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Plato's *Theaetetus* and the Problem of Knowledge

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Plato's *Theaetetus* and the Problem of Knowledge

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Abstract

Plato's *Theaetetus* and the Problem of Knowledge

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In keeping with Socrates' advice that it is "a better thing to accomplish a little well than a lot inadequately" (*Theaetetus*, 187d), this master's report provides a detailed study of a few relatively short sections of Plato's *Theaetetus*. After an analysis of the beginning of the work and its opening themes, I examine the Protagorean thesis as it is first revealed in Theaetetus' second endeavor to say what knowledge is. Rather than follow the entire course of Socrates' account of Protagoras' position, I bring out a few of the essential features of this initial presentation and attempt to gain some clarity as to the possible meaning and purpose behind Protagoras' enigmatic declaration that man is the measure of all things. The final section of my paper entails a close analysis of the dialogue's last definition of knowledge: true opinion with speech. Although this account does not answer all of the questions posed by the Protagorean thesis, we find within it the most promising approach to answering the question of the dialogue: "What is knowledge?" While the *Theaetetus* comes to a close with this final attempt and ultimate failure to answer the question with which it began, I show that Socrates' spurious arguments often serve more as pointers toward the truth than as refutations of the "truths" proposed.

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I. Socrates the Midwife & Theaetetus the Mathematician

In Plato's *Theaetetus* Socrates rather remarkably proclaims himself to be a midwife; his art, however, treats not women and their bodies, but men and their souls.[1,2] While he claims to be "sterile of wisdom" himself, he knows how to deliver the thoughts of others and how to discern whether a newly born idea is an "image and a lie or something fruitful and true" (*Theaetetus,* 150c).[3] While we will see that Socrates is being less than honest with regard to his own condition, his analogy does draw our attention to an important feature of the dialogue: to a large degree, how the conversation proceeds will depend upon how far Socrates' interlocutors' particular capacities and tendencies allow it to go. What, then, do we know about the dialogue's namesake Theaetetus?

It is through his teacher Theodorus that we are introduced to the young Theaetetus. Upon being asked by Socrates whether he has come across any promising youths in the city who have "made geometry or something else of philosophy their concern" (144d),[4] Theodorus eagerly reports that he has a student who is well worth telling and hearing about, and goes on to praise Theaetetus to the skies. Not the most tactful of men, Theodorus explains that he feels at liberty to speak of his student so

[1] My reading of the *Theaetetus* is largely indebted to two courses I have attended on the dialogue, one by Christopher Bruell at Boston College, and another by my master's report supervisor Devin Stauffer. I have greatly benefited from their guidance in following the path of the argument through the text. Any missteps along the way are, of course, my own.
[2] cf. Xenophon's *Symposium*, Chapter 3 Section 10, where Socrates describes himself as also possessing the art of pimping, which he here disavows.
[3] Unless otherwise noted, all references given in parentheses are to Seth Benardete's translation of Plato's *Theaetetus*. Noted emendations are made with reference to *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet, as are all other references to Platonic dialogues, unless otherwise noted.
[4] cf. Plato's *Charmides*, 153d2-5.

enthusiastically because (if Socrates doesn't mind him saying so) given how similarly ugly Theaetetus and Socrates look, there is no need to fear that anyone will mistake his admiration for desire. That said, he goes on to explain that the young Theaetetus is so exceptional for his age as to be the cause of wonder.[5] On the grounds of such an introduction, we are given every reason to believe that Theaetetus is the ideal interlocutor. But if this were truly the case, one might wonder why the dialogue ends in an *aporia*. Must even the best, brightest, and most promising of students be left at a loss? Or does the young Theaetetus, who is similar to Socrates in his youth in more ways than one, still have more to learn?

Upon meeting Theaetetus, Socrates suggests that they might each learn something about themselves by examining each other. Socrates tells the boy that he, for one, would like to examine what sort of face he has; Theodorus, as he explains, says they share similar features. But Socrates then questions whether they should take Theodorus' word for it, and if so, why. He goes on to suggest that to determine the truth of a statement, one must look to the qualifications of the one who makes it, rather than simply determining the matter by relying upon one's own senses. Thus, if someone says two lyres are similarly tuned, one ought to consider whether the person speaking has any expertise in music. By this logic, since Theodorus is not especially skilled in painting, there is no reason to trust his statement that Socrates and Theaetetus look alike.[6] To this conclusion Theaetetus responds, "perhaps not," showing polite and proper deference to

[5] It is worth contrasting Theodorus' description of the ideal student with Socrates' own in the *Republic*, 485a10-487a5.
[6] cf. Hemmenway, 337.

his teacher by refusing to agree entirely with Socrates' suggestion that "it's scarcely worthwhile to pay him any mind" (145a).

But Theaetetus' hesitance might also point to the partial absurdity of Socrates' argument. While artists may be more attuned to certain subtleties, one need not be a Picasso to recognize that two faces look similar nor a Perlman to notice when two instruments are similarly tuned. Socrates curiously passes over all layman-like forms of observational knowledge. The ability to recognize similarities and differences seems to be the starting point for the more sophisticated kinds of skills or knowledge belonging to those to whom Socrates suggests we must defer. Moreover, this very ability would be involved in our own determination of whether someone else is in fact a skilled painter or musician. Thus, our attention is drawn to the role that is played in our attainment of knowledge by the kind of simple awareness involved in comparing the likenesses and differences of our perceptions, if only insofar as this simple awareness is too obviously and problematically ignored by Socrates. Whether or not it is properly called "knowledge," the significance of this kind of elementary grasping must be kept in mind as we continue.

After hearing from Theaetetus the less than convinced response described above, Socrates goes on to ask him whether it is worth examining a person to whom one is considered similar when the similarity is not one of appearance, but rather one of the soul in point of virtue and wisdom. Here the otherwise reticent Theaetetus enthusiastically agrees. To begin with, the question is no longer a direct challenge to the authority of his teacher (although Socrates does subtly suggest that Theodorus is not sufficiently skilled

in virtue and wisdom for them to defer to his expertise). More important, Theaetetus' eagerness reveals a second challenge to Socrates' initial suggestion that one ought to defer to established experts when it comes to questions of the truth. Theaetetus shows himself to be promising insofar as he cares for the state of his soul enough for it to be a matter about which he wants to gain his own knowledge. For while we may often be willing to take the word of experts in other matters, when it comes to the soul, especially *our* soul and its alleged virtue or wisdom, it is not enough just to know what someone else, even one's own teacher, thinks.

Thus, we expect an evaluation of Theaetetus' soul is soon to follow. After all, Socrates says in response to the youth's piqued interest, "[I]t's time, my dear Theaetetus, for you to display and for me to examine" (145b). But this apparent interest in Theaetetus turns out to be but a segue into an examination of an altogether different object. After trying in vain to embolden Theaetetus by letting him know that he has never heard Theodorus praise anyone as highly as he has just been praised, Socrates goes on to ask him about his studies. Surely, Socrates asks Theaetetus, he has been learning astronomy, harmony, calculations, and the like. And, as Socrates says, he himself has everything about them "down to a fair degree" (145d). Except, Socrates adds, "[T]here's a small point about which I'm perplexed" (145d). This small point will turn out to be the preoccupation of the entire dialogue, as Socrates shifts the focus of their conversation away from Theaetetus and his soul toward knowledge and its meaning. Nonetheless, we must realize that Theaetetus' soul remains under examination, albeit indirectly. His

character will continue to be revealed through the questions he asks and the answers he gives, not to mention those he passes over.

After easily getting Theaetetus to concede that to learn is to become wiser in whatever one learns and that the wise are wise by wisdom, Socrates asks, "And this doesn't differ at all, does it, from knowledge?" (145e).[7] At this point, Theaetetus, who had been complaisantly agreeing with everything Socrates said, admits that he is not sure what exactly he's being asked; Socrates readily feeds him the answer that the wise are wise by knowledge and thus knowledge and wisdom are the same. While Theaetetus agrees without hesitation, we must stop to note that this equation of knowledge and wisdom is by no means necessary or clear.[8] While we may acknowledge a person to be eminently knowledgeable when it comes to sports trivia, we would not go so far as to call such a person wise on account of it. Wisdom seems to have a character that is not quite captured by mere knowledge or, at the very least, not by knowledge of any sort. Moreover, Socrates himself is famous for portraying his own wisdom as consisting precisely in his awareness of what he does not know.[9] Still, under the questionable assumption that wisdom and knowledge are equivalent, Socrates goes on to say that "this is the very point about which I'm perplexed, and I'm incapable of grasping it adequately by myself. Whatever is knowledge?" (145e).

