The Midwife of Platonism

Text and Subtext in Plato's *Theaetetus*

DAVID SEDLEY

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Preface

My aim in this book is neither to replace, nor to discount, the vast spectrum of philosophical illumination that recent decades have brought to the *Theaetetus,* but to provide a corrective historical lens through which to read the dialogue. It is my belief, nevertheless, that this lens brings into focus philosophically important aspects of the dialogue which previous approaches have failed to discern, including, above all, Plato's actual reasons for writing it.

I first sketch, and then develop in detail, a strategy for clearing up the main interpretative mysteries that have dogged the *Theaetetus.* If the outcome of this were accepted, it would free us to return to the dialogue's philosophical merits with new historical insight, and unencumbered by numerous of the often diversionary exegetical controversies. The book is written in the hope of modifying an approach to the *Theaetetus* inspired in particular by the work of such Oxford scholars as Richard Robinson and G. E. L. Owen in the 1950s, which has remained largely dominant, especially in English-language studies of Plato, for more than three decades. I mean the strategy of treating the *Theaetetus* as a critical or non-doctrinal dialogue, written by Plato if not in abandonment, then at any rate in studied disregard, of his middle-period metaphysics.

Although approaches—largely analytic—of this general kind have produced what is undoubtedly the best philosophical work on the dialogue's interpretation, I argue that they deliver no more than half the truth. Beneath the critical dialectic conducted by the speaker Socrates there lies a Platonic doctrinal agenda, and this can be appreciated as soon as we abandon the almost ubiquitous practice of treating author and speaker as de facto interchangeable. Once they are separated, I maintain, the following message emerges: Socrates—that is, the semi-historical Socrates portrayed in Plato's early dialogues—although not yet a Platonist, was the *midwife of Platonism.* Plato is emphasizing the continuity of his own lifetime's work. He is evaluating the meaning of his Socratic legacy, showing how it paved the way to his current metaphysics, and using it to point forward to his later projects.

Whether my interpretative strategy is judged to work will depend on the reader's cumulative evaluation of the book's results, rather than on any one argument contained in it. I would nevertheless like to draw particular attention to §§3–7 of Chapter 3, which I believe jointly constitute an exceptionally good illustration of the case for such a reading. These are centred on the Digression and its immediate aftermath. Relating this eloquent excursus to the dialogue's main argument has always proved a thorny problem for interpreters, a number of whom have preferred to pass it over in virtual silence. I believe that in this part of the dialogue the proposed split-level interpretative strategy is strikingly more successful than its competitors in illuminating the dialogue's unity and coherence. But I must await the verdict of my readers on this, as on much else.

My hope is to engage, in principle, the attention of *any* reader with a prior interest in Plato. What is on offer, if I am right in my main proposal, is the prospect not just of shedding new light on one philosophical masterpiece, but also of recovering from it what is in effect Plato's own commentary on the Socrates of his early dialogues.

My policy has been to make my interpretation accessible to Greekless readers, by both transliterating and translating any Greek that cannot be avoided in the main text, and by confining scholarly points about Greek to the footnotes. All the translations of Plato's text are my own. I have sought so far as possible to retain the sentence structure of the original, to translate key terms consistently, and to stick as close to the Greek as the standards of idiomatic English permit. Naturally I hope that readers will consult, alongside my book, a complete text or translation of the *Theaetetus*. Fortunately two outstanding English translations are already in widespread use—those of Jane Levett (revised by Myles Burnyeat) and John McDowell. Of these, the latter is the one that sticks closer to actual run of Plato's text, and in writing this book I have acquired an enhanced respect for its accuracy, consistency, and sensitivity to detail.

Parts of my argument have benefited from the critical comments of a variety of audiences: at a joint session of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association in Birmingham, the University of Macerata, the University of Florence, Ohio State University, McGill University, the University of California at Santa Barbara, Pomona College, the University of Leeds, the Central European University, Budapest,

Eötvos Lorand University, Budapest, the University of Oslo, a meeting of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy held at Dartmouth College, and, finally, my home institution, the University of Cambridge. My first attempt to formulate the main argument at length was for the Lectura Platonis series of lectures which I gave at the University of Macerata in March 1997. Especial thanks are due to my genial host Maurizio Migliori, and to his dialectically able team of students. An Italian version of the book will be appearing in the Lecturae Platonis series which he edits.

I have also learnt much over the years from discussing the *Theaetetus* with Cambridge students, both undergraduate and graduate, even though the interpretation of it that I am proposing in this book is a relatively recent arrival in my own armoury. Its origin lies largely in my work on the ancient commentary tradition on the *Theaetetus,* which helped persuade me that the lean analytic style of reading I first learnt from John McDowell's invaluable commentary was by itself inadequate to do the dialogue justice. Although I cannot run through a catalogue of thanks for all who helped and supported me in that earlier project, I must make special mention of Fernanda Decleva Caizzi and Guido Bastianini, my generous and resourceful collaborators in the early 1990s in editing the large papyrus containing the anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus* (published as Bastianini and Sedley 1995).

Those who have been kind enough to send me comments on drafts of various parts of the present book and their ancestors are Lesley Brown, Myles Burnyeat, Joseph DeFilippo, Pierluigi Donini, Anna Maria Ioppolo, Mary Margaret McCabe, Mark McPherran, and Alice van Harten. Comments on a complete draft were generously supplied by Christopher Bobonich, Nick Denyer, Gail Fine, Tony Long, Stephen Menn, Malcolm Schofield, Robert Wardy, James Warren, and an anonymous reader for Oxford University Press. All of these comments were of tremendous help to me, and some (in particular those of Gail Fine and Stephen Menn) were at a length which clearly represented an enormous investment of time. I thank their authors warmly. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to Raphael Woolf for his probing commentary (resulting in Woolf 2003) on the outline version that I gave at the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy in 2002 (Sedley 2003*c*): he saved me from a number of mistakes, however many others I may have left in. Christopher Gill, who as editor of the web journal *Plato* published a

version of Chapter 4 §1 (Sedley 2003*a*), helped constructively in improving the formulation of my argument. And at Oxford University Press I have benefited from the invaluable support and advice of Peter Momtchiloff and the copy-editing expertise of Laurien Berkeley.

In working on this book, I have been constantly aware of my profound debt to Myles Burnyeat, from whom I have been learning about the *Theaetetus* ever since I attended his inspiring lectures on the dialogue in the 1970s. But I must emphasize that, however much it may owe to him, he shares no guilt or complicity whatsoever as regards the re-reading of the dialogue attempted here.

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1 Opening Moves

1. *Locating the Theaetetus*

There is nothing novel about pointing out that the *Theaetetus* is a problematic dialogue to fit into any overall picture of the Platonic corpus. While no one today is likely to suggest that it belongs to Plato's early 'Socratic' phase,[1] it possesses nearly all the hallmarks of the dialogues which we do normally attribute to that phase. To mention just the most obvious among these, the *Theaetetus* is a dialogue in which a confessedly ignorant Socrates asks for a definition of a problematic item, dialectically examines a series of candidate answers, and at the end admits failure. No other dialogue generally regarded as middle or late does this. Why would Plato, in the period of his philosophical maturity, have reverted to the aporetic dialectic of his early phase?

My question does, of course, presuppose a conventional division of Plato's works. According to this, he starts with an early period in which Socrates is depicted cross-questioning one or more interlocutors, usually either young or sophistic, and undermining the views they proffer, sometimes also defending substantive moral theses of his own, albeit with prominent disclaimers of knowledge. In his middle phase, represented by classic dialogues like the *Phaedo, Republic,* and *Phaedrus,* he develops his metaphysical theory of Forms, along with such accompanying doctrines as recollection,

[1] I am not aware that anyone in the last two centuries—since Schleiermacher, in fact—has considered the *Theaetetus* one of Plato's earliest dialogues. However, even if the proem, commemorating the death of Theaetetus, is thought to tie the dialogue's composition to *c.* 369 BC, there is evidence (Anon., *In Plat. Tht.* 3.28–37; see Bastianini and Sedley (1995, ad loc.) that an alternative, perhaps earlier, proem circulated in antiquity; and some, starting from this evidence, have argued that our version of the *Theaetetus* is a reworking by Plato himself of a significantly earlier dialogue—a view discussed and rejected by Guthrie (1962–81: V 62), but revived by Tarrant (1988: 117–18). In any case, Nails (2002: 274–7) has recently revived the case for an earlier dating of Theaetetus' death, which she places with some plausibility in 391 BC: it would be hard to date the *Theaetetus* itself as early as that.

the soul's immortality, and its complex volitional structure. The *Meno,* which of all his dialogues has the strongest affinities with the *Theaetetus,* is usually thought to straddle the divide between these early and middle phases. (Large stretches of it are widely regarded as undilutedly Socratic, a consensus which in this book I will join by frequently citing passages from the *Meno* as evidence for 'Socratic' ideas.) The late period, represented by such heavyweight texts as the *Sophist, Politicus, Timaeus,* and *Laws,* is much harder to sum up with a single set of characteristics, other than stylistic ones; but it is I think safe at least to say that the figure of Socrates recedes from prominence (with the single exception of the *Philebus*), and that the introduction of new speakers represents Plato's recognition that he has by now partly outgrown his Socratic heritage.

Now is not the occasion to mount a defence of what at present remains the standard division of Plato's corpus. Although there have in recent years been voicings of discontent about it, the ball is still firmly in the court of anyone who wishes to undermine it.[2] Indeed, if the interpretation that I shall offer in this book helps to explain what has previously been mysterious about the *Theaetetus,* that in itself will serve as secondary support for the prevailing view of Plato's development.

The *Theaetetus* itself is the first dialogue in a trilogy whose other two members are the *Sophist* and *Statesman.* No one need doubt that the latter two belong to Plato's late period. The stylistic evidence is quite clear on this. And that fact has sometimes encouraged the impression that the *Theaetetus,* being part of the same trilogy, is itself more closely linked to Plato's late work than to his middle period. Yet the stylometric tests concur in locating it substantially earlier than the *Sophist* and *Statesman,* as part of a group whose

[2] See Annas and Rowe (2002) for a variety of viewpoints on this question. Note in particular there Kahn (2002), as well as Young (1994), for a balanced evaluation of how far stylometry goes in backing the conventional ordering of the dialogues: most important for my purposes is that stylometry really does support the dating of the *Theaetetus* to late in Plato's middle period. It is true that, as Kahn observes, no stylometric test has succeeded in separating the 'Socratic' dialogues from apparently more mature dialogues like the *Symposium* and *Phaedo.* But there was never any reason to expect that conspicuous changes of style should correspond chronologically to major philosophical changes, and if the stylistic phases had proved to map one for one onto all three supposed philosophical phases in this way, that would have been a surprising coincidence.

other members are the *Republic, Phaedrus,* and *Parmenides*— that is, on the usual tripartite division of his work, towards the end of Plato's middle period.

In this book I want to sketch a line of interpretation which fully respects and even exploits that dating of the *Theaetetus* to late in Plato's middle period, even though nothing I will propose actually excludes a later one. It is enough for my purposes to invoke the consensus that the dialogue does not belong to Plato's early period.

In separating an early Socratic phase from one or more subsequent Platonic phases,[3] I make no claim that the dialogues of the former phase necessarily *succeed* in achieving historical authenticity: what matters is that they to a much greater extent showcase, for better or worse (and most of us would say 'better'), Plato's own perspective on the historical figure Socrates, whereas in dialogues like the *Republic* that goal has to a considerable extent given way to Plato's own philosophical agenda. The 'Socrates' to whom I shall mostly be referring in this book is the person whom I more fully call the 'semi-historical' Socrates featured in the early dialogues. He can be called historical to the extent that the dialogues in question are implicitly written as a contribution to the record about the actual philosopher Socrates. I add 'semi-' in order to acknowledge both that Plato's was only one of the available perspectives on the historical Socrates, and that, since Plato was not writing history,[4] he cannot be assumed to be sticking to actual conversations which he knew to have taken place. But I shall assume that Plato did, at least, believe that his broad characterization of Socrates' life, goals, beliefs, and methods was at bottom correct.

As regards the structure of the *Theaetetus,* I shall again follow convention. It has three parts. In part I, down to 187a3, the definition of knowledge as perception is developed and criticized; part II (down to 201c6) then tackles the problems of false judgement, notionally while considering the definition of knowledge as true judgement; and the third and final part turns to the definition of knowledge as 'true judgement plus an account (*logos*)', ending in the declared failure of the entire investigation.

[3] In this I am broadly agreeing with Vlastos (1991) against Kahn (1996).

[4] Cf. Kahn (1996, ch. 1) on the Socratic dialogue as a fundamentally fictional genre.

2. *Some Interpretations*

Among the many lines of interpretation that have been developed over the centuries, a few are particularly important or promising for my purposes.

The first of these was already current in antiquity.[5] Its most eminent modern proponent has been F. M. Cornford.[6] According to this interpretation, the *Theaetetus* does fail in its enterprise, but the failure is a calculated one which makes a positive point. Socrates has entirely neglected the Forms as the proper objects of knowledge, and the empirical approach to knowledge which results from this neglect serves, by its very failure, to highlight the ruinous consequences of attempting epistemology without the backing of a Platonic metaphysics. This interpretation has the merit of linking the *Theaetetus* closely to its dramatic sequel, the *Sophist,* seeing this latter as an exploration of the world of Forms, to fill the yawning gap to which the first dialogue in the trilogy drew attention: while the *Theaetetus* tells us what knowledge is *not* of, the *Sophist* tells us what it *is* of.[7] Nevertheless, according to this interpretation, it is legitimate to recognize already in the *Theaetetus* allusions to the Forms, because the Socrates of that dialogue is a spokesman for Plato, and Plato is himself writing to advocate and defend Platonic metaphysics.

A second interpretation that I want to bear in mind is that developed by Myles Burnyeat. On Burnyeat's view, the *Theaetetus* is a dialectical exercise rather than a doctrinal one. Plato's method is to create a double dialectical confrontation—one within the dialogue, the other between the dialogue and the reader, who is forced by a complex interaction with the text to reflect on the philosophical

[5] Both this interpretation and what I below call the 'maieutic' one are reconstructed in Sedley (1996*a*).

[6] Cornford (1935).

[7] This formulation, one which clearly influenced Cornford (Sedley 1996*a* : 90 n. 23), is found in the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus,* who does not, however, himself fully endorse it (2.32–52; see Bastianini and Sedley 1995: 264–6). Alternatively, with Cherniss (1936), 'The *Theaetetus,* then, is an attempt to prove that the theory of Ideas is a necessary hypothesis for the solution of the problem of epistemology; the constructive doctrine of the *Sophist* demonstrates that it is a sufficient hypothesis' For my part, although I shall go more than halfway towards vindicating this broad line of interpretation, I am not committed to the view that the classical theory of Forms is present in the *Sophist.* It is enough for my purposes that it can be found in the *Timaeus.*

issues which it addresses. All this, according to Burnyeat, is done in a spirit of open-minded inquiry, without at any point presupposing Plato's characteristic middle-period doctrines. Burnyeat develops his interpretation (Reading B) in parallel with a version of the Cornford reading (Reading A), so as to offer us a reasoned choice between the two.[8] Welcome and enlightening though this method is, one of my contentions will be that it is misleading to regard ourselves as committed to an exclusive choice between the two types of reading. They are each, in their own way, correct. For Burnyeat it can hardly be more than a coincidence that throughout part I of the dialogue the materials for the two competing interpretations coexist (since in his view Reading A is systematically untrue to the text). On the view that I shall be advocating, it is no accident at all, but a crucial feature of the dialogue's design.

So far I have mentioned two lines of interpretation which should be familiar to every modern student of the dialogue. But I want now to add a third which, although current in antiquity, seems to have gone virtually unnoticed in the modern discussions.[9] I shall christen this the 'maieutic' interpretation.[10] The dialogue takes the form of an increasingly close approximation to the true definition of knowledge. The first attempt is a dismal failure, the second an improvement, and so on. The final definition, as construed in the closing pages of the dialogue, is so close to the true one that Socrates has to stop there and then. Why must he stop? Because, as the dialogue itself tells us, the correct philosophical method is that of midwifery, where it falls to the interlocutor, and no one else, to give birth to the true doctrine. Once Plato has brought us, the readers, as close as he can to the true definition, short of actually stating it, his work is done. It remains for us, the readers, to give birth, and to see if our own offspring can be successfully reared.[11] Judged in this way, the dialogue's failure is only an apparent one.

