

Theaetetus

Plato

February 14 - 21, 2006

As far as dialogues go, this is a very simple one in structure. Only three people are involved. Socrates of course, his friend Theodorus and the young student Theaetetus¹ Hence there are no parentheses within parentheses, so common in many of Platons dialogues, the action and speech is direct, not relayed third or fourth hand. In practice it does not make too much difference, yet the simplicity is refreshing.

This is a dialogue about 'knowledge'. Not about what is, but what constitutes knowledge. In modern terminology, not ontology but epistemology. The dialogues work on two levels. First there is the the direct level, where the reader is expected to pay attention to what is explicitly being said, secondly there is the indirect level, when the reader is expected to read between the lines, when ostensibly stupid things are said in order to bring out irony, or to suggest a subtle point. Philosophy, like all ambitious reasoning, is self-referential, thus liable to run into contradictions if everything is made explicit.

Socrates famously claimed that the source of his wisdom was that he knew nothing, and, to the point, was very well aware of this fact. He likens his task to that of a midwife, to assist in the birth of new ideas and insight, but not to germinate nor to gestate. Thus what is supposed to be brought forward in a dialogue with Socrates is only what is intrinsic to the interlocur. Socrates himself does not bring anything substantial, his purpose is simply to steer thinking away from false and fruitless paths, to constantly confront the thinker of what he is really thinking, and to make him retrace his steps, even to start from scratch again, whenever things run into difficulties. On the other hand he claims that while a mid-wife is not expected to give birth herself, she is expected to have done so in her past, otherwise what would be the source of her authority? Thus one may expect, although this is one of the things that is never said explicitly, that Socrates in the past was used to bring about the birth of his own ideas.

The basic question is 'what is knowledge'. A straight answer is required, not simply to give examples of it, that would be cheating, and besides in the end not very instructive, but to go to the quick of the matter. Theaetetus suggests perception. After all this is the way we gain acquaintance with the outside world. But who owns those perceptions? If I say that the thing is cold, and you say it is hot; does it mean that it is both hot and cold. Hot for you, but cold for me? After all is not the individual perception the ultimate authority²? So should we follow the claims of Protagoras, that Man is the measure of everything? The late Protagoras appears as an opponent throughout the earlier parts of the dialogue, and who has to be questioned. Unfortunately he is dead and cannot speak

¹ In the initial pages Euclid appears, but of course not the same Euclid as we all know, and a certain Terpsion, to set the stage in true 'Platonic' manner.

² This certainly seems to be true as to the nature of the qualia of consciousness. The ultimate authority must be the sole owners of them.

up for himself, thus has to be posthumously represented by Socrates himself, when his old friend Theodorus does not seem to be equal to the task. Socrates makes at first vulgar fun of Protagoras. Why men, why not pig? More seriously though, if Protagoras truly believes that one man's opinion is as good as another's, why does he make people pay him to hear his advice, when they would as well be served by listening to their own? The argument against Protagoras is strikingly similar to the modern arguments against the post-Modernists. It is remarkable, how little the world has really changed. The analogy between the ancient sophists and modern ones has been even more clearly elucidated in other dialogues of Socrates, when he accuses them of being misologists, so addicted to arguing both sides of a question, that they have forgotten the pursuit of truth for their own vanity of wanting to appear clever. The trap into which sophists fall is not to appreciate orders of statements and thus to confuse them all. It is fine to claim certain truths, but whenever you expound on something you make some tacit assumptions, and have to make a distinction between your discourse and your meta-discourse. Your discourse may all be formal and extensive, but it can never be inclusive. Formality may not extend to the meta-discourse, that by necessity is charged with meaning. Thus the need to leave certain things unsaid, and the possibility of the spectacle of the earnest (or cynical) philosopher claiming as an unassailable truth the categorical non-existence of such. As to modern logic, those pitfalls were not truly elucidated until the turn of the last century, and as far as the general public goes, there has been no progress since antiquity.