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[7] The word in Greek is ἐπιστήμη. Following Benardete, I will most often translate it as knowledge, although it can also mean science. For Heidegger's analysis on how one should and should not understand the question of the dialogue see The Essence of Truth, 109-117.

[8] Aristotle, for one, draws an initial distinction between knowledge and wisdom in Book 6, Chapter 3 of the Nicomachean Ethics. Although he then goes on Book 6, Chapter 7 to describe wisdom as a specific type of knowledge.

[9] E.g., Plato's *Apology*, 21d1-e2.

Despite being made up of knowledgeable men, Socrates' audience seems to be as perplexed as he is when it comes to what knowledge might be, and they remain intractably speechless as he repeats the question. After trying to lower the stakes by likening their inquiry to a child's game, Socrates finally has to ask whether he's simply "being boorish" (146a). Theodorus reassures him to the contrary and encourages Theaetetus to answer, if only so that he himself doesn't have to. Socrates for his part does not hesitate to exploit Theaetetus' unwillingness to disobey the older and wiser Theodorus and urges him to "in a good and noble fashion speak out" and say what knowledge is (146c). Theaetetus, who feels he must answer, begins by reassuring himself out loud that if he makes a mistake someone will be able to correct him. At this point we would expect Socrates, who seems otherwise eager to encourage Theaetetus, to confirm his belief that any mistake can be corrected. Instead he answers, "Yes, of course, if, that is, we can" (146c). This qualified response causes us to wonder whether Socrates is less sure than Theaetetus is that all things can be known. However that may be, Theaetetus proposes that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is in fact nothing other than knowledges (ἐπιστῆμαι), the sciences and arts themselves, from geometry to shoemaking. According to Socrates, his answer is, while "noble and lavish," wrong (146d). Giving one of his characteristic objections, Socrates explains that having been asked for one simple thing, Theaetetus has given an answer that is "many and complex instead" (146d).[10]

But one might wonder whether Socrates' dismissal of Theaetetus' answer is as questionable as the answer itself. For in asking the question "What is knowledge?"

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[10] Compare Plato's *Meno*, 74a7-10.

would one not at least have to begin by pointing to those things to which we normally attribute the word? Socrates suggests that Theaetetus misses the meaning of his question entirely. He's not looking to count the various kinds of knowledge, "but to get to know knowledge whatever it itself is" (146e). Theaetetus readily acknowledges this difference. He is, however, much more hesitant (answering "perhaps") when Socrates goes on to suggest that if he were asked what clay is, it would be "ridiculous" to answer that "there's the clay of potters, the clay of furnace makers, the clay of brick-makers" (147a).[11] His hesitation here is indicative of the fact that there is something plainly not ridiculous about such an answer (and so too for Theaetetus' answer regarding knowledge). For in answering the question of what something is, why should we not begin by listing the various kinds that make up the class? And does it not make sense in the case of clay to focus upon use as a determining factor for inclusion? What is particularly suggestive about Socrates' supposedly ridiculous answer is its emphasis on the way *we* use clay. In other words, the answer suggests that in some sense what a thing *is*, or is known to be, is at least in part determined by its relation to human beings.

Ignoring the possible merits of this kind of answer, Socrates goes on to explain that it is ridiculous because it assumes that the questioner already understands what clay is. "Or," he asks, "do you believe that someone understands some name of something if he doesn't know what it is?" Theaetetus answers "in no way" (147b). But is this so

[11] Here I have amended Benardete's translation, translating πηλός as "clay" rather than "mud." Not only is this more accurate, but it also makes more sense in the given context. Here clay is clearly being distinguished from mere mud on the grounds of its ability to be used in a particular way: molded and dried into bricks, pots, etc.

unlikely? After all, the entire dialogue to follow revolves around the question what is knowledge, and to ask that question in the first place, let alone make progress toward an answer, must we not have *some* grasp of what we are looking for?[12] Is this not similar to the initial kind of grasp that Socrates passed over and the kind evident in Theaetetus' first answer? It is clear, however, that while we may start with *some* grasp or understanding of what something is, a deeper, clearer, and more confident understanding, which may rightly be called knowledge, or perhaps even wisdom, would require much more. Just what this might entail is what the rest of the dialogue will try to determine. For now, it is important to note that from the start our attention is drawn to what seem to be different kinds or levels of knowledge. Furthermore, the question is raised as to whether or not there is something, namely wisdom, which somehow goes beyond or can be distinguished from knowledge, especially insofar as it may entail an understanding of precisely that which we do not know. We must keep these matters in mind and consider what effects the dubious premises, assumptions, and oversights with which the dialogue begins might go on to have upon the arguments that follow.

[12] Compare *Meno* 80d5 ff.

II. Knowledge is Perception and Man is the Measure

Having been encouraged by Socrates' midwifery account and his offer to act as Theaetetus' deliverer,[13] Theaetetus makes his second attempt to say what knowledge is, suggesting that "knowledge is nothing else than perception" (151e). In contrast to his first definition, this time he satisfies Socrates by making a unifying claim about the essence of knowledge. But this is a curious answer for Theaetetus, a promising young mathematician, to give. For mathematicians deal mostly with abstractions that are not directly perceived by the senses; we neither see, smell, hear, taste nor touch, numbers. It isn't surprising then that the answer turns out not to be his own, as Socrates soon traces its source to Protagoras. Perhaps Theaetetus, who has read Protagoras' work many times (152a), is eager to have Socrates refute what might be a disconcerting challenge to the validity of his own endeavors. As Theaetetus admitted earlier, he has a concern about the question of knowledge that he can't get rid of, and, despite having examined the question time and again, is unable to persuade himself that he says anything adequately about it (148e). Whatever his reasons for proposing this definition might be, before they examine whether the answer is "fruitful or a wind-egg" (151e), Socrates rephrases it. He asks Theaetetus, "Perception, you say, (is) knowledge?" (151e), and Theaetetus answers yes, making no note of any difference. But it is important to see that this reformulation makes Theaetetus' initial statement less comprehensive and extreme. Rather than knowledge

[13] For a persuasive discussion of the ways in which Socrates' midwifery account serves as more than mere encouragement, see Hemmenway, especially pages 325-331.

being *nothing else* than perception, Socrates' statement suggests, or at least allows, that perception, while it may be one kind of knowledge or constitute knowledge in some sense, is not simply all there is to it.

Having traced Theaetetus' answer to Protagoras, Socrates turns their attention to an examination of its source. As he explains, Theaetetus has "probably not spoken a trivial speech," but rather one similar to what Protagoras meant when he wrote, "Of all things (a) human being is the measure, of that things which are, that (how) they are, and of the things which are not, that (how) they are not" (152a). As this translation suggests, Protagoras' "man is the measure" thesis abounds with ambiguity. It is ambiguous whether the "ὡς" in "ὡς ἔστι" and "ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν" should be translated as "how" or "that"; whether "χρημάτων" should be understood to refer to the qualities of things or to the things themselves; and finally, whether "ἄνθρωπον" without an article should be read as the human species generally or as an individual human being.[14] Depending on how one reads each of these terms, Protagoras' statement becomes either less or more extreme.

