427-367 B.C.

Plato’s Theaetetus: What is Knowledge?

Theaetetus is an extended attack against the empiricistic idea that knowledge is constructed out of perception and perception alone.

Background:

It is set within a framing conversation between Euclides & Terpsion (142a-143c)

Theaetus’ discussion is “What is Knowledge? & is considered Plato’s greatest work on epistemology.

It is an aporetic dialogue—its ends in an impasse. It reviews 3 definitions of knowledge; each proposal is rejected, & no alternative is explicitly offered.

We never discover what knowledge is. Rather, we discover only 3 things that knowledge is not (210c).

1st Pt: KNOWLEDGE IS PERCEPTION:

Socrates’ question: “What is Knowledge?”

143d-145e Theaetetus’s 1st response: Examples of knowledge (geometry, astronomy, music, & arithmetic (146a-c).

But Socrates rejects the examples of knowledge since they are neither necessary nor sufficient for a definition of x (146d–147e).

Theaetetus contrasts this difficulty to define knowledge with the ease to define mathematics terms (146c–146e). Socrates then compares himself with a midwife [reminder, of theory of recollection?] stating that Theaetetus is in “intellectual labor” (148e–151d).

Theaetetus’s 2nd Response: Knowledge is Perception:

151d–e: Example: I know I’m hot = I perceive that I’m hot. Then, perception is related to the perceiver. Unknowable. Knowledge is subjective, but no appearance/reality gap.

Socrates Response: “Knowledge is perception” entails 2 theories: Protagoras & Heraclitus (151e–160e) & then criticizes it (160e–183c). Protagoras: Man is the measure: 152b–152c8: X is to any human just as X appears to that human (example of wind: it can be cold to the person who feels cold, but not cold to the one who does not feel cold) Heraclitus: All is Flux 152e–152e1: He offers at least 11 arguments.

3 Arguments against Protagoras:

(1) If people are a work of measure of their own truth, then we can’t know anything. But wisdom has nothing to do with truth, it is how they package their words (e.g., doctors, farmers) (187a-d)

(2) Self-Refutation Argument: Two parts (a) False beliefs: many people believe that there are false beliefs; therefore, (b) all beliefs are true, but not all beliefs are true beliefs; (c) But, either way, there are false beliefs (186d-187a). The existence of false beliefs is inconsistent with the homo-nousa doctrine: & hence, if there are false beliefs, Protagoras’ doctrine is not tenable for actual validity of non-nousa doctrine undermines Protagoras’ own commitment to relativism from within the relativism framework itself (176e–177c).

Protagoras, regarding the opinion of those who think he is wrong in his theory that they have no evidence that everybody believes things that are so. On the other hand, there is no evidence that they are wrong. On the basis of, it agrees that they are wrong, but one can’t use mutual agreement to prove that beliefs are true, that they exist. The argument is circular, as it uses the belief that all beliefs are true for the establishment of the theory.

(3) If all beliefs are true, there is no distinction between true belief and false belief: the concepts of true and false beliefs are inherently linked, which is impossible to have 2 ideas that are equivalent but not the same. Hence, Protagoras’ views are not consistent.

[Retrospective 172-172c]

Dichotomy between judicial (legal practicalities: blind followers) & philosophical realm (unrestricted by temporal, spatial limitations are free to investigate true essence of justice: Justice as an absolute-not relativistic.

Godlike/ness requires a certain degree of wisdom to discern truths from earthly affairs & an attempt to emulate divine intelligence and morality.

(1) Productive Powers of Experience is against moral & epistemological aspects of Protagorean Relativism. Socrates exposes the flawed nature of Protagoras’ definition of experience, as a tool that points out what is a habitual, without contrasting individuals—such as, who, where, when, why... Socrates argues that this is the content of value judgements is properly arrived by reflection to see how true things will turn in the future. Experts are those people who have the capacity to be the future effector of present causes. One may be an infallible judge of whether one is hot, but only the expert physician is able accurately to tell today whether one will be feverish tomorrow. Thus the productive powers of expertise must be on the mental and epistemological dimensions of Protagorean Relativism.

Argument Against Heraclitus:

Question: Theaetus does the soul “seems to be making a calculation within itself of past and present in relation to future” (186b) Thus, knowledge is not perception.

2nd Pt: KNOWLEDGE IS TRUE BELIEF:

In 187a10c6: Thaetetus proposes “Knowledge is True Belief.”

Socrates Response: One can’t make proper use of notion of “true judgment,” unless one can explain what a false judgment is.