8 Burnyeat (1990). To the extent that Reading B denies any reliance on or reference to Platonic metaphysics, it can be compared to the interpretations advanced in Cooper (1967), McDowell (1973), and Bostock (1988), among others.

9 This is not to deny that many other interpreters have likewise thought the *Theaetetus* to deliver, or come close to delivering, the Platonic truth: e.g. Fine (1979*a*); D. Frede (1989); Polansky (1992).

10 This is favoured by the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus*: see Sedley (1996*a*: 101–3).

11 I am grateful to Raphael Woolf for impressing on me the importance of this latter clause.

Finally, I must mention a recent interpretation of the *Theaetetus* by A. A. Long.[12] One aspect of the dialogue which Long properly emphasizes where most others have failed to do so is its Socratic aspect: in one way or another, the *Theaetetus* is Plato's re-evaluation of Socrates.

The interpretation which I shall be sketching shares elements with all four of these approaches. From Cornford and his ancient forerunners I take over the idea that mature Platonism is importantly present in the *Theaetetus*. From Burnyeat I borrow both the systematic coexistence of two readings, and his differentiation of the dialogue's internal dialectic from the external dialectic between text and reader. And to this latter distinction I add the basis of the maieutic interpretation: that the internal and the external dialectic are both, in their own way, applications of philosophical midwifery. With Long, finally, I share the recognition of a sharp distinction between the author, Plato, and his main speaker, a re-created early Socrates.

3. *The Authorial Voice*

Let me say a little more on this last issue, the separation of main speaker from author. One minimalist strategy, which has gained some recent favour, insists that Platonic dialogues are dramas, and that you cannot straightforwardly read off the dramatist's beliefs from the words of one or more characters in a play. Plato, it has been said, maintains a radical distance from the arguments in the dialogue.[13] Some interpreters have even used this device to rescue Plato from subscribing to arguments which they judge unworthy of him, although it is much rarer to find him being similarly absolved of having to believe the good arguments.

In general I favour the more conservative view, the one which nearly all interpreters of Platonic texts since antiquity have reflected in their actual hermeneutic practice, that by and large the main speaker in a dialogue can be assumed to be voicing Plato's own beliefs and arguments.[14] However, that assumption does not

[12] Long (1998).

[13] M. Frede (1992), Nails (1995), Wardy (1996: 52–6), Cooper (1997, pp. xviii–xxv), Blondell (2002: 18–21), and the majority of the authors in Press (2000) develop variously nuanced versions of this perspective.

[14] The view is very well articulated by Kraut (1992: 25–30).

preclude the occasional presence of a contrived gap between author and speaker, in cases where the gap may actually serve a purpose. The default assumption, in other words, remains that of author–speaker identity, but this identity can be set aside in cases where good reasons emerge for separating the two.

My contention is that the *Theaetetus* is one such case, and that by pursuing the reading strategy that I propose in this book we can actually learn in some detail what gains are on offer for those who start out with an open mind on the relation of author to main speaker. The upshot is not, for example, Plato's deliverance from having to endorse all the arguments he formulates. Rather, what we will find is a kind of *autobiographical self-commentary* on Plato's part. For this very reason, my proposal will depend on the further assumption that we do know, from other dialogues, more or less what Plato's own views are. If author and speaker were *always* taken to be philosophically independent of each other, no such interpretation could ever get off the ground. But in the case of the *Theaetetus* itself I shall maintain that such a separation is indispensable to a proper understanding. The literature on this dialogue abounds with formulae like 'Plato argues that…'. If I am right, these locutions are never justified, and cannot fail to mislead.

The prima facie motive for putting some distance between the authorial voice of the *Theaetetus* and the letter of the text should be obvious enough, given the likely chronology. The author is a Plato who has by this date developed a major metaphysical doctrine of obvious relevance to some of the dialogue's central concerns; yet his speaker, Socrates, is to all appearances almost entirely innocent of that Platonic metaphysics. It is worth seeking some explanation for this, and preferably one which falls short of the scarcely credible hypothesis that Plato has abandoned his entire metaphysics of transcendence and thrown everything back into the melting pot. Notoriously, the price for that hypothesis is the near-impossible feat of redating the *Timaeus* earlier than the *Theaetetus,* which was famously attempted by G. E. L. Owen, but has found little favour since.[15] If we accept the overwhelming likelihood that whereas the *Republic* pre-dates the *Theaetetus* the *Timaeus* post-dates it, it can hardly be irrelevant to the reading of our dialogue that in both those

[15] Owen (1953). This seminal article, despite ultimately winning few backers for the actual redating (although Bostock 1988 is one), has been a major influence on attempts to undo Cornford's Platonizing interpretation of the *Theaetetus.*

flanking works Plato appears committed to an epistemology based on the metaphysical distinction between two worlds: a world of 'becoming', which is the object of mere 'opinion' (*doxa*), and a separated world of 'being', which alone is the object of 'knowledge' (*epistēmē*). This entire family of concepts is so pivotal to the argument of the *Theaetetus* that it would be astonishing if Platonic metaphysics had no bearing on its interpretation.

A much more promising alternative is therefore to take the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* to represent, not Plato's present philosophical persona, but a reversion to the historical or semi-historical Socrates brought to life in Plato's early dialogues.

4. *The Midwife of Platonism*

And that brings me to my own interpretative proposal. The *Theaetetus* does indeed contain a Platonic message, but that message is not articulated by the speaker Socrates. Socrates fails to see the Platonic implications, and instead it is we, as seasoned readers of Plato, who are expected to recognize and exploit them. If the question is asked, what could legitimize such a division of roles between Plato and Socrates, the answer is: the concept of *midwifery.* In a celebrated image unique to this dialogue, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* presents himself as an intellectual midwife. Analogously to literal midwives, who are beyond their childbearing years, Socrates is intellectually barren, having no brainchild of his own to give birth to. Instead, he helps others by delivering their brainchildren, and the painful puzzlement which he inflicts on his interlocutors is in reality nothing less than their birth pangs. In this way Plato is inviting us to reinterpret in a positive light the notoriously negative tendency of Socrates' inquiries.

I propose an interpretation of the dialogue according to which Socrates—by whom I now mean the historical or semi-historical figure of that name made familiar by Plato's early dialogues—although not himself a Platonist, was, so to speak, *the midwife of Platonism.* By developing this implicit portrayal of Socrates as the midwife of Platonism, Plato aims to demonstrate, if not the identity, at any rate the profound *continuity,* between, on the one hand, his revered master's historic contribution and, on the other, the Platonist truth.

To justify this approach requires a short digression. I am convinced that the *Theaetetus* was by no means the first dialogue in which Plato had set out to demonstrate that same continuity between Socrates' work and his own. On the conventional picture of Plato's development, which I endorse, Plato gradually transforms his speaker Socrates from an open-minded critic and inquirer into a mouthpiece for his own Platonic doctrines and a committed proponent of the underlying arguments. But it is that same Plato who again and again sets out to underscore the continuity of the old Socrates with the new. For instance, the *Meno* starts out with a virtuoso performance by what is palpably the old elenctic Socrates, but one which leads seamlessly into his replacement by the new doctrinal Socrates. The Socrates of the opening pages declares his total ignorance of what virtue is, systematically refutes all Meno's attempts at defining it, and has no proposal to offer in their place. But in the next phase of the discussion, in which he demonstrates the theory of Recollection by interrogating a slave, Socrates emphasizes how Meno's initial puzzlement, just like the slave's, was in fact a necessary preliminary to his finding and recognizing the truth: you have to be freed of your false beliefs before you can go on to recover the knowledge which, deep down, you already possess. Generalizing the lesson of this, we can work out that the historical Socrates had the initial task of pressing the right questions, and of so puzzling us as to persuade us of our own ignorance, before Plato could come along and get us to see the truth. That amounts to a reassurance that the early Socratic phase was a necessary preliminary to the mature Platonic phase. The smooth continuity, within the dialogue, between the primarily aporetic Socrates and the primarily doctrinal one demonstrates the profound historical continuity between the work of Socrates and that of Plato.

The *Republic* is another specimen of this pattern, with the aporetic Socrates of book I merging into the system-building political philosopher and metaphysician of the remaining books. I am inclined to add, more controversially, that when it comes to what is widely considered Plato's most radical departure from Socrates, his abandonment of Socratic intellectualist psychology in *Republic* book IV,[16] he is at pains to show that what he has supplied is a supplementation

[16] Cf. Carone (2001), who argues that this is a development, not an abandonment, of Plato's earlier position.

rather than a rejection of Socrates' views. He achieves this by making the ensuing books V–VII entirely intellectualist,[17] returning to tripartition of the soul only in books VIII–X.

In both *Meno* and *Republic* Plato is, it seems to me, setting out to reassure his readers that, as Socrates' philosophical heir, he has not betrayed the legacy entrusted to him. His new positive approach to philosophical questions is no abandonment of his master, he means, but is on the contrary the natural continuation of Socrates' work. Indeed, it is only in the light of Plato's positive results that we can finally grasp the meaning and justification of the role previously played by Socrates.[18]

Although such a progression, from the semi-historical Socrates to a Socrates who voices Plato's current thinking, may not have been evident to later generations of Platonists reading the Platonic corpus as a unity, it was presumably obvious to Plato's contemporary readers, whether inside or outside his school. Aristotle, for example, clearly gives priority to what we think of as the early dialogues when reconstructing Socrates' thought in *Metaphysics* M 4. We may take it that when the *Republic* was published, readers had no difficulty in detecting the difference between the aporetic Socrates of book I and the doctrinal Socrates whom such dialogues as the *Phaedo* had by now made familiar.

The same distinction, in my view, also underlies the *Theaetetus,* a dialogue from the same chronological group as the *Republic,* and therefore one whose readers can be assumed to have been similarly attuned. This time, however, the difference and continuity between Socrates and Plato are not expressed by the philosophical sequence of the argument. Instead, if I am right, they are expressed by the theme of midwifery, and the distinction which that entails between

[17] I mean by this that there is no mention or assumption of irrational soul-components, and the desires of the trainee philosophers are, so far as we can tell, purely rational. The one mention of tripartition in *Rep.* V–VII is when referring back, at 504a4–6, to the book IV argument. I hope to develop this point elsewhere, and nothing in my present argument depends on it.

[18] This will be one reason why *Rep.* I contains so many hints at the doctrinal outcome of the later books: cf. Kahn (1993). Another dialogue that invites this kind of interpretation is the *Euthydemus,* where what reads as an authentically Socratic dialogue is punctuated by a sudden influx of middle-period wisdom from the young Clinias (290b7–d8), so extraordinary that neither Socrates nor Crito can entirely believe that he said it (290e1–291a7). Whatever the precise purpose of this device, it undoubtedly serves to link the Socratic inquiry and impasse to the mature philosophy of the *Republic.*

the cognitive state of the dialectical questioner and that of the pupil. For 'dialectical questioner' read Socrates, and for 'pupil' read Plato. Let me try to explain.

I have already stressed that, whereas the dialogue's internal midwifery fails (Theaetetus' offspring have not proved viable, as Socrates remarks at the very end), its external midwifery, practised on us the readers, may yet succeed. Since the first rule of philosophical midwifery is not to hand the right answer to one's interlocutors, but to enable them themselves to give birth to it from their own inner resources, the dialogue unavoidably had to stop short of telling us the right answer to its central question. It by no means follows that Plato himself does not know it. Thus the external midwifery consists partly in the dialogue's power to bring us to the point where we are ready to abandon the written text and continue the dialectic for ourselves, our puzzlement at the inquiry's failure being in reality our birth pangs as we struggle to bring to birth a better definition of knowledge—a definition which Plato nowhere formulates in the dialogues, but leaves to his readers to work on.[19]

It may well be in addition that, even before we reach that final state of puzzlement, the main body of the dialogue's argument has already inspired some Platonist thoughts in us—I shall be pointing out various ways in which it is set up to do exactly that. But this could count as authentic midwifery only when exercised on readers not already au fait with Platonism.[20] More seasoned readers will have to think of themselves as its spectators rather than its beneficiaries.

The final stratum of midwifery, of a different order altogether, is once more addressed only to Platonically informed readers. The dialogue offers them the historical insight that Socrates, while no Platonist, was, as I am putting it, the midwife of Platonism. That is, by his dialectical activities, Socrates unconsciously advanced the process of enlightenment which culminated in Plato's mature thought. It is on this level of midwifery that I shall to a large extent be concentrating in the chapters that follow.

[19] I am taking it, for reasons that will become clear in Ch. 6 §§4–5, that the *Meno* 's implicit definition of knowledge as 'true judgement bound down by calculation of the cause' is not—as the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus* (2.52–3.25) believes it is—the missing one at the end of the dialogue.

[20] I am grateful to Raphael Woolf for this distinction between two kinds of reader.

So much for Socrates' midwifery. But in what does this midwife's declared barrenness consist? What he lacks will prove to be, first, a developed metaphysics, and, secondly, a developed physics.

The metaphysics of transcendent Forms is a discovery of Plato's middle period, even if it is there put, unhistorically, into Socrates' own mouth. Plato's semi-historical Socrates, although not without metaphysical curiosity and ideas, has no such grand ontology. It would not ring true to talk of him as being a metaphysician.[21]

Likewise, the addition of a physics is a product of Plato's late period, largely confined to the *Timaeus,* a dialogue almost certainly not yet written at the time of the *Theaetetus,* but whose future contents may well have been already evolving in Academic discussions.[22] Plato's Socrates, as portrayed in the *Apology* and still in the *Phaedo,* has no physics, and in the *Timaeus* he is present as a largely silent auditor when the eponymous speaker expounds what we may take to be Plato's physical theory.

What I hope to show, by way of support for this interpretation, is how throughout the dialogue Socrates repeatedly voices nascent ideas and propounds arguments which cry out for Platonist interpretations, but cannot himself articulate them in a Platonist mode. Plato is helping us, in the light subsequently shed by his own philosophical insights, to look back and see their Socratic origins, while also enabling us to understand, by means of the 'barren midwife' image, how it can be that Socrates himself failed to conceive them.

Let me, however, underline that I am not for one moment suggesting that this semi-autobiographical theme exhausts the dialogue's philosophical content. Far from it. Rather, it provides a frame within which Plato can conduct his own exploration of a range of epistemological issues. If he does so in a consciously Socratic voice, that is not a mere historical reversion to his earlier ideas, but the application to new or under-explored topics of the Socratic component in his own philosophical make-up. Moreover, as we will see in the following chapters, this rediscovery of his Socratic roots in more than one case brings Plato to a philosophical insight which he

[21] For a judicious assessment of Socrates' metaphysical presuppositions, see Silverman (2002, ch. 2).

[22] In Sedley (1990) I argue that the teleological physics of which Socrates despaired according to his intellectual autobiography in the *Phaedo* is sketched for us in the concluding myth of the dialogue; but I treat this sketch as a Platonic subtext, not representing the speaker Socrates' own meaning.

will then continue to exploit in his late dialogues, where Socrates to a considerable extent recedes from prominence. Most significant among these are the diagnosis of thought as internal dialogue, the theme of 'becoming like god' as a human aspiration, the ingredients of his eventual solution to the puzzles of falsity, and the reasons for excluding physics as an authentic route to knowledge. Thus Plato, writing in order to emphasize the continuity of his own lifetime's work, is reclaiming his Socratic legacy not only as the indispensable pathway to his current metaphysics, but also as pointing the way forward to his later projects.

One gain that emerges from this approach is an enhanced understanding of why the dialogue so often takes a circuitous route. Why the long critique of Protagoras, when Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception can more effectively be dispatched with the short argument at 184b3–187a3? Why the excursus on false belief, which turns out to contribute nothing to the definitional question at issue? While the speaker and respondent may gain little from these episodes, the author does. We are being taken on a guided tour of Socrates' philosophical achievement, and this includes his shunning of fashionable relativism and his advances in cognitive psychology. These, and much more, are being put on display, in ways which will enable readers to see how well they dovetailed into Platonism.

