



THEAETETUS

PLATO (c. 427–347 B.C.) stands with Socrates and Aristotle as one of the shapers of the whole intellectual tradition of the West. He came from a family that had long played a prominent part in Athenian politics, and it would have been natural for him to follow the same course. He declined to do so, however, disgusted by the violence and corruption of Athenian political life, and sickened especially by the execution in 399 of his friend and teacher, Socrates. Inspired by Socrates' inquiries into the nature of ethical standards, Plato sought a cure for the ills of society not in politics but in philosophy, and arrived at his fundamental and lasting conviction that those ills would never cease until philosophers became rulers or rulers philosophers. At an uncertain date in the early fourth century B.C. he founded in Athens the Academy, the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching, and the prototype of all western universities. He travelled extensively, notably to Sicily as political adviser to Dionysius II, ruler of Syracuse.

Plato wrote over twenty philosophical dialogues, and there are also extant under his name thirteen letters, whose genuineness is keenly disputed. His literary activity extended over perhaps half a century: few other writers have exploited so effectively the grace and precision, the flexibility and power, of Greek prose.

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PLATO

Theaetetus

Translated with an Essay by

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FOR BRIJI

ἐν χάριτος μέρει καὶ δωρεΐας

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PREFACE



Theaetetus is often hailed as ‘Plato’s most sustained study of epistemology’ or the like – and this is true, but it is also misleading. It is misleading because it makes it sound as though epistemology was an established subject, which Plato was addressing. It wasn’t. His philosophical predecessors had occasionally made remarks which we would classify as concerned with the problem of knowledge, and so had Plato himself, more systematically, in earlier dialogues; but it is closer to the truth to say that *Theaetetus* establishes the study of knowledge as a branch of philosophy in its own right, distinct from, especially, ontology. Consider, then, how remarkable it is that two and a half thousand years later it is still worth reading and discussing, for its philosophical interest as well as for its literary merits. Indeed, it is one of the few Platonic dialogues which consistently appears in modern works and courses on philosophy.

This alone is enough to justify the inclusion of an essay on the dialogue in a volume whose first aim is to translate it. To make such an inclusion is not to suggest that the dialogue cannot be appreciated by a lay reader, but to acknowledge its importance and the fact that, as the virtual inventor of the subject, Plato’s discussion lacks technical vocabulary and precise distinctions, and therefore occasionally requires elucidation. In fact, *Theaetetus* is a philosophical work *par excellence* – accessible to the layman, yet leading one ever deeper into philosophical areas.

An anecdote may indicate a further reason for the necessity of exploration of this (and of any) Platonic dialogue. I well remember how, on first reading *Theaetetus* as an undergraduate, I was entranced by the clarity of the writing and the confidence of the arguments into believing almost everything Plato said. This is a trap which I am sure Plato himself would have wanted us to avoid: he wrote philosophy to stimulate thought rather than acceptance.

So much for justifying the inclusion of the essay on the dialogue. It will be noticed that I have broken with common practice and put this essay after the translation, rather than as an introduction: this is to indicate that the text needs reading first. The essay, it should finally be noted, falls far short of a thorough scholarly commentary on the dialogue, but is intended to alert the reader to the major issues which should be confronted if reading the dialogue develops into study of it.

As for the translation, my policy has been to try to reproduce the Greek both fluently and literally. Where these two aims clashed, I have preferred fluency to literalness, except where to do so would gloss over some important ambiguity. I chose not to break up the rhythm of the dialogue with the type of running commentary which is popular among translators of Plato; but I have added footnotes on minor points of explication or interest.

The Greek text used is that of J. Burnet (*Platonis Opera*, Volume 1, Oxford, 1900). Any divergences from this text have been mentioned in footnotes. The numbers and letters which appear in the margins are the standard means of precise reference to Plato; they refer to the pages and sections of pages of the edition of Plato by Henri Estienne, or Stephanus (Geneva,

Plato's *Theaetetus* has been very intensively studied, particularly by recent scholars. The bibliography may be taken to express my acknowledgements to written work. I also have two further academic acknowledgements to make: I attended a series of lectures on the dialogue by Myles Burnyeat in Cambridge in late 1976, and at much the same time was participating in the late Gwil Owen's seminars on the dialogue.

I would also like to thank Glyn Davies for many Socratic discussions on philosophy in general and knowledge in particular, Diana Pulvermacher for a thorough reading of the first draft of the typescript, Hugh Lawson-Tancred for several improvements, and Christine Collins for intelligent and observant editing. The book is dedicated to my wife Brijji, for far more than simply checking the translation.



EUCLID: Hello, Terpsion. Been in town long, or have you [142a] just arrived?

TERPSION: I've been here a while. In fact, I was looking for you in the agora – I was surprised not to find you.

EUCLID: I was out of town.

TERPSION: Where?

EUCLID: I was on my way down to the port when I came across Theaetetus being brought back to Athens after active duty at Corinth.

TERPSION: Alive or dead?

EUCLID: Alive – but only just. He sustained some wounds, [b] but he also caught the epidemic that's broken out in the army, and that has weakened him more than the wounds.

TERPSION: Is it dysentery?

EUCLID: Yes.

TERPSION: What a person to be on the danger list!

