which differ so widely?

Theaetetus: Surely that would not be right.

Socrates: Well then, what name do you give to the first one – to seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling warm?

e Theaetetus: Perceiving. What other name is there for it?

Socrates: Taking it all together, then, you call this perception?

Theaetetus: Necessarily.

Socrates: A thing which, we agree, has no part in apprehending truth, since it has none in apprehending existence.

Theaetetus: No, it has none.

Socrates: Nor, consequently, in knowledge either.

Theaetetus: No.

Socrates: Then, Theaetetus, perception and knowledge cannot possibly be the same thing.

Theaetetus: Evidently not, Socrates. Indeed, it is now perfectly plain that knowledge is something different from perception.

"true judgement² is knowledge"

199c Socrates: But it strikes me that a still stranger consequence is coming in sight.

Theaetetus: What is that?

Socrates: That the interchange of pieces of knowledge should ever result in a judgment that is false.

Theaetetus: How do you mean?

d Socrates: In the first place, that a man should have knowledge of something and at the same time fail to recognise that very thing, not for want of knowing it but by reason of his own knowledge; and next that he should judge that thing to be something else and *vice versa* - isn't that very unreasonable: that when a piece of knowledge presents itself, the mind should fail to recognise anything and know nothing? On this showing, the presence of ignorance might just as well make us

² In the text the word translated here is *doxa* (and its cognates) - Cornford uses the word *judgement*, but others translate it as *opinion* or even *belief*.

know something, or the presence of blindness make us see – if knowledge can ever make us fail to know.

^e Theaetetus: Perhaps, Socrates, we were wrong in making the birds³ stand for pieces of knowledge only, and we ought to have imagined pieces of ignorance flying about with them in the mind. Then, in chasing them, our man would lay hold sometimes of a piece of knowledge, sometimes of a piece of ignorance; and the ignorance would make him judge falsely, the knowledge truly, about the same thing.

Socrates: It is not easy to disapprove of anything you say, Theaetetus; but think again about your suggestion. Suppose it is as you say; then the man who lays hold
200a of the piece of ignorance will judge falsely. Is that right?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: But of course he will not think he is judging falsely.

Theaetetus: Of course not.

Socrates: No; he will think he is judging truly; and his attitude of mind will be the same as if he knew the thing he is mistaken about.

Theaetetus: Naturally.

Socrates: So he will imagine that, as a result of his chase, he has got hold of a piece of knowledge, not a piece of ignorance.

Theaetetus: Clearly.

Socrates: Then we have gone a long way round only to find ourselves confronted once more with our original difficulty. Our destructive critic will laugh at us. 'You
b wonderful people,' he will say, 'are we to understand that a man knows both a piece of knowledge and a piece of ignorance, and then supposes that one of these things he knows is the other which he also knows? Or does he know neither, and then judge that one of these unknown things is the other? Or does he know only one, and identify this known thing with the unknown one, or the unknown one with the known? Or are you going to tell me that there are yet further pieces of knowledge *about* your pieces of knowledge and ignorance, and that their owner
c keeps these shut up in yet another of your ridiculous aviaries or waxen blocks, knowing them so long as he possesses them, although he may not have them at hand in his mind? On that showing you will find yourselves perpetually driven round in a circle and never getting any further.' What are we to reply to that, Theaetetus?

Theaetetus: Really, Socrates, I don't know what we are to say.

Socrates: Maybe, my young friend, we have deserved this rebuke, and the argument
d shows that we were wrong to leave knowledge on one side and look first for an explanation of false judgment. That cannot be understood until we have a satisfactory account of the nature of knowledge.

³ Previously our grasp of the elements of knowledge was likened to a cage full of birds – with the thinker having to reach in and take hold of one of the birds to bring any particular element into focus.

Theaetetus: As things now stand, Socrates, one cannot avoid that conclusion.

Socrates: To start all over again, then: what is one to say that knowledge is? For surely we are not going to give up yet.

Theaetetus: Not unless you do so.

Socrates: Then tell me: what definition can we give with the least risk of contradicting ourselves?

^eTheaetetus: The one we tried before, Socrates. I have nothing else to suggest.

Socrates: What was that?

Theaetetus: That true belief is knowledge. Surely there can at least be no mistake in believing what is true and the consequences are always satisfactory.

Socrates: Try, and you will see, Theaetetus, as the man said when he was asked if the river was too deep to ford. So here, if we go forward on our search, we may
201a stumble upon something that will reveal the thing we are looking for. We shall make nothing out, if we stay where we are.

Theaetetus: True; let us go forward and see.

Socrates: Well, we need not go far to see this much: you will find a whole profession to prove that true belief is not knowledge.

Theaetetus: How so? What profession?

Socrates: The profession of those paragons of intellect known as orators and lawyers. There you have men who use their skill to produce conviction, not by instruction, but by making people believe whatever they want them to believe. You
b can hardly imagine teachers so clever as to be able, in the short time allowed by the clock, to instruct their hearers thoroughly in the true facts of a case of robbery or other violence which those hearers had not witnessed.

Theaetetus: No, I cannot imagine that; but they can convince them.

