"Plato's Theaetetus", in Gail Fine (ed.), Oxford Handbook on Plato, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press 2019: 261-285.

CHAPTER 11

THE *THEAETETUS*

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Is it possible to explore and settle questions about the nature and possibility of knowledge without also considering what the possible objects of knowledge are? That is, can epistemology be done independently of metaphysics? Or must epistemology always go hand in hand with consideration of what kinds of things there are, and of what can be said about them and how?

This question is raised most vividly for readers of Plato when assessing the central epistemological claim of the *Republic*: that knowledge is impossible unless one grasps the Forms, and that those who do not recognize the existence of the Forms can at best achieve "opinion" (*Rep*. V. 475e–480a). It may then come as a surprise, when one turns to Plato's late dialogue the *Theaetetus*, which is devoted to the question "What is knowledge?," that Plato nowhere explicitly makes or even considers this claim, that knowledge is not possible without the Forms. For one thing, the dialogue is filled with examples of knowledge where the objects known include ordinary, mundane, individual objects such as Theaetetus, Theodorus, oxen, wagons, and stones, as well as colors, smells, and sounds. Socrates and his interlocutor discuss examples of knowledge, including knowing that a stone is white, knowing that so-and-so is guilty of such-and-such a crime, knowing that this person standing here is Theaetetus.

Of course, this by itself does not indicate a change in view—if Plato thought that Forms are required for knowledge, but are not the only possible objects of knowledge, then it would be possible to have knowledge of things other than Forms.[1] However, it is striking that the Forms are nowhere explicitly mentioned in the dialogue. One might even suppose that the *Theaetetus* offers evidence that Plato eventually gave up the theory

[1] Cf. Gail Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 60 (1978), 121–39, and Gail Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* 5–7," in Stephen Everson (ed.), *Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), 85–115. For a recent defense of the "Two Worlds" interpretation of Plato, according to which Plato argues in *Republic* V that the only possible objects of knowledge are the Forms and the only possible objects of opinion sensible particulars, see Francisco J. Gonzalez, "Propositions or Objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V," *Phronesis* 41 (1996), 245–75.

altogether;[2] or, at any rate, one might arrive at the impression that Plato has decided, in the *Theaetetus*, to make a fresh start by considering what knowledge is, while remaining agnostic on the question of what the possible objects of knowledge might be.

This view is, in a way, both right and wrong. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates does not assume the existence of the Forms. Indeed, he tends to use premises about the nature of reality that are incompatible with the Forms. In that sense, the *Theaetetus* is free of the Forms. But this does not mean the Forms have been abandoned. Plato adopts a complex strategy for examining the nature of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*: he sometimes has Socrates examine a conception of knowledge purely on its own terms. In other parts of the discussion, he has Socrates examine a proposed conception of knowledge with the help of substantial metaphysical claims about the nature and kind of objects that are known—claims that conflict with what Plato argues for elsewhere. Plato's strategy appears to be to allow a fairly generous set of assumptions about the nature of the objects of knowledge, assumptions that are introduced for dialectical reasons, and not because he endorses them himself. He explores various conceptions of knowledge without assuming that the only things that can be known are Forms or that knowledge is not possible unless there are Forms. Nevertheless, although Plato does not prove the impossibility of knowledge for one who does not acknowledge the existence of Forms,[3] some of the problems do appear to come from premises belonging to a Forms-free metaphysics.

But before we examine these issues in detail, let me briefly consider the main contours of the dialogue and of Plato's method of argumentation in it. After the introductory section (*Tht*. 145c–151d), in which a preliminary attempt at defining knowledge is rejected,[4] three further definitions of knowledge (K1–K3) are proposed, examined in detail, and then rejected. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates and his interlocutors express puzzlement about what knowledge is, but Socrates declares Theaetetus better prepared now to take up these questions again on a future occasion (*Tht*. 210bd). The *Theaetetus* is thus an aporetic dialogue, sharing that form with early "Socratic" dialogues such as the *Euthyphro*.

According to the first definition (K1), knowledge is the same as perception (*Tht*. 151e). This leads to a long and extended attempt to spell out what exactly this amounts to and

[2] McDowell tends to favor this as a working hypothesis; see the passages cited at John McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus* [*Theaetetus*] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 159.

[3] Contrast Cornford, who holds that the implicit moral of the *Theaetetus* is that "True knowledge has for its object things of a different order—not sensible things, but intelligible Forms and truths about them" (Francis Macdonald Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*: *The Theaetetus and the Sophist of Plato Translated with a Commentary* [*Theaetetus*] (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935), 162). For a discussion of some shortcomings of Cornford's thesis and how it might be improved, see Gökhan Adalıer, "The Case of 'Theaetetus' " ["Case"], *Phronesis* 46/1 (2001), 2–3; Timothy Chappell, *Reading Plato's Theaetetus* [*Theaetetus*] (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2005), 20–21.

[4] This section includes Socrates' famous comparison of himself to a midwife (*Tht*. 148e–151d); for discussion, see Myles F. Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London* 24 (1977), 7–16; Myles F. Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato* [*Theaetetus*], trans. M. J. Levett (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1990); David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus* [*Midwife*] (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004).

how one might support it. Plato has Socrates introduce a number of metaphysical theses, belonging to the so-called Secret Doctrine,[5] in support of the definition. In the end, the supporting metaphysical theory is rejected as incompatible with the proposed definition (*Tht*. 181c–183c); furthermore, the definition is rejected on its own for independent reasons (*Tht*. 184b–186e). According to the second definition (K2), knowledge is true opinion or judgment (*doxa*) (*Tht*. 187b).[6] Plato has Socrates explore this definition by seeing whether it is possible to explain how false belief is possible. Their repeated failure to be able to explain how it is possible to think about something, and at the same time make a mistake about it, strongly implicates the definition of knowledge itself (though, admittedly, Socrates does not make the connection clear). The definition is also rejected in a more straightforward fashion by pointing to contexts in which we would clearly want to say that true judgment is not sufficient for knowledge (*Tht*. 200d–201c).

Finally, the third proposed definition of knowledge (K3) states that knowledge is true judgment with an account (*logos*) (*Tht*. 201cd). Socrates and his interlocutors explore this definition in two stages. First, they explore it in terms of a "Dream theory," which includes various metaphysical assumptions about the kinds of objects that can and cannot be known, along with various reasons some things can be known and others cannot (*Tht*. 201d–203c). The thesis of asymmetry in the knowability of objects is first rejected by making explicit use of those metaphysical assumptions of the Dream theory (*Tht*. 203e–205e), and then rejected in a more straightforward fashion (*Tht*. 206ac). Second, they examine what an "account" (*logos*) is (*Tht*. 206c–210a). Each notion of account they examine encounters problems, and in the end it is not clear whether and what kind of account is necessary for knowledge—but their failure is partly due to the kinds of assumptions retained from the Dream theory, and indeed from earlier parts of the dialogue, about what kind of objects can be known and what can be said about them.

In what follows, I pursue two themes concerning the relation between epistemology and metaphysics in the *Theaetetus*. The first theme concerns Plato's methodology: sometimes Socrates examines a thesis on its own, and sometimes he examines it by assuming premises on behalf of that thesis. These ancillary theses introduce metaphysical ideas and commitments that are meant to describe sufficient conditions under which the proposed definitions would be true. But they turn out to create problems for the very definitions they were meant to support. In the case of K1 and the Secret Doctrine, Socrates argues that K1 is not true if those metaphysical ideas are true. And in the case of K3 and the Dream theory, Socrates argues that if one makes certain apparently reasonable assumptions about the nature of things, then it is not possible to maintain, as K3 does, that some things can be known and others cannot.

The second theme of the discussion concerns the kinds of objects of knowledge under consideration. For the reader of the *Theaetetus*, the theory of Forms is the elephant in the room—Socrates never mentions it, but that does not mean it has gone away. Socrates nowhere argues that knowledge requires a grasp of the Forms—much less that knowledge

[5] Socrates introduces this as a doctrine Protagoras taught his students "in secret" (*Tht*. 152c).