5. *Plato's Unitarianism*

How does this proposed reading bear on the old debate between unitarian and developmentalist interpretations of Plato's work? I have already made it clear that I endorse in its broad outlines the chronology that has been widely accepted in recent decades, but it is important not to confuse the endorsement of a chronological order of composition—it would after all be hard for *anyone* to deny that the dialogues were composed, or at any rate completed, in some order or other—with 'developmentalism'. Even this latter is an ambiguous term. If developmentalism simply means the thesis that Plato's philosophy developed during his lifetime, only the most extreme of unitarians would be likely to resist. Regardless of what the chronological sequence may be, it would be altogether astonishing if Plato's ideas—indeed, the ideas of any philosopher whose

work spanned six decades—had been as fully developed on the day he first sat down to write as they were in his final years. If, as more commonly, the term 'developmentalism' is used to designate the thesis that Plato *changed* his views over the years, it should be clear that my interpretation has a close bearing on it, since I shall present Plato as himself emphasizing the continuity in his development, rather than acknowledging any radical break.

It is easy, but probably mistaken, to discuss this question, whether Plato changed his views, as if there were some simple fact of the matter waiting for us to recover it, with the thought at the back of our minds that if only we could travel back in time and ask Plato himself his reply would settle the issue. It seems to me most unlikely that there is any such fact of the matter. To appreciate this, it is instructive to compare an example of what may happen when you *are* able to ask a philosopher the very same question—the 1988 anthology on the eminent moral philosopher R. M. Hare. Following a number of chapters in which a series of philosophers, some of them his own pupils, subjected his *œuvre* to critical examination, Hare was permitted a global reply. It includes the following:[23]

> It may be helpful to start on an autobiographical note. It is often suggested…that in later books of mine I have changed my views substantially from those expressed in earlier ones. It would be no discredit to me if I had, because many famous philosophers such as Kant and Plato have done the same. But it might lead to misinterpretation if it were assumed that I have changed my position when I have not; and in fact I have done so perhaps less than has been thought.…Though my ideas have developed and expanded, and I have found new ways of defending them, I have not had actually to reject very much that I wrote earlier.…If those who think I have changed my views would look for chapter and verse in earlier writings where there is an inconsistency with later, and tell me about them, they would do me a service. But actually references are seldom given.

Despite this last remark, Hare proceeds to a close examination of three cases where his critics *have* cited chapter and verse for an alleged change of mind, and in each case rejects the allegation.

Hare's passing remark about Plato (on whom he was the author of a well-known book) adds a certain irony to the story. Changes of mind may look like refreshing honesty in philosophers other than oneself, but one can remain far more reluctant to construe one's own

[23] Seanor and Fotion (1988: 201).

development in those same terms when some alternative is available. If Hare and his eminent pupil Bernard Williams could even after discussion remain in disagreement on this question, it is only too easy to imagine a Plato who denied or minimized discontinuities in his own work, even when challenged by *his* eminent pupil Aristotle, who is widely agreed to make a sharp philosophical distinction between Plato's Socratic dialogues and those representing his mature work. This is what I mean by warning against expecting there to be a simple fact of the matter. Whether a diachronic body of work is viewed as a unified and gradually unfolding project, or as a series of discrete phases punctuated by changes of mind, is much more a matter of perspective and emphasis than of fact.

I am, for my part, favouring neither of these options with regard to Plato. What I am, however, claiming is that Plato himself was not unlike Hare, concerned to present his own corpus of work so far as possible as the unfolding of a single project. His Socratic phase had not been, in his eyes, an early episode from which he was later to distance himself in the manner of a Wittgenstein. It had been the integral first stage of a unified philosophical project. In this book I shall be presenting the *Theaetetus* as eloquent testimony to such a self-construal on Plato's part. And I am convinced that the same could, on another occasion, be done by appeal not only to the dialogues I have so far mentioned—in particular *Meno, Republic,* and *Theaetetus*—but also to late productions such as *Philebus, Timaeus,* and *Laws.*

6. *The Prologue*

The *Theaetetus* has a unique prologue.[24] In the town of Megara, Euclides and Terpsion fall into conversation about Theaetetus, reported to be dying of wounds and dysentery after heroic action in battle at Corinth. Euclides reminisces about a conversation between Theaetetus, then a mere boy, and Socrates, in the last weeks of

[24] Cf. n. 1 above on the alternative prologue that circulated in antiquity, on which see most recently Carlini (1994), and also on the question of the prologue's dramatic date. It is worth considering, as a parallel, the two prologues to [Euripides] *Rhesus,* recorded in the hypothesis to that play as being 'in circulation' (φέρεσθαι, the same verb as in Anon., *In Plat. Tht.* 3.28–37; see Euripides frr. 1108–9 Nauck), and generally agreed by scholars both to have been inauthentic.

his life. It turns out that Euclides, having heard Socrates recount the conversation, had immediately gone home and made a complete transcript of it. Not only that, but on subsequent visits to Athens he had taken the opportunity to check the details with Socrates, making consequent adjustments to the text. The upshot is that he now possesses a 'virtually complete' written transcript of the conversation (143a4–5).

Some of the themes here are familiar to Plato's readers. I am thinking less of the problematic relation of writing to memory, famously highlighted in the *Phaedrus* (274c5–275e6),[25] than of the other proems where the sources of information are equally carefully set out. In the *Symposium* Apollodorus can narrate to his companion what was said at Agathon's banquet, despite not having been present, because he learnt it orally from one Aristodemus, and subsequently checked some of the details with Socrates himself (173b1–6). In the *Parmenides* Pythodorus was the original witness to the conversation which the very young Socrates held with Parmenides and Zeno; Antiphon, who has often heard Pythodorus recount it, now in turn narrates it to Cephalus and his companions; and at the end of this same chain Cephalus himself recalls that account for us. These intriguingly parallel passages emphasize above all the indirectness of the report which Plato's readers are about to encounter. In neither case was Socrates the original informant, even if in the *Symposium* case some of the details were subsequently confirmed by him. Although we must not underestimate the powers of a trained memory, especially in the context of ancient practice, it seems safe to say that the *Theaetetus* prologue differs markedly in stressing the *directness* of the report: Euclides obtained his information directly from Socrates within days of the original conversation, and the virtually contemporary written text still in his possession has, in effect, Socrates' own approval and imprimatur.

These differences may look casual, even insignificant. But in the light of the interpretation that I am proposing they take on new importance. It is likely that, at the date of the *Theaetetus,* Plato's audience had the *Parmenides* fresh in their memories.[26] This

[25] On this aspect, see esp. Narcy (1995: 22–30).

[26] Stylometry strongly suggests that the two dialogues are close in date (n. 2 above). Although the intertextual reference at *Tht.* 183e7–184a2 to the meeting portrayed in the *Parmenides* is not decisive for the sequence *Parmenides–Theaetetus* (Plato might have been *planning* the *Parmenides* at the time of writing), the further fact that the *Parmenides* seems to be Plato's last dialogue in narrative form, and that the *Theaetetus* not only shares its dramatic form with all the dialogues generally agreed to be late, but also contains at 143b5–c7 a purported justification for the abandonment of the narrative form, supports the sequence.

dialogue had exploited the long chain of narration and memorization in creating a symbolic fiction: a Socrates who is, dramatically speaking, a mere child in the remote past, and, philosophically speaking, voicing Plato's mature metaphysics at a level which falls far short of Plato's own current grasp of the issues as represented by the main speaker, Parmenides. Here, then, we find Plato engaged in the same *kind* of dramatic game that I am claiming for the *Theaetetus*: the creation of a Socrates who cannot be straightforwardly identified as Plato's mouthpiece, but who represents, as it were, no more than one component of his current thinking. Imagine then that this same audience is soon afterwards confronted with *another* Socrates, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus*. The latter Socrates is a different kind of throwback: not this time a dumbed-down version of the 'Socrates' who had been Plato's middle-period spokesman, but an authentic reversion to that brilliant but enigmatic Socrates whom Plato had brought to life in his early dialogues. The different symbolism is announced by the subtly different proem: this time there has been no chain of transmission; instead, the transcript that Euclides' slave is now asked to read out, and which will constitute the main body of the dialogue, purports (within the dramatic fiction) to take us straight back to a vividly historical Socrates, frozen in time by a verbatim record of his words, at the moment in his life when he was about to hand on the torch to his successors. Contemporary readers could not in any case fail—as later readers so easily could—to spot the radical reorientation of the figure of Socrates as now presented. But the new symbolism deployed in the proem would ensure that the reorientation was signalled right from the start. Here was a dialogue that would transport readers back to a historically Socratic mode of philosophy.

7. *Epistemology or Ethics?*

We may go back now to the opening of the reported conversation. The veteran mathematician Theodorus introduces Socrates to Theaetetus. Socrates quizzes the young prodigy about his studies

with Theodorus, and the conversation soon turns to the topic of knowledge, with Socrates confessing to a ‘small’ (145d6) puzzlement: what *is* knowledge (145e8–146a1)? That will hereafter be the question that governs the entire dialogue. But before we pursue its fortunes, it is worth pausing for a moment to ask how uncharacteristic this topic is for Socrates.

There is much truth in the observation of Gregory Vlastos[27] that the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues is exclusively a moral philosopher. For even on those rare occasions, as in the *Charmides,* where he turns to questions about knowledge as such, the focus is ultimately ethical—the knowledge under consideration is that which either is identical with or underlies virtue. And his explicit or implicit scrutiny of others' claims to expertise, while not always immediately tied to an ethical agenda, is ultimately driven by the question of his own and others' claims to wisdom.[28] It might seem hard to deny, by contrast, that the question about knowledge which sets the agenda for the *Theaetetus* is, and remains throughout the dialogue, fundamentally epistemological. To this extent, the Socrates of *Theaetetus* may look strangely unlike the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues. It is important therefore to emphasize that Plato never in any dialogue imposes a boundary between ethics and epistemology—least of all in the *Philebus,* his final word on the place of knowledge in the good life. In the *Cratylus,* where the sequence of words etymologized exhibits the order of a formal philosophical curriculum,[29] knowledge terms—including *epistēmē* itself, the term for ‘knowledge’ which serves as definiendum of the *Theaetetus*—are entirely contained within the ethical section. Whether ‘knowledge’ is interpreted as a moral virtue, an intellectual virtue, or both indifferently, in Plato's eyes it undoubtedly is a virtue, and an essential factor in the goodness of a life. In the *Theaetetus* the moral importance of the dialogue's topic will emerge at various stages, above all in the engagement with Protagoras. But notice how it is signalled even by the manner in which Socrates first introduces it (145d7–e7):

27 Vlastos (1991: 47–8).

28 Cf. *Ion,* where Socrates' cross-examination of the rhapsode has close affinities with his interrogation of the poets (*Apol.* 22a8–c8), part of his bid to evaluate his own relative wisdom.

29 Sedley (1998*b* ; 2003*b* : 156–8).

SOCRATES. . . .Tell me, is to learn to become wiser about what one learns?
THEAETETUS. Of course.
SOCRATES. And it is wisdom that makes the wise wise?
THEAETETUS. Yes.
SOCRATES. And I take it that this is nothing different from knowledge?
THEAETETUS. What is?
SOCRATES. Wisdom. Or isn't it true that what people are knowledgeable about they are also wise about?
THEAETETUS. What are you getting at?
SOCRATES. Then knowledge and wisdom are the same thing?
THEAETETUS. Yes.

This authentically Socratic[30] identification of knowledge with wisdom serves as a bridge, leading from a recognizably Socratic focus on one of the cardinal virtues, wisdom, to a discussion of its epistemological basis: what are the cognitive conditions of knowing something? The *Theaetetus,* although not just a rehearsal of familiar Socratic discussions, does present itself as a natural extension or continuation of these.

8. *Problems of Definition (146c7–147c7)*

The first definition offered by Theaetetus, that knowledge is such things as geometry and shoemaking, is quickly dispatched by Socrates, but not without a dazzling display of dialectical fireworks. In explaining why such definitions by exemplification must fail he turns in a virtuoso performance, in the tradition of those early dialogues in which hastily proffered definitions are shown up as incoherent, but taking the art to a new level of sophistication. The run of the argument can be compared, by means of the chart on pp. 20–1, with principles established or assumed elsewhere in Plato's dialogues, especially the Socratic definitional dialogues.

In (**2**) Socrates objects to a mere list offered as a definition, on the initial ground of principle **A**, the Unity of Definition: a definition of 'X' must point to a *single* property that all things correctly called X have in common. This principle was already familiar to Plato's readers from the *Meno,* where Meno offers a similar list in reply to the question 'What is virtue?' But Socrates' explicit defence of it

[30] Cf. *Protagoras* 330b4, where Socrates uses ἐπιστήμη for what elsewhere in the context he calls σοφία; and the later *Phaedrus,* 247d6–e2.

Passage	Paraphrase	Principles of definition: 'X is Y' is not a proper definitionof 'X'…	Platonic parallels
1. 146c7–d3	Theaetetus' definition: 'Knowledge is shoemaking (etc.).'		
2. 146d4–5	Socrates' reply: this definition gives many where one was asked for.	A…if, while X is singular, Y is a plurality of things	*Meno* 71e1–73c5, etc.; *Euthyphro* 6d6–e3
3. 146d6–e11	Shoemaking ' knowledge of (making) shoes…and 'Knowledge is knowledge of (making) shoes (etc.)' tells us what knowledge is *of,* and what its species are, not what *it* is.	B…if Y ' Z, and 'X is Z' is not a proper definition of 'X'C…if 'Y' conveys some fact about X but not what X is	*Euthyphro* 11a6–b1
4. 147a1–b7	Just as 'Clay is potter's clay, etc.' fails as a definition, because it presupposes understanding of what the definiendum is, so 'Knowledge is knowledge of (making) shoes (etc.)' fails as a definition.	D…if the word 'X' is included in the expression 'Y'	*Tht.* 210a 3–9; *Rep.* 505b5–c5
5. 147b8–10	Therefore 'Knowledge is shoemaking, etc.' fails as a definition, since it too presupposes understanding of what knowledge is.	B (reapplied)E…if any word naming a species of X is included in the expression 'Y'	*Meno* 79b4–c3
6. 147b11–c2	In naming the knowledge *of something* it fails to answer the question what knowledge itself is.	C (reapplied)	
7. 147c3–7	The simple definition 'Clay is earth mixed with moisture' is superior to the indeterminately protracted one in (4). So too for knowledge.	F…if 'Y' cannot be briefly and determinately formulated	

Principles **A–C** and **F** are implicitly *invoked in* the argument.

Principles **D–E** are implicitly *justified by* the argument.

there had contented itself with an analogical argument aimed at showing that, if only Meno were to try harder, he should succeed in finding a unitary property underlying all the diverse virtues on his list, just as he clearly could for less problematic definienda like size, health, and strength (72d4–73c5). Precisely why a list of examples *fails* as a definition was left unclear.[31]

One might have expected Socrates to disqualify it for its failure to achieve *coextensivity* with the definiendum; but he does not do so either in the *Meno* or here in the *Theaetetus.* And perhaps rightly so: a list of species *could* in principle be exhaustive, and indeed Theaetetus' definition, which in its full form covers all branches of mathematics and all manufacturing crafts, may well be claiming to be exactly that. To reject it simply by pointing to some missing item would not be to tackle the root cause of its defectiveness as a definition. Socrates does, in (**7**), point out that such a list has the

[31] Cf. helpful discussions of this in Burnyeat (1977*a*) and McCabe (1994: 26–7).

disadvantage of being indefinitely long, but that too falls short of proving it to be untenable as a definition.[32]

What we get instead is (**3**) (146d6–e11):

> SOCRATES. . . . When you say shoemaking, are you talking about anything other than knowledge of the manufacture of shoes?
> THEAETETUS. Nothing other.
> SOCRATES. What when you say carpentry? Are you talking about anything other than knowledge of the manufacture of wooden objects?
> THEAETETUS. Again, nothing other.
> SOCRATES. Then aren't you in both cases defining what each is the knowledge *of*?
> THEAETETUS. Yes.
> SOCRATES. But the question, Theaetetus, was not what things knowledge is of, or how many kinds of knowledge there are. We didn't ask out of a desire to count them, but to know what knowledge itself is.
> THEAETETUS. And rightly so.