3-Fold attempt to come up with an account of false belief:

(a) false judgment as a mistaken judgment of one thing for another (189a-c): (b) false judgment as “thinking what is not” (186–189a); (c) false judgment as “other-judgment” (189b–191a); (d) false judgment as the inappropriate linking of a perception to a memory – the mind as a wax tablet (191a–196c); (e) potential and actual knowledge – the mind as an avary (196d–206c).

All 5 attempts fail, & appears to be the end of topic of false belief. They fail because they’ve ‘settle[d] quite different issues of the nature of knowledge.

Then in 206d-206c17: Socrates returns to Knowledge is True Belief & dismisses it again that accidental beliefs can’t be called knowledge, giving Athenian jurymen as an ex. of accidental true belief (hearsay).

Forming a true opinion about x by means of persuasion is different from knowing it. An appeal to the only method by means of which it can be known—in this case by seeing it—and thus knowledge and true judgment cannot be the same.

DECISION: ARGUMENT: 184d-7:

Mind makes use of a range of concepts that it could not have acquired & which don’t operate through the senses: e.g., “existence,” “sameness,” “difference.”

So, there is a part of knowledge, which has nothing to do with perception. In fact, All of these are ascertained by the soul through its own resources, w/o recourse to senses. Theaetus does not involve belief or judgment at all.—David Hocken

3rd Pt: KNOWLEDGE IS TRUTH BELIEF W/ AN ACCOUNT:

Thaetetus remembers having heard that “Knowledge is true belief with an account” (logos): 201c-d.

The Dream of Socrates: 201d-206b: Knowledge of O is true belief about O plus an account of O’s composition. If O is not composite, O cannot be known but only perceived (202b).

(a) The world is composed of complexes & their elements. (b) Complexes have Logos, while (c) elements have none, but can only be named. It isn’t even possible to say of an element that “it is” or “it is not,” because adding Being or Non-Being to it would be tantamount to making it a complex. (d) Elements can’t be accounted for by known, but are perceptible. Complexes, on the contrary, can be known because one can have a true belief about & give an account of them, which is “essentially a complex of names” (202b).

Socrates Objection against Dream Theory: (202d-206b11):

According to dream theory, the world is composed of complexes & elements. Socrates objects appealing to a (a) dilemma & (b) experience: (a) Dilemma: How can a complex of unknowable elements be itself knowable? For if the complex is simply the sum of elements, then the knowledge of it is predicated on knowledge of its elements, which is impossible, if, on the other hand, the complex is a “single form” produced out of the collections of its elements, it will still be an indefinite one. Rather, what is reasonable is to say that the elements are much more clearly known than the complexes. (b) 206a-c2: The thesis that complexes are knowable, the elements unknowable, is false to our experience, in which “knowledge of the elements is primary.”

What is Logos? 3 Interpretations:

(1) Does logos mean “speech or statement?” (206c–e)? Giving an account of something is “making one’s thought apparent vocally by means of words and verbal expressions” (206c). Probs: Logos becomes “a thing that everyone is able to do more or less readily,” unless one is deaf or dumb, so that anyone with a true opinion would have knowledge as well.

(2) Eyes of O on enumeration of the elements of O (206d4–206b12)? To give an account of a thing is to enumerate all its elements (207a). Hesiod said a wagon contains a 100 timbers. If asked what a wagon is, the average person will likely say, “wheels, axle, body, rakes, yoke.” That is ridiculous, Socrates says, because it would be the same as giving the syllables of a name to someone’s asking for an account of it. The ability to do that doesn’t preclude that a person identifies now correctly & now incorrectly the elements of the same syllable in different contexts.

(3) The “sign” or diagnostic feature wherein O differs from everything else (208c1–210a2)? “Being able to tell some mark by which one is sure that this is not that” (208c). Ex. Socrates uses the def. of sun as brightest of heavenly bodies that circle earth. But def. of knowledge as true judgment with Logos is not immune to criticism. For someone, who is asked to tell what distinguishes, say, Theaetus, a man of whom he has a correct judgment, from all other things, were to say that he is a man, & has a nose, mouth, eyes, & so on, his account wouldn’t help to distinguish Theaetus from an “other-man.” But if he had no knowledge of the means of differentiating Theaetus from everyone else, he couldn’t judge correctly who Theaetus was & couldn’t recognize him the next time he saw him. So to add Logos to true judgment is meaningless, because Logos is already part of true judgment, & so can’t itself be a guarantee of knowledge.

To say that Logos is knowledge of the difference doesn’t solve the problem, since the definition of knowledge as “true judgment plus knowledge of the difference” begs the question of what knowledge is.