Socrates begins by narrowing and radicalizing the meaning of Protagoras' doctrine. As noted above, ἄνθρωπος could be taken to mean the human species, such

[14] On this point classicist Kurt von Fritz insists: "There can be no doubt whatever that, in accordance with the prevailing linguistic usage of the time of Protagoras, and especially in reference to the preceding *onton* and *ouk onton*, *hos estin* means '*that* they exist' and *hos* ouk *estin* '*that* they do not exist.' Yet when Protagoras illustrates his point by means of the qualities or, to use Aristotle's language, the *poietetes*, of 'warm' and 'cold,' it seems equally clear that *hos* in both cases must mean 'how,' though in good Greek this would really be *hoia*. At this point, however, one has again to remember that in early Greek philosophy, that is, for the predecessors of Heraclitus and Parmenides, warm and cold were not *poiotetes*, much less purely sensual qualities, but rather the fundamental contrasts of which the universe consists, and in this sense *chremata* or *onta*."

that we as humans, occupying a common world, constitute the measure of things/qualities, that/how they are and are not. Rather than go this route, Socrates interprets Protagoras' position as more radically relativistic. To begin with, he shifts from perception to the broader category of appearance and focuses upon human beings as individuals to whom things appear differently rather than similarly. Using the example of wind, Socrates asks Theaetetus whether a breeze, feeling cold to one person but not to another, could be called "in itself" either cold or not cold. Must it not *be* cold in the first place and not cold in the second? "For," he says, "whatever sort each perceives, it's that sort that they probably are for each" (152c). Furthermore, he claims, perception "is…always of that which is, and it's without falsehood inasmuch as it is knowledge" (152c). Thus, it is true for one person that the wind is cold, and no less true for another that the wind is not cold. It seems no meaningful distinction can be maintained between the way things appear to the individual and the way that they are. The coldness of the wind lies not in the wind itself, but in the perceiver, and if knowledge is perception, then truth is relative to the perception of the individual.

But during the course of the argument above, Socrates asks a line of questions that draws our attention to the issue of whether appearing and perceiving are in fact as equivalent as the argument assumes. It is, obviously, not at all unusual for the wind to blow and for one person to be made to feel colder by it than another. For example, someone who has a fever will be more sensitive to a breeze than someone who is healthy. We normally find no need to draw the conclusion of radical relativism from such a fact precisely because we are able to distance ourselves from an immediate perception and

explain why it *appeared* or revealed itself in a particular way to a particular person. To be sure, Socrates' statement that "perception is…always of that which is, and it's without falsehood inasmuch as it is knowledge," seems valid. There is something that could rightly be called a kind of knowledge grounded in what is immediately perceived by the senses, if only a knowledge of the fact that this particular perception occurred. In short, one could agree to the relativity, or subjectivity, of experience without having to conclude that there is nothing constant behind each of our individual and varied experiences. While we all may have more or less different and necessarily private perceptions of heat and cold, this does not eliminate the possibility that something fixed is the cause of our varying perceptions, such that, for example, thermometers can measure temperature consistently. In short, it has not been sufficiently shown that behind our subjective experiences there is not *something* constant, of which we could, through observation and reflection, attain some objective knowledge.

Moreover, that there is in fact something constant is suggested by the fact that while speaking of different perceptions of the wind, Socrates still speaks of the *same* wind. While it might be that we cannot say the wind in itself is cold or hot, we can say that the wind exists, and that we experience the wind as something that produces in us sensations within a certain range of cold and warmth. The properties of coldness and warmth do not belong solely to wind insofar as they belong in part to the experience of the person who perceives them. But there is still a common world and a singular being that is experienced, i.e., the wind, to which human beings react in a relatively similar if not identical way. So far then the example of wind would seem to suggest that for all

things each man is the measure of *how* they are and *how* they are not, but even this within certain limits. The variability that exists within our experiences of the qualities of beings is not an irreconcilable variability. Furthermore, far from being impossible, it seems evident that we can by virtue of reflecting upon and talking about our shared experiences, come to find these differences in perception to be entirely understandable.

There seems then to be no need on the basis of the present example to draw such a strange conclusion as that of radical relativism. If this is Protagoras' position, then its grounds have not been adequately established. It is indeed a puzzle why he jumps to such an extreme position from the common and seemingly unproblematic experience of people being more or less sensitive to a breeze. Why, in Socrates' words, does Protagoras "make this an enigma for us" (152c)? Further pieces of the puzzle come to light when Socrates suggests that this first presentation of Protagoras' theory, which before he said was only "probably" not a trivial speech (151e), is in fact a trivial, or exoteric, presentation. He goes on to give what is "actually a not trivial speech" (152d). It still remains to be seen just what this exoteric doctrine meant, or what purpose it might have served. First, however, we must consider it in light of the esoteric doctrine Socrates claims Protagoras told in secret to his students (152c-d).

The esoteric Protagorean position that Socrates goes on to articulate he says is shared by many of the wise. It is composed of two claims: nothing is one itself by itself, and all things come to be from motion. As we will see, what each claim might mean and their relation to each other takes some unraveling to discern. As regards the first claim, we get only a brief glimpse of its meaning. Socrates quotes a speech which claims that

common language misleads us. We fail to speak correctly when we refer to something in itself and call it big, for it will also appear small, and presumably what appears warm will also appear cold, and so too with what is "heavy, light, and all things in this way, on the grounds that nothing is one, neither something nor of any sort whatsoever" (152d). "But," the speech continues, as an apparent explanation of the first claim, "all things – it's those we say are the things which are (not addressing them correctly) – come to be from locomotion and motion and mutual mixing" (152d). The speech seems to be a deepening of the problem of perception discussed above. It challenges the notion that there is any being (wind) in itself that remains constant and distinct from our shifting perceptions, insofar as the claim is now made that we speak incorrectly in talking of "things" in the first place. But the ground upon which this challenge is made is not immediately clear.

Returning to the first claim of the speech, what exactly does it mean to insist that nothing is "itself in itself"? If one reflects upon what it means for something to be small, one sees that a thing can be small only in relation to something else that is larger, which in its turn is only large by virtue of its relation to something smaller. In other words, nothing is either large or small in isolation, "itself in itself." If one takes this claim as to the relational character of qualities, and combines it with the claim that all beings are in motion, then one begins to see why the qualities of things are constantly shifting. But for the time being we are left wondering why the speech does not restrict its claims to the qualities of things, instead insisting that we are even mistaken in speaking of such "things" in the first place, for "nothing ever is, but (everything) always becomes" (152e). In other words, not only are its attributes, such as warm and cold, shifting and inconstant,

but so is the thing itself, wind, which is not even stable and fixed enough to be properly called a "thing" in the first place. We will have to wait for a fuller explication of this part of the thesis.

Having finished quoting the esoteric speech, Socrates then adds "about this let all the wise in succession except Parmenides converge" (152d).[15] As Socrates explains, "with the line 'Oceanus and mother Tethys, the becoming (genesis) of gods,' [Homer] said that everything is the offspring of flowing and motion" (152e).[16] "Or doesn't he seem to mean this?" Socrates leadingly asks Theaetetus, who readily agrees. But, of course, Homer doesn't at all *seem* to mean this. He *seems* to mean that two gods, Oceanus and Tethys, not motion and flowing, created all the other gods.[17] Moreover, the first articulation of the motion thesis need not have meant that the origin of all things, from the beginning of time, is in motion. It could have simply meant that all things presently come to be from motions and mixing. The gods themselves could have been the source of this motion, rather than the other way around. In short, Socrates' additions and emphasis suggest and make rather explicit what would have remained only buried implications of the motion thesis as it was first articulated: *all* things, the gods included, are the products of motion. As Seth Benardete suggests, having torn the veil from Protagoras' speech, Socrates proceeds to do the same with Homer's (105).[18]

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[15] As Socrates later explains, followers of Parmenides insist upon the opposite: "all things are one and it is at rest in itself without a place in which it moves" (180e).

[16] Here I have amended Benardete's translation, substituting "Oceanus" for "Ocean," which seems more in keeping with the Homeric myth.

[17] On this point see Benardete, 1.105. Note that in his commentary he translates "Ὠκεανόν" as "Oceanus" rather than "ocean."

[18] cf., 180d.