Theaetetus has defined knowledge as shoemaking, carpentry, and the like. Socrates objects that shoemaking and carpentry are in turn equivalent to knowledge of certain things; hence Theaetetus has only told us that knowledge is knowledge of certain things, not what knowledge is. The inference has rightly been regarded with suspicion.[33] In particular, it may look as if Socrates has committed the following fallacious inference: 'You said that X is Y; but Y is Z; therefore you said that X is Z'. The type of error is one that has been diagnosed in modern times as one of illicit substitution in an 'opaque context', a type of error that we will encounter again in later chapters (see below, pp. 131 n. and 166). As ancient critics were already pointing out,[34] albeit without the help of this diagnosis, if the inference were correct it would be equally true that someone who asserts that X is Y was asserting the mere tautology that X is X: if X *is* Y, to say that X is Y just is to say that X is X.

However, we are not compelled to read Socrates as accusing Theaetetus of having said, or meant, something that he neither said nor meant. We can, more charitably, read the argument as

[32] It is only in the ensuing discussion of an analogous mathematical problem that the infinite range of items waiting to be encapsulated in a single formula is clearly problematized (147d8–9).

[33] Cf. McDowell (1973: 114), and, for a more constructive set of criticisms, Burnyeat (1977*a*).

[34] See Sedley (1993).

resting on the assumption that definition is transitive. To invent an example, if 'dilution' is definable as 'adding water', and if 'water' is definable as 'H_2O', 'dilution' will be definable as 'adding H_2O'. I am not sure whether this principle is ultimately sound, but it does not look obviously objectionable either. Socrates would be pointing out to Theaetetus that, if we define knowledge as shoemaking (etc.), and we further agree that shoemaking is definable as knowledge of making shoes, that will entail the unacceptable consequence that knowledge is definable as 'knowledge of making shoes (etc.)'.

With this move successfully made Socrates is in a position to launch a pair of alternative objections.

First he assumes that in its reformulation as 'Knowledge is knowledge of making shoes (etc.)' the second occurrence of 'knowledge' is redundant, so that the definition amounts to 'Knowledge is of making shoes (etc.)'. But, he objects (appealing to principle **C**), a definition of X must answer the question 'What is X?', whereas the definition that has now emerged answers some other question: either 'What is the object of knowledge?' (answer: making shoes, etc.), or 'How many species of knowledge are there?' (answer: shoemaking, geometry, etc.). It was very natural to an ancient reader like the anonymous *Theaetetus* commentator (writing between the late first century BC and the early second century AD),[35] steeped in Aristotle's *Topics,* to assimilate Socrates' objection to the use of categorial theory exhibited in that work. Socrates has spotted a category mistake: the question was in the 'What is it?' category, but Theaetetus' answer was in the category of relation, or (he might have added) in that of quantity.[36]

Socrates' second objection, in (**4–5**), is epistemological (147a1–b10):

[35] On the question of date, see Bastianini and Sedley (1995: 254–6), Brittain (2001: 249–54).

[36] Anon., *In Plat. Tht.* 20.24–37, on which cf. Sedley (1993). On the highly credible view that the *Topics,* including its use of category theory, emerged from Aristotle's early immersion in dialectic within the Academy (M. Frede 1981), the anonymous commentator's diagnosis can be regarded as a successful application of the analytic approach to Plato: clarification of an argument-form by retrojection of an anachronistically precise conceptual distinction, but one which does not do any historical violence to the text. The point in the present case is not precisely that to say 'of X' in answer to the question 'What is knowledge?' is itself to designate a relative, which (at least in Aristotelian terms) it is not. It should be, rather, that 'the knowable' (τὸ ἐπιστητόν) is the proper Aristotelian correlative of 'knowledge', so that by saying 'Knowledge is of X' one is specifying knowledge's correlative, and to that extent treating it in the category of relativity.

SOCRATES. Suppose someone asked us about some banal, familiar thing, such as what clay is. If we replied to him 'Potters' clay, oven-makers' clay, brick-makers' clay', wouldn't we be ridiculous?
THEAETETUS. Perhaps.
SOCRATES. First, I suppose, in thinking that the questioner understands our answer, when we say 'clay', whether we add 'dollmakers' ' or any other craftsmen. Or do you think someone has any understanding of the name of anything, when he doesn't know what the thing is?
THEAETETUS. None.
SOCRATES. Then nor does someone who does not know knowledge understand knowledge of shoes.
THEAETETUS. No, they don't.
SOCRATES. Then whoever is ignorant of knowledge does not understand shoemaking, or any other craft.
THEAETETUS. That is so.

This time Socrates is assuming that in the reformulated definition 'Knowledge is knowledge of making shoes (etc.)' the second occurrence of 'knowledge' is *not* redundant. As a result, the reformulated definition is circular, in that it uses 'knowledge' to define knowledge, thus presupposing our understanding of the very term that awaits definition. And since the original definition, 'Knowledge is shoemaking (etc.)', is convertible into the reformulated definition, it too must be vulnerable to the same objection. The reformulation has simply brought into the open the defect that was already implicit in it. If to understand what knowledge is presupposes understanding what shoemaking is, and understanding what shoemaking is in turn presupposes understanding what knowledge is, then vicious circularity has indeed set in.

Socrates here maintains that understanding what the species, shoemaking, is presupposes understanding what its genus, knowledge, is, no doubt because the genus must be expected to feature in the definition of the species. (For this as a Socratic principle, see pp. 143–4 below.)

There is a problem as to what kind of 'understanding' Socrates intends. If we take it to be basic *lexical* understanding—simple recognition of the word's linguistic meaning—then his argument looks suspect, since few would agree that such recognition of a word's meaning presupposes knowledge of the corresponding item's genus or indeed of any other component of its definition. Maybe we would doubt that someone could (lexically) know what a kangaroo is if they did not have the least idea what an *animal* is, but they could certainly do so without having the least idea what its

immediate genus, a marsupial, is. Hence the frequent designation of the principle underlying this argument, that understanding of the species presupposes understanding of the genus, as one version of the 'Socratic fallacy'—a catch-all designation of the alleged fallacy that until you know something's definition you cannot know *anything* else about it.[37] If, on the other hand, we assume Socrates to mean not basic lexical comprehension, but the sort of dialectical understanding that can be achieved only through formal definition, the argument appears plausible, since one might well agree that you could not master the definition of kangaroo if you had no idea what a marsupial is.[38] And this more modest version is all that Socrates needs in order to expose the defect of Theaetetus' proposal to define knowledge by naming its species.

Socrates' implicit appeal to the Priority of Definition, whichever way we may interpret it, is being invoked by him in order to invalidate any definition where the definiens mentions a species of the definiendum. It thus corresponds to principle **E** in the above chart: ' "X is Y" is not a proper definition of "X" if any word naming a species of X is included in the expression "Y" '. I shall limit myself to two observations on this.

First, it is important to notice that here in the *Theaetetus* (under **5**) we find the one place in Plato's works where principle **E** is not merely invoked (as already at *Meno* 79b4–c3) but actually defended. The defence is achieved by application of the conversion principle, **B**, which Socrates uses to bring into the open the concealed circularity already present in definitions of this form. If you define X as Y, where 'Y' includes reference to a species of X, in mentioning Y you have (by principle **B**) also in effect mentioned X, resulting in a viciously circular definition of X in terms of X.

Secondly, although Socrates does not in the present context enable us to decide between the suspect and the innocuous interpretation, he will do so in due course, namely during the discussion of false belief in part II of the dialogue. At 196d2–197a7[39] he envisages someone objecting that they should not be, as they in fact are,

[37] The label is due to Geach (1966: 371). That the fallacy is Socratic is denied by Beversluis (1987), Vlastos (1994, ch. 3), and Kahn (1996, ch. 6 §3), among others.

[38] Thus Burnyeat (1977*a*) and the anonymous *Theaetetus* commentator (Sedley 1993). The two versions of the Priority of Definition that I have formulated above do not map exactly onto the two which Kahn (1996, ch. 3 §4, ch. 6 §§3–4) distinguishes in the dialogues: he sees the stronger one as epistemological, the weaker one as merely methodological.

[39] The vital relevance of this passage is well brought out by Burnyeat (1977*a*).

discussing false judgement in terms of knowledge at this stage, when knowledge itself has yet to be defined: if we do not know the definition of 'knowledge' *we do not understand each other at all* (196e4) when using the word 'knowledge', its cognates, and other words that have to be understood in terms of it—you cannot say what something is *like* when you do not yet know what it *is*.[40] This objection, lexical in focus, is dismissed by Socrates as sophistical.[41] Yet soon after (200d1–2) he is quite prepared to admit that *methodologically* it was indeed a mistake to do things in the order they have adopted:[42] 'It is impossible to know it [false judgement] until one has an adequate grasp of what knowledge is.' By comparing these two passages, we are enabled to work out that, by now at least, Socrates interprets his own appeals to the priority of definition as follows: an as yet undefined word can be successfully understood in interpersonal communication, but lacks the informational content that would make it an instrument of *philosophical* understanding. The same will apply to definitions, such as that offered by Theaetetus, which mention one or more species of the definiendum: the species names are understood in a lexical sense, but not philosophically.

These two observations have important implications for the interpretation I am proposing. In the passage that we are considering, Socrates has been displayed to us at work in an area of dialectic of which Plato's readers knew him to be a master, the formal critique of definitions. This is clearly a central element in his avowed expertise as intellectual midwife (cf. p. 33 below). But what we have been given is not simply a rerun of moves familiar from other definitional dialogues. Socrates takes those moves one stage further, both offering a formal defence of one version of the 'Socratic fallacy', and, as the dialogue proceeds, making it clear in practice just how he discriminates non-fallacious from fallacious interpretations or

[40] 196d9, 11–12, 197a4; cf. *Meno* 71b3–4.

[41] 197a1: it is the sort of thing a controversialist—ἀντιλογικός—would say. Cf. *Meno,* where Socrates starts by insisting on the Priority of Definition, by the analogy at 71b4–7, 'Or do you think it is possible for someone who doesn't know in the slightest who Meno is to know whether he is beautiful or rich or well born, or the opposites of these?', yet later subtly undermines this by remarking (76b4–5), 'Even someone blindfolded, Meno, would know from hearing you in conversation that you are beautiful and have lovers.'

[42] I do not mean by this anything as weak as the principle of good method that Kahn (1996, ch. 3 §4) discerns in the *Gorgias,* and which is little more than a requirement for maximum clarity. Here in the *Theaetetus* Socrates is quite explicit that the methodological failure is epistemological in character.

applications of it. If this is recognizably the Socrates of the early dialogues, his work is here being not just re-created and celebrated, but also elucidated and made more precise.

9. *Mathematics (147c7–148d7)*

In the definitional section of the dialogue's opening, then, Plato has given due recognition to what, historically speaking, he acknowledges to be Socrates' trademark. And that, I suggest, is why Socrates is himself left firmly in control. Contrast with this the paradigmatic role of mathematics, a theme to which they now briefly turn.

Theaetetus recounts how he and his fellow student the younger Socrates were set by Theodorus the task of generalizing over the infinitely many square areas with integer areas but irrational sides.[43] They discharged it by first distinguishing two classes of numbers, then mapping the same distinction onto two kinds of geometrical figure (square and oblong), then doing the equivalent job for cubic numbers. The question which concerns Socrates is whether, in the dialectical discussion to follow, Theaetetus can find an equally successful way of generalizing over all cases of knowledge.

Now it did not altogether escape the ancient commentators,[44] as it has their modern counterparts, that this progress from arithmetic, via plane geometry, to solid geometry, and then on to dialectic prefigures the educational programme of *Republic* VII, in which dialectic is the culmination of a series of five mathematical studies which likewise start with arithmetic and plane geometry, and then continue with solid geometry (the discipline which readers presumably knew to have been developed in later years by Theaetetus himself), before culminating in astronomy and harmonics. Even the two remaining mathematical disciplines—astronomy and harmonics—along with the fundamentally arithmetical discipline of 'reckoning' (*logistikē*), are ones which Theaetetus has said he hopes to study with Theodorus in the future (145d1–3).[45]

Is Socrates' prefiguring of Plato's mature educational programme deliberate? One reason why it may seem not to be is that the entire

[43] I am avoiding the technical problems of interpreting this passage, for which see especially Burnyeat (1978).

[44] See Bastianini and Sedley (1995: 534).

[45] Cf. 145a6–9, where Theodorus was proclaimed an expert in geometry, astronomy, reckoning, and music.

mathematical model is suggested by the young prodigy Theaetetus, not by Socrates. But on the story I am telling that is exactly right. The paradigmatic role of mathematics for the philosopher is a discovery of Plato's middle period.[46] The re-created early Socrates of the *Theaetetus* therefore cannot be made to propose it himself. Although he has dreams of studying mathematics with Theodorus in the future (145d1–5),[47] in the entire dialogue the most sophisticated piece of mathematical knowledge that he displays is that 7 plus 5 makes 12, not 11 (195e9–196a8). Hence instead of proposing any mathematical model himself, he hears of this innovative venture from the lips of a precocious mathematics student, and in response simply declares his approval of it. It is Plato, the author, who is in control here, and his speaker Socrates, in expressing approval for the mathematical paradigm, is unaware of the deeper philosophical significance which Platonically alert readers will be expected to spot.[48]

10. *Midwifery and Recollection*

The *Theaetetus,* I am proposing, portrays Plato's semi-historical Socrates as the midwife of mature Platonism. Throughout the dialogue, if I am right, readers will need to distinguish a Socratic surface from a Platonic undercurrent. The Socratic dimension has already been illustrated by the dazzling array of dialectical moves made in response to Theaetetus' first definition. The Platonic undercurrent emerged immediately after, in the appeal to a mathematical paradigm. Let me next try to illustrate the dialogue's *pairing* of these two strata, by turning to the theme of midwifery itself (148e1–151d6).

Theaetetus declares himself stuck: he cannot find any universal way of encapsulating what all kinds of knowledge have in common. Socrates explains that Theaetetus' state of puzzlement is in reality his intellectual labour pains, and that he, Socrates, has inherited from his mother, Phaenarete, the skill needed for dealing with these. Just as Phaenarete was an excellent midwife in the literal sense of

[46] Cf. Vlastos (1991: 107–31).

[47] Cf. Socrates' hope at *Phd.* 99c6–8 of being taught teleological physics, programmatically hinting at the *Timaeus,* where exactly that will happen.

[48] In the Digression (172a1–177c4) Socrates' praise of the philosopher for his concern with the universal treats mathematicians, such as his current addressee, Theodorus, as belonging to the same camp (see p. 70 below). This too seems to signal his incipient recognition of the kinship between philosophy and mathematics.

the word, so Socrates is an intellectual midwife, whose job is to determine which young men have brainchildren awaiting delivery, and, if appropriate, to deliver these and test whether they are sound.

Since antiquity[49] readers have suspected that midwifery may be intended as a method whereby interlocutors are induced to recollect—recollect, that is, in the technical Platonic sense of bringing to the surface the prenatally acquired knowledge which we all possess.[50] As Cornford noticed, the theme of midwifery occurs in the *Theaetetus* at a point closely corresponding to the appearance of recollection in the *Meno,* immediately following the interlocutor's reduction to a state of bewilderment.[51] To the embarrassment of those who harbour this suspicion, not only is the identification never made explicit in the *Theaetetus,* but much later on, in the passage where our cognitive apparatus is compared to an aviary, Socrates makes explicit the opposite assumption, that our aviaries, far from being stocked with all species of knowledge-birds, are in fact empty in infancy (197e2–3). This denial by Socrates of the recollection theory's main premiss can hardly be accidental. But it by no means follows that the postulated correspondence between midwifery and recollection is superficial or illusory. Rather, we need to distinguish two levels of discourse. On the dramatic level, the speaker, Socrates, is innocent of any heavy-duty metaphysical or epistemological theory. Although acutely aware of his divine mission (which he believes the midwife role to embody), he is still struggling to make sense of the concept of knowledge at the simplest possible level. This Socrates—far more reminiscent of the *Apology* than of the *Phaedo*—certainly has no theory that all learning is recollection, let alone recollection of transcendent Forms. But it seems to me equally clear that, from a Platonic perspective, we are meant to recognize that this primitive Socrates is practising a method by which he extracts, from the interlocutor's inner resources, beliefs which are already present there, if only in embryo, and some of which will

[49] Anon., *In Plat. Tht.* 47.8–59.34; cf. Sedley (1996: 95–102); Cornford (1935: 27–8); contra Burnyeat (1977*b* : 9–11).