[6] For a discussion of these and other possible translations of *doxa*, see Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 69–70.

can only be had of the Forms. But the repeated failure to arrive at a definition of knowledge when assuming a metaphysics incompatible with the Forms suggests (though it does not require) that progress could be made if we admitted certain assumptions characteristic of Plato's metaphysics of Forms.

1. Knowledge Is Perception (K_1)

The first definition of knowledge Plato examines in the dialogue is the thesis that

(K1) Knowledge is perception (*aisthêsis*). (*Tht*. 151e)

Now this definition is of great interest because it articulates two ideas about knowledge and perception that get short shrift in other dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*: the idea that our senses are accurate and informative about their proper objects—that is, colors, sounds, smells—and the idea that knowledge depends on and is built up from perception. It becomes clear that Plato is particularly interested in exploring the first idea, for he quickly connects the definition of knowledge as perception with another thesis, Protagoras's measure doctrine, according to which "man is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, of what is not that it is not" (*Tht*. 152a). This is construed as the claim that

(P) Whatever appears to be the case to one is the case for one.

Claim (P) appears to have been introduced for the following reason: Plato understands Protagoras as focusing on what is the "measure" or criterion of truth. Protagoras's thesis—that each of us is the measure of truth—derives its plausibility from the fact that the senses are the criterion of what is and what is not, at least in the case of things such as hot, cold, sweet, bitter, and so on.[7] Thus, the senses are a criterion of truth, and what they perceive in the case of sensible qualities is true. But if Protagoras's measure claim is true in the case of sensible qualities, such as hot, cold, and the like, then it follows that perception "is always of what is, and free from falsehood" (*Tht*. 152c), and from this we are to infer that it must be the same as knowledge. This, then, represents one version of the empiricist claim: since perception is infallible with respect to the sensible qualities, it should be regarded as a kind of knowledge. What the senses tell us is always true, and hence their claims to knowledge should not be dismissed. Furthermore, K1 implies that every instance of knowledge is a case of perception and that the senses do tell us about everything; thus, it implies that nothing exists that is not perceived. Thus, (P),

[7] For further discussion, see Mi-Kyoung Lee, *Epistemology after Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus* [*Epistemology*] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 8–29.

when restricted to sensible qualities, implies and is implied by (K1), at least on a certain interpretation.[8]

Plato proceeds to explore the Theaetetan-Protagorean proposal (K1 and P) by working out in detail the kind of metaphysical assumptions that would make the thesis true. He introduces a set of Heraclitean theses, which include the idea that everything is in motion and changing, and the thesis that, if something is F, then it also is or will be its opposite, not-F (*Tht*. 152de). Drawing on this set of ideas, he shows that you can describe a world in which perception is always true and that whatever appears to be the case in perception is the case for one (*Tht*. 153d–160e). In this world, the object of perception and the perceiving organ together generate perceptible properties and perceivings that are unique to each encounter and that are each "of" the other (*Tht*. 156a–157c). That is, when I perceive a stone, I perceive the whiteness that was generated together with my perception. One obvious question is why we should suppose that these two "offspring" should always be generated together and why it's not possible to have one without the other. The answer is that these are assumptions that are simply brought in—ad hoc or otherwise—under the rubric of the Heraclitean doctrine in order to make good on Theaetetus' and Protagoras's claims.

The exact nature of the connection between (K1) and (P), on the one hand, and the Secret Doctrine, on the other, is controversial. There are, in fact, two related issues: first, how exactly to interpret (P); second, how (K1) and (P) are related to the metaphysical theses in the Secret Doctrine. There are a number of possible answers to the first question: Protagoras's measure doctrine can be variously interpreted as (1) the thesis of relativism about truth, according to which truth is relative, and nothing is true absolutely; (2) the thesis of infallibilism, according to which all beliefs and appearances are true *simpliciter*; and (3) relativism of fact, according to which whatever appears to be the case to one is the case for one—a position that resembles (1) in emphasizing the importance of the relativizing move but is more like (2) insofar as it is noncommittal on the question of whether truth itself is to be relativized.[9]

As for the second issue, two general lines of interpretation are possible:

1. (K1), (P), and the Secret Doctrine are connected by relations of mutual entailment, so that each one requires and is required by each of the others. On this view, there is no way to maintain Protagoras's measure doctrine without also being committed to a radical doctrine of flux.

[8] On some interpretations of (K1), this entailment does not hold true; see R. M. Dancy, "Theaetetus' First Baby: *Tht*. 151e–160e," *Philosophical Topics* 15/2 (1987), 61–108.

[9] Point (1) can be found in Myles F. Burnyeat, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," *Philosophical Review* 91/1 (1982), 3–40. Point (2) can be found in Gail Fine, "Protagorean Relativisms," in J. Cleary and W. Wians (eds.), *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 19 (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996), 211–43, and in Fine, "Conflicting Appearances: *Theaetetus* 153d–154b," in C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (eds.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105–33. I have given arguments for point (3) in Lee, *Epistemology*, 30–45; see also Sarah Waterlow, "Protagoras and Inconsistency," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59 (1977), 29–33.

2. (K1), (P), and the Secret Doctrine are not connected by relations of mutual entailment but by a narrower set of relations: the Secret Doctrine is sufficient for the truth of (P), which, in turn, is sufficient for the truth of (K1). On this view, Plato does not think, or argue, that the relations among the three positions is one of entailment; rather, Plato is trying to characterize, on the basis of the Secret Doctrine, a world of which (P) and thus (K1) hold true.[10] All this requires him to do is to find metaphysical assumptions on which the truth of (K1) and (P) would follow—and these are found in the Secret Doctrine.

The two issues—concerning the exact interpretation of (P), and its connections with (K1) and the Secret Doctrine—are not unrelated. If one adopts the view that interpretation 1 describes Plato's strategy, then we have a problem since relativism about truth does not appear to commit one to the metaphysical doctrine of flux, and, indeed, seems to be incompatible with it, since the doctrine of flux would appear to be presented in the *Theaetetus* as being true *simpliciter*, whereas relativism about truth denies that there are any such truths. But perhaps (P) is not (1) relativism about truth but, rather, infallibilism, (2) above. On this view, all appearances and beliefs are true *simpliciter*. But if contradictory beliefs are true together without relativization, then doesn't this imply that contradictory states of affairs are simultaneously true? It is in order to save (P) from this problem that Plato introduces the flux doctrine: contradictory beliefs can simultaneously be true without contradiction because they turn out to be true of different things. On the other hand, if one adopts the view that interpretation 2 describes Plato's strategy, then Plato is not arguing that (K1) or (P) commits one to any metaphysical thesis at all, but only that, on certain metaphysical assumptions, (K1) and (P) turn out to be true—or so it seems.

On interpretation 2, the interpretation I favor, Plato argues that if one accepts the "Heraclitean" metaphysical doctrine, then Theaetetus' and Protagoras's claims follow. So do the dual theses in fact find support in the Heraclitean doctrine that Socrates introduces? His own answer is yes and no. At first glance, the theory of perception Socrates works out on the basis of the Secret Doctrine seems effective in showing how Theaetetus' and Protagoras's claims could be true. It can even handle problem cases such as sickness and dreaming; as Socrates notes, if perceptions are always generated together with perceptible properties, and these "offspring" are generated in different ways over time, then there is no reason to suppose that someone who is supposedly awake is more authoritative about her perceptions than one who is asleep (*Tht*. 157e–160e).

