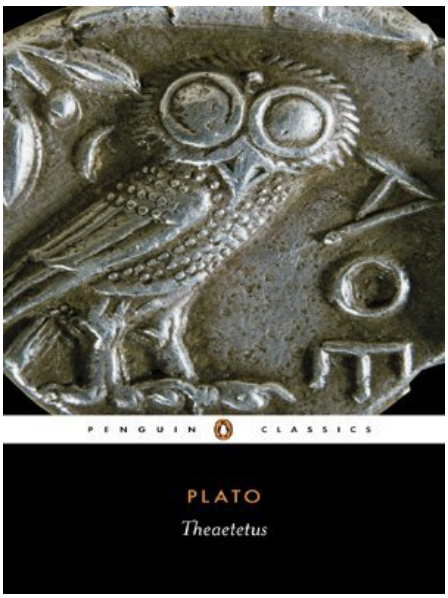

Theaetetus

Plato , Robin Waterfield (Translator)

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Set immediately prior to the trial and execution of Socrates in 399 BC, Theaetetus shows the great philosopher considering the nature of knowledge itself, in a debate with the geometrician Theodorus and his young follower Theaetetus. Their dialogue covers many questions, such as: is knowledge purely subjective, composed of the ever-changing flow of impressions we receive from the outside world? Is it better thought of as 'true belief'? Or is it, as many modern philosophers argue, 'justified true belief', in which the belief is supported by argument or evidence? With skill and eloquence, Socrates guides the debate, drawing out the implications of these theories and subjecting them to merciless and mesmerising criticism. One of the founding works of epistemology, this profound discussion of the problem of knowledge continues to intrigue and inspire.

Theaetetus Details

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From Reader Review Theaetetus for online ebook

Tim says

Knowing that Theaetetus is one dialogue in a trilogy with Sophist and Statesman following it, and with Parmenides prior and linked to the trilogy, and having struggled through the almost impenetrable Parmenides, I was apprehensive about Theaetetus but then pleasantly surprised when I read it. After Parmenides, Theaetetus seems like a hybrid of Plato’s early, middle and late periods (assuming this division). It’s a bit more genuine dialogue as opposed to monologue, it has more humor and irony (including several thinly veiled and cutting digs at Protagoras, similar treatment of the Heracliteans, and the familiar but always enjoyable abuse of lawyers, orators and Sophists), and has more of the literary artistry of the early and middle works, as well as something more like their topical breadth (and pleasant digressions). Also the metaphors, e.g. of the wax and the aviary, and it touches more on myth (though other late works, e.g. Timaeus and Laws, still deal with myth, sometimes extensively). But then it has the proto-formal logic, more sustained and elaborated arguments, and concerns for precision in use of terms and investigation into language that are characteristically late period. It also doesn’t mention the Theory of Forms, possibly departing from it at least somewhat, and it pretty clearly seems to depart from the earlier conception of learning as recollection of what’s already in the soul.

The primary question is, What is knowledge? and as so often in Plato it ends up inconclusively (“aporia” to ancient Greeks and modern scholars). Of course much is considered, clarified, and much rejected along the way – presumably valuable steps toward a legitimate answer if one’s possible. Plato, in stark contrast to Aristotle, rarely provides a clear and unambiguous doctrine for acceptance or rejection; whether his own beliefs were as qualified and provisional as the dialogues appear to suggest we’ll never know. But he does seem to have believed pretty firmly that a concept given to a mind rather than discovered by it isn’t of much value, either in itself or perhaps more importantly as a way of developing understanding (i.e. of doing philosophy).

This Hackett edition is a nice translation (I’d found Jowett’s unsatisfactory and Cornford’s good, but the constant interruptions of the running commentary unworkable for a first read). It has a good, brief introduction, a useful outline, and few but helpful footnotes. Hackett’s Plato is pretty reliably high quality (Penguin’s is usually good too, and R. E. Allen has been working for years on commentaries and translations of the dialogues which are excellent: he’s done Parmenides; I hope to see Theaetetus and Sophist by him some day. I haven’t used the couple recent single volume modern translation compilations so I can’t comment on them, but I’d also like to get familiar with those). Well, on to Sophist ….