EUCLID: Yes, he's a fine man, Terpsion. Why, only just now I overheard some people praising him highly for his part in the battle.

TERPSION: That doesn't surprise me; I'd be far more surprised to hear anything else of him. But how come he didn't stay here in Megara? [c]

EUCLID: He was in a hurry to get home. I kept asking him and advising him to stay, but he didn't want to. So I saw him on his way. As I was returning, I remembered with astonishment how Socrates had predicted Theaetetus' future particularly accurately. It was shortly before Socrates' death, I think, that he met Theaetetus, who was just a boy then, spent some time in conversation with him, and was very favourably impressed with his natural abilities. When I was in Athens, he recounted their remarkable discussion [d] for me, and he commented that without a doubt Theaetetus would become well known, if he lived long enough.¹

TERPSION: Events seem to have proved him right. But what was this discussion? Are you in position to go through it?

EUCLID: Well, that would be quite out of the question if I [143a] was unprepared, but I made notes as soon as I got home on that occasion, and later, when I had the time, I wrote it out from memory; and whenever I went to Athens, I used to ask Socrates about the bits I didn't remember, and then come back here and make corrections. So I think I've got almost all of it written out now.

TERPSION: Oh, yes: I've heard you mention it before, and, you know, I always meant to ask you to show it to me, but I never got around to it. But what's to stop us going through it now? I don't know about you, but I could certainly do with a rest after my journey from the country.

[b] EUCLID: Well, in fact, I accompanied Theaetetus as far as Erineon,² so a rest would be welcome for me too. So that's settled; my slave will read to us while we take a rest together.

TERPSION: Good idea.³

EUCLID: Here's what I wrote, Terpsion. I didn't write the discussion down in the form in

which Socrates repeated it to me, with him doing all the talking, but as a dialogue between him and those who he said took part in the discussion – who were the geometer Theodorus and Theaetetus, he said. I [c] wanted to avoid the nuisance of all the bits which Socrates had to insert about himself for explanation, like ‘And I said’ or ‘And I remarked’, or about the interlocutor, like ‘He agreed’ or ‘He disagreed’; so I omitted all that kind of stuff and wrote it down as a dialogue between them.

TERPSION: That sounds very sensible, Euclid.

EUCLID: All right, boy, take the book and read to us.

SOCRATES: If Cyrene were uppermost in my mind, Theodorus, I would ask you about events there, to find out [d] whether there’s any interest in geometry or any other branch of philosophy among the Cyrenian young men. But as it is, I am less concerned about them than the local lads; I’ve a greater desire to know which of *our* young men are likely to turn out well.¹ I investigate this myself as much as I can, and I ask other people whose company I see they seek out. Now, *you* attract quite a crowd – which is as it should be, given your knowledge, of geometry especially. So I’d be glad [e] to know if you’ve met anyone worth mentioning.

THEODORUS: As it happens, Socrates, there *is* a young Athenian I’ve come across who is well worth my telling you about – though if he were good-looking I would hesitate to be too enthusiastic, in case anyone thought I fancied him!² But as it is – and I hope you’ll take this in good part – he isn’t good-looking, but he looks like you! He’s snub-nosed and his eyes bulge, though not as much as yours.³ I know you won’t mind the comparison, because you should know that [144a] of all the people I’ve met – and that’s no inconsiderable number – I have never yet seen anyone with such incredible talents. For someone to be remarkably intelligent and yet exceptionally unassuming, and moreover to have courage that would bear comparison with anyone’s – well, I would not have credited it. It’s not a phenomenon that I’ve seen before: such quickness, acuity and retentiveness usually go hand in hand with emotional instability – the image of un-ballasted ships being tossed about comes to mind – and lack of control, rather than courage. On the other hand, the [b] steadier ones tend to approach intellectual matters somewhat sluggishly, and their ballast is forgetfulness. But this lad tackles his lessons and research so calmly and precisely and efficiently, and in such an unassuming manner – like a soundless stream of liquid oil – that it’s amazing to find one so young setting about them like that.¹

SOCRATES: That *is* good news. And whose son is he?

THEODORUS: Somebody told me, but I’ve forgotten. Never [c] mind – he’s the one in the centre of the group coming up to us now. He and these friends of his were just oiling themselves in the portico outside, and now, I suppose, they’ve finished and are on their way here. So you see if you know him.

SOCRATES: Yes, I do. He’s the son of Euphronius of Sunium, who was just as you have described his son to be, and well respected too; *and* he left quite a large estate. But I don’t know the boy’s name.

[d] THEODORUS: It’s Theaetetus, Socrates. By the way, I think some of the trustees have squandered the estate. Despite that, however, another one of his remarkable characteristics

financial generosity, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You are describing a person of good breeding. Please ask him to come and sit down here.

THEODORUS: All right. Theaetetus, come and be with Socrates.

SOCRATES: Yes, do, Theaetetus. I want to examine the cast of my own features. I mean, Theodorus claims that we [e] are alike. But if we each had a lyre, and he said that they were similarly tuned, would we just take his word for it, or would we first see whether his statement was backed by musical knowledge?

THEAETETUS: The latter.

SOCRATES: And our belief or disbelief would depend on whether or not we found him to be a musician?

THEAETETUS: Right.