Building up this thesis as if it were unassailable, Socrates asks, "Who would still be capable, should he dispute against so large an army and so great a general as Homer, of not proving himself to be ridiculous?" (153a). Of course, Socrates had previously indicated that no less than Parmenides disputes against this army, not to mention the fact that he has not said where he himself stands among the wise. However that may be, in light of the flimsy arguments he goes on to mount in its defense, his question begins in retrospect to sound sarcastic. Socrates goes on to argue that the good is motion, and that the bad is rest. For example, bodies come to be through motion and deteriorate through idleness. The soul learns from activity and forgets by the kind of stillness involved in a lack of practice. Finally, and most unpersuasively, quiet conditions at sea "rot and destroy, but the other things preserve" (153c). These arguments are, in short, too unconvincing to be believed. Does not the body get destroyed just as much by being excessively in motion as it does by being excessively idle?[19] Furthermore, in the case of learning, which Socrates says is motion by which things "get saved and become better," is this getting saved really best understood as motion? Could learning even be possible without an element of stillness or stability in memory, or in the classes that fundamentally do not change? Finally, the ghost of Protagoras himself, who is said to have died in a shipwreck, could likely attest to the fact that anyone at sea would prefer calm waters to storms.[20]

[19] As Benardete puts it, "We do not need the dysenteric Theaetetus, dying on his way to Athens, to know that the signs hardly suffice as signs of the second order truths, let alone of the truth that nothing is" (I.105).
[20] Diogenes Laertius, IX.8.55.

But all this becomes a bit beside the point once we stop to notice something very strange. Not only does Socrates offer us a series of bad arguments, but the examples themselves are not even meant to show that all is motion. Far from denying the existence of stability, the argument itself openly affirms it: motion is not the source of all things, but of all things good, while rest is the source of all things bad. Thus, where we were expecting to find proof or evidence in favor of the "all is motion" thesis, we get something quite different: bad evidence for a distorted version of it. Rather than argue that *all* is motion, Socrates insists that, "[T]he good is motion both in terms of soul and in terms of body" (153c). The dubious argument culminates in another reference to Homer, suggesting that "as long as the sun and its orbiting is in motion, all things are and are preserved both among gods and human beings…" (153d). Far from throwing our ordinary experience of the world and the stability of things within it into question, as it is here articulated, motion seems to ensure the opposite; ordered and predictable motion, the sun in its orbit, holds the world together and preserves the things within it.

It is a real puzzle as to why Socrates proceeds in this way. If the purpose of this account is not to provide evidence in favor of the thesis that all is motion, then what purpose does it serve? A clue to its meaning can be found when one consults the Homeric passage to which Socrates here alludes.[21] The message in Homer's mythical account is strikingly different from the one that Socrates here presents to Theaetetus. In Homer's *Iliad*, Zeus warns the other gods that not even with all their might combined

[21] For this reference, I'm indebted to Seth Benardete, who directs his readers to the original passage in footnote 25.

could they tear *him* from the heavens, he who alone has the power to turn the whole world upside down. As Zeus makes clear to the immortals who marvel at his words, "It is by so much that I am superior to gods and human beings" (fn 25). In contrast to the original passage, the meaning of Socrates' version comes to light. The sun in its orbit replaces almighty Zeus as the force that holds the world together.[22] Natural necessity, not divine whim, is what keeps the world in order, preserving the things within it, and setting a new standard for good and bad. Once again tearing the veil from Homer's mythic account, Socrates suggests that the "forbidden secret" of Homer and his army of the wise is an esoteric, scientific account that displaces the mythical accounts. But, as we saw, the evidence Socrates presented in favor of his distorted motion thesis was so obviously weak as to make any of its conclusions questionable. We are left wondering whether the "all is motion" thesis rests upon more solid ground.

The Speech of the Moment

After the line of argument described above, Socrates returns to a more direct account of the claims he described as the esoteric teaching of the wise. He asks Theaetetus to "follow the speech of the moment" and "set down nothing alone by itself as being one" (153e). They are to adopt the suppositions of the speech, namely that everything is "becoming in becoming" as opposed to "in order and abiding" (153d-e). Presumably this can only be the speech of a "moment" because otherwise it too would be abiding. However that may be, Socrates has Theaetetus consider the implications of this

[22] Compare *Phaedo*, 99c.

speech with regard to perception, using the example of vision. Suppose, he says, that what we call white color isn't something in itself, either outside or inside the eyes. Instead, all colors come to be "from the application of the eyes onto the suitable local motion" (153d). Color is neither that which strikes, nor that which is struck against, "but something in between that has become private (peculiar) for each" (154a). In this way, color, far from being a stable quality possessed by a particular being, is instead a singular and momentary event produced by the striking together of motions.

The first part of this theory, while contrary to how we often speak of color, is not so far fetched. We are, after all, familiar with modern science's notion of color as "something in between," namely the result of an interaction between the eye's retina and the light waves reflecting off of an object's surface. What is more jarring is the degree to which (following the speech of the moment) Socrates goes on to insist that this something in between is "private for each." To begin with, he argues that things do not appear similarly to one human being and another. Here we are reminded of the wind example. But Socrates then goes so far as to ask Theaetetus whether it is "much more the case that not even for you yourself (is there) the same thing, on account of the fact that you yourself are never in a condition similar to yourself" (154a). Apparently one can neither step into nor see the same river twice. The suggestion is that all things, the individual included, are in such flux that one could never say the same individual sees the same color twice. Theaetetus surprisingly agrees with this far from intuitive suggestion. Indeed, upon reflection it seems true that every moment of existence is in some sense unique and unrepeatable. If one takes the single example of our perception of a tree, with

different leaves growing, shifting, and falling with each second in the breeze, one can begin to see this point more clearly. But despite these manifold changes, we still effortlessly recognize the tree as the same tree. And despite all the ways in which Theaetetus' own being might change with each passing moment, could he even begin to answer Socrates' question if he didn't possess an abiding self, present over an extended amount of time, and capable of remembering and comparing a collection of past experiences?

Again, one is waiting for more compelling evidence in favor of a thesis so contrary to our everyday experience. Socrates seems to be offering us just that when he goes on to tell Theaetetus, "Take a small paradigm and you'll know everything I want" (154c). But as we will see, the example Socrates proceeds to give has so little to do with a scientific account of perception that one wonders whether what *he* wants is the same as what those advancing the motion thesis want. He goes on to describe the following phenomenon: "We say surely that six dice, if you apply four to them, are more than the four and one and a half times as much, and if you apply twelve, they're less and half as much" (154c).[23] As Socrates explains, this simple example stands in striking contrast to our ordinary assumption that nothing either increases or decreases so long as it remains equal to itself. We normally assume that the nature of a being changes only by virtue of some physical change to the being itself, but this example shows quite clearly that what a being is can also change by virtue of a mere shift in its relation to other beings. We come

[23] While Benardete here uses the word "apply," it is worth noting that the verb in this case (προσφέρω) is different from the one used earlier and translated as "application" (προσβολή) in the context of the perception account (153d), further emphasizing the fact that here we are dealing with a different kind of application.

to see from another angle the way in which nothing is one itself in itself. The example reinforces the notion that a being's identity cannot be established by reference to itself alone because there is no itself alone; a being's identity is constituted through its relations with other beings. What, in other words, would six be if it were not more than five and less than seven?

But, as we noted earlier, Socrates' example, what *he* wants Theaetetus to know, points to the relational character of being in a way that is quite different from that of the motion thesis. Nothing is one itself in itself because a being's relations to other beings are constitutive of its character. But the shift of these relations in this example is not the result of an underlying mixture of motions. Here the emphasis is upon motion of a different sort, and a kind that is as, if not more, responsible for what a being is: the "motion" of the mind's eye. It is in the mind's grasping of the four and the six together that the six appears large, and in its grasping of the six and twelve together, that the six is appears small. But at this point another feature overlooked by the "all is motion" thesis comes to light. While the six may shift from big to small, depending on the movement of the mind's eye, that six is larger than four and smaller than twelve never changes. Not everything is in motion. From the point of view of the mind's eye, there is a stable framework within which beings in their relations shift.

Thus our most convincing example turns out to support the notion that nothing is itself in itself, but in a way that qualifies the notion that everything is in flux. It is only after this revealing example that Socrates returns to an analysis of the "all is motion" thesis, giving his most elaborate and radical account yet. Before doing so, Socrates tells

Theaetetus that what follows is for the ears of the initiated only. The uninitiated he describes as "those who believe that nothing else is except what they are capable of getting a tight grip on with their hands, but actions, becomings and everything invisible they don't accept as in the class of being" (155e). Such human beings, Theaetetus replies, are both "stiff and repellent" (155e). Lest we make the mistake of the uninitiated, it is worth pausing to consider whether the demand we have been making all along for "evidence" in favor of the motion theory has been, at least in some respect, missing the point. If the entire gist of the account is to call our ordinary experience of the world radically into question, then why should we expect any "evidence" from the world as we know it to confirm anything other than our own delusions? Let us try then to follow along with Socrates the speech of the moment and to accept "the mysteries he's about to tell" (156a).