But in the end, they have to conclude that the dual theses are insupportable on the Heraclitean hypothesis, for the reason that the thesis that "everything is changing" implies not just the truth of Protagoras's and Theaetetus' claims but the opposite as well (*Tht*. 181c–183b). For if everything is changing, then it will certainly be the case that for every perception, there is a perceptible property matching it that will come into being with it. But ex hypothesi the perception and perceptible property themselves will be

[10] Sufficiency here is a one-way entailment, which is weaker than mutual entailment: if the Secret Doctrine is true, then (P) and (K1) are true, but (P) and (K1) do not imply that the Secret Doctrine is true.

undergoing change (*Tht*. 182de). For example, whiteness and the perceiving of white—that is, the "twin births" in the Heraclitean story of perception that Socrates tells on Protagoras's behalf—themselves are constantly changing, so that whiteness becomes not-white and perceiving becomes not-perceiving. What exactly this means is not clear; at the very least, it suggests that a person's perceiving that the stone is white is no more true than it is false.

The Secret Doctrine is a metaphysical doctrine that leaves no room for the existence of anything such as Forms. It says that everything is both F and not-F, that everything is always changing, that everything is what it is relative to something else (*Tht*. 152de). The Forms, by contrast, are never both F and not-F (e.g., *Phaedo* 74bc; *Republic* 478e–479e). The Forms do not undergo change. And the Forms are not what they are relative to something else—for example, relative to a perceiver—but are whatever they are in themselves. Its total lack of stability—such as would be provided by the theory of Forms, if one accepted it—is part of the reason that the Secret Doctrine comes to grief. For it says that things such as perceptible properties and the perceptions of those properties themselves do not remain stable. Thus, on this view, nothing can be said to be white (as opposed to not-white) or to be perceiving, since whiteness itself and perceiving are always changing.[11]

When Socrates says that the Secret Doctrine tells us that "whiteness" itself is becoming not-white (*Tht*. 182d), it is unclear whether he has in mind the universal color white or a particular instantiation of white. Either way, the lesson remains the same: one cannot make perceptions true in a world that lacks the kind of stability that Forms would provide. For in a world without that stability, things such as whiteness and perceiving themselves undergo constant change, such that someone who is perceiving something as white cannot be said to have a true perception—since even if they are right, because there is something white out there, they are at the same time wrong, because what is out there is at the same time not white. This argument cannot stand alone as a proof for the existence of Forms, for nothing has yet been said about why there must be entities that never change at all—it only shows that there must be some necessary truths or that the nature of what it is to be white cannot change. (For example, whiteness is necessarily white, and it is impossible for perceiving to become something other than perceiving.) So (K1) and (P) can only be true in a world in which some such limits have been placed on the extreme thesis of flux and opposites found in the Secret Doctrine—limits such as can be found in Plato's own view about the place of Forms in a world of flux.

Theaetetus' definition (K1), then, cannot be given any support by the Secret Doctrine. Socrates proceeds to examine Theaetetus' definition on its own, independently of the

[11] On interpretation 1, according to which Protagoras is committed to the theory of flux, it is difficult to explain why Protagoras is committed to such an extreme thesis of flux. Why couldn't he simply say that things are sometimes changing in some respects—not everything in every respect? On interpretation 2, however, flux is introduced as a part of a metaphysical doctrine that is meant to provide sufficient conditions for (P). On this view, Plato is not arguing that Protagoras is committed to the radical thesis of flux.

doctrine of opposition and flux, at *Theaetetus* 184–86.[12] This argument is of interest because it comes the closest of Plato's arguments in the *Theaetetus* to ground familiar from *Republic* book V: as in the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates argue here that perception is not sufficient for knowledge because it cannot "get at being." But whereas in the *Republic* the reason for this has to do with the nature of the objects of perception—namely, the fact that they are changeable and variable—the reason given here has to do with the nature of perceptual states and activity.

At 184–86 Socrates argues that perception is infallible about the proper objects of sense: sight is authoritative about colors, hearing about sounds, and so on. But unlike Epicurus, Plato does not make much of this fact, if indeed he thinks it's true. Though he thinks that the senses are authoritative about their own objects, he is interested rather in their limitations: they cannot tell us about anything beyond their own special objects. Thus, for example, the sense of sight is capable of determining about colors but not about sound, much less about anything such as "being," which is needed to determine truth. And if the senses are not capable of getting at "being" or any of the other common objects of thought, and "being" is necessary for truth, which, in turn, is necessary for knowledge, then it follows that perception is not sufficient for knowledge.

What does it mean to say that perception cannot get at "being," which is necessary for truth and for knowledge? Perception consists of a bare sensory awareness and lacks even the basic ability to apply concepts and form judgments. But grasping being is, in the first instance, saying what things are. What we do with the senses does not even rise to the level of making a judgment of the form "x is F," such as "the stone is white"; the senses do not "say" anything at all. Perception by itself has no propositional content; all that we do with the senses is to apprehend some color, experience some texture, and the like. Knowledge, however, requires at the very minimum the propositional complexity involved in making judgments.[13]

[12] Socrates also examines (P) independently of the doctrine of opposition and flux in the celebrated refutation of Protagoras at *Theaetetus* 169e–171d. The classic treatment of this argument is Myles F. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976), 172–95.

[13] This accords with one of the two interpretations offered in John M. Cooper, "Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge (*Theaetetus* 184–186)," *Phronesis* 15 (1970), 123–46, and is endorsed by Myles F. Burnyeat, "Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving," *Classical Quarterly* 26 (1976), 44–45. However, Plato does not consistently adhere in this passage to a neat distinction between perception as sensory awareness and the mind's conceptualizing activity; for one thing, it seems that perception includes not just sensory awareness but some use of concepts in order to label things as "sweet" "hot," and so on, which, in turn, suggests that use of concepts does not necessarily require the use of *einai*. For this reason, Cooper prefers the second interpretation, on which perception is taken to be the activity of the mind in apprehending things by means of the senses. Perception then does attain the use of sensory concepts and can determine by itself whether something is white or red or sweet or hot (*Tht*. 184d–e). But it fails to be knowledge because it does not attain objective validity. For whereas it is possible to "read off" from sensory data whether something is hot, cold, wet, or dry, it is not possible to determine in the same way whether something is (really) beneficial or valuable, same, different, and so on. On this interpretation, what the senses do falls short of what is needed to determine what is really the case. For problems with this interpretation, see Sedley, *Midwife*, 106–07 n.29.

Socrates then rejects the claims of perception to be knowledge because, on his newer and narrower understanding of perception,[14] perception constitutes bare sensory awareness and never attains the level of making judgments about how things are. This argument does not imply that knowledge is not possible without the Forms. But at the same time, it doesn't tell us that knowledge *is* possible without the Forms—nothing here suggests that Plato has renounced the view that knowledge requires grasping the Forms. What the argument here tells us is that knowledge is not possible without grasping "being," where that includes not merely the ability to make judgments and claims about how things are (which is why perception falls short) but also the ability to make expert judgments about what is true, an ability that requires the grasp of objective standards for each subject matter (*Tht*. 186bc).[15] And this point is consistent with the claim in the *Republic* (though, again, it does not imply) that only the person who grasps the Forms is in a position to know whereas the person who is ignorant of the Forms is not.

What the argument here at *Theaetetus* 184–86 does leave open is that it might be possible to know things about the objects of perception. For the argument here focuses not on the unsuitability of the objects of perception for being objects of knowledge but, rather, on how perception relates to its objects. Since perception fails to count as knowledge because it doesn't even rise to the level of making statements about them, this leaves open the possibility that sensible objects could be objects of knowledge. This could explain why, in the next section where Socrates examines a new definition of knowledge as true judgment, he consistently uses examples of knowledge about sensible objects to illustrate his points.

2. Knowledge as True Judgment (K_2)

The second proposed definition—according to which knowledge is true belief or judgment—flows from the rejection of the first definition of knowledge as perception. Perception is rejected as insufficient for knowledge since it is limited to the apprehension of proper sensibles (such as hot, cold, red, sweet, etc.) and lacks propositional content and so cannot even get at "being." That is, perception cannot by itself deliver judgments about what is the case. But that then raises the question whether true judgments about what is the case might be sufficient for knowledge (187bc).