SOCRATES: In the present instance, if we were bothered about whether our features were similar, I suppose we should see whether or not he speaks with the authority of being an [145a] artist.

THEAETETUS: I think so.

SOCRATES: Is Theodorus an artist?

THEAETETUS: Not as far as I know.

SOCRATES: He's a *geometer*, isn't he?

THEAETETUS: Absolutely, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And does he know about astronomy, mathematics, music and other educational subjects?

THEAETETUS: I think so.

SOCRATES: So if he says that we have physical similarities – whether or not he finds them commendable – we have no particular reason to listen to him.

THEAETETUS: I suppose not.

SOCRATES: But what if he were to praise one or the other [b] of us for mental attainments and cleverness? Whoever he was talking *to* ought to do his best to examine whoever he was talking *about*, who in turn should do his best to prove himself, don't you think?

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Now is the time, then, my dear Theaetetus, for you to do the proving and for me to do the examining. I must tell you that Theodorus, who has often praised both Athenians and others to me before, has never praised anyone as he did you just now.

THEAETETUS: That's all very well, Socrates, but are you sure he wasn't joking? [c]

SOCRATES: That's not his style. Now, don't you try to duck out of our agreement by pretending that he was joking. Otherwise he'll have to give evidence under duress; I mean, there's absolutely no chance of anyone accusing him of perjury and making him take an oath. But don't give up: abide by our agreement.

THEAETETUS: All right, if you say so.

SOCRATES: So tell me: you learn some geometry from Theodorus, I imagine, don't you?

THEAETETUS: I do.

[d] SOCRATES: And what is relevant to astronomy, harmony and calculation?

THEAETETUS: I do my best.

SOCRATES: So do I, my boy, when I learn from him and from anyone else who I think has any understanding of these subjects. But although I get on fairly well in these subjects on the whole, there's a minor issue¹ which puzzles me and which I'd like to look into, with the help of you and your friends here. Tell me: isn't learning becoming wiser about the subject one is learning?

THEAETETUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: And it is *wisdom* that makes people wise?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

[e] SOCRATES: Is this different from knowledge?

THEAETETUS: What?

SOCRATES: Wisdom. If you know something, aren't you also wise about it?

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: So knowledge is the same as wisdom?²

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, now we're at the heart of what puzzles me and what I cannot satisfactorily grasp on my own – what knowledge in fact is. Are we in a position to give an account of [146a] it? What do you all think? Which of us should have a go first? If he misses the mark – and the same goes for anyone who misses the mark at any time – then he'll sit down and be the 'donkey', as children say in their ball-game. But anyone who comes through without making a mistake will be our 'king', and it'll be *his* turn to set us to answer any questions he likes.

Why doesn't someone say something? Surely, Theodorus, it's not ill-mannered of me to enjoy discussions so much that I am trying to get us talking and to be on friendly and familiar terms?

THEODORUS: No, that could never be considered [b] ill-mannered, Socrates. But you must address yourself to the young men. I'm not used to this way of carrying on a discussion, and besides, I'm too old to form the habit now. But it'd be just the thing for them, and they'll get far more out of it. There's always further to go when you're young, and that's a fact. Why don't you carry on as you started? Don't let Theaetetus off the hook: ask *him* your questions.

SOCRATES: Theaetetus, you have heard Theodorus, and I'm sure you'll do as he says; indeed when a wise man gives [c] an order in such matters, the only proper course of action for a younger person is obedience. So, what do you think knowledge is? Hold your head up high, and answer me.

THEAETETUS: Here goes, then, since you're both telling me to answer. No doubt you'll correct any mistakes I make.

SOCRATES: Yes, if we can.

THEAETETUS: Well, I think that the subjects Theodorus teaches – geometry and so on (you listed them just now) – are kinds of knowledge; and let us not forget cobbling and the [d]

other humbler crafts. All of these together constitute knowledge, and each individually is a kind of knowledge.

SOCRATES: You are over-generous, my friend. I asked for one, and you are offering many; I asked for something simple, and you respond with complexity.

THEAETETUS: What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I'm probably talking nonsense, but I'll tell you what's on my mind. When you speak of cobblery, don't you just mean the knowledge of making shoes?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: What about carpentry? The knowledge of [e] making wooden objects?

THEAETETUS: Again, yes.

SOCRATES: So in both cases you are pinpointing what each craft is knowledge of?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But the question, Theaetetus, was not 'What are the objects of knowledge?', nor 'How many branches of knowledge are there?' We didn't ask the question because we wanted a catalogue, but because we wanted to know what knowledge is. Am I talking nonsense?

THEAETETUS: No, you're quite right.

[147a] SOCRATES: Look at it this way too. Suppose we were asked about something familiar and commonplace – suppose the question was 'What is clay?' Wouldn't it be ridiculous of us to answer that there's clay for making pots, clay for making terracotta and clay for making bricks?

THEAETETUS: I suppose so.

SOCRATES: I mean, in the first place, it would be ridiculous to suppose that our answer gave the questioner any understanding of what clay is when we use the term, whether [b] we add 'for making statuettes' or mention any other craft. Or do you think that any term can be meaningful without knowledge of what it stands for?

THEAETETUS: No, of course it can't.

