

Knowledge, Facts, and the Senses: A New Look at an Old Dialogue

THE argument of the Platonic dialogue *Theaetetus* moves like a ratchet wheel, advancing in small, jagged increments. Each move, like a ratchet tooth, clicks into place, forcing the next to attain a position beyond it. Yet the mechanism which turns the argument is not in plain view. Its detection is left to the reader. There can be no doubt that an inner dynamic underlies and drives the dialogue. The aim of this essay is to indicate what that dynamic may be, and to show how Plato's adherence to certain principles gives unity to his masterpiece.

The *Theaetetus* is concerned, in general, with the definition of knowledge. "I cannot make out to my own satisfaction what knowledge is,"¹ says Socrates, opening the inquiry (145E). The special task of the dialogue is to determine whether knowledge can be found at the level of sensory perception and report. Socrates' only interlocutors are Theaetetus and his teacher Theodorus, a mathematician-scholar. It is a little surprising when Theaetetus proposes early in the discussion that "knowledge is nothing but perception" (151E). Can he really suppose that the geometry, astronomy, harmonics, and arithmetic which he learns from Theodorus are wholly derivative from perception? Plato surely intends that his reader feel the gap between the sciences and

the senses, but Socrates does not take up the point. Rather, he helps Theaetetus to see that the various sciences and crafts are *sorts* of knowledge, not its definition. "Try to find a single formula that applies to the many kinds of knowledge," he tells Theaetetus (148D).

Now the distinction between a concept and the things to which it applies is, for Plato, no incidental matter. It involves the famous contrast between the one and the many: a single formula embraces many instances. The contrasting terms represent different logical levels, unity supervening upon multiplicity. Yet the contrast is not taken in abstraction from the context of human minds engaged in dialogue and reflection. The unity that a concept provides is the unity of understanding amid a multitude of data. Thus, it will do Theaetetus no good to dwell on the objects or the kinds of knowledge so long as he fails to grasp their commonality and relatedness as expressed in a definition of knowledge. For how will he recognize an instance without knowing what it is an instance of? One may of course presuppose a definition, as Theaetetus did even while trying to supply it (146C-147C). But that procedure not only leads to logical snarls, as Socrates points out; it in fact testifies to the

1. All quotations are from *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: the Theaetetus and the Sophist of Plato*, translated with a running commentary by Francis Macdonald Cornford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1935).

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primacy of definition, by which one surmounts mere plurality, and apprehends unity in diversity. The principle of ascent to unity—a variant of the more general axiom of basic contrasts—is one of the keys to the dialogue.

Socrates, examining the hypothesis that knowledge is perception, says that Protagoras, though he used different words, held the same view (152A). For Protagoras taught that a thing is to me as it appears to me and to you as it appears to you, man being the measure of all things. One implication, drawn immediately by Socrates, is that perception is infallible. Next Socrates attributes to Protagoras the doctrine championed by Heraclitus that all things are in process of becoming. The perceiver, no less than the objects he perceives, is ever changing. The general view emerges (156) that sense perception results when the respective motions of sense organ and physical object come within range and generate quick movements between them, so that the organ becomes sensory (e.g., the eye filled with vision) and the object suffused with quality (e.g., the stone's surface saturated by white). Having arisen in the transaction between sense organ and external object, the sensory experience and its datum are completely private. What is perceived is impermanent; that it is perceived as it is, is unassailable.

