

The Sophist – dialectical paths to knowledge, and the question of what is real

The Theaetetus, Sophist and Statesmen are connected dialogues and can be seen as rungs on a ladder of human learning. Experts posit that there is an unwritten fourth dialogue which was to be entitled The Philosopher, others argue this is the dialogue The Parmenides. The Sophist is a conversation between an Elean stranger and Theaetetus – the stranger replacing Socrates as interlocutor. The Elean Stranger was definitely an adherent of the Eleatic school that Parmenides and Xenophanes were a part of: the school was centred on Italy and Sicily and had strong connections with Pythagoras and his brotherhood. Athens lay geographically between the Eastern Greek colonies and Magna Graecia in Italy: in the former arose the physicalist schools of Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus and Anaxagoras, while in the latter arose the Eleatic School – and Plato stands metaphysically between these two Schools. If Theaetetus gave us an incomplete definition of knowledge, The Sophist is a complex metaphysical and psychological examination of knowledge, the knower and the things known. Sophistry in the ancient world took many different guises – Socrates himself was even called a sophist by some. Sophists promised various rewards to their fee-paying students; for example, making them wise and knowledgeable or teaching them the art of winning arguments. The dialogue starts with a long and winding dialectical examination of the definition of a sophist – it represents the division stage of the dialectical method – and gives us both an insight into inductive and deductive dialectic. In part of the conversation they have considered how some words can be blended together, and others not; also how some sounds can be blended, while others are discordant. Here we join the Elean Stranger (the leader of the dialogue) and Theaetetus as they move on to the same view of Forms (or Ideas).....

253b Stranger: Well, now that we have agreed that the Forms stand towards one another in the same way as regards blending, is not some science needed as a guide on the voyage of discourse, if one is to succeed in pointing out which Forms are consonant, and which are incompatible with one another; also, whether there are certain Forms that pervade them all and connect them so that they can blend, and again, where there are divisions (separations), whether there are certain others that traverse wholes and are responsible for the division? –

Theaetetus: Surely some science is needed – perhaps the most important of all.

Stranger: And what name shall we give to this science? Or – good gracious, Theaetetus, have we stumbled unawares upon the free man's knowledge and, in seeking for the Sophist, chanced to find the Philosopher first?

Theaetetus: How do you mean?

d Stranger: Dividing according to Forms, not taking the same Form for a different one or a different one for the same – is not that the business of the science of Dialectic?

Theaetetus:..

Stranger: And the man who can do that discerns clearly *one* Form everywhere extended throughout many, where each one lies apart, and *many* Forms, different from one another, embraced from without by one Form; and again *one* Form connected in a unity through many wholes, and *many* Forms, entirely marked off apart. That means knowing how to distinguish, e Form by Form, in what ways the several Form can or can not combine.

Theaetetus: Most certainly.

Stranger: And the only person, I imagine, to whom you would allow this mastery of Dialectic is the pure and rightful lover of wisdom.

Theaetetus: To whom else could it be allowed?

254a Stranger: It is, then, in some such region as this that we shall find the Philosopher now or later, if we should look for him. He too may be difficult to see clearly ; but the difficulty in his case is not the same as in the Sophist's.

Theaetetus: What is the difference?

Stranger: The Sophist takes refuge in the darkness of Not-being, where he is at home and has the knack of feeling his way ; and it is the darkness of the place that makes him so hard to perceive.

Theaetetus: That may well be.

b Stranger: Whereas the Philosopher, whose thoughts constantly dwell upon the nature of reality, is difficult to see because his region is so bright; for the eye of the vulgar soul cannot endure to keep its gaze fixed on the divine.

Theaetetus: That may well be no less true.

Stranger: Then we will look more closely at the Philosopher presently, if we are still in the mind to do so; meanwhile clearly we must not loosen our grip on the Sophist until we have studied him thoroughly. Theaetetus: I entirely agree.

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Perhaps that description of what dialectic is doing needs a bit of expansion:

We can, for example, think about the idea of geometrical shape: it is extended through the ideas of square, circle, rectangle, pentagon, etc.: each of these particular ideas can be considered on its own or "where each one lies apart". But we can also start with the many ideas of shapes and mover upwards, so to speak to their over-arching idea of geometrical shape - and this may be a movement through intermediate ideas (for example the ideas of two dimensional and three dimensional shapes) the unity of the idea of "geometrical shape" lies within both "solid" and "two dimensional shape." Dialectic discovers which forms blend and which do not: here shape blends with cube and with solid - on the other hand, whereas both circle and square blend with shape, they are unable to blend together. The idea of square is not excluded by the idea of shape, but is excluded by the idea of circle.