SOCRATES: So the phrase 'knowledge of shoes' is meaningless, unless you know what knowledge is.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So anyone who doesn't know what knowledge is¹ cannot understand cobblery or any other craft.

THEAETETUS: You're right.

SOCRATES: So it is absurd to give the name of any craft as an answer to the question what knowledge is. For that is [c] knowledge of something, and doesn't answer the question.

THEAETETUS: I suppose you're right.

SOCRATES: In the second place, all this rigmarole gets us nowhere and is quite unnecessary, because, I think, an ordinary, short answer *must* be available. For example, in the case of the question about clay, the ordinary, simple reply is that clay is earth mixed up with liquid; there's no need to say what the clay is used for.

THEAETETUS: It seems easy now, Socrates, when you put it like that. But, you know, it looks as though you're asking a similar question to one which occurred to me and your namesake,

Socrates here, when we were talking together a [d] short while ago.

SOCRATES: What was that, Theaetetus?

THEAETETUS: Theodorus here was using diagrams to explain to us something about irrational square roots.¹ He showed² that the sides of squares whose areas are three square feet³ or five square feet are incommensurable with one foot, and he went through the sides of every such square up to seventeen square feet, where he happened to break off.⁴ Now, since there are evidently an infinite number of irrational square roots, what occurred to us was to try to gather them all under a single heading. [e]

SOCRATES: And did you find a way of doing this?

THEAETETUS: I think we did; see what you think.

SOCRATES: Go on.

THEAETETUS: We distinguished two classes into which all numbers fall. Any number which can be the product of multiplying some number by itself, we called 'square and equal-sided', on the analogy of a geometrical square.

SOCRATES: Good.

THEAETETUS: But as for the intermediate numbers – three, five and any number which cannot be the product of [148a] multiplying some number by itself – which are always the product of multiplying either a greater number by a smaller one or vice versa, and which, in geometrical terms, form figures with unequal sides, we called such numbers 'oblong', on the analogy of a geometrical oblong.

SOCRATES: Excellent. Then what happened?

THEAETETUS: We defined as 'rational lengths' all those lines which form the sides of a square whose area is one of our 'equal-sided' numbers; and we defined all those lines which form the sides of a square whose area is one of [b] our 'oblong' numbers as 'irrational roots', since they are not commensurable with the former lines in length (though their squares are commensurable with the former lines).¹ A similar distinction can be made for solid figures too.²

SOCRATES: Nobody could have done better, my boys. I really don't think that Theodorus is going to be liable to the charge of perjury.³

THEAETETUS: Well, but I think you're looking for the same sort of answer to your question about knowledge, Socrates, as we came up with for rational and irrational roots – and I don't think I can do it. So Theodorus turns out to be mistaken after all!

[c] SOCRATES: Hang on. Suppose it was your running ability he was praising, and he said that he had met no young man better at running; and suppose that you were then beaten in a race by a champion in his prime. Do you think that his praise would have been any the less correct?

THEAETETUS: No.

SOCRATES: Well, do you think that getting clear about knowledge is really a 'minor issue', as I called it just now?¹ Don't you think that it is altogether one of the highest achievements?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I do – one of the very highest.

SOCRATES: Don't worry about yourself, then. Just assume that Theodorus knows what he is talking about, and do your [d] absolute best to express your thoughts, especially about what

knowledge in fact is.

THEAETETUS: If doing my best is all it takes, Socrates, we'll get results.

SOCRATES: All right, then. You showed the way well just now, so take your answer about irrational roots as a model. What you must try to do is give a single account of the many branches of knowledge, in the same way that you gathered together the plurality of irrational roots under a single concept.

THEAETETUS: But I think you should know, Socrates, that [e] this is not the first time I've tackled this problem; I've heard about your questions at second hand. But all I've been left with are two convictions: that anything I come up with is unsatisfactory, and that I can't find anyone else giving the sort of account you're asking for – and yet, for all that, the question hasn't stopped niggling me.

SOCRATES: This isn't lack of fertility, Theaetetus. You're pregnant, and these are your labour pains.

THEAETETUS: I don't know about that, Socrates. I'm just telling you my experiences.

SOCRATES: Don't be so serious! Haven't you heard that [149a] my mother Phainarete² was good, sturdy midwife?

THEAETETUS: Yes, somebody did tell me once.

SOCRATES: And have you heard that I practise the same profession?

THEAETETUS: No, never.

SOCRATES: But it's true, you know: I do have this skill. It's a secret, though, my friend, so don't tell on me. Because people don't know, it isn't part of my reputation, which is only as an eccentric and someone who confuses people. I imagine you've heard that?

[b] THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Do I need to tell you the reason for my reputation?

THEAETETUS: Yes, please.

SOCRATES: If you consider midwifery as a whole, you'll soon see what I'm getting at. I mean you are aware, of course, that no woman practises midwifery while she is still of an age to get pregnant and give birth herself. It's only those who are past child-bearing.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: This is thought to be due to Artemis, who is childless, but is in charge of childbirth. She wanted to reward women who are like her, but barren women weren't the [c] recipients of her gift of midwifery, because human nature is too weak to become skilled in matters of which it has no experience. Instead, therefore, she gave the job to those whom age prevents from giving birth.