Jeff says

Unlike some of the other dialogues this one doesn't feel like a verbal sparring match. One gets the feeling that the speakers are generally attempting to discover what they claim to be attempting to discover rather than simply win an argument. The dialogue is basically an inspection of the question "what is knowledge," the question of epistemology. We'll worth the read.

Thomas says

Theaetetus is an elaboration of the basic problem presented in Meno: how can we know something if we don't already know what that thing is? Doesn't something have to precede knowledge to tell us that what we "know" is true? The question that Theaetetus presents is similar to the "zetetic paradox" presented in Meno, but it is more specific and more compounded. Rather than the general question of how we know anything, it asks how do we know knowledge itself. After successfully dethroning relativity and the Protagorean answer that knowledge is perception and the truth of perception is relative, Socrates succeeds only in delivering a "wind egg" of the pregnant Theaetetus. We do not know what knowledge is, only what it is not. But what is it not turns out to be something after all.

Joe Sachs's translation is next best in accuracy to Benardete's, but it has the advantage of being readable. Sachs is very concerned with the Greek term *dunamis* in this dialogue and ends up translating "potency" and "power" where "ability" and "able" might be more natural alternatives, but aside from that the translation flows pretty well. The introduction is good and the footnotes are excellent, as usual.

Aaron says

I bought this many years ago, but was finally motivated to read it because of Jo Walton's The Just City. It's often quite difficult, and Robin Waterfield's commentary is far easier to understand than the Theaetetus itself. Still, this is a fascinating book and it's revived my interest in philosophy.

Karl Hallbjörnsson says

the dialogues are remarkable not for their philosophical content but for the form of the discourse itself

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Yann says

Le Théétète n'est pas aussi aussi ardu que Parménide, mais il reste assez exigeant, et il faut rester concentrer pour suivre Socrate dans toutes ses subtilités. Tous les dialogues de Platon ne sont pas faciles d’accès. A son habitude, Socrate perturbe les certitudes de ses amis en les poussant à analyser les conséquences de leurs opinions. On est payé de la perte de ses illusions par celles de ses préjugés.

Matthieu says

Next to *Parmenides*, this is probably the most rigourous/'difficult' Platonic dialogue. It might also be the most frustrating, mainly due to the fact that the intellectual bandying-about does not yield any clear, definitive conclusion. The dialogue asks: *What is knowledge?, Is knowledge perception?* (T.'s response), and, *Can one have knowledge of knowledge*? In a forest of ideas and assertions (along with some brilliant metaphors on the part of Socrates (midwifery)), no answer is to be found.

This is certainly not the ideal entry point into all things Plato; for the newcomer, I'd recommend *Meno* or *Gorgias* as they contain similar themes, but aren't quite so abstract and demanding. However, for one familiar with the ideas contained therein, the denseness is strangely purifying.

Richard Newton says

This is a great translation of one of Plato's most complex and interesting books. This is never going to be the easiest of reads, but the translator makes a great attempt to make it accessible, and bar one or two areas which require really close attention this is a fairly straightforward read. He has an extensive essay at the end of the book, which is helpful, but not perfect.

Trevor says

This is much harder work than your average Socratic Dialogue by Plato. I found I really had to concentrate on some of the twists in the argument and have to say that I found some of the footnotes quite distracting in this edition. As someone who does not read Ancient Greek – part of the reason I'm reading Plato in translation – it is a little hard to know why my reading needs to be interrupted to be told the translator is reading some word in Ancient Greek as it is in the manuscript.

I got half way through the essay in the back of this and have now have given up. It is basically working its way through the text and like I said, I struggled over the text enough to not feel like I'm really getting much extra out of the essay to justify reading on.