But can sensory awareness be identified with knowledge? Clearly the reason for the infallibility of perception is its directness to its data. Sensation is simply the presence, to the sense organ, of something immediately given; it is physical conformation of the organ to a presented object. There is no room for error because there is no distance from what is perceived. Neither dreams nor illusions can disturb the reliability of sense experience (158). Yet such experience falls short of truth on the same ground that it falls short of error. Without openly declaring it, Plato permits his reader to feel the necessity of climbing above sensation to the level of judgment in order to reach truth or error. At this higher level, there is distance from the data of sensation and thus the

possibility of reflection upon them and appraisal of them. Here again Plato seeks the higher, contrasting term: objects are given, but only for subjects. To be sure, he insists on the distinction of subject and object even at the level of perception: "I cannot have a perception and have it of nothing," says Socrates, "and equally the object, when it becomes sweet or sour and so on, must become so *to someone*: it cannot become sweet and yet sweet to nobody" (160A,B). But here the subject is identified with the sense organ, a mere patient with respect to a physical object that acts upon it and thus registers sensory data in it. So far as sensation is concerned, man is no more the measure of all things than is the pig, baboon, or tadpole—as Socrates indicates (161C,D). Sense data as such are discrete and unorganized; they constitute an uninterpreted aggregate, a flux or welter. Socrates' account of the "someone" to whom objects appear is as yet insufficient. It will be significantly expanded later, as the ratchet wheel moves beyond its present position.

Of course, Protagoras did not restrict his claim to the level of perception or mere sensory report, but included the level of belief and statement as well. Whatever a person judges to be true *is* true, at least for him. One function Protagoras serves in the dialogue is to give the argument a larger context, for if it is impossible to think or judge falsely, then knowledge is not simply perception—but reaches far above the level of the pig. Received data are met (in humans) by interpretive response, characteristically expressed in language. The trouble with Protagoras is that while maintaining that any belief is true for one who holds it, his role as a sophist tells another story. "Where is the wisdom of Protagoras," Socrates asks, "to justify his setting up to teach others. . . when each of us is himself the measure of his own wisdom?" (161D,E).

Socrates does not immediately press his case with Protagoras. There is Theaetetus, who must be pried loose from his defense of perception as knowledge. After all, why should a defender of perception grant that

there is knowledge of a different sort or, what is more, that every man's judgment is true for him? Socrates must grapple with that defender on the ground where he stands. Socrates begins with a series of questions which indicate the direction his refutation will take. Do we know a foreign language we have not learned merely by hearing it spoken? (163B) The question suggests that *sensa* may be used (and in this sense known) as symbols, which transport us into unperceived regions. Moreover, must we not admit that we can remember (and in this sense know) what we have previously seen? (163E) The admission will of course only force Theaetetus to include memory-images among immediately given data, thereby expanding the scope of "perception," but not transcending it. If you see a man's coat with one eye but not with the other, covered eye, do you know the coat yet also not know it? (165B,C) This puzzle really raises the question as to who the perceiver is, a question to which Socrates later turns.

SPEAKING in behalf of Protagoras, Socrates responds (166A,B) to his own queries regarding perception and also defends the Protagorean thesis that man is the measure (166D-167D). The real link-between Theaetetus and Protagoras comes out in this defense. Though Protagoras goes beyond perception, to belief, in his claim that what *seems* also *is*, he construes belief on the model of perception. "It is not possible either to think the thing that is not or to think anything but what one experiences, and experiences are true," says Socrates in his defense of Protagoras (167A,B). We always think something (not a thing that is not), and that something, like a sense object, is infallibly present in our experience. There is then no distance from the object thought, hence no possibility of response to it or interpretation of it, and so no possibility of error. But what then of Protagoras' setting himself up as a teacher? A man is wise, according to

Protagoras, only in the sense that he can change things for the better, not in the sense that he can substitute the true for the false (166D-167A). Look at the teacher, the physician, the farmer, the public orator—they all help produce results that are sounder or more desirable, but in no way truer.