THEAETETUS: That's plausible.

SOCRATES: And isn't it also plausible – isn't it necessary, in fact, that midwives are better than others at recognizing whether or not women are pregnant?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that's not the end of their abilities: their [d] chants and the drugs they administer can induce labour and relieve the pains, as they see fit; can bring a difficult birth to a successful conclusion; and can bring on a miscarriage,¹ if that is what seems best.

THEAETETUS: True.

SOCRATES: And have you also noticed that they know all there is to know about pairing types of women and men to produce the best children – in other words, that they are the most skilful match-makers?

THEAETETUS: No, I wasn't aware of that at all.

SOCRATES: Well, let me tell you, they pride themselves more on this than on cutting the umbilical cord. Look at it [*e*] this way: do you think that the matching of shoots and seeds to soils is the province of the *same* skill as the cultivation and harvesting of crops, or of a different one?

THEAETETUS: No, the same one.

SOCRATES: What about the case of women? Are the analogous skills different?

THEAETETUS: That's not likely.

SOCRATES: No. But the improper and unskilled pairing of [*150a*] couples, which is called pimping, means that midwives, who want to preserve their reputation, steer clear of match-making, in case this latter activity leads them to incur the charge of the former. But in fact only proper midwives are qualified to make successful matches.

THEAETETUS: Apparently.

SOCRATES: So you can see how important midwifery is, but it still falls short of *my* business. For women cannot produce offspring which are sometimes true, but sometimes illusory, [*b*] with the difference hard to discern. I mean, if that were the case, the finest and most crucial task that midwives could perform would be distinguishing the true from the false. Don't you agree?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, my midwifery has all the standard features, except that I practise it on men instead of women, and supervise the labour of their minds, not their bodies. And the most important aspect of *my* skill is the ability to apply [*c*] every conceivable test to see whether the young man's mental offspring is illusory and false or viable and true. But I have *this* feature in common with midwives – I myself am barren of wisdom.¹ The criticism that's often made of me – that it's lack of wisdom that makes me ask others questions, but say nothing positive myself – is perfectly true. Why do I behave like this? Because the god² compels me to attend to the labours of others, but prohibits me from having any offspring myself. I myself, therefore, am quite devoid of wisdom; my mind has [*d*] never produced any idea that could be called clever. But as for those who associate with me – well, although at first some of them give the impression of being pretty stupid, yet later, as the association continues, all of those to whom the god vouchsafes it improve marvellously, as is evident to themselves as well as to others. And they make this progress, clearly, not because they ever learn anything from me; the many fine ideas and offspring that they produce come from within themselves. But the god and I are responsible for the delivery.

[*e*] There is clear evidence of this. Often in the past people have not been aware of the part I play; they have discounted me, and thought that they themselves were responsible for the delivery. Either of their own accord, or under the influence of others, they left me sooner than they ought to. Then, because they kept bad company, they proceeded to have only

miscarriages, and they spoiled all the offspring I had delivered with wrong upbringing. They placed more weight on counterfeits and illusions than on the truth. Eventually, they gained a reputation for stupidity, and thought themselves [151a] stupid too. Aristides the son of Lysimachus was one of these people,¹ but there were plenty of others. If they come back, begging and doing goodness knows what for my company, sometimes the supernatural sign that I get² does not allow me to let them be with me, but in some cases it does, and these are the ones who make progress again.

There's another experience which those who associate with me have in common with pregnant women: they suffer labour-pains. In fact, they are racked night and day with a far greater distress than women undergo; and the arousal and relief of this pain is the province of my expertise. [b]

So it is with them, Theaetetus. As for people who strike me as not yet being pregnant and therefore as having no need of me, this is where my skills as a kindly match-maker come into play. Though I say so myself, I'm pretty good at guessing whose company would be beneficial for them. I have handed lots of them over to Prodicus' care, and plenty to other wise and remarkable men as well.¹

Now, why have I gone on at such length about all this to *you*? Because I suspect, as do you yourself,² that you are in pain, and that this is due to pregnancy. So let me take on [c] your case: remember, I'm a midwife's son and practise the art myself. When I ask a question, set about answering it to the best of your ability. And if, on examination, I find that some thought of yours is illusory and untrue, and if I then draw it out of you and discard it, don't rant and rave at me, as a first-time mother might if her baby was involved. In the past, my friend, when I've removed some piece of nonsense of theirs, people have often worked themselves up into such a state that they've been ready literally to bite me! They don't believe that I'm acting out of goodwill; it doesn't even cross their minds that no god bears ill-will towards men, and that I am [d] not motivated by ill-will either. I do what I do because it is my moral duty not to connive at falsehood and cover up truth.

So let's start again from the beginning, Theaetetus: try to define knowledge. Don't ever say that it's beyond your ability. If God is willing, and if you find the courage, the ability will follow.

THEAETETUS: Well, Socrates, it would be disgraceful for anyone, faced with the sort of encouragement you are giving, not to try his hardest to express his thoughts. So ... I think [e] that someone *knows* something when he *perceives* it; my current impression, at any rate, is that knowledge and perception¹ are the same.