If dialectical thinking allows us to explore forms, does this mean that material things are excluded from accurate or infallible thought? At the end of the Theaetetus we established that knowledge can't just be a true belief, if the object of that belief is liable to change - and even by fixing this in place with an account, as this account is also liable to change this can't be knowledge either. Can it be that we can only really think about the immaterial realities? For Plato, this would cast adrift the whole of the manifested universe from our intelligence and understanding. Eventually a definition of a sophist as essentially a producer of images, is formulated. Sophists don't really make people wise: they just give them the appearance of it. If they produce the image of knowledge within people what is this "knowledge"? And is there a relation between infallible knowledge of immaterial things and some other kind of knowledge of the manifested universe? The Elean Stranger introduces this question as the "battle of the Gods and Giants" - echoing the mythological story of the beginnings of things which described such a conflict - and explores the way in which we can understand both immaterial and material things as in some sense real, and consequently within our power to think rationally - or know - about:

246a Stranger: What we shall see is something like a Battle of Gods and Giants going on between them over their quarrel about reality.

Theaetetus: How so?

Stranger: One party is trying to drag everything down to earth out of heaven and the unseen, literally grasping rocks and trees in their hands; for they lay hold upon every stock and stone and

strenuously affirm that real existence belongs only to that which can be handled and offers
 b resistance to the touch. They define reality as the same thing as body, and as soon as one of the
 opposite party asserts that anything without a body is real, they are utterly contemptuous and will
 not listen to another word.

Theaetetus: The people you describe are certainly a formidable crew. I have met quite a number
 of them before now.

Stranger: Yes, and accordingly their adversaries are very wary in defending their position
 somewhere in the heights of the unseen, maintaining with all their force that true reality consists
 c in certain intelligible and bodiless Forms. In the clash of argument they shatter and pulverise
 those bodies which their opponents wield, and what those others allege to be true reality they
 call, not real being, but a sort of moving process of becoming. On this issue an interminable
 battle is always going on between the two camps.

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: Suppose, then, we challenge each party in turn to render an account of the reality they
 assert.

Theaetetus: How shall we do so?

Stranger: It will be easier to obtain from those who place reality in Forms, because they are more
 d civilised; harder, from those whose violence would drag everything down to the level of body-
 perhaps, all but impossible. However, I think I see the right way to deal with them.

Theaetetus: What is that?

Stranger: Best of all, if it were anyhow possible, would be to bring about a real change of heart i;
 but if that is beyond our power, to imagine them reformed and assume them willing to moderate
 their present lawlessness in answering our questions. The better a man's character is, the more
 force there will be in any agreement you make with him. However, we are not concerned with
 them so much as with our search for the truth.

e Theaetetus: You are quite right.

Stranger: Well then, call upon these reformed characters to oblige you with an answer, and you
 shall act as their spokesman.

Theaetetus: I Will.

Stranger: Let them tell us, then, whether they admit that there is such a thing as a mortal living
 creature. Theaetetus: Of course they do.

Stranger: And they will agree that it is a body animated by a soul?

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Stranger: Taking a soul to be something real?

247a Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: Again, they allow that one soul may be just, another unjust, or one wise, another
 foolish? Theaetetus: Naturally.

Stranger: And that any soul comes to be just or the reverse by possessing justice or the reverse,
 which is present in it?

Theaetetus: Yes, they agree to that too.

Stranger: But surely they will admit that whatever can come to be present in a thing or absent
 from it is certainly a real thing.

Theaetetus: Yes.

^b Stranger: Granted, then, that justice or wisdom or any other sort of goodness or badness is real, and moreover that a soul in which they come to exist is real, do they maintain that any one of these things is visible and tangible, or are they all invisible?

Theaetetus: They can hardly say that any one of them is visible.

Stranger: And do they really assert that something that is not visible has a body?

Theaetetus: That question they do not answer as a whole without a distinction. The soul itself, they think, does possess a sort of body; but when it comes to wisdom or any of the other things
^c you asked about, they have not the face either to accept the inference that they have no place among real things or to persist in maintaining that they are all bodies.

Stranger: That shows, Theaetetus, that they are genuinely reformed characters. The Giants among them, of the true earth-born breed, would not stick at any point; they would hold out to the end, that whatever they cannot squeeze between their hands is just nothing at all.

Theaetetus: I dare say that describes their state of mind.

Stranger: Let us question them further, then; for it is quite enough for our purpose if they
^d consent to admit that even a small part of reality is bodiless. They must now tell us this; when they say that these bodiless things and the other things which have body are alike 'real', what common character that emerges as covering both sets of things have they in view? It is possible they may be at a loss for an answer. If that is their state of mind, you must consider whether they would accept at our suggestion a description of the real and agree to it.