In this dialogue Socrates makes some digression on lawyers. Lawyers, along with sophists, are the professional men of argument, at least in the sense of charging for their services. There is an important distinction between the philosopher and the lawyer. The lawyer has to perform within formal confines. He is not allowed to digress from his topic, and he has only a limited time at his disposal. His purpose is not so much as to arrive at the disinterested truth, as much as to serve some client and to persuade a jury. The philosopher though, is encouraged to digress. If the pursuit turns out to be too hard, it can safely be left for the time being, while something of greater comfort is taken up instead. Philosophy is an activity of the idle, meaning those exempt from the pressing contingencies of everyday life. In this it reminds the mathematicians of his own freedom of following his interests, giving up on a problem when it turns out to be too intractable, and instead indulge in more congenial digressions. And of course this is nicely illustrated throughout the dialogue by its many asides and the following of leads, only to pick up the thread later.

And the main thread, that of knowledge, is returned to over and over again. Once some kind of conclusion has been reached, and Theaetetus gives his wholehearted approval, Socrates is there again, flouting his famous denseness, finding some contradiction. Knowledge as simple perception has to be abandoned, as Theaetetus realises that the mind itself can perceive of things without the mediation of the senses. And here we enter the exalted realm, that so electrified the Greeks and whose engagement with catapulted them into our almost contemporaries, namely the realm of abstract thought, trying to gain access to what lies beyond the confusing, multifarious world of the senses. Two opposing philosophers of the pre-Socratic era are Heraclites and Parmenides. The former famous for the constant flux, and in the mind of Plato, somehow conflated with the teachings of Protagoras and his

emphasis on the provisional; the second noted for the opposite, that change is impossible, as something can never come out of nothing, nor nothing can be the result of something. Taken literally, the teachings of Parmenides are of course nonsense, yet in spite of that, or for that very reason, they have a great poetic attraction, apparent to me when I first came across them as a teenager. Parmenides teaches the unity behind apparent diversity, and as such makes the case of the quintessential intellectual approach to philosophy, something I must have vaguely sensed from the start. Thus Parmenides has since then been a kind of philosophical hero to me, and as far as heroes go, a rather personal one, as there never was any iconic status, unlike that of say Shakespeare or Einstein, attached to his name. It is thus gratifying for me to learn of the praise bestowed upon him by Socrates, as that praise becomes something personal, whose appreciation I can share with the great man, even as he appears more or less fictionalized in the writings of Plato.

At the end of the dialogue Socrates engages in a rather technical analysis, (and it is hard to avoid the suspicion that this technical discussion into many different cases is nothing but a parody on philosophical pedantry perpetuated by Plato), as how the possibility of false beliefs can arise. The mind is likened with a cube of wax on which impressions are imprinted. For some people the wax is soft. Such people easily learn, but have a harder time retaining as the wax tends to go soft and disfigure; for others the wax is hard, and impressions are but made with great difficulty. Such people have a hard time learning, but what they once have learnt is remembered for life. With this metaphor, there is bound to be confusion as to the proper retrieval of imprints, some imprints made incompletely, others interfering with previously made. In such a situation the forming of false beliefs may not be so farfetched. As usual when the ancients get into technical explanations, they reveal the primitivity of their empirical grasp, and what they offer invariably falls very short of what we nowadays can supply; but when they stick to their poetic metaphors, they can still startle the modern reader. Socrates likens knowledge to birds caught in the forest and brought into an enclosure. Knowledge is there to be grasped, but once grasped it cannot be constantly retained in the focus. Thus there is interesting point as to the difference between a bird in the bush and one in the hand, as to what it means to possess knowledge³. Knowledge is the combination of true belief and a rational account of it. Thus in other words, you do not know of a fact, if you just hold it, you must also understand it. This leads into a digression of what constitutes a rational account. Is it equivalent to knowing all the parts of which it is made of? In other words is a complex entity nothing but the sum of its parts, or does it transcend its constituents, in the same way a name or a word is more than the letters which make it up. Or does it? In this discussion Socrates touches upon some very modern concerns. It is also interesting that he touches upon the smallest parts of which matter is supposed to be made. Of such things we cannot say anything, he argues, as any qualification or any attribution of property would violate their absolutely irreducible status.

As in most dialogues there is no conclusion, at least not an explicitly stated one. Hypothesis are formulated, contemplated, elevated, and then unceremoniously let go, because few of the births that are extricated are not viable. In the end, even the promising lead of knowledge being a configuration of true belief and a rational account for it, is tossed on

³ In modern terms we would talk about quick retrievals

the garbage heap, having met with a fatal inherent contradiction.

February 22, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se