The proposal is not innocuous. It says that getting something right—making a correct judgment about something—is enough to count as having knowledge about it. But Plato already pointed out in the *Meno* that there is a significant difference between true belief and knowledge: true belief is presumably just as good as knowledge as long as it

[14] For the argument that *Theaetetus* 184–86 signals a change in Plato's conception of perception, see Michael Frede, "Observations on Perception in Plato's Later Dialogues," *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–8.

[15] This is why perception falls short, according to the second interpretation argued for by Cooper.

"stays put." But true belief is easily dislodged; someone who only has true belief and not knowledge will easily be persuaded of the falsity of her belief and will quickly change her mind. What is needed to make one's belief stay put is an "account of the reason why" (*aitias logismos*) that will make the belief stable (*Meno* 98a).

Another way of putting this is to say that true belief is not a capacity or ability. You can make a true judgment once, by accident or randomly, for the wrong reasons or perhaps because you made a good guess. Judging correctly about something on one occasion is quite compatible with making mistakes about it on other occasions. Saying that true belief is sufficient for knowledge thus violates the idea of knowledge as expertise, the idea that knowledge is a capacity that makes one the source of authoritative and infallible judgments about a thing. Surely someone who knows something can't also make mistakes about it.

To say, then, that knowledge is the same as true judgment is to maintain that true judgment itself is the (sole) source of authority and infallibility with respect to knowledge. Getting things right—no matter how one manages to do so and how reliably one is able to do so—is enough in itself to count as having knowledge. Note that this was implied by the earlier proposal that perception is knowledge; perception was deemed to be knowledge because perception is infallible, and truth is sufficient for knowledge (152c).[16] This definition of knowledge as true judgment gives Plato the opportunity to examine the assumption contained in the definition of knowledge as perception—an idea otherwise taken for granted up to now—that what makes *anything* a suitable candidate for knowledge is its getting things right.

Like the definition of knowledge as perception, the definition of knowledge as true judgment is examined in two phases. First, Plato has Socrates examine it indirectly, by seeing whether it is possible to explain how false judgment is possible, if we suppose that true judgment is sufficient for knowledge. Socrates' repeated failure to explain the possibility of false judgment—five attempts in all at (1) *Tht*. 188ac, (2) 188c–189b, (3) 189b–191a, (4) 191a–196c, and (5) 197a–200d—is an indirect indictment of the definition of knowledge on which the discussion depends.[17] The fundamental problem is that it doesn't seem possible to explain how one can be thinking of something (as opposed to something else) and make a mistake about it (say, by misidentifying it as something else entirely, Y). The source of the problem is the very definition of knowledge as true judgment itself, for on that view, as we noted earlier, knowledge is not an enduring capacity

[16] The connection of this section with Protagoras is reinforced by the fact that much of this section is devoted to the apparent impossibility of false belief; the *Euthydemus* (285e9–286c9) attributes the denial of falsity to Protagoras. In antiquity, Proclus also thought that this section was a continuation of the discussion of Protagoras in the first part of the dialogue (*In Plat. Prm*. 657.5–10; cf. David Sedley, "Three Platonist Interpretations of the *Theaetetus*," in C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (eds.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 82 n.3; Sedley, *Midwife*, 119).

[17] See also Gökhan Adalıer, "Materialism in Plato's *Theaetetus*" ["Materialism"] (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1999), and Adalıer, "Case." Gail Fine, "False Belief in the *Theaetetus*" ["False Belief"], *Phronesis* 24 (1979), 70–80, also thinks the definition of knowledge as true judgment is implicated in the failure to explain how false judgment is possible.

that can be exercised or not on various occasions but, rather, consists simply of true or correct judgment, whenever it happens to occur.

Thus, if knowledge is the same as true judgment, then whenever you make a correct judgment, you have knowledge. But to think about something, you must be thinking about it and not something else, and so you must be judging it truly (about what it is)—but then by definition you know it. And if you know it, it seems impossible to make a mistake about it, since it is not possible to know and not know the same thing. In other words, if even thinking of something requires that one know what one is thinking of, then it seems to follow—at least according to the line of thought Socrates and Theaetetus pursue[18]—that it is not possible to think of something and make a mistake about it at the same time. This is the fundamental obstacle that Socrates and Theaetetus keep confronting and trying to find a way around.

For example, consider the fourth attempt to explain false judgment, the "Wax Block" model of thinking (*Tht*. 191a–196c), according to which there is a wax block or tablet in our souls onto which we imprint our perceptions, thereby gaining the ability to call up those thoughts long after the sensory affection has passed. The wax block itself seems to represent the faculty of memory and of thought. Socrates introduces it to solve the problem that it seems impossible to think of something as X and at the same time to think of it as something else, Y. He solves it by finding a way to have something in mind without thinking of it as X: by perceiving it. Socrates says that we perceive things and then imprint the images of those things into the "wax block" in our minds—that is, in our memory. Thus, having a wax imprint of something in our minds represents the capacity to call up an image of, and think of, that thing. But when one perceives an object, the object is presented to one without one's being aware of what it is.[19] Thus, it is possible to have something in mind and to misidentify it without knowing it. One can have an object presented to one in perception (e.g., Theaetetus), and when one matches this to the wrong imprint in one's wax block (e.g., that of Theodorus), one is effectively making a mismatch without being guilty of knowing Theaetetus and making a mistake about him. For the reason is that the wax block allows one to perceive Theaetetus, but in perceiving Theaetetus, one is not perceiving Theaetetus *as* Theaetetus; in other words, one can perceive an object without having any thought whatsoever about what it is.

So according to the proposal, one has a wax block in one's mind, which allows one to have an imprint of X, which represents the thought or memory of X, and one is also capable of having perceptions of X (though one does not perceive X *as* X), and in making judgments about things, one either successfully or unsuccessfully matches perception with imprint. A mismatch then represents the thought that "this is Y," where "this" in fact refers to some X that is not the same as Y. This appears to be a successful explanation

[18] This follows only if we assume that all judgments are identity statements (see note 20 of this chapter), or if we assume that knowing what one is thinking of is knowing everything about what one is thinking of (cf. the "all-or-nothing" view of knowledge as acquaintance discussed in Fine, "False Belief").

[19] This passage continues to assume, in line with *Tht*. 184–86, that perception has no propositional content, though perhaps it differs from it in allowing that what we see are objects like Theaetetus, not just the special sensibles.

of false judgment. But it is rejected because it is unable to explain how false judgment can occur in cases where perception is not involved (*Tht*. 195b–196c). And it is clear that false judgment occurs even about things that we grasp by means of the mind; for example, one can make a mistake about 12, thinking that it is the same as 5 + 6.

One noteworthy feature of the entire section on false judgment is that Socrates focuses almost exclusively on judgments of identity about particular things, such as judging Theaetetus (i.e., judging who he is) or judging Socrates (i.e., judging who he is).[20] In my view, the focus on identity statements does not vitiate the argument; even if it does not cover all judgments, such as judgments like "Socrates is snub-nosed," Socrates is still quite right to think that it is a problem, given their initial assumptions, to explain how one can know something and make a mistake about it. More significant, in my view, is the fact that they tend to focus on judgments about particular things. Here, as elsewhere in the dialogue, we find an ecumenical tendency toward the question of what kind of objects can be known.

Though the problems of explaining false judgment cannot be laid at the doorstep of this focus on judgments about unique particulars,[21] we will see that it will later give rise to a problem for the final definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account. The problem raised there is that anyone with true judgment already appears to be in possession of an account, if having an account is having the distinguishing mark that sets off what one knows from everything else; hence, adding "with an account" adds nothing to true judgment that it didn't already have (*Tht*. 208d–210a). As we've already seen, if having a true judgment about X consists of having X in mind, and no one or nothing else, then it does seem that true judgment already carries with it the ability to distinguish X from everything else. But this problem disappears, as I argue later on in the chapter, if one takes kinds, rather than unique individual objects, as the objects of knowledge.