Now, it is simply untrue that our beliefs and judgments merely register what we experience—though of course some do (as when we think the wine we have tasted is sour). Rather, our thought pyramids upon its data, construing, organizing, judging, and interpreting them. Moreover, we reflect upon and judge our own judgments, and those of others. This is really the point of Socrates' next argument, in which he says he aims to deduce from Protagoras' very teaching that some are wiser than others. If what seems true to a person is true to him, then, since to everyone it seems that some are wiser than others, it follows that for everyone some *are* wiser than others (170A,B). Socrates proceeds: may not an opinion Theodorus holds to be true, be-judged false by many others? (170C,D,E) And, moreover, Protagoras' teaching will be false to all if believed by no one (or false to most if disbelieved by most) (170E-171A). Most ridiculous of all, Protagoras will have to admit that those who think him wrong are correct in their judgment (171A,B,C). The point of this line of attack is that judgments belong to a higher and different order than do perceptions or mere reports of experience. There are conflicts of judgment, judgments upon judgments, and circles in which judgments are self-denying. Protagoras, like Theaetetus, settles for too little: he fails to recognize that thought is free to leave what lies at hand, take wings, and range from one subject to another. (Cf. 173.) Thought is far more than observation; it is essentially conceptualization—and the comparison and evaluation of concepts, as well as their coordination. If we are to know what knowledge is, we must go beyond perception (or reception) and ascend to another, contrasting level, that of conception.

Consider the physician who makes a judgment about whether his patient will catch a fever (178C). He is dealing with possibilities and probabilities, not merely observing data given in experience. The legislator, too, in deciding which course will be advantageous to the state (179A), is coping with possibilities and probabilities. Whenever a judgment is to be made regarding the future, it is the wiser man—not just anyone—who is the measure. The many, varied, and often conflicting opinions of the multitude must give way before wiser (truer) judgments. Thus, Socrates' argument, in defense of Protagoras, that "wise" means better or sounder but not truer (since no one thinks falsely), is unavailing. For one who lacks the truth about which changes will be most beneficial, or how they can be brought about is not likely to improve matters, and his opinions should not be heeded.

As we know, Plato restricts the scope of the *Theaetetus* to the sensible world. Accordingly, he returns to the doctrine of sense perception, focusing on the heraclitean theory of flux. Can it be that all things change in all ways (*i.e.*, both in place and quality) all the time? (181B-182A) If so, neither the qualities perceived nor the perception of them remain constant. Indeed, perception itself—as the awareness of a sense object—will be impermanent, whether we are referring to sight, hearing, or another sense. If the *meaning* of perception is subject to change, perception is not "entitled to be called perception rather than not-perception" (182E), and one who identifies perception and knowledge will have no more right to speak of knowledge than of not-knowledge. Without the contrary of change, without a constant, unitary structure for the occurrence of change, we can make sense neither of perception nor of anything else, "Any answer that can be given to any question is equally right" (183A). But in referring to such a structure, we are adverting to a higher level, the level of meaning, beyond anything empirically given. What Plato has made clear is the indispensability of that level, even for the theory which holds that

knowledge, being perception, belongs wholly to flux.

The decisive argument against Theaetetus' identification of knowledge and perception comes in two steps. Socrates points out that an object perceived by one sense organ cannot be perceived by another (184E-185A). Yet the objects of different organs can be compared. For example, a sound and a color both *exist*, and though *different* from one another, each is the *same* as itself. It is the mind which appropriates terms common not only to particular sense objects but to all things. Thus, though the mind, through the bodily faculties, perceives some things, it contemplates others (the common terms) through its own instrumentality. The first step has been taken: we can apprehend more than sense objects, namely, the commonality or unity of things. So perception is not the whole of knowledge. Moreover, sensations furnish data but cannot attain to existence or usefulness, and thus they cannot attain to truth or knowledge (186C,D,E). Socrates' contention is simply that facts given by perception are not true; white or hard or sweet are just there, as raw materials. Yet they can be wrought into a fabric of interpretation by the mind's power to reflect upon impressions and make comparisons. Such reflection and comparison requires a perspective above the data from which judgments can be made upon them, judgments always asserting existence in some sense. Perception, then, is less than knowledge. So the second step has been taken.