SOCRATES: Well done, boy! That is the way to speak up. An excellent answer! Now then, we must investigate it together, to see whether it is in fact viable or still-born.² Perception, you claim, is knowledge. Yes?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Whether or not you are aware of it, however, this statement of yours about knowledge is a substantial one; [152a] it's what Protagoras used to say as well, though he used different words to say the same thing. I mean, he says somewhere that 'Man is the measure of all things – of the things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not,' No doubt you've read this?³

THEAETETUS: Yes, often.

SOCRATES: And doesn't he mean by this that 'Each and every event is for me as it appears to me, and is for you as it appears for you' – you and I being 'man'?

THEAETETUS: That's what he says.⁴

[b] SOCRATES: Now, he's a clever person, and unlikely to be talking nonsense; so let's follow in his footsteps. Isn't it possible that, when the *same* wind is blowing, one of us might feel chilly, while the other doesn't? Or one might feel slightly chilly, the other really rather cold?

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: So when that happens, are we to describe the wind *per se* as cold or not cold? Or should we follow Protagoras and say that it is cold for the one who feels cold, but not for the one who doesn't?

THEAETETUS: That seems reasonable.

SOCRATES: And that is how the wind appears to each of us?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now, the phrase 'It appears to me' is the same as 'I perceive', isn't it?

THEAETETUS: It is.

SOCRATES: So appearance is the same as being perceived, [c] in the case of warmth and so on. I mean, as each person perceives events to be, so they also are, I suppose, for each person.

THEAETETUS: That sounds reasonable.

SOCRATES: Perception, therefore, is always of something that is, and it is infallible, which suggests that it is knowledge.¹

THEAETETUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Well, by heaven, there's a question here. Was Protagoras' wisdom *all-inclusive*? I mean, did he treat us, the masses, to these riddles, but speak the truth to his students in secret?

THEAETETUS: What are you getting at, Socrates? [d]

SOCRATES: I will tell you – and this is certainly a substantial theory. I mean the view that nothing is a single, non-relative identity, and that you cannot correctly identify anything or describe what it is like. If you call something big, it will also turn out to be small, and if you call something heavy, it will also turn out to be light, and so on for everything, on the grounds that nothing is single and you cannot say what it is or what it is like. In fact, everything which we describe as 'being' is actually in the process of being generated¹ as a result of movement and change and mutual mixture. We are wrong to describe things in that way, because [e] nothing ever *is*, but is continually *being generated*. The whole succession of past sages (with the exception of Parmenides) can be seen to agree on this point – I'm thinking of Protagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles – and so can Epicharmus and Homer, the foremost composers of their types of poetry, comedy and tragedy respectively. When Homer speaks of 'Oceanus, whence gods are generated, and mother Tethys', he is saying that everything is the offspring of flux and change. Don't you think that that's his meaning?²

THEAETETUS: I do.

SOCRATES: What chance has any view which opposes [153a] such a mighty host, with a leader of Homer's stature, of appearing sensible?

THEAETETUS: Not a lot, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You're quite right, Theaetetus. And there's further compelling evidence for this theory. The process of generation – that is, apparent being – is a result of change; but destruction – that is, not being – is a result of inactivity. I mean, heat and fire, which generate and nourish everything else, are themselves generated by movement and friction. These are changes, and they are the origin of fire, aren't they?

THEAETETUS: They are. [b]

SOCRATES: Moreover, movement and friction give rise to living creatures as well.¹

THEAETETUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: And a healthy physical condition is spoiled by inactivity and inertia, but, on the whole, is preserved by exercise and change, isn't it?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is it not by means of lessons and practice – that is, by means of change – that the mind acquires information and that its healthy condition is preserved and improved? But inactivity – lack of practice and learning – leads the mind not only to learn nothing, but even to forget [c] what it has learned.

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: So change is good for mind and body, and lack of change the opposite?

THEAETETUS: Apparently.

SOCRATES: Need I go on? What about torpid weather, stagnant water and all the other instances where inactivity causes rot and ruin, and preservation requires different conditions? Do I have to crown it all by pressing into service¹ Homer's 'golden cord' and arguing that he uses this image [d] for nothing other than the sun, because he wants to demonstrate that the existence and preservation of everything divine and human depends on the cyclical motion of the sun and the heavenly bodies, and that if they were bound down and static, everything would be destroyed and 'what's up would end up down', as they say?²

THEAETETUS: No, I think you are obviously right, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well then, my friend, here is a hypothesis: take vision first. The colour white is nothing distinct in itself either outside your eyes or in your eyes – in fact, you may not [e] locate it anywhere. If you did, it would have a position and it would be stable – in other words, it would not be undergoing a process of generation.

THEAETETUS: What do you mean, exactly?

SOCRATES: If we follow the theory we mentioned just now, and assume that nothing is a single, non-relative entity, then we will find that black, white and so on are generated by the eyes meeting the movement for which they are adapted, and [154a] that what we call a colour is neither the thing which does the meeting, nor the thing which is met, but something generated in between, which is peculiar to the individual perceiver. At least, I imagine that you wouldn't maintain that a dog or any other animal perceives colours in the same way that you do, would you?

THEAETETUS: No, I certainly wouldn't.

SOCRATES: What about another human being? Are his or her perceptions similar to yours? I think what you would maintain, or would you much prefer to say that not even you yourself perceive things in the same way, because you never remain in a similar state?