Socrates begins by reiterating that the first principle from which everything else follows is the claim that all is motion. There are, however, two species of motion, each being "infinite in multitude" (156a). One has the power to affect and the other has the power to be affected. The coming together of these two powers produces what Socrates describes as twin offspring: "that which (is) perceived and that which (is) perception" (156b). While a countless number remain unnamed, Socrates explains that we do have names for many of these offspring. The perceptions, for example, we call "sights and hearings and smellings…and…pleasures certainly and pains and desires and fears" (156b). With each of these, the genus of the perceptible is "cogenerated" (156b). Thus we have, "omnifarious colors with omnifarious sights, and likewise sounds with hearings,

and all the rest of the things perceived which come to be congeners with all the rest of the perceptions" (156c).[24]

After laying out what would seem by all accounts to be a scientific theory, Socrates surprisingly refers to it as a myth. Before addressing the meaning of this strange and suggestive remark, we should first see the way in which Socrates tries to bring this so-called myth "to completion in some sense" (156c). He begins by returning to the earlier example of vision. Using the instance of an eye seeing a white stone, Socrates pushes the analysis even further, holding that it is the very coming together of commensurate motions that gives birth both to the eye seeing and to the white stone being seen. In other words, the eye as an eye, and the white stone as a white stone, are not present prior to this coming together of motions. There is, as he explains, no thing affecting prior to its coming into contact with that which is affected, and vice versa. It is only at the very moment these motions meet that there comes to be a motion affecting and a motion affected, an eye seeing and a thing seeable. In this way, "nothing is itself by itself…but in the association with one another, all things become and become of all sorts from the motion" (157a). Here we see most clearly the way in which nothing is itself in itself insofar as all things come to be through a mixing of motions.

To begin to understand what this might mean, one can reflect upon the sensation of touch. It is, for example, easy to see that when my finger presses against the computer key, and the key in its resistance presses back, both feeling (perceiving) and hardness (perceptible) are born together. Still, it requires what seems to be an impossible

[24] For a second extended discussion of the all is motion thesis see 180d-183b.

stretching of the imagination to push the elements of this example as far as one would have to in order not to distort the theory that all is motion. For, according to this theory, one cannot even begin by imagining two stable objects coming into contact. The idea verges upon the unthinkable insofar as it asks us to conceive of motion without allowing us to think of there being some *thing* that is moving. Indeed, when Socrates returns to an explication of this thesis later in the dialogue, it culminates in the insistence that we would need an entirely different language to be able to capture the truth of the motion thesis. As it is, one must not even say "this is so," or "this is not so," "for 'so' would no longer be in motion" (183a-b). Not saying "so," if by this one means holding one's tongue, might be feasible, but is it actually possible to *think* in this way? The motion thesis, which began as an explanation of what lies behind the ordinary world of our experience, seems to bring us to a point at which we become entirely estranged from our ordinary world, and have, in fact, no way to account for it.

At this point, we can begin to make our way back to the question of the meaning of Protagoras' declaration that man is the measure. As we saw, the thesis shared by all the wise (except Parmenides) follows from a claim regarding motion. However, when pushed to its extreme, exactly what "motion" is turns out to be something of an enigma about which it is nearly impossible to say, think, or even imagine anything clearly. It is important, however, to see that this difficulty need not make the thesis something to be simply dismissed. As a sophisticated account of perception, and one held by "all the wise," it is worth taking very seriously, as Socrates himself surely did. Moreover, to focus entirely upon the apparent failures of this particular account would be to miss the

greater point, which is the limits of *any* scientific account of this sort. By reflecting upon the particular difficulties of the motion thesis in its most radical form, a more generally troubling thought emerges. As knowable as our given world may seem, what might lie behind the sense perceptions by which we take our bearings remains inaccessible and relatively mysterious, something about which we can only speculate. Thus, any account of the origins cannot help but be, as Socrates said, a myth; such accounts maintain a mythic status insofar as they are at best likely, but by no means verifiable, explanations of the underlying character of the world to which we have no direct access. The motion thesis, viewed in this light, points to the inevitable limits of human knowledge.

These limits become especially problematic when considered with a view to the principal aim of the "all is motion" thesis. As was brought out earlier, this thesis was meant in large part to displace the traditional mythical accounts.[25] But because of its limitations, the "all is motion" thesis fails to provide a definitive account of the origins and underlying character of the world. This failure, along with the inaccessible and thereby relatively mysterious realm to which it points, leaves room for a whole host of alternative explanations. These alternatives include not only competing scientific accounts, as seen in Parmenides, but also the very divine accounts that the "army of the wise" hoped to conquer. How, for example, has it been proven beyond a doubt that the ultimate cause behind wind is motion, as opposed to a "[servant] of the gods" (*Memorabilia*, 4.3.14), especially when exactly what motion is, in the final analysis, remains so far from clear?

[25] Compare *Phaedrus*, 229c5 ff.

Having brought out the above difficulty, we are now in a position to suggest a possible meaning of Protagoras' exoteric position, which sets him apart from the rest of the wise. While Protagoras shares with the others a belief in the "all is motion" thesis, he also maintains that concerning the gods, he is unable to know whether they exist or do not exist.[26] Perhaps Protagoras recognized that the theory about perception and the origin of beings in motion shared among the wise left him without the adequate means to disprove another's claim to having perceived the divine. Thus, he asserts that human beings are the measure of all things, so as to relegate alternative claims to the truth to the status of being merely true for those individuals who make them. On the other hand, to say that man is the measure is also to concede that such alternative claims cannot be proven false. His unique wisdom among the wise seems to consist in the recognition of what he could *not* justifiably claim to know.[27]

On this interpretation, the significance and strength of Protagoras lies not in his "solution," but rather in the fact that he recognized that there was a problem in the first place. Thus, it seems Socrates considered Protagoras the wisest of those reputed to be wise because he recognized the limits to his own knowledge. That said, Socrates was wiser still. He also recognized the limits to such scientific explanations. However, rather than adopting the position of relativism, Socrates was prompted instead to take a new

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[26] Diogenes Laertius, IX.8.51.

[27] To confirm this interpretation one would have to consider the rest of the Protagorean position as it is articulated throughout the dialogue, as well as Plato's *Protagoras*, an examination of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

approach: the Socratic turn to speeches.[28] Despite the great respect Socrates had for Protagoras, both in the *Theaetetus*, and in his life as a whole, Socrates managed to move beyond the Protagorean position. As David Bolotin points out, the exact way in which Socrates and Theaetetus, with Theodorus' reluctant help, are finally rid of Protagoras is difficult to discern.[29] The aim here has been to try to bring out why he was worth taking seriously in the first place. But, in short, by the time we reach the final definition of the dialogue, Socrates has returned us to the ordinary world, from which the motion thesis had left us estranged. Furthermore, far from calling the validity of all speech into question, the last proposed definition of the dialogue presents speech as an essential component of knowledge. Why one may want to start again from this beginning has become clear in light of the limits to the Protagorean account of knowledge.

While Theaetetus and Socrates will move beyond Protagoras' definition of knowledge, the questions and themes raised by the Protagorean thesis remain at issue throughout the dialogue. Before proposing the final definition of knowledge as true opinion with speech, Theaetetus begins by defining knowledge as merely true opinion. While this second attempt at a definition leads to a relatively lengthy inquiry into the possibility of false opinion,[30] it takes only a "brief" (201a) inquiry for Socrates to dismiss the definition once they return to it. As Socrates explains, in courts jurors are persuaded rather than taught the truth "about whatever it's only possible to know if one sees it"

[28] *Phaedo*, 99e4 ff.
[29] See Bolotin, especially pages 179-184.
[30] For an insightful essay on this section of the dialogue, and one that has had a strong influence on the reading of the dialogue presented in this paper, see Bolotin.