This is perhaps one of the first works in the history of Western Philosophy on Epistemology – or the Theory of Knowledge. It is an explanation and critique of both Heraclitus (all is flux – you can't step in the same river twice) and mostly Protagoras (Man is the measure of all things). I can't remember now if in one of the dialogues in *The Trial and Death of Socrates* we learn there that Socrates considered himself a mid-wife or if this is just one of those things you get taught in introductory philosophy. Either way, there is a long discussion of what Socrates saw as his role in helping – particularly young men come to grips with philosophical ideas. This is a late dialogue of Plato's and as such is not at all what you might expect of Plato from any intro course you might have done. The world of forms has no place here. In fact, there were repeatedly times while reading this when I expected Plato to just say, "Knowledge is a kind of recollection of the forms we knew before birth". That he doesn't say anything remotely like this in this dialogue is fascinating in itself.

What is even more fascinating is that there is no conclusion to what knowledge is in this dialogue. There are some very tentative steps taken towards the idea that knowledge is the production of rational statements – but even this is discarded.

Other alternatives are that knowledge is perception or memory.

What is interesting is that whenever we are truly stuck – we turn to metaphors. In this memory is first described as a kind of wax in which memories are imprinted. Then memories are compared to a collection of birds that one keeps in an aviary. This is my favourite as it is used to explain why we might mistakenly say that seven plus six equals twelve – that is, we have grabbed at and caught the wrong bird in the aviary of our mind. Lovely image.

Like I said, this dialogue was hard work and not the place to start if you haven't read any Plato before. However, it is quite a remarkable text. I'm fascinated by the fact that it is told long after Socrates is dead. It is told when the young man that Socrates was engaging in this dialogue with is lying dying years later. It is

told by two men who are both mathematicians. Mathematics was the most ‘developed’ science of the day and the one that is still closest to ‘the truth’. If anyone should know what ‘truth’ is then surely a mathematician is our best bet.

This doesn’t prove to be the case here. The question what is knowledge remains quite intractable. But what is gobsmackingly interesting here is the fact that we are so far removed from the date that the dialogue was supposed to have occurred and are being told this story through many whispers. This is a play written by Plato from a reading by a Slave of a text written by a friend of Socrates’s just before Socrates died. And then Plato starts asking what is true knowledge and how does memory impact on the reliability of knowledge and it is quite clear someone (perhaps someone nicknamed Plato – or Broad in English due, some speculate, because he had a fat head) is having a rather subtle go at us all.

Like I said, rather hard work – but then epistemology hasn’t gotten too much easier with the aeons.

Maria says

If you're still looking for answers in philosophy, boy are you barking at the wrong tree.

Bruce says

Plato’s *Theaetetus* is one of his most important dialogues, a work that is fundamental to the field of epistomology or the study of how we know. In it Socrates discusses the subject of knowledge with the boy Theaetetus and his teacher of mathematics, Theodorus. In this complex work Plato explores not only his primary focus but touches upon a host of additional topics, drawing on the ideas of previous and contemporary philosophers. This makes the work often seem highly digressive but nonetheless provocative and entertaining.

Asserting his role as midwife to the ideas of others rather than a source of knowledge himself, in this dialogue Socrates plays the role that is familiar to most readers. Basically (and to oversimplify), the discussion explores three possible meanings of knowledge: knowledge as perception; knowledge as judgment (both true and false, if this latter exists at all); and knowledge as “judgment with an account.” None proves to be satisfactory, and the dialogue ends inconclusively.

I find a periodic return to the reading of Plato’s dialogues challenging, stimulating, and refreshing, an opportunity to stretch and hone my mental capacities and to think more deeply on commonly held but frequently unexamined or poorly thought-out assumptions that I have been taught or into which I have uncritically drifted. The dialogues are valuable less to convey specific information than to illustrate one important way of thinking through language and concepts and to encourage a careful examination of “truths” that are no more than hazy intuitions, prejudices, or communal biases. Plato’s writing is not without wit, and his writing, while always trenchant and insightful, is less dense than often assumed. If it is read with patience and close attention it can provide the thoughtful reader with stimulating entertainment and tools for rational inquiry.