[50] That what is innate in us is already knowledge, and not merely beliefs or truths that might *become* knowledge, is made explicit, if not in the *Meno,* in the summary of the *Meno* account at *Phd.* 73a7–b2. Thus, in contrast to the unwillingness of Fine (1992: 213) to find a theory of innate knowledge in the *Meno,* it seems clear to me that Plato, at least with hindsight, read it that way, which is what matters most for my present purposes.

[51] *Meno* 79e7–81a2; *Tht.* 148e1–8.

when tested turn out to be true.[52] Socrates may not see the significance of this, but that is no reason why Plato should not be asking us to see it.

What is more, there is very good reason to think that in the Aviary passage Plato is doing just that. Soon after making clear his total lack of suspicion that any knowledge might be innate, Socrates pursues the Aviary model in the following words (198d4–8):

> In this way, the things of which he long ago had pieces of knowledge because he had learnt them—things which he used to know—these same things he can learn again, by recovering the knowledge (*analambanonta tēn epistēmēn*) of each thing and taking hold of it, knowledge which he long ago possessed but did not have at the forefront of his mind.

He will go on immediately after to deny that 'learn' (*manthanein*) is actually the appropriate word for this recovery of knowledge which one already possesses, but nevertheless he has used a word meaning 'learn' (*katamanthanein,* a compound form of the same verb) in just that way here. Moreover, he has used it in conjunction with talk of 'recovering knowledge', the identical expression to that used in the *Meno* (85d3–8) for recollection. Once this is noticed, it becomes hard not to recognize here a deliberate allusion to the thesis defended in the *Meno* that all 'learning' is in fact recollection. Not, that is, an allusion by the speaker Socrates, whose casual remarks have emphatically ruled out innate knowledge, but an authorial ploy to indicate how short a step it is from Socrates the midwife's diagnosis of learning as the realization of latent understanding to the Platonic theory of recollection.

11. The Midwife's Toolkit

What then, if anything, *does* Socrates see? How literally are we to take his self-description as barren, as lacking intellectual

[52] One could, alternatively, connect this metaphor with the psychic pregnancy described by Diotima in the *Symposium* : cf. Sheffield (2001) for the enlightening proposal that psychic pregnancy in the *Symposium* is designed to do the same job as the theory of recollection, but *without* prenatal learning. However, as Burnyeat (1977*b* : 7–9) has shown, the *Theaetetus* account is not designed to recall the *Symposium* one: for example, in *Smp.* 205c1–3 all human beings are pregnant, whereas in the *Theaetetus* only some are, and even fewer with authentic offspring. It is easier to connect the latter with the rarity of successful *recollection,* pointed out at *Phd.* 76a9–c3.

brainchildren of his own? In some sense this barrenness must be read as Plato's current way of viewing Socrates' celebrated disavowal of knowledge (a disavowal which later, at 179b2–3, Socrates will reaffirm). But that disavowal is itself open to many interpretations. Socrates has frequently been thought, while claiming not to *know* anything, to permit himself any number of strongly held *beliefs*;[53] or alternatively to disavow 'knowledge' only in a very strong sense of the word, while happily admitting that he 'knows' things in some secondary sense.[54] Others have taken the disavowal of knowledge to be mere irony. But there remains a long-standing suspicion—already embraced by the Academic sceptics in antiquity—that he not only admits to knowing nothing in *any* sense of 'know', but also does his best not to hold opinions that fall short of knowledge—any opinions at all, that is.

It is not my intention to enter this debate about the Platonic Socrates. As a matter of fact I doubt that any one interpretation will work for all the Socratic dialogues, if only because Plato himself may have had considerable trouble deciding just what spin to put on Socrates' disavowal. He probably suspected at times that Socrates knew more than he let on, and his tendency—which increased dramatically in his middle period—to put solid doctrines in Socrates' mouth could well be a measure of that suspicion. But this can be a matter for little more than speculation. What we might more usefully do is ask what spin Plato was putting on his master's disavowal of knowledge *at the time of writing the Theaetetus.* And that will require closer scrutiny of the midwife image than I have so far attempted.

How wise does Socrates admit to being? He explains that he is 'unable to give birth to wisdom' (150c4), and that he 'has nothing wise' (150c6); but also, more moderately, that he is 'not entirely wise' (150d1).[55] These mixed signals seem to mean that he has no piece of wisdom to which, under questioning, he might give birth, but that he nevertheless does in some other way possess rudiments of wisdom. There is good reason to interpret these rudiments as consisting in the insights that enable him to practise midwifery itself. So at any rate I will argue now, as I turn to the metaphor of his barrenness.

[53] e.g. Irwin (1995, ch. 2).

[54] Vlastos (1994: 39–66).

[55] That οὐ πάνυ τι σοφός means 'not entirely wise', not, as usually translated, 'not at all wise', was recognized by the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus,* 55.42–5, whose interpretation I defend as linguistically correct in Sedley (1996*a* : 98).

Does Socrates' failure to produce offspring mean merely that he has no *knowledge,* or that he has no beliefs either? On the one hand, he says that he has given birth to no *wise* discoveries from his soul (150d1–2), leaving open the possibility that he has given birth to beliefs that then proved untenable—just as, by the end of the dialogue, Theaetetus will have done. On the other hand, he also tells Theaetetus that, whereas he questions others, he makes no *assertions* of his own about anything (150c4–7). It seems to follow from this latter that Socrates' recognition of his own inability to give birth to wisdom—the consciousness of his own lack of wisdom already famously declared in the *Apology* (21b4–5)—has led him to avoid asserting philosophical truth-claims at all. To that extent, a relatively strong reading of his disavowal of knowledge is here receiving Plato's endorsement.

However, Socrates' denial that he makes assertions cannot on any reading be taken as comprehensive, because he is right now making a whole series of assertions about his midwifery. And since—unusually for Socrates—he explicitly claims this latter as an *expertise* (*technê*) that he possesses and practises (149a4, 7, 150b6, c1, 184b1, 210c4–5),[56] we may well get the impression that the 'barren midwife' metaphor does not include midwifery itself among the subjects about which he is intellectually barren. For clearly whatever items of knowledge one has to possess in order to practise the expertise of midwifery *are* possessed by Socrates.[57] Indeed, later in the dialogue Socrates makes it virtually explicit that the expertise of midwifery constitutes the sole exception to his disavowal of knowledge. At 161b1–5 he tells Theodorus:

> You don't realize what is happening. None of the arguments originates from me, but always from my interlocutor. I myself have no knowledge to add,

[56] There is a partial parallel at *Euthyphro* 11b9–e1, where Socrates professes to possess, here too by family inheritance rather than choice, a version of the expertise of his ancestor Daedalus. Again it is a dialectical skill: that of destabilizing a *logos.*

[57] There is a possible further advantage in supposing this. When speaking about literal midwives at 149b4–c4, Socrates remarks that although now unable to give birth they must have *past* experience of doing so, 'because human nature is too weak to acquire expertise in things of which one has no experience' (149c1–2). It may appear to follow from this that Socrates too has *some* past experience of producing intellectual offspring of his own, and here too we may suspect that these offspring are the principles of midwifery itself. However, I would not insist on this, because Socrates' midwifery does not rely purely on 'human nature', having been imposed on him by god (150c7–8, d8–e1).

> with one small exception: how to extract and receive an argument in a reasonable way, from someone else who is wise.

And at the close of the dialogue (210c4–6), with regard to his claim to have, if nothing else, rid Theaetetus of the false conceit that he knows what he in fact does not, he remarks:

> For that alone, and nothing more, is the extent of my expertise's powers, and I know none of the things which others do—great and wonderful men both present and past.

Jointly, these passages make it clear that Socrates does count his maieutic expertise as knowledge. On the other hand, beyond this single exception, his barrenness has turned out to manifest itself, not merely in the avoidance of knowledge claims, but in his not making assertions at all. And that corresponds to a relatively strong interpretation of the disavowal of knowledge.

At the same time the concession that the principles of midwifery are an exception to Socrates' avowed ignorance is of vital importance. For *all* of the skills and insights that Socrates will contribute in the course of the dialogue can, it seems to me, be classed among these principles. To anticipate (their actual justification will in the main have to wait), they can be summarized under ten headings:

1. *Religion.* The god-given nature of his maieutic expertise gives Socrates insight into god's essential goodness, and an overwhelming commitment to divine service (Chapter 3 §§5–6).
2. *Cognitive psychology.* The requirement that an intellectual midwife should be able to distinguish which objects of investigation can and which cannot be studied by his art—an art which examines the soul's inner resources, without reliance on the senses—enables Socrates to discern the distinction between two modes of thought, roughly the empirical and the a priori (Chapter 4 §4, Chapter 5 §6).
3. *Universality.* By the same token, Socrates understands the importance of the universal, and is correspondingly uninterested in asking questions about the local and particular (Chapter 3 §4).
4. *Definition.* Socrates understands the primacy, in a dialectical inquiry about anything, of seeking its definition; in keeping with this, he is an arbiter of well and badly formed definitions, and understands how they should be sought (Chapter 1 §8).

5. *Aporia.* The requirement that a midwife should be able to bring an interlocutor's ideas into the world makes Socrates an expert at inducing mental labour, that is, puzzlement (*aporia*; 148e1–8, 151a5–b1).
6. *Refutation.* The requirement that a midwife should be able to recognize a false or unviable offspring (150b9–c3) makes Socrates an expert at exposing falsehood in argument, thus (210b11–c5) disabusing people of the belief that they know what in fact they do not know. This is actually the most important of his maieutic skills (150b9–c3).
7. *Dialectic.* The intellectual midwife's dependence on question and answer as the proper mode of investigating ideas has led Socrates to the insight, first made explicit in the *Theaetetus* itself (189e4–190a8), that thought itself has, and can be exhibited in terms of, that same question-and-answer structure (Chapter 5 §4).
8. *Expertise.* The fact that midwifery is an expertise (*technê*) which Socrates has mastered gives him an understanding of what expertise itself is and how it functions (Chapter 3 §7).
9. *Virtue.* Although Socrates does not claim to know what virtue is, his understanding of expertise gives him the insight that being virtuous, like being good at anything, entails wisdom, consisting in intellectual understanding of the relevant principles (Chapter 3 §§5–6).
10. *The soul.* Socrates' almost exclusive interest in the souls of those he engages in conversation arises from his appreciation that the soul is the true self, and the sole agent of all acts, cognitive or otherwise (Ch. 4 §6).

While all ten facets of Socrates' midwifery arise from his quest for moral understanding, they endow him with knowledge which extends considerably wider than that. Virtually all of them will inform his interrogation of Theaetetus, Theodorus, and the absent Protagoras, and they might also be argued to amount, jointly, to a fairly accurate retrospect on the kinds of insight that the Socrates of the early dialogues, despite his avowed ignorance, appears to manifest.[58] If

[58] Even the main convictions that Socrates expresses in *Apology,* that it is wrong to disobey your superior and that no harm can befall a good man, and in *Crito,* where the former of these does much of the work, might be accommodated under item 1. I confess that I have not yet worked out a fully satisfactory way to get from item 9 to Socrates' confident condemnation of harming others in *Crito, Gorgias,* and *Rep.* I .

this is right, Plato's decision in the *Theaetetus* to allow Socrates one genuine expertise, that of midwifery, is a strategy for rationalizing the deeply enigmatic figure displayed in his early dialogues. I am not suggesting that this makes it the right way to read the early dialogues, but if it is Plato's retrospective interpretation of his own portrayal of Socrates, it deserves to be considered with the utmost respect.

Notice, too, what is *not* included in the ten principles:

(*a*) *Transcendence.* As already observed, Socrates has no inkling of the transcendent Forms.
(*b*) *Psychic complexity.* For all that he says about the soul, Socrates never hints that it may be complex, comprising irrational as well as rational components.
(*c*) *Immortality.* Although Socrates is open to the idea of the soul's surviving death, nothing that he says about eschatology depends on it (pp. 79–81 below).
(*d*) *Recollection.* As we have seen (§10), Socrates does not suppose knowledge to be, thanks to the soul's pre-incarnate experiences, innate.
(*e*) *Physics.* Socrates has no theories of his own about the structure and nature of the physical world.

When Plato shows us Socrates calling himself barren, it is surely above all the absence of doctrines like these—none of them integral to the maieutic principles with which he operates—that he has in mind. Of the five themes, (*a*)–(*d*) are widely held to mark Plato's major departures in his middle period, while (*e*), developed in the *Timaeus,* is thought to belong primarily to his late period. Socrates' innocence of all five confirms once again that the figure before us really is a re-creation of the early Socrates.

12. *The Effects of Midwifery*

Three outcomes of Socrates' midwifery are highlighted:

I. Socrates is not willing to handle all prospective patients, and some of those who are not pregnant he sends on to other teachers, implicitly sophistic teachers who profess to supply information rather than extract it (151b1–6).

II. Some are pregnant, but do not stay the course, failing to nurture their offspring and therefore ending up seeming ignorant to others (150e1–8).
III. Some 'give birth to many fine offspring' (150d6–8).

Socrates' selectivity as expressed in (I) captures well enough his concern, prominent in the early dialogues, with seeking out talented young men to interrogate. And his critical remarks in (II) may be taken to represent his many interrogations of opinionated but less than satisfactory subjects, such as Meno and Euthyphro. They especially recall his regretful remark near the end of the *Euthyphro* (dramatically set on the same day as the *Theaetetus*) to the effect that Euthyphro gave up too soon, just as he was on the point of supplying a satisfactory definition of piety (14b8–c5).

However, the list also manifests two anomalies, one of exclusion, the other of inclusion.

First the anomaly of exclusion: there is no mention of the relatively felicitous kind of case which Theaetetus himself exemplifies. Theaetetus is pregnant, and Socrates is glad to act as his midwife. Nor does Theaetetus give up prematurely by refusing to nurture his offspring, once delivered. Finally, although he turns out in the end to have given birth only to wind-eggs, not worthy of nurturing (148e7–8, 160e2–161a4, 210b4–d2), the overall effect of Socrates' midwifery is nevertheless beneficial (210b11–c4): the thorough examination which today's offspring have undergone will make the young man's future pregnancies better ones; and on those future occasions when he is not pregnant he will at least be suitably modest, thanks to a new-found awareness of his own ignorance.

The absence of such cases from Socrates' own account no doubt reflects the author's strategy more than it does the speaker's. This particular outcome of Socrates' midwifery is being held in reserve for more prominent display at the end of the dialogue, where it will serve to associate the *Theaetetus,* taken as a whole, with the beneficial intellectual impact of Socratic dialectic. The formal beneficiary is his present interlocutor—who tomorrow, in the *Sophist,* will play to excellent effect his modest role as respondent to the stranger from Elea. But it is easy to generalize from this to the benefit of the philosophical community at large. Compare the *Meno*'s implicit message (p. 9 above) that Socrates had the role of convincing us all of our ignorance, and thus preparing the ground for a journey

of genuine discovery such as Plato's own. The upshot of the *Theaetetus* invites similar extension: Socrates' lifelong practice of cross-examination, despite the numerous well-known cases where it did not bring positive philosophical truth to light, was preparing our minds for a more fruitful era of future inquiry. And Socrates' beneficial effect on Theaetetus can be understood as emblematic of this historic role.

The other anomaly is one of inclusion. It lies in (III), according to which some of Socrates' patients ‘give birth to many fine offspring’. Nowhere in the early dialogues does Socrates meet an interlocutor who is, as a result of his services, seen doing anything of the kind. Is there nevertheless some interlocutor, absent from the early dialogues, whom Socrates does bring to successful intellectual childbirth? I can see only one plausible answer: *Plato himself*.