(201b-c). Socrates shows clearly by this example that knowledge and true opinion must be different insofar as there is an obvious difference between what one opines from hearsay and what one knows as an eyewitness. While a juror may be persuaded to judge rightly on the grounds of what others have seen and in this sense holds a true opinion, this opinion lacks the certainty of firsthand knowledge. Therefore, it seems clear that knowledge must be something more than true opinion. As it stands, the example of the courts suggests the impossibility of ever coming to have knowledge regarding the truth of that which one has not perceived. Whether or not this is indeed impossible seems to have been the question lurking throughout the dialogue. As we saw, it is precisely this kind of knowledge that Protagoras thought he could not have with regard to reports of the gods. The question now is whether, unlike the jurors, who rely on persuasion, opinion, and hearsay, we might be able to teach ourselves the truth about both what we have and haven't seen. It is with this question in mind that we begin our examination of the final definition of knowledge proposed in the dialogue.

III. True Opinion with Speech

After the discussion of the jurors, Theaetetus recalls that he once heard someone say that "true opinion with speech was knowledge, but true opinion without speech was outside of knowledge, and of whatever there is not speech, these things are not knowable…and whatever admit of speech are knowable" (201d). Could the origins of Theaetetus' hearsay account be traced back to Socrates himself? In the *Symposium*, Socrates explains that it was Diotima who, after asking him whether he knew "that there is something between wisdom and lack of understanding," went on to ask, "Don't you know…that to opine correctly without being able to give an account is neither to know expertly (for how could expert knowledge be of an unaccounted for [*alogon*] matter?) nor lack of understanding (for how could lack of understanding be that which has hit upon what is)?" (202a).[31] While this statement is suspiciously similar to Theatetus' new definition, it is important to notice the differences between the original and the report. Theaetetus' version misses the nuance and emphasis of Diotima's. In her account in the *Symposium*, Diotima chastises Socrates for believing in contraries to the point that he is unable to recognize anything that might lie between them. Theaetetus seems to suffer from a similar fault. His answer draws a clear division between knowledge and non-knowledge, without any indication that there may be gradations between.

[31] Again, I am indebted to Benardete's notes for pointing me toward this passage in the *Symposium* (fn, 80) and am here quoting his translation of the text.

Socrates asks Theaetetus to tell him "at just what point [the one whom he heard] was dividing these knowable and not knowable things" (201d). Indeed, it would seem by virtue of the definition Theaetetus offered that there is a clear line to be drawn. Yet there is a way in which Socrates sets up a nearly impossible task for Theaetetus. For if what is not knowable is that of which there cannot be speech, how could he then go on to *say* more about which things are not knowable and which are? When Theaetetus unsurprisingly cannot answer, Socrates tells him to hear a "dream in exchange for a dream" (201e). Theaetetus' opinion, as one attained by hearsay for which he has no account or understanding of his own, while it may be true, has as it stands little more than the status of a dream.

Socrates overcomes the difficulty of his own question by giving an elaboration by means of analogy. In his dream, he "heard some people say that the first things were just like elements (letters) out of which we and everything else are composed, and they do not admit of speech…" (201e). These elements, "each thing alone by itself," can only be named, "and one should apply nothing to it if one will speak of it as that thing alone, since none of those must be applied at all—'it,' 'that,' 'each,' 'alone' —and 'this'…For these expressions in running around get applied to everything, being other than the things to which they're applied" (202a). While the letters may only be named, when combined together they can become a speech, in the same way that the elements, "though they are without speech and unknowable, are still perceptible, but the syllables are knowable, speakable, and opinable by true opinion" (202b). Socrates' dream ends with the possibility of one having a "perfect condition relative to knowledge" (202c). Is his

suggestion that such a perfect state is possible only in a dream? However that may be, Theaetetus enthusiastically accepts the dream as his own (202c).

This dream claims, contrary to the motion thesis discussed earlier, that there are certain first things, each of which exists in some sense "alone by itself." While one cannot apply "it," "that," "each," "alone," or "this" to these elements, they can nonetheless be named. This makes sense insofar as such designations take away from the singularity of each element by placing upon it a general label referring to a condition shared by countless other things. But does a name really escape this difficulty? Proper names certainly appear to insofar as they have no descriptive aspect and have the pretense to singularity. Still do they not have within them the implication of some "it"? In other words, a name seems inevitably to carry with it the implication that it is some *being* that is being named. But it is precisely the application of being or nonbeing that Socrates claims naming is meant to avoid (202a).[32] In short, one might ask, what could be being named other some person or some thing, i.e., "that" or "this" or "it"? Furthermore, the very act of naming presupposes the context of a language, a web of meanings of which the name is a related part. What meaning could "alpha" have apart from all the other letters and language as a whole? It seems then that strictly speaking, with regard to the elements as they are here described, even a name could not be spoken.

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[32] A convincing argument to this effect can be found in Jacques Derrida's essay "Signature, Event, Context," where he analyzes the signature, an act meant to represent a singular and present intention yet one which also must be legible and repeatable, i.e. universal and detached from the present. Through this analysis he shows the impossibility of ever simply capturing singularity in language, the signs of which must always be repeatable to be meaningful.

This line of reflection is suggested by a textual detail to which translator Benardete draws the reader's attention (fn 81).[33] In Socrates' above-mentioned list of pronouns that cannot be applied to the elements, all the words listed were previously used in his very description of the elements with the exception of "this" (τοῦτο). By going out of his way to include "τοῦτο" (this) along with "ἐκεῖνος" (that), Socrates draws attention by omission to the third possibility of "τόδε." The meaning of the Greek word, "τοῦτο," which can be translated as "this" or "that," lies in between "ἐκεῖνος" which means "that over there" and "τόδε" which means "this here." The exclusion of this last meaning prompts us to reflect upon whether the immediate experience of "this here," present in the actual act of pointing, captures our initial grasp or recognition of an individual as a whole more than any speech could. It seems the most primary experience of connecting a name with an object begins with someone pointing to that object, which we grasp in some sense as singular before a name is attached to it. Pointing is the experience of the shared recognition of some singular whole that is presupposed by all naming. In the act of naming, what was grasped as a singular whole is conceptualized, brought into a shared world of interrelated meanings, in such a way that it no longer simply retains this singularity.[34]

Nonetheless, Theaetetus accepts the account as is and again affirms that true opinion with speech is knowledge (202c). Socrates, on the other hand, is displeased by

[33] For more evidence for such subtle textual detail in Plato's *Theaetetus*, see Fogelman and Hutchinson.

[34] This account does not mean to imply that we have an actual experience of some one thing itself in itself if by this one means in absolute isolation. The point is only that it does seem *something* may be lost in language (which is not to say nothing is gained, i.e. that what the beings are is not also in part constituted or created by the meaning they take on in language).

the part of the speech that claimed elements are unknowable but syllables are knowable. So they put the hostages of the speech to the torture.[35] In the attempt that follows to know for themselves whether what was cleverly said was true, the "hostages" seem to confirm the story that in the case of a syllable one has a speech, but not in the case of the element. For the account of the syllable consists of listing the elements that compose it, and how, Theaetetus asks, could one go on to "say the elements of the element?" (203b). Socrates says this has been put right in the case of knowledge, and it does seem indisputable.[36] If the elements are non-composites, then no speech, if speeches are a listing of elements, could be given for them by virtue of the fact that there are not elements of elements. But, Socrates goes on to ask, what about the contention that the element is not only not speakable, but not knowable? The discussion of this question turns on whether when speaking of the syllable they mean the elements or "some single look (idea) that has come to be when they are put together" (203c). Theaetetus answers that they mean the former, which makes some sense. Given that they had just taken as knowledge a listing of elements, if he were to say that they mean something else, then he would concede that there is something left over which they had not yet spoken of or known. Yet is it worth noting that there is something plainly wrong about Theaetetus'

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[35] Before they take up the examples of the speech, i.e. the elements and syllables of letters, Socrates asks Theaetetus whether he believes the one who spoke "gave a glance anywhere else when [he]…said those things which we're saying?" (202e5-7). Theaetetus says no and Socrates does not pursue the matter, but it seems worth noting the strangeness of this question. To begin with, the one who spoke obviously had something other than letters in mind, namely the "first things" (201e), for which the letters are only meant to be a useful analogy. At the very least, Socrates' question draws one's attention back to this, lest it be forgotten. But this point seems so obvious that it is worth wondering where else the one who spoke "gave a glance" when he said these things.