THEAETETUS: I prefer the latter view to the former.

SOCRATES: Now, if the objects we measure ourselves [**b**] against¹ or touch were large or white or warm, then they would never have become different (as they do), just because a different person meets with them, unless they themselves are changing. And on the other hand, if the perceiver, who does the measuring or touching, were each of these things,² then again, he or she would not become different just because some other object comes along or because something happens to an object, unless something was happening to him or her. But in everyday speech, my friend, carelessly uses words which, from the Protagorean viewpoint and others which approximate to it, are extraordinarily absurd.

THEAETETUS: What do you mean? What's absurd in everyday speech?

SOCRATES: Here's a small example, which will help you [**c**] to see what I mean in general. Suppose we have six knuckle-bones. If we put them next to four knuckle-bones, then we say that they are *more* than four – one and a half times more, in fact. But if we put them next to twelve knuckle-bones, we say that they are *fewer* – in fact, half as many. And that's the only way our language allows us to put it, isn't it?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, suppose Protagoras or someone asks, 'Theaetetus, can anything become greater or more without being increased?' What will your answer be?

THEAETETUS: If I was thinking about just *this* question, Socrates, I would answer 'No'. But if I was thinking about the [**d**] last question you asked, I would answer 'Yes', in case I contradicted myself.³

SOCRATES: An excellent answer, by God! My friend, you are inspired! The trouble, apparently, is that if you answer 'Yes', we get the Euripidean situation of the tongue being safe from refutation, but the heart not being safe from refutation.¹

THEAETETUS: True.

SOCRATES: Well, if you and I were clever savants and the examination of the contents of our hearts were a thing of the past, then we'd be in the happy position of having nothing [**e**] left to do now except put each other to the test; we'd make a contest out of it, as sophists do, and meet, with great clashing of argument on argument.² But as it is, since we're amateurs, our first concern will be to compare our thoughts, to see what they are and whether they are consistent or quite the opposite.

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's certainly *my* concern.

SOCRATES: Mine too. Since this is so, shall we peaceably take up the investigation? There's plenty of time: we don't [**155a**] need to be impatient. What we're really looking at is ourselves, to see what these phantoms are which lurk inside us. And the first of these, on examination, we will formulate, I think, as that nothing can ever become greater or smaller, in bulk or in number, as long as it is equal to itself. Right?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the second is that something to which nothing is added and from which

nothing is taken away neither increases nor decreases, but remains equal.

THEAETETUS: Exactly.

[b] SOCRATES: And isn't there also a third, that it is impossible for something later to be which once was not, without having come to be and without the process of becoming?¹

THEAETETUS: I think so.

SOCRATES: So we're agreed on these three points, but, I believe, they fight with one another in our minds, when we think about the case of the knuckle-bones. Or here's another example: we say that I, an old man, without growing or shrinking, am now taller than you, who are young, but later on, within a year, we say that I am smaller, although my size hasn't decreased at all, and it's just that you have grown. The trouble is that this implies that I am later what I once **[c]** was not, despite not having undergone any coming-to-be. I mean, nothing can happen without coming-to-be, and unless I lose some of my size, I can't come to be smaller. Now, if we accept these examples, thousands upon thousands of other similar cases crowd in. You see what I mean, don't you, Theaetetus? I get the impression that you've come across these problems before.

THEAETETUS: Yes, I most certainly have, Socrates, and they arouse my curiosity no end. Sometimes I get really dizzy from considering them.

SOCRATES: It looks as though Theodorus' sketch of your **[d]** character was accurate, my friend. I mean, this feeling – a sense of wonder – is perfectly proper to a philosopher: philosophy has no other foundation, in fact. Whoever said that Iris was the offspring of Thaumas was no mean genealogist.² But I wonder whether or not you can now see why it follows from the theory we are attributing to Protagoras that these things are so?

THEAETETUS: No, I don't think I can yet.

SOCRATES: So would I be right in thinking that you will be grateful for my help in uncovering from its hiding-place the truth concealed in the mind of a famous man – or, I **[e]** should say, of famous men?¹

THEAETETUS: Of course I will be grateful, very much so.

SOCRATES: Take a careful look around, then, to make sure that none of the uninitiated are listening in on our conversation. The uninitiated are those whose sole criterion of existence is what they can get a good grip on with their hands, and who refuse to accept that causes and effects and anything invisible have any place in reality.²

THEAETETUS: These are hard, obstinate people you are **[156a]** speaking of, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Yes, my boy, they are very uncouth indeed. There's far greater sophistication among the others, whose mysteries I am about to reveal to you. Their starting-point – the one on which all that we were just saying depends too – is that the universe is change and that there is nothing but change. There are two kinds of change, which may be distinguished not by their frequency of occurrence (for both manifest in an infinite number of ways), but by their powers: one is active, the other passive. The intercourse and friction of these two with each other give rise to an infinite number of **[b]** offspring, which are always born as twins: there is the perceived thing and there is the perception, which always emerges and is born along with the perceived thing.³ Anyway, examples of perception have various names: cases of seeing, hearing, smelling, sensations of heat and cold – yes, and what are called pleasure,

pain, desire and fear; and there are infinite numbers of others which have no name, though very many have got names. Then there are the perceived things: all sorts of colours for all sorts of cases of seeing; a [c] similar variety of sounds for cases of hearing; and so on and so forth, every perceived thing being compatible with a perception.¹ So, Theaetetus, do you realize the significance of this tale in relation to what was said earlier?