If this last suggestion is right, we have here the single clue planted by Plato, with his usual restraint and subtlety, as to the meaning of the dialogue's subtext: Socrates was the midwife of Plato's own philosophy. It would be over-literal to object that, were it so, Socrates should be fully conversant with Platonism, having already brought it to birth. The oblique allusion to Plato's successful philosophical parturition is an authorial hint, and Socrates need not be taken, in the dramatic context, to be referring specifically to Plato or any other named individual. For Socrates' bringing of Platonism to birth has to be seen as the result less of his dialectical interrogation of Plato than of Plato's persistence, after Socrates' death, with the pursuit of the interrogative agenda he had set. That is what I intend in this book when I speak of Socrates as the ‘midwife of Platonism’.

It is now high time to embark on the main argument.

2 'Knowledge is Perception'

1. *Enter Protagoras*

Encouraged by Socrates' offer to act as his midwife, Theaetetus now (151d7–e3) comes up with a serious proposal for a definition: knowledge is perception. Socrates is this time happy with, at least, the *form* of the definition. But is it a viable offspring? To find out, it must be examined minutely. To this end, Socrates converts the definition into the celebrated dictum of Protagoras from his book *Truth*: 'Man [or "A man"] is the measure of all things, of the things that are that [or "how"] they are, of the things that are not that [or "how"] they are not.' Socrates explains the conversion as follows (152b2–c4):

SOCR. … Isn't it sometimes the case that, when the same wind[59] is blowing, one of us shivers, the other doesn't? And that one of us shivers slightly, the other a lot?
THT. Very much so.
SOCR. Then are we going to say that on such occasions the wind is cold or not cold in itself? Or are we going to believe Protagoras—that it is cold for the one who shivers, not cold for the one who doesn't?
THT. We should, it seems.
SOCR. And is that not how it appears to each of them?
THT. Yes.
SOCR. And 'appears' is the same as 'perceives'?
THT. Yes it is.
SOCR. Then appearance and perception are the same thing, both in questions of heat and in all such matters. For the way each person perceives things also looks like being how they are for each person.
THT. It seems so.

[59] From Socrates' reference to 'the same wind' one need not infer that the Protagorean theory, as reconstructed here, allows for there being a wind-in-itself. The sameness requirement will in context be satisfied if it appears to anyone evaluating the theory that the two subjects are standing in the same wind. The proviso was, I suggest, included simply because the case would be uninteresting if they were *ex hypothesi* standing in (what seemed to be) two quite different winds.

The conversion relies on two premisses:

(1) the interpretation of Protagoras' thesis as meaning 'How things appear to S [= any subject] is how they are for S';
(2) the equivalence of 'X appears to S' (or 'X appears F to S') with 'S perceives X' (or 'S perceives X as F').

Given these two assumptions, it follows that how each individual perceives things is how things are for that individual. The thesis not only makes perception an infallible form of cognition, and hence a kind of knowledge, but also appears intended to *limit* how things are for each individual to how that individual perceives things: otherwise the account would be failing to make man the measure of *all* things, as it claims to do. And if there are, as this implies, no facts to learn that are not ascertained through perception, it seems, at least for the present, to follow that there is no room for any non-perceptual kind of knowledge. The result is a complete identity between knowledge and perception.

Before criticizing the Protagorean theory, Socrates sets out to uncover and articulate its presuppositions. Our task in the remainder of this chapter will be to track those preliminary moves, before we can turn in the following two chapters to Socrates' critique. Readers should be warned that the pay-off in terms of my dominant theme, Socrates as the midwife of Platonism, will not emerge in the present chapter, but only in the ensuing ones.

2. *Flux*

Socrates' next move (152c8–153d7) is perhaps the most surprising in the whole dialogue. He introduces a historical fiction about Protagoras, indicating its fictional status by the suggestion that what he is about to formulate is what Protagoras (long dead at the dramatic date of the dialogue, 399 BC) used to tell his pupils in secret. This Secret Doctrine is one of radical flux. Nothing is anything in itself, in that there are no determinate (i) subjects or (ii) predicates for us to speak of ('you could not correctly call it (i) *such and such a thing,* or (ii) *of such and such a kind*'; 152d3–4). Even 'be' is a misleading word, which must be outlawed, because things only 'become', thanks to 'movement, change, and mixture relative to each other' (152d7–e1). And there follows a parade of the wise, from

Homer onwards, nearly all of whom can be allegorically or literally read as endorsing this picture of universal flux (152e1–153d7). Any implied pretence that these figures are authoritative is ironic, but there is no strong reason to doubt that Socrates really does assume them to have held that things are fundamentally fluid—in other words, that he really does believe that a view of the world as inherently unstable is the dominant tradition. And he takes care to point out the kind of reasoning that can indeed make the view plausible: the observable dependence of good things on both cosmic and intellectual change, for example (153a5–d5).

Why should the semi-fictional Protagoras of this dialogue be thought to have stipulated universal flux? Because flux is, in short, the necessary condition of perception's infallibility. The first move (153d8–154b6) in explaining this is to insist that a perceptual content, such as whiteness, cannot be pinned down to some determinate spatial location, whether inside or outside your eyes; rather, it is the 'private' (*idion*; 154a2) product of interaction between your eyes and an external motion. Later this 'privacy' will be elucidated with the metaphor of perceiver and perceived object as parents giving birth to their own twin offspring, namely (in the visual example) the object's whiteness and the subject's matching vision of that whiteness. The way in which offspring belong uniquely to their own parents is, among other things, an attempt to capture the notion of privacy that we have just encountered.

Why then should privacy depend on flux, that is, on perpetual and universal becoming? The answer is hinted at next, at 154b1–6. Suppose that an object you perceive as large, white, or hot actually *is* large, white, or hot. If you assume in this way that your perception directly reads off the object's properties, you will be unable to explain why, for some other observer whose viewpoint there is no reason to consider less privileged, it is small, yellow, or cold. If, on the other hand, it simply *becomes* large, white, or hot in virtue of the encounter occurring at this moment between you and it, there is nothing to prevent its becoming small, yellow, or cold in some different encounter.

So how does an object *become* large, white, or hot? This last example, hot, takes us back to the wind. As we have learnt, the wind is not hot or cold in itself, its heat or coldness being purely the product of its interaction with whoever is standing in it. There is clearly some intuitively plausible sense in which, when X shivers in

the wind while Y does not, the wind's coldness is 'private' to X. Even if they were both shivering, it would still be plausible that each of them is experiencing a private coldness, especially as X might well be shivering more than Y (another possibility emphasized back at 152b3–4).

Now *we* might well want to assimilate this privacy to the epistemological privacy that, according to a view widespread among philosophers, characterizes all mental states and immediate contents of awareness. Other people's consciousness is not even in theory open to inspection by us, whereas they themselves have uniquely privileged access to it. Moreover, this notion of privacy frequently comes with the further thesis that we have *incorrigible* awareness of our own private sense-data, a thesis which has important affinities with Socrates' stronger contention that perception, on the account that he is developing, will be *infallible* about the sense-data that are its direct objects.[60] Indeed, at least once (160c4–10) Socrates does seem to infer directly from the privacy of perception to its infallibility.

Although the analogy is helpful, we should be very wary of attributing to Plato this full notion of the privacy of the mental, which as far as I am aware became a familiar philosophical tenet only with the Cyrenaic school, probably at too late a date to have any impact upon the *Theaetetus*.[61] Socrates himself, later in the *Theaetetus* (189e4–190a8) when analysing thought as internal

[60] I use the term sense-data without any particular theoretical loading, but as a matter of fact the similarity to modern sense-data theories seems to me too close to discount. McDowell (1973: 143–4) argues against any such identification on the ground that, when it comes to the 'twins' theory (156a2–e7; below pp. 91–3), it would be hard to say *which* of the twins is the sense-datum. But it seems to me to be the external twin, exemplified by the 'whiteness' with which the stone becomes 'filled around' (156e4–6), that is unmistakably reminiscent of sense-data, as in G. E. Moore's notoriously enigmatic description: 'Things *of the sort* (in a certain respect) of which this thing is, which he sees in looking at his hand, and with regard to which he can understand how some philosophers should have supposed it to be part of the surface of his hand which he is seeing, while others have supposed that it can't be, are what I mean by sense-data' (Moore 1925: 218). The perfectly matching internal twin, here exemplified by the vision of whiteness with which the eye becomes filled (156e3), can then be compared to the incorrigible awareness we are alleged to have of our sense-data.

[61] See Tsouna (1998, esp. 124–37) for a well-reasoned rejection of the older view which identified the 'more sophisticated' χομψότεροι philosophers of *Tht.* 156a3 with the Cyrenaics (on which see also n. 9 below). Cf. McDowell (1973: 143–4) for a salutary warning against importing the post-Cartesian notion of privacy.

dialogue, will be offering us on his own behalf an important and thoroughly Socratic sense in which other people's thought, at least, *is* open to inspection. Rather than think of the privacy of the mental quite generally, it is safer to say that the privacy recognized by Socrates as required by the Protagorean theory is limited to that of sense-perceptions and their immediate contents, and that where we ourselves might have preferred to explain it along the above lines, his own best shot of making sense of it is in terms of the causal, or quasi-causal, two-party interaction that perception entails. My shivery feeling when standing in the wind is *my* feeling, and not yours or anyone else's, because only an encounter between this wind as it now is and me as I now am could have given birth to it (just as only an encounter between *this* father and *this* mother could have produced *these* offspring).[62]

The immediate objects of our perceptual awareness, then, are not things that *are* out there in the world all along, waiting for us to detect them. Rather they *become,* privately for us, at the moment of our encountering things. Although Socrates associates this privacy with infallibility, there is a strong indication that he does not understand it as, by itself, sufficient for infallibility. For he has already implied (by banning the verb 'be' in favour of 'become'), and will shortly develop explicitly, the further requirement that the two parents in the encounter must be constantly undergoing change. The sense-organ and the object—for example, an eye and a stone—are each in 'slow' change (156c7–d3), meaning that the eye gradually changes its condition through ageing (cf. 181d1), varying health etc., and the stone gradually changes, for instance, its colour. In the example of the wind all this would be more obvious: how the wind feels to me depends very much both on my bodily condition right now and on the way the wind is right now, and both are subject to constant change; but even the much slower changes that typically affect stones and eyes must, on the thesis of universal flux, be

[62] The Protagorean theory will, as it further unfolds at 156b2–7 and 157e1–160d4, attempt to reduce all states of consciousness, or at any rate all truth-evaluable ones, to perceptions, and thus at least implicitly to incorporate them under the same notion of privacy. In the latter passage this includes dreaming and the delusion that one is flying, despite the considerable unclarity as to what, if these are forms of perception, could function as the external 'parent'. Here we have moved well beyond any possible philosophical insight about the intrinsic 'privacy' of the mental, into a procrustean attempt on Protagoras' behalf to extend the Measure Doctrine to all states of belief. See, further, pp. 43 and 52–3 below.

assumed to be going on all the time. The upshot is that no two instants of perceptual encounter are ever indiscernible: my present feeling of cold as I stand in the wind will not be replicated at any other subsequent instant: by then there will be a different subject interacting with a different wind, the two of them therefore generating a different feeling. The importance of this thesis is that, if it is right, no two perceptions can ever be in conflict with each other: each is a unique report of a percept that instantaneously 'becomes' and vanishes. If the wind starts to feel warm to me, I am not entitled to say 'I must have been wrong just now to think the wind cold'. I was right then, and I am right now too. To guarantee this, it might have seemed enough that either I had changed or the wind had changed, but Socrates has good reason for insisting that in fact both must be in constant change, since any change in the wind's perceived properties is *ipso facto* a change in my perceptual state regarding it, and vice versa. If any stability had been left in the picture, there would have been the danger that sooner or later a static perceptual relation might occur: if both the wind and I remained unchanged for even a short while, there would be time for me to revise my estimation of its coldness, the later appearance conflicting with the earlier one, with the implication that at least one must be false. The thesis of universal flux precludes any such possibility.

At 157e1–160d4 Socrates shores up this thesis by explaining how, if it is accepted, even the most obvious cases of false perception will be eliminated—misperceptions due to illness, insanity, or dreaming. These are usually thought to be corrected, and thus shown up as false, by our perceptions of the same objects when healthy, sane, or awake. But according to the Secret Doctrine every change in one's own state has the result that one becomes a different perceiver—a different parent, who should therefore *expect* to give birth to different offspring. Each perception, whatever our current state, truly represents how things instantaneously are (or, more accurately, become) for the instantaneous parents that generate it.[63]

[63] Cf. n. 4 above for the problem of how dreaming etc. can count as perception. As for Socrates' too easy slide between qualitative and numerical identity at 158e5–159a9, I am no more able than others have been to justify it adequately. What should matter is that every change makes you a different perceiver, not a different person.

Socrates is not himself committed by his argument to upholding the thesis of universal change on his own behalf. He has in effect asked the question 'What would the world have to be like in order to make it true that knowledge is perception?', and has arrived at the answer that it would have to be a world of total fluidity. Only in such a world would our knowledge be confined to instantaneous perceptual *relations,* whose information we could not overturn by appeal to any counter-evidence, whether by pausing to take a closer look at something, or by appealing to permanent truths with which they were in conflict. That is why, throughout part I of the dialogue, universal *flux* and universal *relativity* are treated by Socrates as intimately interdependent, if indeed not as identical.

However, while Socrates is not committed by his argument to the truth of this thesis, it is important to appreciate that, to Plato and his readers, the thesis is by no means a ridiculous one either. For Plato tends elsewhere to put forward a view of the sensible world which is remarkably, and non-accidentally, similar to the one outlined here. I shall return to this point in Chapter 4 §2 when considering the Platonic undercurrent of the argument. For the moment I limit myself to one specific question: what kind or kinds of flux are included in the picture Socrates has painted?

Most of the emphasis is placed on *relative* changes: 'If you call it large, it will also turn out small, if heavy, light, and likewise all such cases…' (152d4–6). There can be no doubt that these opposite properties are deemed to belong to the same thing when considered in different relations: what is large or heavy in relation to one thing will turn out small or light in relation to another. For in the well-known passage about dice that follows shortly (154b6–155d5) precisely that point is generalized: it is *only* by appreciating the thoroughgoing relativity of properties that we can prevent our heads from spinning when confronted with cases where, thanks to different juxtapositions, things become larger or more numerous without actually increasing. The message is that relativity, being that par excellence which makes properties radically unstable, lies at the root of flux. The application of this to perception rests on a narrowing of the focus to one particular relation, that of perceiver to perceived: when you perceive your bathwater as hot, a basketball player as tall,[64] your orange juice as

[64] I add this to cater for 154b2, where 'large' is included with 'white' and 'hot' as a property which depends on a relation between perceiver and perceived.

sweet,[65] etc., those properties are just as much the products of some relation (between your foot and the water, between your height and his, between your tongue and the juice) as the numerousness of the dice is.

But can it really be that *all* the changes that underlie flux are relational changes? The 'slow' changes that characterize (and even constitute) the perceptual 'parents'[66]—for example becoming ill, growing, or ageing—are naturally assumed to be not relative but intrinsic changes. Unless *something* is undergoing intrinsic changes, whether of quality or quantity, or at the very least of location, it becomes hard to see how relative changes can take place either. Someone who falls sick could hardly, it may seem, be a different perceiver from their previous healthy self, if falling sick were itself merely a relational change, e.g. becoming sicker merely to the extent that one is now being compared to somebody healthier. And my foot could not perceive the bathwater as hot if it had not first moved into the water. At the very least then, as is in fact made clear from the outset, the flux thesis involves locomotion: things must move so as to form new juxtapositions and mixtures (152d7–8), in which new relativities come to operate. (That there must also be constant qualitative change will be inferred only later, 181c1–182a3).

The problem that may well be worrying us by this stage is: what are the entities that are doing the moving? If they are physical stuffs, it will be hard to avoid the implication that they themselves are not sense-contents but the underlying causes of those contents. In which case, there are after all things of which perceivers are not measures, namely the objective physical truths which underlie the things of which they *are* measures.

I take Socrates to be anticipating this objection at 155e3–156a7, where, in amplifying the perceptual doctrine, he expresses the hope that none of the 'uninitiated' are listening, specifying these as materialists who grant existence only to bodies, excluding 'actions, processes, and everything invisible'. Instead, he attributes the quasi-Protagorean view of perception to 'more sophisticated'

[65] I choose orange juice as a modern counterpart of the example, favoured by the ancients including Plato in the *Theaetetus* (159c11–e6), of wine which tastes sweet to the healthy but bitter to the sick. I am not familiar with this experience (wine tastes bitter to me all the time), but many people have agreed with me that orange juice, which usually tastes sweet, tastes bitter when you have just brushed your teeth.