[36] Indisputable, that is, assuming there are foundational and non-composite elements. If nothing can exist in isolation, then insofar as elements cannot be understood independent of each other, the notion of their being non-composite loses its significance.

answer. The very meaning of a syllable is that in coming together two or more letters form one sound distinct from each of the elements. Rather than note a difficulty of this sort, Socrates goes on to point out to Theaetetus the corner into which he has painted himself. If knowing the syllable (SO) amounts to knowing both the elements (sigma and omega), and the elements cannot be known individually, then how is it coherent to insist that one is "ignorant of each of the two, and in knowing neither knows both" (203d)? Theaetetus rightly finds this conclusion both dreadful and nonsensical.

Socrates emphasizes that "if there's a necessity to know each of the two if one will know both, there's every necessity for whoever's going to know a syllable to know first its elements" (203d). But it is important to see why they have been forced into what Theaetetus calls a dreadful and speechless state, and what exactly it was that turned this part of the dream into a nightmare. The predicament results from the assumption that there is only one kind of knowledge. While knowledge of the syllables may entail a listing of its components, it is not necessarily the case that knowledge of the components must also take the form of yet another such listing. If this were the case, the process would either go on *ad infinitum* or, if there are indeed unknowable non-composite first things, one would have to concede that all knowledge is built upon what is fundamentally unknowable. But are these first things simply unknown or in insisting so would we be falling into the same trap that Diotima warned Socrates against? Is there not some understanding entailed in our grasping of the first elements, even if this grasping must remain without an articulation?

In any event, Socrates tries to rescue their speech by returning to the possibility he had suggested before (203c), that the syllable is not the collection of its elements, but rather “some single species that has come to be out of them, with its own single look and other than the elements” (203e). Theaetetus agrees and Socrates draws the conclusion that there must, then, be no parts, for if there are parts, then there must be a whole (of which the parts are parts). If there is a whole then what could the whole be other than the sum of its parts? This brings them back to their initial difficulty. Or, Socrates asks, does Theaetetus mean to say that the all (i.e. all the parts) and the whole (the single look that has come to be and is distinct from the parts) are the same or different? Theaetetus does not quite know what he means, but risks the guess that they are different. If the whole is different from the all, it seems they may be able to concede that there are parts composing the all without having to deny there is still some whole different from these parts.

In the discussion that follows, Theaetetus at least fights in a manly way (205a) to defend this assertion, but in the end he fails. Beginning with an example of numbers, moving to distances, and finally to an army and “all things of the sort” (204d), Socrates gets Theaetetus to agree that in each case the number of respective things (6 units in the number 6, 100 feet in a plethron, x men in an army) “is all that each of them is” (204d). These numbers of things are the parts that form the all, and while Theaetetus tries to insist that the all is different from the whole, he is ultimately unable to defend this distinction. Despite Theaetetus’ failure, Socrates’ examples give us cause to wonder whether a defense could have been made. Following a mathematician’s inclinations,

Theaetetus agrees that there is no difference between what lies on one side of the equals sign and what lies on the other. Whether it is 2 x 3, 2 + 2 + 2, 4 + 2, etc., combinations of this sort equal nothing other than 6. He is then led by degrees to say the same of an army, losing sight of the fact that on the face of it this is plainly false. An army is clearly more than the number of men of which it happens to be composed. The notion of an army is one of a *united* whole that transcends the parts, so much so that in a battle scores of men could be killed without this meaning that the army as an army has ceased to be. This point would not seem to hold in the case of a plethron or the number six, for if one were taken away from either of them, it would cease to be. But even in these cases, is not a certain unity being overlooked in saying the number is *all* that each of them is? When one says "six" or "stade" or "plethron," the many does in a sense become united into one single idea, making the whole in some sense as different from the parts as the one is from the many. In short, this account overlooks the unity of the whole.

Nonetheless, when Socrates suggests that both the whole and the all are equivalent insofar as each means that from which nothing stands apart, Theaetetus gives up and changes his opinion, now saying "an all and a whole do not differ" (205a). Socrates points out that they have returned to their original predicament. He provides two alternatives: either the whole is something other than the parts and so without parts entirely, in which case it suffers from the same unknowability as did the parts, for which there was no speech (205e), or it is nothing other than the parts, which are themselves unknown and so a collection of unknowns, no more knowable by virtue of being gathered together. Either way, by this speech the whole appears as unknowable as the parts, and

so Socrates and Theaetetus no longer accept that the "syllable's knowable and speakable, but for an element it's the contrary" (205e).

Having seen a difficulty within the speech itself that led them to deny one of its premises, Socrates then asks Theaetetus whether his own experience of learning letters confirms this denial. In learning the letters or the elements of music, it seems we attend to and recognize "each one itself by itself" (206a), and that in fact the "genus of the elements admits of a knowledge more vivid and authoritative than that of the syllable" (206b). From this Socrates concludes that anyone who says the syllable is knowable while the element is unknowable is being playful. Theaetetus is pleased to have the difficulty they had been struggling with settled so easily, and to have the possibility of knowing the elements and therewith the syllables reaffirmed. But there is surely something playful about Socrates' examples. For in learning letters, if in one sense we attend to each itself in itself, we need just as much to attend to them in combination (most obviously in the case of diphthongs and double consonants). Likewise, in learning chords we do the opposite of attending to each note itself in itself, for in chords the notes become indistinguishable insofar as they form one harmonious sound. The example then shows that there is indeed a vivid grasping, but this is both of the notes (elements) and of the chords (syllables), insofar as each can present itself as a whole that is in some sense singular. Without this grasping it is hard to imagine how we would be able either to learn to read or to play music. While this grasping may be fundamental, it is not the "most complete and perfect knowledge" for which they have been searching, anymore than a chord is as perfect and complete as a symphony. Returning then to the account of this

knowledge as true opinion with speech, they go on to examine what exactly "speech" was meant to signify (206c).

Speech

In this section Socrates presents three possible meanings for speech. First, speech could mean the literal voicing of the ideas in one's mind. They are able to eliminate this possibility immediately since it is clearly something almost anyone is capable of doing. In short, anyone who has a thought in his mind is capable of putting this same thought into audible speech, and the simple voicing of a thought does not add anything to it; this sort of speech would effectively return them to the position that knowledge is nothing other than right opinion. Next Socrates proposes that by speech the speaker may have meant the "capacity, when asked what each thing (is), to give the answer back to the questioner through the elements" (206e-207a). He gives the example of a wagon, and the listing of its main components as an answer with which they could be content. But he goes on to show that one could question whether this sort of speech is thorough enough, or whether to be a truly competent knower of the wagon's being one would have to go "through the whole through its elements from end to end" (207c). After Theaetetus accepts this definition as his own, Socrates goes on to argue that this version of speech also fails to guarantee knowledge. Returning to the example of letters, he shows that one could know the correct elements composing the name Theaetetus without knowing them correctly in the name Theodorus. Insofar as one makes this kind of mistake, he is said not to know the elements entirely. While one would have right opinion and speech when

spelling "Theaetetus" correctly, he still lacks sufficient knowledge of these elements insofar as he is ignorant of them as they appear in "Theodorus."

There are at least two strange aspects of Socrates' argument. First, the difficulty he points to is one that he characterizes as commonly experienced by people when they are just learning the letters (207d). This leaves open the possibility that at a certain point one would no longer make this sort of mistake. On the other hand, if knowing anything means knowing it correctly in every possible instance in which it could appear, it seems that the bar for knowledge has been set impossibly high. To return to the example of the wagon, not only would one need to know each of its elements, but one would also need to have knowledge of how each of these elements appears in any other possible context. At this point, it is worth recalling Socrates' remark that we are often content with a much more limited account and asking ourselves what would be a more sensible version of the argument. The question is how one could know where to reasonably draw the limits of an account that could suffice for knowledge. If we consider again what one may need to claim to understand a wagon expertly, it seems there need be an awareness not only of the parts but more importantly of the properties of these parts. In other words, an expert has knowledge of the possibilities and impossibilities of the various combinations of parts as opposed to every particular instance in which they could be found combined. Thus one need not know every instance in which wood is used in addition to its use in making

wagons, but that it burns, floats, etc.[37] In short, to say knowing letters requires one never make a spelling mistake, is to go both too far, and down the wrong road.