Besides the indirect examination of the definition of knowledge as true judgment, Plato also has Socrates examine it directly: Socrates dispatches it fairly quickly, in an argument that takes barely two paragraphs (*Tht*. 201ac). As Socrates notes, juries can be

[20] At *Tht* 188c5–7, Socrates draws the conclusion that it is impossible to judge that one thing is another—that is, that false misidentifications are impossible; he then infers that one cannot make any false judgments (188c7–8). Since there seem to be more forms of judgments than identifications, such as misdescriptions, it would appear that the inference does not follow (cf. Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 70–123, esp. 70–73, for a statement of the problem). Either the argument is meant to be limited to identity judgments (Cornford, *Theaetetus*, 113; Frank Lewis, "Two Paradoxes in the *Theaetetus*," in J. M. E. Moravcsik (ed.), *Patterns in Plato's Thought* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), 123–24; Nicholas White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1976), 164; McDowell, *Theaetetus*, 195), or more than identity judgments are considered (C. F. J. Williams, "Referential Opacity and False Belief in the *Theaetetus*," *Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1972), 298–99; Fine, "False Belief," 74; and David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* [*Theaetetus*] [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988], 172–73). A Cornford-style approach has recently been argued for by Adalıer, "Materialism," who thinks these assumptions are characteristic of a position Plato is arguing against, one which assumes that all judgments are judgments of identity, precisely because it does not admit Forms and therefore the possibility of predication.

[21] Unless one supposes that this entire section implicitly presupposes an ontology of particulars; cf. Adalıer, "Materialism," and Adalıer, "Case."

correctly convinced that certain events occurred—for example, that the defendant committed a murder at a particular time—even though they did not themselves witness the event. But only someone who has actually seen the event could be said to know that it occurred. That is, in order to have knowledge, one needs proper evidence or justification for one's belief. The members of the jury could be said to have, at best, correct judgment, not knowledge.[22] The striking thing about this argument, for our purposes, is that it clearly implies that knowledge is possible for things such as particular facts and events and, furthermore, that perception may have a role to play in acquiring the proper evidence or justification required for knowledge. Here again is evidence that Plato is prepared to entertain a wide range of possible objects of knowledge, though the argument still leaves open the possibility that Plato thinks that knowledge of the Forms is necessary even to know, for example, that some event occurred.

3. Knowledge as True Judgment with an Account (K_3)

The refutation of the definition of knowledge as true judgment shows that true judgment by itself is not sufficient for knowledge: one needs something additional, playing the role that firsthand witnessing of an event plays in the case of knowing what happened on a particular occasion. This point leads Socrates and Theaetetus to their final proposal concerning knowledge, (K3), that knowledge is true judgment with an account (*logos*) (*Tht*. 201cd). This definition is the most likely to be endorsed by Plato himself, since there are many passages in other dialogues where something like K3 is endorsed—most famously, the statement in the *Meno* that "true beliefs are not worth much until one ties them down by reasoning about the cause" (*aitias logismoi*; *Meno* 98a).[23]

The central idea in Theaetetus' definition of knowledge is that "things of which there's no account are not knowable . . . whereas things which have an account are knowable" (*Tht*. 201d). This introduces an asymmetry between things that do and do not have an account (call this "asymmetry of *logos*," or "AL"), which together with the requirement that everything known must have a *logos* (call this "knowledge requires a *logos*," or "KL"), gives rise to an asymmetry between things that can be known and things that cannot be known (call this "asymmetry of knowledge," or "AK").[24] K3 explicitly says that some

[22] For further discussion, see M. F. Burnyeat, part 1, and Jonathan Barnes, part 2, of "Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 54(suppl.) (1980), 173–91 and 193–206.

[23] See also *Phaedo* 76b5–6, 97d–99d2; *Symposium* 202a5–9; *Republic* 534b3–7; *Timaeus* 51e5. For further discussion, see Taylor, chapter 18 in this volume.

[24] Cf. M. F. Burnyeat, "The Material and Sources of Plato's Dream" ["Dream"], *Phronesis* 15 (1970), 101–22; Gail Fine, "Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*," *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* ["Knowledge"] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 225–51, originally published in *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), 366–97.

things can be objects of knowledge (namely, those things that have an account) and that other things cannot be objects of knowledge (namely, those things of which there is no account). But as it stands, K3 is extremely abstract; it is unclear what exactly a *logos* or account is, and why certain things admit of an account, whereas others do not.

Socrates begins his examination of this definition with a move familiar from the perception section of the *Theaetetus*: he introduces another thesis—or, rather, a set of theses that are meant to illustrate and support the proposed definition. That is, he examines the definition by offering a set of ideas that is sufficient for the truth of the definition; he introduces what he refers to as a "dream" to show how Theaetetus' definition could be true (*Tht*. 201d–203d).

In particular, the "dream" is meant to answer the second question posed previously, why some things can't be given a *logos* and hence can't be known, whereas others can. According to the Dream theory, the asymmetry exists because things fall into two different kinds: "primary elements (*stoicheia*), as it were, of which we and everything else are composed" (*Tht*. 201e–202a) and those things that are composed out of them. It is unclear what these primary elements are and how they figure as constituents in everything else. We are simply told that (1) elements can only be named; (2) that one cannot say anything else of an element—such as "is," "is not," "itself," "that," or "each"—since that would be to add something to it which does not belong to it alone; and (3) that an element can be perceived, not known. By contrast, things composed out of elements (a) can be given an account, (b) which consists of names woven together, and (c) can be known (201e–202b).

Like K3, the Dream theory is abstract and open to multiple interpretations. Are the primary elements material stuffs, or are they parts out of which other material objects are constituted? Such an interpretation is encouraged by the fact that Socrates talks of primary elements "out of which we and everything else are composed" (201e), as well as by his later remark that elements "have no account and are unknowable, but they're perceivable" (202b). Or is the Dream theory a theory about meaning, where the primary elements and things that are composed out of them are the meanings of our words and meanings of sentences or propositions constructed out of them? One could cite in support of this Socrates' speaking of the elements being "woven together" into a complex, just as the names are woven together into a *logos* or account (202b). So understood, there is a resemblance between the Dream theory and Wittgenstein and Russell's Logical Atomism, a resemblance noted by Wittgenstein himself.[25] There are no doubt other possible spheres of application—and perhaps this is a sign of how potentially powerful the theory is. But, in my view, none of these do justice to Plato's intentions. Plato deliberately leaves it open what the "primary elements" are,[26] for he only wants to focus on certain features of ontology and language and not others. Plato leaves many features of

[25] Cf. Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 149–64; Chappell, *Theaetetus*, 208–11, offers a reply to Burnyeat's objections to the "Logical Atomist" interpretation of the Dream theory.

[26] This is a theme of Burnyeat's discussion of the third definition of knowledge (Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 129, 131–32, 164).

the Dream theory vague in order to make it sufficiently general and hence widely applicable to a variety of possible objects of knowledge.

The Dream theory focuses on the following three features of ontology and language:

1. It tells us that things fall into two kinds: elements and those things that are composed or "woven together" out of them. That is, the distinction between things that can and can't be known appears to correlate with a distinction between things that are ontologically basic and others that are made up out of them.
2. Elements can only be named (not given an account), and they can only be perceived (not known). That is, their ontologically basic status gives rise to the fact that they cannot be given a *logos* (AL) and thus the fact that they cannot be known (AK); they are spoken of and grasped through other means.
3. A *logos* says of a thing what is proper to it. This effectively restricts all *logoi* to identity statements—that is, statements or definitions of what a thing is.[27] The Dream theory continues to assume, as in the false judgment section, that all judgments are judgments of identity about particular objects.