IF, now, Theaetetus must abandon his original premise and offer a new one, he will go no further than required by Socrates' argument. The wheel moves only so far as the ratchet pushes it. Knowledge is not perception, so it is perhaps opinion. Yet if an opinion is false, it is not knowledge; knowledge, therefore, must consist of opinions or judgments which are true. Socrates does not immediately take up this suggestion, for it rests on an unexamined

assumption—that false judgment is possible. Granted that the mind is able to view things from a vantage point above them, how could it fail to apprehend them as they are? No one could think that Theaetetus, whom he knows, is either Socrates, whom he also knows, or a total stranger; nor could he mistake one total stranger for another (188B,C). Moreover, to think falsely is not to think nothing at all, for to think nothing is simply not to think (189A). Thinking, however, is not just a form of observation; it is, Socrates holds, the mind's silent discourse with itself, a judgment being a decision reached at the end of a mental process of question and answer (189E-190A). Even so, one will not judge (or state to oneself) that of two things clearly before the mind, one is the other, or that something clearly before the mind is some other thing which is not thought of at all (190C,D). However, there are two ways in which a thing may be before the mind: it may either be perceived or remembered. Given this distinction we can see how mistaking *is* possible. One who knows (is acquainted with) both Theaetetus and Theodorus has memory-images of each imprinted in his mind like seal-impressions in a waxen block. He may, on seeing the two men, mistakenly assign to the perception of the first the memory-image belonging to the second, and to the perception of the second the memory-image belonging to the first (193B,C). Of course, on seeing only one of the men, he may mistakenly assign to the perception of that man the memory-image of the other (193D).

What is the thread of the argument to this point? Socrates has shown that knowledge is not perception. He has also shown that it is not merely judgment, for there *are* false judgments. But Socrates has not explained false judgment in cases other than those involving the misfitting of memory-image to perception. He now undertakes a fuller explanation. One can be mistaken about numbers, which, though not perceived, are supposedly before the mind as imprints in the waxen block. Finding 5 and 7 among the numbers, one may in his inner discourse con-

clude that their sum is 11 (196A,B). So, says Socrates, it is possible to think 12 is 11. The difficulty is, no one can be mistaken regarding two things that are each known, and 11 and 12 are supposed to be stamped in the waxen block. Perhaps two numbers, though they are in the memory, are not at the moment equally present to the mind and hence are not known in the same sense. Pieces of knowledge then are like birds in an aviary: they are possessions, yet we do not always have hold of them (197C,D). In hunting for a piece of knowledge in the mind's aviary, we may seize the wrong item, catching hold for example of the knowledge of 11 instead of the knowledge of 12. The point is that knowledge need not be present to the mind; it may be only latent, though subject to the mind's power to search into it, take hold of it, and bring it to the fore.

What the reader discerns is the contrast between the mere reception of data and the mind's action on them. It is with respect to the latter that error is possible: one may assign to a perception the wrong memory-image, or in chasing after a piece of knowledge in his memory he may grasp the wrong piece. Moreover, where there is false judgment, there might have been truth—and knowledge. So it is with the mind's activities and operations—with its own discourse—that knowledge becomes possible. Of course, there are problems. Socrates immediately asks how, granting one directly knows a number, he can judge it to be another number somewhere in the mind's aviary (199D). This objection is somewhat unclear. On reflection, we can see that Plato is playing on the ambiguity of "know." If knowing about numbers is merely possessing them in an enclosure or even having hold of them, there is no problem about the possibility of making errors in associating them, the errors arising mechanically. And of course if the numbers (and number facts) are originally learned from a teacher, if they are merely received and deposited, then they do exist in the memory like so many possessions. But Plato is suggesting that knowing the numbers means *understanding* them and

their relations, that is, grasping them intellectually, not mechanically. Then indeed Socrates' objection takes on weight.