Socrates: And by convincing you mean making them believe something.

Theaetetus: Of course.

Socrates: And when a jury is rightly convinced of facts which can be known only by an eye-witness, then, judging by hearsay and accepting a true belief, they are
c judging without knowledge, although, if they find the right verdict, their conviction is correct?

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Socrates: But if true belief and knowledge were the same thing, the best of jurymen could never have a correct belief without knowledge. It now appears that they must be different things.

"knowledge is true belief with an explanatory account"⁴

208c Socrates: Or shall we not condemn the theory yet? Perhaps the meaning to be given to 'account' is not this, but the remaining one of the three, one of which we said must be intended by anyone who defines knowledge as correct belief together with an account.

Theaetetus: A good reminder; there is still one meaning left. The first was what might be called the image of thought in spoken sound; and the one we have just discussed was going all through the elements to arrive at the whole. What is the third?

Socrates: The meaning most people would give: being able to name some mark by which the thing one is asked about differs from everything else.

Theaetetus: Could you give me an example of such an account of a thing?

d Socrates: Take the sun as an example. I dare say you will be satisfied with the account of it as the brightest of the heavenly bodies that go round the earth.

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Socrates: Let me explain the point of this example. It is to illustrate what we were just saying: that if you get hold of the difference distinguishing any given thing from all others, then, so some people say, you will have an 'account' of it; whereas, so long as you fix upon something common to other things, your account will embrace all the things that share it.

e Theaetetus: I understand. I agree that what you describe may fairly be called an 'account'.

Socrates: And if, besides a right notion about a thing, whatever it may be, you also grasp its difference from all other things, you will have arrived at knowledge of what, till then, you had only a notion of.

Theaetetus: We do say that, certainly.

Socrates: Really, Theaetetus, now I come to look at this statement at close quarters, it is like a scene-painting: I cannot make it out at all, though, so long as I kept at a distance, there seemed to be some sense in it.

Theaetetus: What do you mean? Why so?

208a Socrates: I will explain, if I can. Suppose I have a correct notion about you; if I add to that the account of you, then, we are to understand, I know you. Otherwise I have only a notion.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: And 'account' means putting your differentness into words.

Theaetetus: Yes.

⁴ The word here translated as explanatory account is *logos*: this is a notoriously difficult word to find a simple English equivalent – but essentially what is being suggested here is that knowledge is a true belief with a series of logical terms strung together in order to construct a supporting argument for that belief.

Socrates: So, at the time when I had only a notion, my mind did not grasp any of the points in which you differ from others?

Theaetetus: Apparently not.

Socrates: Then I must have had before my mind one of those common things which belong to another person as much as to you.

b Theaetetus: That follows.

Socrates: But look here ! If that was so, how could I possibly be having a notion of you rather than of anyone else? Suppose I was thinking: Theaetetus is one who is a man and has a nose and eyes and a mouth and so forth, enumerating every part of the body. Will thinking in that way result in my thinking of Theaetetus rather than of Theodorus or, as they say, of the man in the street?

Theaetetus: How should it?

c Socrates: Well, now suppose I think not merely of a man with a nose and eyes, but of one with a snub nose and prominent eyes, once more shall I be having a notion of you any more than of myself or anyone else of that description?

Theaetetus: No.

Socrates: In fact, there will be no notion of Theaetetus in my mind, I suppose, until this particular snubness has stamped and registered within me a record distinct from all the other cases of snubness that I have seen; and so with every other part of you. Then, if I meet you tomorrow, that trait will revive my memory and give me a correct notion about you.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

d Socrates: If that is so, the correct notion of anything must itself include the differentness of that thing.

Theaetetus: Evidently.

Socrates: Then what meaning is left for getting hold of an 'account' in addition to the correct notion? If, on the one hand, it means adding the notion of how a thing differs from other things, such an injunction is simply absurd.

Theaetetus: How so?

e Socrates: When we have a correct notion of the way in which certain things differ from other things, it tells us to add a correct notion of the way in which they differ from other things. On this showing, the most vicious of circles would be nothing to this injunction. It might better deserve to be called the sort of direction a blind man might give: to tell us to get hold of something we already have, in order to get to know something we are already thinking of, suggests a state of the most absolute darkness.

Theaetetus: Whereas, if . . .? The supposition you made just now implied that you would state some alternative; what was it?

210a Socrates: If the direction to add an 'account' means that we are to get to *know* the differentness, as opposed to merely having a notion of it, this most admirable of all definitions of knowledge will be a pretty business; because 'getting to know' means acquiring knowledge, doesn't it?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Socrates: So, apparently, to the question, What is knowledge? our definition will reply: 'Correct belief together with knowledge of a differentness'; for, according to it, 'adding an account' will come to that.

Theaetetus: So it seems.

Socrates: Yes; and when we are inquiring after the nature of knowledge, nothing could be sillier than to say that it is correct belief together with *a knowledge* of differentness or of anything whatever.

b So, Theaetetus, neither perception, nor true belief, nor the addition of an 'account' to true belief can be knowledge.

Theaetetus: Apparently not.