Theaetetus: What description? Perhaps we can tell, if you will state it.

Stranger: I suggest that anything has real being, that is so constituted as to possess any sort of
^e power either to affect anything else or to be affected, in however small a degree, by the most insignificant agent, though it be only once. I am proposing as a mark to distinguish real things, that they are nothing but power.

Theaetetus: Well, they accept that, having for the moment no better suggestion of their own to offer.

^{248a} Stranger: That will do; for later on both they and we perhaps may change our minds. For the present, then, let us take it that this agreement stands between us and the one party.

Theaetetus: It does.

Stranger: Let us turn, then, to the opposite party, the friends of Forms. Once more you shall act as their spokesman.

Theaetetus: I Will.

Stranger: We understand that you make a distinction between 'Becoming' and 'Real being' and speak of them as separate. Is that so?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And you say that we have intercourse with Becoming by means of the body through sense, whereas we have intercourse with Real being by means of the soul through reflection. And Real being, you say, is always in the same unchanging state, whereas Becoming is variable.

^b Theaetetus: We do.

Stranger: Admirable. But now what are we to take you as meaning by this expression 'intercourse' which you apply to both? Don't you mean what we described a moment ago?

Theaetetus: What was that?

Stranger: The experiencing an effect or the production of one, arising, as the result of some power, from things that encounter one another. Perhaps, Theaetetus, you may not be able to catch their answer to this, but I, who am familiar with them, may be more successful.

Theaetetus: What have they to say, then?

^c Stranger: They do not agree to the proposition we put just now to the earth-born Giants about reality.

Theaetetus: You mean?

Stranger: We proposed as a sufficient mark of real things the presence in a thing of the power of being acted upon or of acting in relation to however insignificant a thing.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: Well, to that they reply that a power of acting and being acted upon belongs to Becoming, but neither of these powers is compatible with Real being.

Theaetetus: And there is something in that answer?

^d Stranger: Something to which we must reply by a request for more enlightenment. Do they acknowledge further that the soul knows and Real being is known?

Theaetetus: Certainly they agree to that.

Stranger: Well, do you agree that knowing or being known is an action, or is it experiencing an effect, or both? Or is one of them experiencing an effect, the other an action? Or does neither of them come under either of these heads at all?

Theaetetus: Evidently neither; otherwise our friends would be contradicting what they said earlier.

^e Stranger: I see what you mean. They would have to say this: If knowing is to be acting on something, it follows that what is known must be acted upon by it; and so, on this showing, Reality when it is being known by the act of knowledge must, in so far as it is known, be changed owing to being so acted upon; and that, we say, cannot happen to the changeless.

Theaetetus: Exactly.

^{249a} Stranger: But tell me, in heaven's name; are we really to be so easily convinced that change, life, soul, understanding have no place in that which is perfectly real – that it has neither life nor thought, but stands immutable in solemn aloofness, devoid of intelligence?

Theaetetus: That, sir, would be a strange doctrine to accept.

Stranger: But can we say it has intelligence without having life?

Theaetetus: Surely not.

Stranger: But if we say it contains both, can we deny that it has soul in which they reside?

Theaetetus: How else could it possess them?

Stranger: But then, if it has intelligence, life, and soul, can we say that a living thing remains at rest in complete changelessness?

^b Theaetetus: All that seems to me unreasonable.

Stranger: In that case we must admit that what changes and change itself are real things.

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Stranger: From this, however, it follows, Theaetetus, first, that, if all things are unchangeable i no intelligence can really exist anywhere in anything with regard to any object.

Theaetetus: Quite so.

Stranger: And, on the other hand, if we allow that all things are moving and changing, on that view equally we shall be excluding intelligence from the class of real things.

Theaetetus: How so?

^c Stranger: Do you think that, without rest, there could ever be anything that abides constant in the same condition and in the same respects?

Theaetetus: Certainly not.

Stranger: And without such objects can you make out that intelligence exists or could ever exist anywhere?

Theaetetus: It would be quite impossible.

Stranger: Well then, all the force of reasoning must be enlisted to oppose anyone who tries to maintain any assertion about anything at the same time that he suppresses knowledge or understanding or intelligence.

Theaetetus: Most certainly.

^d Stranger: On these grounds, then, it seems that only one course is open to the philosopher who values knowledge and the rest above all else. He must refuse to accept from the champions either of the One or of the many Forms the doctrine that all Reality is changeless; and he must turn a deaf ear to the other party who represent Reality as everywhere changing. Like a child begging for "both", he must declare that Reality or the sum of things is both at once – all that is unchangeable and all that is in change.

Theaetetus: Perfectly true.