[66] On these see further pp. 91–3 (Ch. 4 §3) below.

(*kompsoteroi*) thinkers,[67] who reduce all being to active and passive *kinēseis*—changes and#x002F;or motions, among which are included the ‘parents’ in perceptual encounters. He is here preparing us for a Protagorean world in which bodies are replaced with changes.

If that is so, precisely *what* is changing when the parents undergo change? The answer, I think, lies in the thesis that the parents are themselves simply bundles of perceptual twins (157b4–c1):

> According to their nature, things should be spoken of as becoming, being created, perishing, and altering, because if anyone by the way he speaks makes them stationary, whoever does this is easily refuted. And one should speak this way both in particular cases, and about many bundled together—bundles to which they assign the names ‘man’ and ‘stone’, and every animal and kind.

What are the particular items which, when bundled together, constitute men, stones, etc.? Perceived objects are bundles of perceived properties—presumably, in the case of a stone, properties such as hard, white, heavy, etc. This much has been widely noticed, if rarely given its due place in the perceptual theory. Somewhat less frequently noticed is the accompanying tenet that perceiving *subjects* are bundles, not of perceived properties, but of *perceptions.* That this is what Socrates intends here is quite clear from a slightly later passage, 159e7–160a4, where, speaking of the need for the perceiver's identity to be in constant change, he says:

> So I will never become something else while I am perceiving in this way. For the perception of what is different is a different perception, *and makes the perceiver differently qualified and someone else.* Nor will that object which acts on me, by coming into contact with someone else, generate the same product and come to be qualified in that corresponding way. For it will generate a different product from a different person, and become differently qualified.[68]

[67] A historical identity has often been sought for these ‘more sophisticated’ thinkers, most frequently the Cyrenaics. This is, I think, a mistake (cf. n. 3 above). Their teachings are called ‘mysteries’ (156a3), which suggests that they are party to the ‘secret doctrine’, a fictional creation on Socrates' part. And in fact they resemble in a non-accidental way the equally fictional reformed Giants of the *Sophist,* who, much as they do, replace a crude reduction of being to corporeality with an ontology that makes interactive power (δύναμις) the hallmark of being (*Sph.* 247c9–e6; cf. *Tht.* 156a6–7).

[68] This is well analysed by McDowell (1973: 152–4), who, however, holds back from accepting its full implications. The words I have italicized surely mean that every perceptual change in a perceiving subject replaces the old subject with a new one. That Socrates does not go on to specify a change of identity for the object, as he does for the subject, simply reflects his current concern in the passage with the ever-changing identity of the perceiving subject. The Secret Doctrine's need for perceiving subjects to be bundles of perceptions is the strongest reason for taking ‘bundles’ at 157b8–c1 in this rich ontological way, and not just as referring to groups of individuals, an alternative for discussion of which see Brown (1993: 207–8).

Thus, for example, what makes me the perceiver that I am right now is simply the sum of the precise visual, auditory, olfactory, etc. perceptions I am having at this instant; what in addition makes me the perceived object I am right now will no doubt be my colour, my height, and the other properties that some subject is now perceiving.[69]

It can therefore only be to these constituents, individually or collectively, that the change occurs. Specifically, it is changes in my perceptual state that make me a different perceiver, changes in an object's perceived properties that make it a different object. And those changes will themselves consist entirely in shifting relations between perceivers and their objects. If, in such a world, there is *anything* over and above the relativities themselves, it can only be the changes of location on which the perpetual change of the relativities itself depends. And even changes of location could perfectly well be treated as purely relative, on the assumption that there are no absolute spatial coordinates but just positions relative to neighbouring entities. In short, Socrates has constructed an ontology of perceptible properties and perceptions in constant change, outlawing any further entities (particles, elements, forces, etc.; perhaps even space) which might have been thought to underlie those changes.[70]

This is a valiant effort to design a phenomenalist world, one whose contents do not extend beyond the range of what is given in perceptual appearances. But it remains difficult to see how there could fail to be one absolute fact about such a world, namely that it consists of nothing but these volatile perceptions and perceptible

[69] Cf. 157a5–7, on how the same entity can be a perceiving subject in one relation, a perceived object in another. A further question is what can possibly *unify* these bundles in a Protagorean ontology. Given Socrates' readiness, on Protagoras' behalf, to decompose a person's diachronic unity (see n. 5 above), we need not suppose him to be any more concerned about rescuing synchronic unity. It is better to allow this as a weakness of the Secret Doctrine on which Socrates will be able to improve only when he has moved beyond Protagoreanism altogether and introduced a role for the soul: see 184d1–5, and Ch. 4 §6 below.

[70] It is attractive to call this constructed position 'idealism', although see Burnyeat (1982: 4–14) on respects in which it differs from Berkeleian idealism.

properties. Indeed, the whole point of devising the ontology was (or so I have maintained) to ask what the world itself must be like in order to make the Measure Doctrine correct. It would, I think, be a mistake to try to rescue Socrates from the implication that flux is one absolute fact underlying the relativity of all other facts. That the fact of things' being in flux cannot, without disastrous consequences, include itself within its own scope is a half-hidden complication that prefigures the corresponding problem about relativism, later to emerge (see Chapter 3 §2). For relativism too faces unwelcome consequences if it is assumed to apply to itself; and Protagoras will even try insisting that the Measure Doctrine is one thing of which we are *not* measures: 'you must put up with being a measure, whether you want to or not' (167d3–4; cf. 179b4–5). I am suggesting that the ontological equivalent of that epistemological move is already covertly present in the Secret Doctrine: that the world is radically unstable is a stable and non-negotiable fact about the world. There is nothing inherently untenable about such exclusion clauses.[71] Socrates has already on his own account, I have suggested (pp. 32–3 above), treated the 'barren midwife' metaphor as exempt from its own scope: when it comes to understanding the expertise of midwifery itself, Socrates is far from barren. And the later tradition that Socrates professed to know that he knew nothing, although nowhere explicitly prefigured in Plato, Xenophon, or Aristotle, rests on a similar intuition about his modes of thought. It is in principle quite coherent for him to allow the flux component of the Secret Doctrine that same luxury.

3. The Three Theses

Socrates has now distinguished three strands: (1) Theaetetus' definition itself, 'Knowledge is perception'; (2) Protagoras' relativist thesis that man is the measure of all things; and (3) the theory of flux attributed to the Heracliteans. Of these, (1) is the definition under scrutiny, (2) is the substantive philosophical thesis to which it has been assimilated, and (3) describes the only kind of world in which (2) would be true. In Chapter 3 we will track how Socrates

[71] Cf. Burnyeat (1997*b*) for a defence of similar exclusions.

deals with (2), Protagoras' thesis, saving his dismissals of the other two theses for Chapters 4 and 5.

Since Theaetetus' definition, taken in its own right, will be very effectively refuted in the closing pages of part I (184b3–187a3), why bother first to elaborate it with the addition of the Protagorean and Heraclitean strands, and to refute these severally before returning to the main task? From the point of view of the global interpretation proposed in this book, the answer comes readily. We are being taken on what I have called a guided tour of Socrates' philosophical achievement. His own contribution lay in clearing the ground for Platonic metaphysics by exposing the inherent contradictions of what was in his day the prevailing tradition. That this tradition was, in Plato's eyes, dominated above all by belief in relativity and flux is something that emerges not only from the *Theaetetus* itself, but also from the *Cratylus*.[72] Plato sees Socrates as resisting both currents of Presocratic thought, insisting on absolute and stable truths in his own chosen domain of inquiry, ethics, despite the fact that he still lacked the metaphysics of transcendence that would have substantiated his intuitions by clarifying *how* values can be exempt from change. Given this, Plato very naturally seizes the opportunity afforded by part I of the *Theaetetus* to show how and why Socrates abandoned, not just the typically Presocratic empiricist approach to knowledge which Theaetetus' definition echoes, but also the assumptions of pervasive instability and relativity, assumptions which he saw as no less prevalent in the foregoing tradition.

4. *Broad and Narrow Protagoreanism*

Protagoreanism is initially introduced as the thesis that we are, each of us, the measure of how things are for us: what appears a certain way to a given subject *is* that way for that subject. In the interests of assimilating this to Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception, it is quickly repackaged by Socrates as the thesis that what appears *perceptually* in a certain way to each subject is that way for that subject. He achieves this limitation by deciding that the verb 'appear' is being used in its specifically perceptual sense

[72] I argue this in Sedley (2003*b*, ch. 5).

(152b12–13). Yet in much of the critique that will follow it seems to regain its broader sense, spanning all judgement and not just narrowly perceptual 'appearance'. We can follow Gail Fine[73] in calling the two positions that result 'broad Protagoreanism' and 'narrow Protagoreanism': the former makes all appearances authoritative, the latter only sensory appearances. Is this alternation between a narrow and a broad version of Protagoreanism a piece of licence on Socrates' part, or a reflection of Protagoras' actual position?

Unfortunately we know next to nothing about what the historical fifth-century sophist Protagoras intended by his Measure Doctrine. We can be pretty confident that its reported formulation—'Man is the measure of all things…'—is authentic, and that it occurred in his book entitled *Truth*. But regarding its interpretation, virtually the entire ancient tradition was dependent on Plato's construal of it in the *Theaetetus,* and is therefore disqualified as independent evidence. As a result it is hard to know how, if at all, Socrates is using the actual Protagorean thesis for his own ends, how far simply inventing it. It could, for example, be that Protagoras' initial motivation was political, and, if so, that he was more interested in the authority of human groups, including whole cities (cf. *Tht.* 168b6), than in that of isolated individuals.[74]

The Protagoras who appears in Plato's early dialogue *Protagoras* does not reveal his hand as any kind of relativist,[75] although nothing that he says there positively excludes his being one. Perhaps the most one should venture to say on the basis of Plato's own evidence outside the *Theaetetus* is the following. In the *Cratylus,* widely

[73] Fine (1996). I prefer to skirt round the issue raised by Fine (1995, 1996, 1998) of the appositeness of attributing 'relativism' to Protagoras (she herself prefers 'infallibilism'). Briefly, I incline to the view that, on any reading, relativity is too heavily emphasized in the *Theaetetus* account of Protagoras (e.g. 157a6, 160b8–10) to make it prudent to abandon the term, and that we can usefully instead follow Silverman (2000: 123), who classifies Fine's position as a 'relativism of worlds', as distinct from a relativism of truths or one of agents or appearances.

[74] For meticulous discussion of this and other aspects, see Farrar (1988).

[75] To be able to point out that this or that property belongs to things only in some relation, as Protagoras does for beneficial or good at *Prot.* 334a3–c6, is not itself an example of relativism, as some commentators have incautiously inferred, although it might perhaps be used in another context to help ground an argument for relativism, similarly to the 'dice' passage at *Tht.* 154b6–155d5.

agreed to pre-date the *Theaetetus,*[76] he already presents Protagoras as a relativist of the 'broad' persuasion (385e4–386d2).[77] Since in the *Cratylus* Socrates does not have the same motive that he does in the *Theaetetus* to invent an unhistorical Protagoras (he is not interested there in discussing perception, for example), this provides some independent reason for thinking that Protagoras was, so far as the existing historical tradition was concerned, a broad rather than a narrowly perceptual relativist.

There is, in fact, one item of independent evidence, rarely noticed in this context,[78] which strongly supports a historical claim along the above lines. We have a report of a conversation between Protagoras and Zeno of Elea, said to have run as follows:

> 'Tell me, Protagoras,' said Zeno, 'if one grain of millet falls, does it make a noise? And what about one ten-thousandth of a grain?' When Protagoras said that they do not, Zeno went on: 'What if a bushel of millet falls? Does *it* make a noise, or not?' 'It does,' replied Protagoras. 'Well now,' said Zeno, 'does the bushel of millet stand in a ratio to the single grain, and to its ten-thousandth part?' Protagoras agreed. 'Well,' said Zeno, 'won't the noises they make also stand in those same ratios to each other? For as are the things making the noises, so are the noises. In which case, if the bushel makes a noise, the single grain and its ten-thousandth part will also make a noise.' That is how Zeno put the argument.

The full report comes from Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* (1108.18–28), but the basis of the anecdote was already in Aristotle's text (*Physics* 250^{a}19–21). Although the context in Aristotle is a physical one concerning change, it seems to me a highly plausible conjecture, to say the least, that the original context of the discussion was one in which Zeno was engaged in generating a contradiction in Protagoras' position. The device of getting Protagoras to admit the existence of noises below the threshold of

76 In Sedley (2003*b*) I defend a modified version of this. The *Cratylus* belongs with the main body of Plato's middle-period dialogues, i.e. before the *Theaetetus,* as the stylometric data indicate, but shows signs of late re-editing. This, if true, could appear to weaken its reliability as evidence for Plato's pre-*Theaetetus* take on Protagoras. But it seems likely that the passage of the *Cratylus* criticizing Protagoras does pre-date the *Theaetetus,* because it relies solely on the argument from differing degrees of wisdom, which in the *Theaetetus* Socrates will admit can prima facie be answered by Protagoras (see next note and Ch. 3 §1).

77 The criticism there, that Protagoreanism eliminates differing degrees of wisdom, corresponds closely to *Tht.* 161c2–162a3, aimed primarily at broad Protagoreanism.

78 I made the following suggestion briefly in Sedley (1977: 112 n. 85); it is developed by Wardy (1990: 319–23).

perception can be read as exploiting the same ambiguity of 'appear' as I noted above. Protagoras, who equated truth with what appears to each person, had not appreciated that the very same thing might appear in opposite ways to the same person at the same time: it both does (judgementally) and does not (perceptually) appear to Protagoras that a tiny fragment of an ear of corn makes a noise when dropped. Whether the anecdote derived from historical reportage about Zeno,[79] or from a fictional literary dialogue of unknown authorship, it is valuable testimony to a contemporary or near-contemporary interpretation of Protagoras that is independent of Plato. Protagoras was, on this evidence, interpreted as a broad epistemological relativist, for whom the 'appearances' that he proclaimed to be authoritative ranged over both sensory impressions and reflective judgements, apparently without discrimination.

In the light of this, a promising way to interpret Socrates' strategy in the *Theaetetus* will be as follows. Rather than repeat, as he might have done, the Zenonian criticism of Protagoras, he deliberately leaves intact the ambiguity of 'appear' that was already present in Protagoras' thesis. In this way, he can split his critique into two halves (corresponding to broad and narrow Protagoreanism). The first will attack the attribution of sole authority to appearances in the broad sense which includes all beliefs: that is, it will criticize out-and-out relativism. The second will concentrate its attack on the attribution of sole authority to appearances in the narrower, perceptual sense: that is, it will criticize the empiricism implicit in Theaetetus' definition 'Knowledge is perception'. It is not that Socrates is himself confused about the distinction; rather, it suits his strategy to let Protagoras go on being inexplicit about it. Or, it might be better to say, it suits *Plato* to let Socrates leave the ambiguity intact, so that he can display his midwife at work as a critic of two distinct aspects of the existing climate of thought—relativism and empiricism.

What little plausibility Socrates can confer upon the conflation of narrow with broad Protagoreanism is to be found at 156b2–7. The Secret Doctrine characterizes 'perceptions' as follows: 'they are

[79] This availability of a dependable oral tradition about Zeno early enough to be drawn on by Aristotle should not be neglected. Zeno's motion paradoxes (as I plan to argue at greater length elsewhere) must have been preserved for later antiquity solely by Aristotle, since all later reports including Simplicius' depend on Aristotle's, showing that they cannot have been in Zeno's book, to which Simplicius had independent access; they are nevertheless universally agreed to derive from Zeno himself, not from somebody else's literary fiction about him.

called seeings, hearings, smellings, coolings, and heatings, and moreover pleasures, pains, desires, fears, and others, of which countless ones have no name but a huge number do have a name.' And soon after, at 157d7–9, Socrates and Theaetetus speak in a way which takes it for granted that 'good' and 'beautiful' are by now among the predicates that the Protagorean theory caters for. The idea is that our 'perceptions' of the world are not limited to the registering of colours, sounds, etc., but include all the affective and evaluative states that accompany our sensory interaction with the world, and along with these the evaluative predicates that we attach to things. Thus we may infer that if, for example, the assembly decides that going to war is a good idea, this will be the expression of its collective desires or fears, which are themselves its direct and incorrigible registerings of the way the world currently is for the assembly's members. Any such diagnosis involves a highly reductive account of human rationality, and there is no reason to think either that the historical Protagoras held such a view or that Plato seriously attributes it to him. It is, in its present strategic context, no more than a sticking plaster to hide the considerable gap that remains between narrow and broad Protagoreanism.