Melika Khoshnezhad says

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Zadignose says

Hello philosophy. You've just convinced me that I don't know what knowledge is.

Okay, not true, actually, you've pushed me in the direction I was already inclined to go, and my concept of knowledge is pretty much what it already had been.

Thus I am guilty once again of seeking out philosophy based on the presumption that it will confirm me in what I think I already know, rather than seeking to be corrected.

I'll think some more, though.

Roy Lotz says

The more I read Plato, the more I wonder how much I’m missing through translation. Of course, something is always lost when a work is taken out of its native tongue. But the arguments in Plato’s dialogues often hinge on specific verbal formulas and definitions, and so I imagine the problem of translation is especially acute in this case. But I’m not about to learn Ancient Greek any time soon.

This is by far the most conceptually hairy dialogue of Plato I’ve so far read. Some sections are damn near impenetrable; others are just as dry and confusing as Kant. The problem is one that has dogged the greatest minds in Western history: what is knowledge? Plato attacks this Gordian knot from all directions, enlisting pedantic distinctions and striking metaphors in his struggle. All to no avail. He is repulsed, and wanders off with a shrug of the shoulders.

Reading Plato’s dialogues is often a maddening experience. For an engaged reader, being an eavesdropper to these conversations can be like watching Kid’s Jeopardy. Everyone seems to be drawing a blank on simple questions. At times, Socrates is as strict as a punctilious English teacher with his definitions; at other times, Socrates will make hasty generalizations and subsume a variety of things under one heading. In general, a lot of faith is put into analogies—analogies that frequently seem odd and contrived.

But this frustration is valuable. The reader will feel compelled to draft their own conclusions to the problems, and will become philosophers merely to assuage their frustration. It’s ingenious, really. Plato must have been a clever parent. He was a master of reverse psychology.

Riku Sayuj says

Epistemological Idiots

Here Plato engages with the concept of ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ as in many other dialogues, but *Theaetetus* is often hailed as ‘Plato’s most sustained study of epistemology,’ and is a deep investigation into the question ‘*What is knowledge?*’ As such, it is the founding document of what has come to be known as ‘epistemology’, as one of the most important branches of philosophy and went on to influence Aristotle, the Stoics and the modern geography of the field.

In comparison with most Platonic Dialogues, *Theaetetus* is a complex and difficult work of abstract philosophical theory and attempting to summarize would only serve to make it even more so. The difficult topic of epistemology and its many twists and turns are best left to Socrates’ expert hands. Here I will only try to outline my understanding of how this dialogue fits into Plato’s overall objectives.

Socrates’ abiding passion was the question of *practical conduct*, and to be able to have any workable theory on conduct and the ‘good life’, it is not acceptable that truth is relative — if there is no stable norm, no abiding object of knowledge, Socrates (and thus Plato’s) basic objective collapses. This is why it was essential to be convinced that ethical conduct must be founded on knowledge, and that that knowledge must be knowledge of eternal values which are not subject to the shifting and changing impressions of sense or of subjective opinion, but are the same for all men and for all peoples and all ages, eternal.

This conviction that there can be knowledge in the sense of objective and universally valid knowledge is what animates the spirit of *Theaetetus* — to demonstrate this fact theoretically, and to probe deeply into the problems of knowledge, asking what knowledge *is* and *of what*.

Keeping with this objective, in the *Theaetetus* Plato's first object is the refutation of false theories. Accordingly he sets himself the task of challenging the theory of Protagoras that *knowledge is perception*, that what appears to an individual to be true is true for that individual. His method is to elicit dialectically a clear statement of the *theory of knowledge* implied by the the epistemology of Protagoras, to exhibit its consequences and to show that the conception of "knowledge" thus attained does not fulfill the requirements of true knowledge at all, since knowledge must be, Plato assumes, (i) *infallible*, and (ii) *of what is*.