Next, Socrates considers what the Dream theory would say about the following case: take letters to be primary elements and syllables to be complexes made up out of them (*Tht*. 202e). Thus, the first syllable of Socrates' name, "SO," is a complex, and the letters "S" and "O" are the elements out of which the syllable is composed. The account of the complex "SO"—given in answer to the question "What is 'SO'?"—would be that it is "S" and "O." However, "S" and "O" cannot themselves be given an account; as Theaetetus says, "How could one express in an account the elements of an element? In fact, Socrates, 'S' is one of the unvoiced consonants, only a noise, which occurs when the tongue hisses, as it were" (*Tht*. 203b). One will wonder, of course, why what Theaetetus has just said about the letter "S" could not count as an account of an element. But the reason is evidently that it does not refer to the parts of a letter, because a letter has no parts ex hypothesi. We can thus infer that in the Dream theory we are to assume that the account of a thing is simply an enumeration of its elements (EE) and, furthermore, that the elements are a thing's parts. The Dream theory is thus reductionist because it takes a thing to be no more than its parts and therefore to be wholly analyzable into its parts.[28] But why should we assume that?

[27] The oddity of this stricture—that one should not, in general, say anything of a thing that doesn't belong to it, and that one should only say of a thing what belongs to it alone—has historically put people in mind of Antisthenes, partly because Aristotle seems to suggest that Antisthenes had the strange view that the only way you can talk about a thing is to name it; hence, both subject-terms and predicate-terms in sentences serve the same function—that is, to name—and a sentence itself is nothing other than an extended name. Whether or not Plato has him in mind is not clear, partly because we know so little about Antisthenes. For an even-handed judgment on this matter, see Burnyeat, "Dream," and Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 164–73.

[28] Cf. A. E. Taylor, *Plato, the Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1926), 344–46; K. Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 120–30; Adalıer, "Materialism," 207–48, esp. 234–41; Sedley, *Midwife*, 158.

To answer this, let's look at Socrates' two refutations of the Dream theory—or more precisely, his refutations of the thesis of asymmetry in knowledge between elements and complexes. One of these assumes this controversial point, that the relation between an element and a complex is that of part to whole and that the whole is the same as the sum of its parts (call this "WP"); the other does not. In the first argument, WP is assumed in order to argue that the thesis of asymmetry in knowledge between element and complex is untenable: either they are equally knowable, or they are equally unknowable (not-AK) (*Tht*. 203d–205e). The second argument does not assume WP; it simply points out that our experience in coming to know things is the opposite of AK: far from it being the case that the elements are unknowable, we find that in our own experience of learning, the elements are better known than those things that we know by means of their elements (*Tht*. 205e–206b). For example, when we learn to read, we concentrate on learning the letters first and only later on recognizing the syllables constructed out of them. As Socrates says, "the class of elements admits of knowledge that is far clearer, and more important for the perfect grasp of every branch of learning, than the complex" (*Tht*. 206b).

Plato's strategy in offering two different arguments against AK seems to be to start both from premises (such as WP) that he would probably not accept and from premises that he might accept. The advantage of this strategy is that it covers his bases; insofar as WP is widely accepted, even if not by Plato himself,[29] an argument showing that WP is incompatible with AK would strongly suggest that AK should be rejected. The second version clinches the argument, showing that we have good reason to reject AK even if we do not accept WP.

What follows if we reject AK, the thesis of asymmetry of knowledge between elements and complexes? Either elements and complexes are likewise knowable or likewise unknowable. That we are meant to conclude the former is suggested by the second argument Socrates gives against AK, in which he says that our experience of learning our letters suggests that, far from it being the case that we have no knowledge of the elements, knowledge of the elements of a subject matter is fundamental in coming to learn it. Supposing that elements and complexes are both knowable (not-AK), what should we say about KL, AL, and EE, since KL, AL, EE, and not-AK are inconsistent?[30]

A. One option is to reject KL: not everything requires a *logos* to be known.[31] For example, one might suppose that certain Forms—in particular, the Form of the Good—will figure in Plato's answer to the question of what the elements of

[29] Cf. Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 191–209, esp. 199–201; Verity Harte, "Plato's Problem of Composition," in John J. Cleary and Gary M. Gurtler (eds.), *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 2001, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1–26.

[30] Cf. Fine, "Knowledge," 236.

[31] Some argue that knowledge for Plato requires some kind of nondiscursive, intuitive grasp of its objects (e.g., I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, 1963), 2:1131–34; Richard Robinson, "Forms and Error in Plato's *Theaetetus*" in his *Essays in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 52–55). Alternatively, one might think that the point of giving up KL is to acknowledge that not everything can be defined without circularity, and hence at least the most basic Forms must be known by some other way (Stephen Menn, "Collecting the Letters" ["Collecting"], *Phronesis* 43/4 [1998], 201).

everything are but that the Form of the Good itself cannot be given an account, since it is the most fundamental of all. This option would be particularly compelling if one thought that Plato was committed to EE as a model of what an account is—that is, if one thought that accounts can only be one-directional, from the more complex to the simpler, from explanandum to explanans. (Note that EE does not commit one to WP, since the elements in terms of which one gives an account of a thing need not be parts of that thing.) Arguably, Aristotle took this option, since he distinguishes first principles or elements that are known by other means than demonstrative knowledge[32]—namely, by nous.

B. Another option is to retain KL and reject AK and AL: both elements and complexes can be known, and since knowledge requires an account, both elements and complexes can be given accounts—albeit accounts of different sorts. The key here is to reject EE, according to which an account is an enumeration of a thing's elements.[33] The reason the Dream theory gave for denying accounts to simples was that simples don't have parts. But Theaetetus' own reply when explaining that the letter "S" does not have an account—that it has no account because there are no letters in a letter, that it is simply an unvoiced consonant—shows that one could give a different kind of account of "S," one that did not analyze a thing in terms of its parts, but that placed it in a classification scheme relative to other letters and sounds: vowels versus consonants, voiced versus unvoiced, and so on. So elements could receive accounts not in terms of their parts—since they don't have any—but rather in relation to other elements and ultimately in relation to the whole field to which they belong.

Deciding which option Plato intends us to go for would be too large and complex an undertaking for this chapter.[34] For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that whether one thinks we are supposed to carve out a different conception of knowledge besides the kind of knowledge that is true judgment with an account, as in option A, or to defend the viability of K3 as a definition of knowledge by jettisoning some of the problematic features of the Dream theory, as in option B, there is no reason to suppose that Plato is committed to the assumption that a whole is identical to the sum of its parts (WP). According to option A, Plato retains the idea that a *logos* is, fundamentally, an enumeration of a thing's elements—though the elements of what is known are not necessarily a thing's parts (i.e., not WP). Instead of expanding the conception of *logos*, we're supposed to realize that knowledge does not require a *logos*. Whatever the most basic items of

[32] Aristotle says that knowledge is always "with an account" (*Posterior Analytics* II 19. 100b10; *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 6. 1140b33) but distinguishes demonstrative knowledge with the self-explanatory, undemonstrated knowledge of first principles (*Posterior Analytics* I 3. 72b19–24, II 19. 99b20).

[33] "The endorsement of KL, coupled with the rejection of AK, suggests that AL and, correspondingly, EE are also to be rejected: since elements are as knowable as compounds, and since all knowledge requires accounts, there must be accounts of elements" (Fine, "Knowledge," 237).

[34] Recommended readings include Fine, "Knowledge"; Bostock, *Theaetetus*; Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*; Adalıer, "Materialism"; Sedley, *Midwife*; Chappell, *Theaetetus*; Thaler, "Taking the Syllable Apart"; and Broadie "The Knowledge Unacknowledged."

ontology are, they are not going to be known by means of a *logos* but, instead, will be perceived or known in some other way. According to option B, Plato rejects WP, and also EE, as imposing an unnecessarily restrictive conception of *logos* on the definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account (which then points forward to *Theaetetus* 206c–208b, especially 208ab, where he makes this point explicitly). If one expands one's conception of *logos*, then one might think that both elements and complexes can have *logoi*, and, correspondingly, both elements and complexes can be known, albeit in different ways.