Still, this sort of understanding, however thorough, remains only an understanding of the parts. For example, one may know all one needs to about each component of a wagon, while remaining ignorant as to its actual use. Thus, Socrates presents a third possibility for what could be meant by speech: having a sign by means of which one could say how what is asked about differs from all other things (208c). This answer seems promising insofar as it helps both to set a feasible limit to what is required for one to have a claim to knowledge and to address the being as a whole. Theaetetus is indeed pleased with it. However, after spelling out that speech is taking the difference, while touching upon anything in common is speech about "those things, whichever they are, of which the commonness is" (208d), Socrates runs into another problem. "All of sudden," Socrates claims, "[he doesn't] understand anything at all…[since he has] gotten too near to what is being said, just as if it were a shadowpainting" (209e). He will point out the reason for this, "if he can" (209a).[38] The argument runs as follows: if the speech added to right opinion about some particular thing is speech of difference, then the right opinion

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[37] In remark 46 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that what he calls 'objects' correspond to the 'elements' referred to in the *Theaetetus*. By extension, his 'atomic facts,' i.e. combinations of elements (*Tractatus,* 2.01) correspond to the syllables. According to Wittgenstein, "If I know an object, then I also know all the possibilities of its occurrence in atomic facts" (2.0123), and "[i]n order to know an object, I must know not its external but all its internal qualities" (2.01231). In other words, to know a thing is not to know every instance in which it exists, but every possible mode of its existence, i.e., not every fact in which an object like a ball happens to be found, but rather that there is no such fact in which a ball would be found leaning against a wall (*Notebooks*, 70e). (For a particularly illuminating discussion of Wittgenstein on this point as well as others, see Ostrow especially Chapter One.)

[38] Little on the surface of the argument Socrates goes on to give seems to warrant this dramatic introduction, but it does point us to reflect upon a feature of our experience that might. We somehow manage to grasp beings at once in their commonality and in their difference from all other beings, without having a full articulation of either.

held originally was of nothing other than commonness. If this is the case, then there was never any particular, i.e. distinct, thing grasped in the first place, for all one had in mind were commonalities. In light of this absurdity, it seems right opinion must already be also about difference. But then it becomes unclear what speech about this difference is asking us to add (209d). Socrates makes it seem as though the definition has us running in circles in that "of those things of which we have right opinion, by which they differ from everything else, it urges us to take in addition a right opinion of these things by which they differ from everything else" (209d). He concludes that such an injunction is like the "exhortation of a blind man. For to bid someone to take in addition the things we have in order that we may learn what we think, does resemble in a very grand manner a man who is wholly in the dark" (209e).[39]

Thus speech is shown to add nothing that was not already present in right opinion, and the final definition of knowledge is discarded. Socrates asks Theaetetus whether he is still pregnant and suffering labor pains about knowledge or has given birth to all that was within him. Theaetetus answers, "Yes, by Zeus, and I for one have said even more on account of you than all I used to have in myself" (210b). With this statement, he unwittingly casts doubt upon Socrates' argument above, for he himself has shown and acknowledged that speech, especially speech induced through Socrates' maieutic art, can bear more than one even imagined to be present in one's thoughts. Does this kind of speech give Theaetetus nothing more than knowledge of his ignorance (210c)? As we

[39] This translation was recommended by Christopher Bruell in his Fall, 2007 lectures on the *Theaetetus* at Boston College.

have seen, while exposing Theaetetus' ideas as wind-eggs, Socrates has all the while been laying seeds, so that if Theaetetus were to "try to become pregnant again," he would be "full of better things on account of the present review" (210c).

Which better things might we gain from reviewing the arguments above? With Socrates' language analogy, we saw that the first things are like letters, which are grasped as singular wholes, and the closest we can come to articulating them in speech is by means of names. The combinations of elements (syllables), while they can be divided into parts and articulated in this way, are also in their own way inarticulable, insofar as they too are grasped as singular wholes. Thus, we have an experience of both non-composites and composites as wholes of which there may be a grasping but not a full accounting in speech. The first things may only be grasped and named (although it must be acknowledged that something is lost in the act of naming). Composite beings insofar as they are wholes are also only grasped and named, but can in addition be spoken of and articulated by means of their components (though it must be acknowledged that the whole insofar as it transcends the parts is lost in this articulation). We ended with the question of what speech, be it an articulation of similarities or differences of components, could possibly add to our initial grasp if in that grasp we already have an idea of a being's similarity and difference with regard to other beings.

We can begin to see how the speech that asks us to "learn what we think" as if we were wholly in the dark is less preposterous than Socrates made it seem if we return to the analogy of language. Throughout this section of the dialogue Socrates has been speaking of letters and syllables and language learning as if we never need to worry about

complexities beyond the coming together of letters into syllables, matters far from the kind of intricacies involved in a dialogue like this one. Furthermore, the analogy as it is presented deemphasizes the fact that we learn to read after already having learned to speak, making it seem as though we begin with a clean slate. But a curious thing can happen to people learning how to read. Let alone the letters, whole words and sentences can be skipped over. Rather than actually reading, one can by guesswork, memory, or inference be "reading" while paying little attention to the actual words on the page. Reading well often means getting past this tendency, and learning, once again, to take every word seriously. If this is a challenge with language, a case in which we have little reason not to recognize the letters as they are, then one can begin to imagine the real difficulties to which the analogy points. The genuine complexity of our experience and our tendency to pass over this complexity, by assuming we already know what we think, combine to leave us in a condition that very well may be similar to that of a blind man, such that we have much to gain from an attempt to learn what we think.

While our vision can in many ways be sharpened, as we have seen, there are some matters about which we will always remain in the dark. We have, throughout the course of this paper, come across two substantial limits to human knowledge. On the one hand, as we saw with the motion thesis, our scientific accounts seem ultimately to end in the unknown. As Socrates' discussion of the elements put it, we run into that which can only be named, but not articulated. That said, we must recall the question Socrates asked Theaetetus very early in their conversation: "Do you believe that someone understands some name of something if he doesn't know what it is?" For Theaetetus the answer was,

"In no way." But we have seen that the answer is more accurately, "Yes and no." It may be that we know little about what lies beneath the foundations upon which we build our scientific knowledge, but that need not mean that we know *nothing* about the blocks that we use. Still, as we saw, a theory like the "all is motion" thesis could not secure these foundations as those who held it had hoped. The question that science could not answer was whether there are gods, and if they are like Homer's *Iliad* claims Zeus to be, i.e. beings who can at their own whim turn the world as we know it upside-down.

Having reached this dilemma by following a theory that tried to bring to light the underlying character of being through an analysis of sense perception, we then turned our attention in the final part of the paper to what I suggested was a more Socratic approach. Here again we find another limit, this time having to do with the relational character of being. If nothing can be understood itself in itself, then our understanding of one thing will always entail reference to another, which will entail reference to another, and so on. This would mean that our understanding could never be complete or exhaustive; on the other hand, it could be constantly becoming clearer and more refined, as we sift and sort through these relations, uncovering the differences and similarities between beings through speech. Thus, while we would be dreaming to think we could ever be in a "perfect condition with regard to knowledge," we need not remain in the shadows of our waking life. We come as adults to reflect upon our experience with an entire world colored by opinions and beliefs handed down to us through tradition and hearsay, and with such strong ideas of what we hope and expect to find that we are likely to pass over or distort the very things that lie before our eyes. But we can make our way toward

knowledge by examining the speeches that attend our opinions, measuring them against themselves and in relation to each other. And in coming to learn what we think, not only with regard to clay and wagons, but more importantly with regard to those things of which we are most concerned to have knowledge, i.e. the good, the just, and the state of our own souls, we may begin to have more trust in our own knowledge than Protagoras was able to have in his.

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