Sense-perception is knowledge fails spectacularly (and quite satisfactorily for Plato) in this examination as it is neither the one nor the other. Sense-perception is not, therefore, worthy of the name of knowledge. It should be noted how much Plato is influenced by the conviction that sense-objects are not proper objects of knowledge and cannot be so, since knowledge is of what is, of the stable and abiding, whereas objects of sense cannot really be said to *be* but only to *become*.

This first of Theaetetus’ (Theaetetus was a famous mathematician, Plato’s associate for many years in the Academy) three successive definitions of knowledge — that knowledge is simply ‘perception’ — is not finally ‘brought to birth’ until Socrates has linked it to Protagoras’ famous ‘*man is the measure*’ doctrine of relativistic truth, and also to the theory that ‘*all is motion and change*’ that Socrates finds most Greek thinkers of the past had accepted, and until he has fitted it out with an elaborate and ingenious theory of perception and how it works. He then examines separately the truth of these linked doctrines and, in finally rejecting Theaetetus’ idea as unsound, he advances his own positive analysis of perception and its role in knowledge:

Thus Socrates proceeds to the next two definitions of knowledge — that ‘Knowledge is simply "True Judgment”’ and that ‘Knowledge is True Judgment plus an "Account" of it.’ After systematic exploration of these ideas (with a few amusing digressions) and rejecting them as unsound Socrates paves the way toward an acceptable theory of Forms, to be explored further in dialogues such as *Parmenides* and *The Republic* .

Epistemological Idiots? Not Quite.

Once we reject the three proposals and reach the aporetic conclusion of the dialogue, our first impulse might be, as with all epistemological explorations, to conclude that Socrates has proved that it is impossible to define ‘what is knowledge’ and hence, by extension, the impossibility of knowledge itself. I almost laughed with triumph at this nihilistic ending until I was put in my place by reading commentaries on the subject. For a quick flavor:

> SOCRATES: And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this inquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don’t know. This is all my art can achieve — nothing more.

Instead, a more nuanced reading of *Theaetetus’* conclusion by situating it among the Platonic corpus will tell us that the conclusion to be drawn is not that no knowledge is attainable through definition, but rather that the individual, sensible object is indefinable and is not really the proper object of knowledge at all. The object of true knowledge must be stable and abiding, fixed, capable of being grasped in clear and scientific definition, which is of the universal, as Socrates saw. In the *Theaetetus* he shows that neither sense-perception nor true belief are possessed of both these requirements; neither, then, can be equated with true knowledge.

This is the real conclusion of the dialogue, namely, that true knowledge of sensible objects is unattainable, and, by implication, that true knowledge must be knowledge of the universal and abiding, which must be, as we have said, *(i) infallible, (ii) of what is.*

The key to understanding *Theaetetus* is to accept that Plato has assumed from the outset that knowledge is attainable, and that knowledge must be *(i) infallible* and *(ii) of the real*. True knowledge must possess both these characteristics, and any state of mind that cannot vindicate its claim to both these characteristics cannot be true knowledge. It follows, then, that it is the universal and not the particular that fulfills the requirements for being an object of knowledge. Knowledge of the highest universal (beauty, goodness, justice, courage, etc.) will be the highest kind of knowledge, while "knowledge" of the particular will be the lowest kind of "knowledge." This connects us directly to the famous line analogy of The Republic and paves the way for The Theory of Forms.

Theaetetus is a valuable but difficult dialogue to be familiar with since Plato explores epistemology without letting on his intentions and this might prove difficult to readers who treat this dialogue as standing by itself. Instead it needs to be treated as part of a continuum, that started with *Parmenides* and is carried forward in *The Sophist* and *The Statesman* (the next two parts of the ‘trilogy’) and on to *The Republic*, destined to trouble Plato for the rest of his career, never being resolved satisfactorily enough.