What we ultimately think of the definition depends on getting clear about what a *logos* is, as is made clear in the final section of Socrates' examination of K3, where he considers three different conceptions of *logos* and raises problems for each one (206c–210a). The first proposed interpretation of *logos*—according to which it is simply "speech"—is quickly dismissed, since presumably adding speech to true judgment doesn't get one anything more than true judgment (*Tht*. 206ce). The second account of *logos* holds that one gives a *logos* of a thing when one goes through its elements (*Tht*. 206e). For example, to give a *logos* of a wagon is to name the parts it has—for example, "wheels, axle, body, rails, yoke" (*Tht*. 207a). Though the Dream theory did not explicitly state what it is to give a *logos*, this account articulates what was assumed in the Dream theory: that the *logos* of a thing is an enumeration of a thing's elements. For this reason, Socrates suggests that "our man"—the one who came up with the Dream theory—would scoff at one if one gave as the account of a wagon "wheels, axle, body, rails, yoke" (207ab). He would say that these were no more the elements of a wagon than syllables are of a name; rather, a proper account of a wagon would refer to the wagon's "hundred timbers"—that is, the many individual elements out of which it is made.

This way of conceiving of a *logos* is clearly inadequate. For example, no mention is made of the importance of structure or arrangement or the relationship between the parts of a thing for understanding what it is. Presumably any account of the syllable "SO" should mention not only the letters that make it up but also their order and arrangement—after all, "SO" is different from "OS." An account of a wagon should name not only its parts but also their order and arrangement; a wheelbarrow and a wagon could conceivably be made up out of the same materials and parts but be distinguished by different arrangements of those materials.

Plato does not say this; his point is deeper. The objection he has Socrates raise to this way of thinking of *logos* shows that a *logos* cannot consist simply in being able to name the elements or parts of a thing (207d–208b). Socrates objects that someone might be able to go through Theaetetus' name, spelling it correctly and giving a correct account of all the letters making it up. But that person might at the same time make a mistake about the first syllable of Theodorus' name, spelling it "TE" instead of "THE." And similarly, he might make a mistake about the syllable "AI" when he finds it in another word, though he spelled it correctly in the name "THEAITETOS." Such a person does not know how to spell Theaetetus' name.

The point, then, is that knowledge of something does not simply consist of enumerating the elements of a thing; one must also be able to recognize those elements as such when

they occur elsewhere. The mistake the novice speller makes when he spells Theaetetus' name correctly, but misspells Theodorus', shows that the speller doesn't have a systematic grasp of the rules of spelling and of phonetics. Indeed, Plato uses the same example of spelling and letters in the *Philebus* to illustrate the methods of collection and division (*Phlb*. 18bd). The novice speller is unable to "collect" the letters correctly: he does not recognize letters and syllables as of the same kind when they are found in different words, as when letters and syllables have been combined in different ways.[35] This objection then points toward a different conception of what it is to have a *logos*: it is to have the capacity to *recognize* the parts of an individual thing (e.g., letters in a particular word) as its elements, where those elements can only be identified in terms of a larger, interrelated system characterizing an entire field or genus, one which can explain, for example, how all the words of a language should be spelled. Such a grasp of an entire field or genus is the province of the expert.[36]

For option A—according to which we are supposed to give up the requirement of *logos* for knowledge because some things are known by means of a *logos* of their elements, whereas the elements themselves are known, but not by means of a *logos*—this comes as a welcome amendment to the conception of *logos* at work in the definition of knowledge as true judgment with a *logos*. That is, we are to understand that giving the *logos* of a thing in terms of a thing's elements does not simply consist of naming its parts. And it will insist that the elements themselves do not have *logoi* and are known in a different way. Option B—according to which we should retain K3 as the definition of knowledge, and reject AK and AL—can also admit this amendment to the conception of *logos* at work in the definition. For the objection helps to make the point that having a *logos* of a thing should not be thought of as simply being in possession of a list of the parts of a thing but, rather, as having the ability to locate and recognize the relevant elements for a thing, an ability that would require one to relate that thing to other things of the same kind.

Finally, Socrates considers a third conception of *logos* according to which having a *logos* consists of "being able to state some mark by which the thing one is asked for differs from everything else" (208c). For example, the sun is "the brightest of the heavenly bodies that go round the earth" (208d). An account must, then, "get hold of the differentiation of anything, by which it differs from everything else, whereas as long as you grasp something common, your account will be about those things to which the common quality belongs" (208d).

Socrates raises the following difficulty for the definition of knowledge that results with this meaning of "logos" (208e–210a): it would seem that even in order to judge

[35] Cf. Burnyeat, "Dream"; Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*; Fine, "Knowledge"; Menn, "Collecting."

[36] The importance of this point in reading this part of the *Theaetetus* is emphasized in Burnyeat, "Dream"; Julia Annas, "Knowledge and Language: The *Theaetetus* and the *Cratylus*," in Malcolm Schofield and Martha Craven Nussbaum (eds.), *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy Presented to G. E. L. Owen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 95–114; and Alexander Nehamas, "*Episteme* and *Logos* in Plato's Later Thought," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 66 (1984), 11–36.

correctly about Theaetetus, one has to have in mind and grasp Theaetetus as he is different from everyone else. After all, if one has in mind those features that Theaetetus shares with anyone else, then one will no more be thinking of Theaetetus than anyone else. Hence, even in correct judgment about a thing, one must already grasp the features that distinguish it from everything else. But then this seems to render "with an account" empty; one will not have added anything to true judgment when one adds an account to it. Thus, adding an account of how something differs from something else to a correct judgment will not add anything informative to what was already contained in the judgment itself.

One might insist that adding an account consists of getting to know rather than judging the differentness. But this will not help, because adding "knowledge of the differentness" to a true judgment would simply make the definition of knowledge circular: knowledge is true judgment about a thing plus knowledge of how it differs from everything else (209e–210a).

What are we supposed to make of this conception of *logos*, as well as of Socrates' reasons for rejecting the resulting definition of knowledge? On the one hand, one might think that there are reasons for regarding it with some suspicion. Socrates' marking something as "what most people would say" (208c) is never a recommendation in favor of the proposal.[37] Furthermore, this "popular" conception of knowledge seems to assume that knowledge is always of unique individual objects, like the sun, Theaetetus, and so on, and that knowing a thing means being able to say how it differs from other unique individuals. For this reason, Socrates slips comfortably back into the language of the wax block when he discusses this proposal. He says that one won't have Theaetetus in one's judgment "until precisely that snubness [of Theaetetus'] has imprinted and deposited in me a memory trace different from those of the other snubnesses I've seen, and similarly with the other things you're composed of. Then if I meet you tomorrow, that snubness will remind me and make me judge correctly about you" (209c). What allows one to judge that this is Theaetetus and not someone else is the fact that Theaetetus' unique individual qualities—for example, the particular snubness of his nose—have been imprinted in Socrates' memory, his wax block, so that on future occasions, he is able to make a correct judgment by matching the person he perceives with an imprint possessing exactly those features that he happens to have.