THEAETETUS: Not really, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well, let's see if we can tie it all together. You see, the implication is that although *ex hypothesi* all these things are changing, yet their change may be either fast or slow. Now, anything whose change is slow changes in the same place and in relation to something close by; that is how it produces offspring,² and the offspring produced in this [d] way are quicker, because they shift position and the kind of change they naturally undergo in this motion.³

So, for instance, consider an eye and something which is close to the eye and compatible with it, as they engender whiteness and the perception which is naturally adapted to whiteness, which are the unique offspring of the eye and the other object in just this relation. At this precise moment, the seeing is set in motion from the eyes and the whiteness is set [e] in motion from the object which is the colour-generating half of the pair (both these offspring arise between the eye and the object); the eye becomes filled with sight, and sees at this time, and becomes not sight but a seeing eye; and the object which is the colour-generating half of the pair becomes filled with whiteness and, again, becomes not whiteness but white. The object which happens to be coloured by this colour could be a piece of wood or a stone or anything at all.

We should assume that the same account holds good for all other cases. We must suppose (and this is repetition by [157a] now) that nothing is hard or warm or whatever in its own right, but that all things, in all their variety, are generated during their intercourse with one another, as a result of change. In fact, we should suppose that it is impossible to take even their active and passive components singly and form, as they say, a stable notion of their existence. I mean, the active one is nothing without the passive one, and vice versa; and what is active in one relation turns out to be passive in another.¹

The upshot of all this is what we started off saying: that nothing *is* in its own right, but is always being generated in [b] some relation. The verb 'to be' should be deleted from all contexts, despite the fact that habit and ignorance often force us to employ it, and did so even in our recent discussion. But, the experts are telling us, we shouldn't, nor should we connive at 'it' or 'his' or 'mine' or 'this' or 'that' or any other term which suggests stability.² We should instead adapt our speech to the way things are, and describe them as undergoing generation, production, destruction and alteration. In fact, they say, speech which suggests stability is easily refuted. And this is how we should talk, not just where the constituents of things are concerned, but also about conglomerations of many constituents, such as the conglomerates which are [c] called 'a man', 'a stone', and each creature and entity of any type.³

Well, Theaetetus, do these ideas please you? Would they make a satisfying meal for you?

THEAETETUS: I don't know, Socrates. In fact, I can't even tell whether you're voicing your own opinions or just trying me out.

SOCRATES: You are not bearing in mind, my friend, that *I* have no knowledge; I cannot claim any such ideas as my own – no, I am barren as far as they are concerned. But I am acting as your midwife, and that is why I am chanting and serving up morsels of wisdom for you to taste. This will go on [**d**] until I have played my part in bringing your very own notion out into the world.¹ Once that stage is over, I will examine the idea to see whether it turns out to be viable or still-born. So don't be downhearted and don't let your strength desert you; be a good, courageous fellow, and tell me whatever occurs to you in relation to my questions.

THEAETETUS: Ask away, then.

SOCRATES: Once again, try to tell me if you're happy with the idea that nothing *is*, but that things are continually *becoming* good, fine and all the things we went through a short while ago.²

THEAETETUS: Well, on hearing your account of this view, *I* think it is remarkably reasonable and ought to be accepted just as you have expounded it.

SOCRATES: All right, but the account isn't complete yet. [**e**] We still have to cover dreams and illness (especially mental illness) and all the states which are said to involve mishearing or mis-seeing or mis-perception generally. As you are no doubt aware, the consensus is that the theory we have just gone through is disproved by all these instances, because [**158a**] they surely involve false perceptions; it is by no means the case that what appears to each individual is true – in fact, it is claimed, quite the opposite is the case: *none* of these appearances is true.¹

THEAETETUS: You're quite right, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well then, my boy, how could one defend the thesis that perception is knowledge and that what appears to an individual also is for that person?

THEAETETUS: I hesitate to admit that I have nothing to say, Socrates, because your criticism of me on that score is [**b**] still fresh.² But I really can't argue that insanity and dreams do not involve false beliefs, when madmen imagine that they are gods, and dreamers that they have wings and are flying in their sleep.

SOCRATES: Well, there *is* an argument you're overlooking which is relevant, particularly to sleeping and waking.

THEAETETUS: Which one?

SOCRATES: The one which is implicit in the question, which I imagine you've often heard, what evidence could be brought if we were asked at this very moment whether we are asleep and are dreaming all our thoughts, or whether we [**c**] are awake and talking to each other in a conscious state.

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates, it is difficult to know what might constitute evidence. I mean, the two states correspond as if exact counterparts. And it's not just that the discussion we've been having could equally well have been an illusion in a dream; when one has the experience of dreaming that one is describing a dream, the similarity between the two states is extraordinary.

SOCRATES: So you see that it is not difficult to find an argument, when even the question whether one is awake or asleep is controversial. And we have not yet mentioned the [**d**] fact that the time we spend asleep is equal to the time we spend awake, and in each state our

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