Theaetetus, sticking with the aviary apparatus says that a false judgment results when we lay hold of a piece of ignorance (a false belief we have acquired), the aviary being stocked both with pieces of knowledge and pieces of ignorance (199E). Socrates immediately observes that one who lays hold of a piece of ignorance will not *think* he is judging falsely; "his attitude of mind will be the same as if he knew the thing he is mistaken about" (200A). Knowledge involves insight into beliefs, a meta-level of judgment upon judgment. Socrates is forcing the argument up beyond the confines of mere conviction, up beyond mere beliefs or beliefs about beliefs. Orators and lawyers can make us believe things (201A,B). But being convinced of something is not the same as knowing it is true; we may be as firmly convinced of things that are false. So a belief—even if true—is not knowledge.

KNOWLEDGE is not just belief, any more than it is perception. For there are false beliefs. Moreover, knowledge is not just true belief, whether at hand or in reserve. For a belief is not *known* to be true merely because it is *had* or *possessed*. Knowing requires *understanding* a belief as true or false. Thus, if Protagoras holds that all beliefs are true, Socrates holds that no beliefs, not even true ones, are knowledge. What then must be added to a true belief to transform it into knowledge? Theaetetus reports that he has heard someone declare that true belief plus an account is knowledge. Socrates too has heard some such thing. The theory, he explains (201D-202C), was as follows: things (natural objects) are made up of elements, which, though they can be perceived, are inexplicable and unknowable; these elements can be named, but nothing can be attributed to them or said of them. However, an account can be given of complexes of elements,

the account being a description consisting of the names of the elements in a complex. Such a description, says the theory, converts a true notion of a complex into knowledge of it. But does it? If a complex is just an aggregate of elements that are each unknowable, naming them all will not give us knowledge of the complex (203D). On the other hand, if a complex is a single entity distinguishable from the sum of the parts, it will be unknowable because it is simple and not composed of parts (205C,D).

It is obvious that Plato is discussing a proposal that scarcely goes beyond either perception or true belief. He seems to be asking what last step must be taken to satisfy the requirements of knowledge. Analysis of a complex and enumeration of its elemental parts calls for action from the mind, but it is minimal action—at a low level. But before the argument is pushed to a higher level the possible meanings of an account (at this level) must be examined. The refutation of a particular theory need not deny the general contention that an account added to true belief is knowledge. An account, says Socrates, could mean nothing more than verbal expression of one's thought (206D). But then no one would lack knowledge so long as he could put his true opinions into words. Well, perhaps an account *is* an analysis of some sort—though not into simple, unknowable parts. Still, in spelling "Theaetetus," one may include all the letters (and no others), and even put them in the correct order, yet fail to *know* how to spell the name and on another occasion misspell it (208A,B). What else might an account be? To give an account may be to point out the difference which distinguishes a given thing from all others. But if an account, meaning a distinguishing mark, is to be added to a true notion of something, will that notion itself relate only to what is common to a number of things? Surely a true notion of something must include its differentness from other things. Anyway, "knowledge of differentness" cannot be part of the *definition* of knowledge (210A).

So it is not simply by noting, counting, or

arranging data as individual (perceptible) units that knowledge comes. Nor does it come by grasping the distinctiveness of any particular thing. Knowledge requires a transcending of sensible data and an apprehension of the conceptual patterns that make the many data one and provide stability amid and above the flux. Perhaps one of the Socratic ironies consists in the fact that Socrates, Theaetetus, and Theodorus knew all along what knowledge is. Their long quest for a definition is tacit recognition that knowledge is borne by concepts. The discarding of this or that proposal testifies

(against Protagoras) to the fact that some opinions *are* false, that the true are those that withstand intellectual assault, thereby giving our thought unity and consistency. Did any of the interlocutors [or the reader] ever doubt it? Moreover, all tacitly appeal to certain standards of knowledge for appraisal of hypotheses. Thus, Socrates, that subtle midwife to souls, enables us, by our very participation in the dialogue as readers and thinkers, to discover *in ourselves* what we always presupposed and knew knowledge to be.