On the other hand, one might think that the problem lies not in the idea itself but in its application. One might argue, for example, that the idea that to give an account of a thing is to give the *sêmeion* or distinguishing mark of it is very close to what Plato says in other dialogues[38] but that the way this interpretation is applied in the *Theaetetus* is problematic and the cause of the difficulty. For it is assumed that the things for which we are to give *sêmeia* are particular individual objects; thus to know Theaetetus is to be able to recognize him and distinguish him from everyone else. And here, giving the *sêmeion* does seem to be something one who has a true *judgment* about Theaetetus should already be capable of doing, if they are judging correctly about him as opposed to

[37] Burnyeat, *Theaetetus*, 191, draws attention to this remark.
[38] Fine, *Knowledge*, 228; Sedley, *Midwife*.

someone else. That is, if one is thinking about Theaetetus, as opposed to someone else, one must be picking him out of the crowd not by means of general features that Theaetetus shares with others but by means of particular features that are unique to him. However, if one gives up the assumption that the objects of knowledge are unique individual objects, there is no reason to think that one would be capable of giving the *sêmeion* if one had a true judgment about a *kind* of thing. For example, one might be able to recognize and make true judgments about zebras without being able to give the *sêmeion* of zebras—to say how zebras are different from other species. After all, that is the special province of the expert in biology. In other words, the *sêmeion* of a particular individual object serves to distinguish that object from other objects—in particular, objects of the same species. Hence, what one looks for to distinguish Socrates from Theaetetus is, for example, the particular bend of his nose, or the color of his skin, or the height and weight of the individual—or some combination of these features. But the *sêmeion* of a kind of thing—of human beings, of justice, or of beauty—serves to distinguish it from other kinds of things. (Think, for example, of Aristotle's conception of definition: to give a definition of a thing, you have to give the genus plus its differentiae.[39] The differentiae are obviously not the *sêmeion* or the distinguishing mark of an individual particular concrete object but, rather, what distinguishes a species from other things belonging to the same genus.) Thus, the third conception of *logos* is only vulnerable to Socrates' objection if one assumes that what we have knowledge of are particular things such as Socrates or Theaetetus. If one focuses on knowledge of kinds, there is no reason to think that being able to judge truly about a kind carries with it the ability to give any kind of account of what distinguishes that kind from others; for example, even if I correctly judge my neighbor's tree to be an oak, there is no reason to think I can also give an account of what distinguishes oak trees from all the other kinds of trees that there are. Hence, the definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account of the distinguishing mark remains a promising contender as an account of knowledge.

Although Plato gives no indication here in the *Theaetetus* that this is what he has in mind, it is consistent with his interest in genus-species hierarchies in other late dialogues.[40] And if we apply the third conception of logos in this way to kinds, rather than particulars, then it is also consistent with Plato's claim in the *Republic* that all knowledge requires a grasp of the Forms; here the point of the definition would be that understanding something requires that one be able to give an account of it in terms of what it is to be that kind of thing, which, in turn, requires one to relate it to and distinguish it from other kinds that belong to the same genus. Again, nothing here requires a commitment to Plato's theory of Forms specifically. But it does suggest—along with other passages in the dialogue—that a metaphysics consisting entirely of particulars, with no room for kinds of things to which these particulars belong, would have less chance of success in sustaining what would otherwise seem to be a promising definition of knowledge, namely (K3).

[39] *Topics* VI 4. 141b26: "A correct definition must be given through the genus and the differentiae, and these are better known without qualification and prior to the species."

[40] Taylor, chapter 18 in this volume.

4. Conclusion

Plato examines three definitions of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* using a variety of methods. One feature of his strategy is to examine a particular definition of knowledge using two different methods—one of which explores the definition by offering metaphysical premises in support of that definition, the other of which explores and refutes the definition on its own terms, without any such metaphysical commitments. Thus, for example, Plato tests and examines the thesis that knowledge is perception both on its own (at 184–86) and in conjunction with a number of metaphysical theses, including the thesis that everything is always changing and the thesis that everything is always characterized by opposites (*Tht.* 152c–183c). Similarly, Plato tests and examines one aspect of the definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account both on its own (206ac) and in conjunction with a number of metaphysical theses, contained in the Dream theory—in particular, the thesis that a thing is nothing more than the sum of its parts (203c–205e).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to try to determine what Plato intended us to conclude (Taylor discusses some options in Chapter 18). Instead, I conclude with a more limited point: Plato introduces various metaphysical theses in order to provide support for a definition of knowledge. But they are not necessarily ones that he himself would endorse. Plato's purpose in assuming metaphysical premises that are incompatible with the Forms is analogous to the role of the hedonist hypothesis in the *Protagoras* (353c–354e). There, Socrates assumes the truth of hedonism—that the good is the same as pleasure—in order to show that there is no such thing as being overcome by pleasure. He puts this forward as a working assumption, on behalf of the ordinary folks whom he and Protagoras are addressing (353a, 354b), which will help Socrates to show that no one is ever overcome by pleasure: in particular, that reason cannot be outweighed by pleasure. In my view, neither the character Socrates nor Plato endorses the hedonist hypothesis.[41] Rather, Socrates' purpose in introducing the hedonist hypothesis seems to be to convince those people who are already committed to hedonism—which would presumably include most readers and, perhaps, most people in Socrates' audience—that it's never the case that anyone is overcome by pleasure. But even if one is not committed to the hedonist hypothesis, one can see that Socrates could in principle offer another argument along the same lines that doesn't depend on that assumption—as indeed the Stoics would much later.

Similarly, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato repeatedly introduces metaphysical doctrines he does not himself endorse on behalf of epistemological theses he wishes to explore. Thus, he introduces the flux doctrine in order to flesh out a picture of a world in which knowledge is the same as perception and in which all appearances are true. As it turns out,

[41] This is not uncontroversial; some think that Plato accepted hedonism at the time of the *Protagoras* (see, e.g., T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 85–92).

the flux doctrine implies both that these are true and that they are not true. Hence, the conclusion is, minimally, that the flux doctrine cannot provide support for Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception after all. More robustly, Socrates and his interlocutors conclude that the flux doctrine is incompatible with any kind of knowledge. This hardly constitutes a proof for the existence of the Forms. But it does suggest that there need to be limits on the extent of flux—such as are provided by Plato's theory about Forms.

In the case of the Dream theory, Plato assumes the thesis that a thing is the same as the sum of its parts (WP) on behalf of the definition of knowledge as true judgment with an account. Plato goes on to show that the thesis of asymmetry in knowledge is untenable. But he also argues that the thesis of asymmetry is untenable even if one does not assume WP. And he then goes on to show what is wrong with conceiving of a *logos* as a list of the parts of a thing, which, in turn, suggests that we shouldn't conceive of things as being nothing more than the sum of their parts. Again, this hardly constitutes a proof for the existence of the Forms. But it does suggest the shortcomings in theories that locate knowledge in one's grasp of the parts of a particular thing—rather than in the understanding of what it is to be that kind of thing, an understanding involving a grasp of the systematic relations it has with other kinds of things, such as can be found in the conception of knowledge advocated in other Platonic dialogues.

As we have seen, Plato does not offer anything quite as straightforward as an argument that knowledge is impossible without the Forms. But three aspects of the metaphysical theories he introduces on behalf of the various definitions of knowledge he considers in the *Theaetetus* prove to be problematic. First, the theses of flux and opposition—according to which everything is changing, and everything is F and not-F—are ultimately deemed to be incompatible with the first definition of knowledge and indeed with any conception of knowledge. In particular, these problems result if whiteness is always "flowing" or coming to be not white, and if perceiving is always coming to be not perceiving—that is, if the nature of things is subject to change. Acknowledging that some things, such as the nature of things, cannot change may not yet commit one to the theory of Forms, but it certainly resembles the claim Plato often makes elsewhere that the Forms do not admit of their opposites. Second, Socrates tends in the dialogue to suppose that what is known are sensible particulars rather than kinds to which sensible particulars belong. Expanding the range of possible objects of knowledge to include kinds does not, of course, commit one to the theory of Forms. But it takes one in a direction that is more congenial to the theory of Forms than to an ontology exclusively composed of material particulars. Finally, Socrates adopts the viewpoint in the final section of the dialogue that a thing is nothing other than the sum of its parts and, therefore, that to say what a thing is is to say what it is made out of. His rejection of this kind of reductionism again does not commit him to the theory of Forms. But it does suggest that understanding what a thing is depends not on finding out what a thing is made out of but on finding out how it relates, in a system, to other kinds of things—an idea that Plato goes on to explore in other late dialogues.

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