The fact that Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception merges into both narrow and broad Protagoreanism makes it hard to supply any label that will adequately capture the underlying thesis to whose refutation part I is devoted. However, I shall permit myself in the remainder of this book to call part I, as I have already been doing, Socrates' refutation of 'empiricism'. This is because on both the narrow and the broad reading Theaetetus' equation of knowledge with perception is treated as singling out our sensory experience of the world as the sole route to knowledge. On the narrower of the two readings, sensory experience already exhausts our knowledge; on the broader reading, it is merely the basis of a potentially comprehensive range of cognitions about the world and its contents. But on either version the empiricist canon is observed: there is no kind of knowledge which does not either consist in or depend on sensory experience.[80]

It is on the critique of broad Protagoreanism that I shall focus in the next chapter.

[80] Cf. the characterization of part I by the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus,* 'Since…from the fact that the senses have something striking about them those who overvalued them attributed accuracy to them as well, this is the first belief that he will criticize' (3.7–15).

3 Relativism

1. The First Critique of Protagoras (161b8–168c7)

Socrates now sets about his criticism of broad Protagoreanism. But in order to ensure that it is definitively refuted, he allows Protagoras (long dead, but represented formally by his friend Theodorus, and philosophically by Socrates) a full reply. It will be only thereafter that he feels able to push Protagoras into one or more corners from which he cannot any longer extricate himself. The first phase of attack, with Protagoras' hypothesized replies, can be summarized as follows.[81]

Criticisms	Replies on behalf of Protagoras
1. (161c2–d2) Why 'man' rather than any perceiver, e.g. 'pig'?	(162e2–163a1) This is an appeal to plausibility, not proof
	(167b7–c4) [Even plants are measures of their own truths]
2. (161d2–e3) If people are each a 'measure' of their own truth, why do we rate some (e.g. Protagoras himself) wise?	(166d1–167d4) Wisdom entails not greater grasp on truth, but making good things instead of bad appear to (hence be true for) others
3. (161e3–162a3) Dialectic becomes pointless, if all beliefs are true	(167e3–168a2) [The purpose of dialectic is to correct your respondent's 'failures', produced by himself or his previous associates]
4. (162c2–7) [How will even gods be wiser than humans?]	(162d5–e2) Protagoras is a self-declared religious agnostic
5. Counter-examples to 'knowledge is perception':	
(*a*) (163a7–c5) perceiving without knowing: foreign languages, illiterate readers;	Reply to (5*a*) (163b8–c4): they perceive and know the sounds and shapes; they neither perceive nor know the meaning
(*b*) (163c5–164b12) knowing without (any longer) perceiving: memory;	Reply to (5*b*): *either* (*b*1) (166b1–4): Memory is a prolongation of the original sensory experience, so (implicitly) *can* count as knowledge[82]
(*c*) (165b1–c10) simultaneously perceiving and not perceiving: one eye open, one covered;	*or* (*b*2) (166b4–5): You *can* simultaneously know and not know the same thing[83]
(*d*) (165d2–e4) perceiving 'dimly', 'from afar', etc.	*or* (*b*3) (166b5–c1): The flux doctrine removes personal identity over time and thus eliminates memory
	(No replies to *c* or *d*)

81 Square brackets indicate questions and answers that are at best implicit in the text.

82 Translating 166b3–4 as 'do you think anyone is going to concede to you that if [rather than "when"; McDowell, similarly Levett (at least down to 2003)] one is no longer experiencing something, one can have present in one a memory of that thing', with Rowe, Welbourne, and Williams (1982). On the alternative reading, Protagoras is denying that there is memory.

83 Despite the initial appearance that this answers 5*c*, it in fact seems to pick up on the reference to 5*b* at 166a4, implying the solution that you can know something in so far as you remember it but simultaneously not know it in so far as you are not perceiving it.

Although it is broad Protagoreanism that is under attack, we may note in (1) and (5) how this is being construed as built up from, rather than simply ignoring, the narrow, perceptual version of the Measure Doctrine. For present purposes I shall expand on only one part of the debate, which I have labelled (2). The question posed here, how if everybody is right some can be wiser than others, is one of special importance to Plato, as we can infer from the fact that in the parallel critique of Protagoras in the *Cratylus* (385e4–386d2) it is the sole argument deployed by Socrates, and is treated by both

interlocutors as a sufficient refutation of the Measure Doctrine. That it is not treated as so conclusive here in the *Theaetetus* may indicate that Plato has in the meantime seen how Protagoras might reply (a sign, perhaps, that the reply we meet here was not already to be found in Protagoras' book). The result is that Socrates will be obliged to draw more heavily than he did in the *Cratylus* on his structural understanding of expertise, as we shall see in §7 of this chapter.

Protagoras' imagined answer is one of considerable ingenuity. The 'wisdom' of an educator like Protagoras lies in the fact that he can *change for the better* how things appear to other people. The expert doctor makes the patient feel well by, for example, making his food taste sweet instead of bitter to him—indeed, we might be tempted to add, by making the entire world feel, i.e. appear, better to him. Even farmers, by making their plants healthy, are making them *feel* better (cf. *Timaeus* 77a3–c5 for Plato's own conviction that plants have pleasant and painful pereptions). Along the same lines, an educator does not increase the store of truths in his pupils, but rather gives them good beliefs in place of bad. Finally, Protagoras will say, experts in rhetoric are those who can make the public hold not truer, but good, beliefs about what is just and admirable.

There is no need to worry that the status of 'good' in this account must escape relativization. Protagoras has not been trapped—at least, not yet—into admitting goodness as an objective value independent of each subject's judgement. The account he has given would be fully satisfied by the following example. Pericles persuades the Athenians to spend their allies' money on building the Parthenon. Since this now appears to them to be desirable, it *is* so for them. And why do they later consider Pericles wise? Because, in the light of the outcome—the building of the Parthenon—what Pericles persuaded them was desirable appears to them to be a good thing of which to believe this. In other words, for all we have learnt at this stage the goodness of the appearances instilled by the expert can perfectly well fall within the scope of the overall relativization. Socrates, at any rate, makes no effort to suggest that it cannot.[84]

[84] The issues involved in deciding between what Burnyeat calls the 'uncompromising' and 'compromising' interpretations are illuminatingly weighed up by McDowell (1973: 165–7) and Burnyeat (1990: 23–8).

2. The Second Critique of Protagoras (169d3–171e9)

We now come to the most celebrated, and most controversial, part of Socrates' criticism of Protagoras, the self-refutation argument.[85]

It falls into two separate arguments. The first (170c2–9) raises problems for the status of false beliefs; the second raises problems for the status of the Measure Doctrine itself. Since the second is explicitly said to impose the same constraints on the Measure Doctrine as the first does on the denial of false beliefs (170d1–2), my approach will be to scrutinize the first carefully in order to get help with the second.

The first argument is very simple as stated. After establishing that most people believe there to be false as well as true beliefs (169d3–170c1), Socrates continues as follows (170c2–8):

> How then shall we run the argument *for Protagoras*? Are we to say that people always believe what is true, or sometimes what is true and sometimes what is false? From both of these, I take it, it results that they do not always believe what is true, but both. For ask yourself, Theodorus, whether one of Protagoras' supporters, or you yourself, would be willing to contend that no one thinks anyone else to be ignorant and to have false beliefs.

This dilemmatic argument against the Measure Doctrine boils down to the following:

(1) Many people believe that there are false beliefs.Therefore,
(2) if all beliefs are true, there are false beliefs;
(3) if not all beliefs are true, there are false beliefs;
(4) therefore, either way, there are false beliefs.

Now (2) may look misguided. The antecedent of the conditional, 'If all beliefs are true…', expresses the main tenet of the Measure Doctrine, but the sense in which, according to the Measure Doctrine, all beliefs are true is that they are true *for those who hold them*. In that case the consequent in (2) should be simply that there are false beliefs *for those who think that there are false beliefs*. But then, if the Measure Doctrine is assumed to be correct, (4) could establish no more than that there are

[85] For critical discussion of this argument, see especially Burnyeat (1976*b*), Waterlow (1977), Denyer (1991), Emilsson (1994), Fine (1998). My own proposal takes its lead from Burnyeat, and its main innovation is to try to show how the text itself can deliver the key insight (no worlds within worlds) which Burnyeat has already supplied.

false beliefs for those who think that there are. And this sounds if anything more like a vindication of the Measure Doctrine than a refutation of it. The refutation would, in fact, be no refutation at all.

A solution to this problem is, I think, provided by the words 'for Protagoras', which I have italicized in the above quotation. The manuscripts are here divided between a vocative, 'O Protagoras', and a dative, 'for Protagoras', and contrary to all the modern editions I have opted for the latter, which I take to indicate that everything that follows will be answering the question what is the case *for Protagoras himself*. (That is why the concluding question takes care to establish that Protagoreans must themselves concede that many people believe there to be false beliefs.)

On this reading, all of steps (1)–(4) are relativized to Protagoras—they tell us what is the case *in his world*.

In using this latter expression (borrowed from Myles Burnyeat), I do not pretend to reduce the relativizing locution 'for X' to a more basic concept, 'in X's world'. I am simply assuming the equation of someone's world with the entire set of truths to which that person does or could assent. Since Protagorean relativism's privacy thesis (pp. 40–2 above) excludes the sharing of any truth between two or more individuals, it follows that no two individuals occupy the same world, thus understood. Each person's truths are therefore contextualized exclusively in that person's own world. Thinking of it this way will help elucidate the point I shall proceed to develop next.

A cardinal aspect of the Measure Doctrine is one which I shall call the 'single-relativization assumption'. According to the Measure Doctrine, every truth is relativized to some judging subject, whether an individual or a group. But no truth is, or could be, hierarchically relativized to *two or more* subjects. That is, there are no truths of the form 'For X, such and such is the case for Y'. The qualifier 'for X' means 'in X's world', and although Y may have a place in X's world, Y's world does not. The single-relativization assumption is never stated, but it seems to be unfailingly observed, and once we appreciate that to relativize a truth is to locate it in somebody's world it should be clear why double relativization would simply make no sense.[86] Y's world being private to Y entails

[86] This way of putting the point owes a good deal to Burnyeat (1976*b*). Cf. Denyer (1991: 90–4) for a similar interpretation, and also the comparable insight of McCabe (2000) that Protagoras' relativism is 'flat', in not allowing one to have beliefs about one's own beliefs.

its being altogether outside X's experience, and therefore not a subject of truth for X.

Since, then, the above-quoted argument is working out what is the case *in Protagoras' world,* there is no scope for the defensive move that I sketched a little earlier. Step (1) establishes that *in Protagoras' world* there are many who believe there to be false beliefs.[87] Step (2) establishes that *in Protagoras' world,* if it is, as established, a world where everybody is right, there are false beliefs: not that in Protagoras' world there are false beliefs *in other people's worlds,* because the single-relativization assumption would render any such idea senseless. The same applies to (3): if Protagoras had not after all insisted, or in the light of the foregoing objection had retracted his insistence, that everybody is right, exactly the same conclusion would have followed: in his world there would be false beliefs. In short, even in Protagoras' own world there are false beliefs, in direct contradiction of his own Measure Doctrine.

It has been important to give this short first sub-argument its due, because, as I have already noted, it is announced as setting the pattern for the second, and much more widely discussed, self-refutation argument, which now follows at 170e7–171c7. As a preliminary to that second argument (170d4–e6), Socrates clarifies that, according to the Measure Doctrine, if you believe something but thousands disagree with you about it, that thing is true for you, false for the thousands. This now leads him into the argument itself (170e7–171c7). Note from my italics in the first sentence how it opens in a fashion vitally parallel to the first argument:

> SOCRATES. What is the case *for Protagoras himself*? Isn't it necessary that, if [A] not even he believed that man is the measure, and the many didn't either (as indeed they don't), this 'truth' that he wrote about is so for nobody. If, on the other hand, [B] he himself did believe it, but the masses don't agree, you know that first [i] to the extent that those who don't think so exceed those who do, to that same extent it isn't so more than it is so.
> THEODORUS. That's necessary, given that it will be so and not so according to a count of individual beliefs.
> SOCRATES. Second [ii] comes the most subtle point. On the one hand, [ii.1] Protagoras agrees, regarding his own view, that the view of those who

[87] This is not a double relativization. It would become one only if 'Many people believe that …' (1) were converted into 'For many people it is the case that …', and it is no accident that Socrates does not attempt that move.

> believe the opposite, i.e. who think he is wrong, is *true,* since he agrees that everybody believes things that are so.
> THEODORUS. Absolutely correct.
> SOCRATES. Then he would agree that his own view is false, if he agrees that the view of those who think he is wrong is true?
> THEODORUS. He must.
> SOCRATES. On the other hand, [ii.2] the others do not agree that *they* are wrong?
> THEODORUS. No.
> SOCRATES. And, on the basis of what he has written, he for his part agrees that *this* belief is true.
> THEODORUS. Apparently.
> SOCRATES. So [ii.3] it will be disputed by everybody, starting with Protagoras. Or rather, it will be *endorsed* by Protagoras on every occasion on which he agrees with the person who is speaking against him that the beliefs of that person are true at that time.[88] And Protagoras himself will agree that neither a dog nor just any human being is a measure about anything he hasn't learnt. Isn't that so?
> THEODORUS. It is.
> SOCRATES. [C] In that case, since it will be disputed by everybody, the 'truth' of Protagoras could not be true for anybody—neither for someone else nor for Protagoras himself.

To (Bii)—proclaimed by Socrates the 'most subtle' argument—the traditional objection runs along the same lines as I sketched in connection with the first argument: from the fact that most people disagree with Protagoras, it should not follow that he is wrong, but just that he is wrong *for those who think him wrong.* The reply to that objection should, correspondingly, follow the same lines as I proposed when defending the first argument; and the opening words, 'What is the case for Protagoras himself?', matching as they do the opening of the first argument, strongly encourage that expectation. It is *in Protagoras' own world* that he must admit his critics to be right.

A difficulty, which has obscured this strategy, is that the relativization of the argument to Protagoras—its localization within his own world—having been announced at the outset, does not in fact then begin immediately. The first step (A) is as it were a

[88] I am unconvinced by the syntax of the text as traditionally punctuated (see e.g. OCT), despite the attempt to explain it in Campbell (1861, ad loc.). To obtain the above construal, I delete the comma after δοξάζειν in 171b12, and insert a full stop after the next word, τότε, in c1. For τότε similarly postponed to the end of its clause, cf. 199b9.

parenthetical beginning, which will be put to work only at the end of the argument (**C**), when we have left Protagoras' world behind: if (as will eventually be established) no one at all thinks that Protagoras is right, he is right *for nobody*—that is, in no world whatsoever. It is only with (B) that, as announced, we enter Protagoras' world. For (Bi), '…to the extent that those who don't think so exceed those who do, to that same extent *it isn't so more than it is so*', confirms that we are now inside Protagoras' world. If we were not, the final words should have been expected to be 'it isn't so for more people than those for whom it is so'. It is because we are now inside Protagoras' world, that, given also the single-relativization assumption, the comparative conclusion must limit itself to telling us how the Measure Doctrine fares in Protagoras' own world, and not in anyone else's.

The same applies to the whole of (Bii). When Protagoras is forced to agree that his opponents' view is correct, the reason why this is not qualified as 'correct *for them*' is that his responses are establishing what is true in his own world.

It is only with (C) that we at last move out of Protagoras' world and generalize across worlds, thus picking up the point left hanging in (A): the Measure Doctrine has now been shown not to be true in anybody's world. This is the final refutation, and Socrates has no need to attempt the further inference from 'not true in anybody's world' to 'absolutely not true'. If the Measure Doctrine locates truth in individual worlds, but has to concede that it is itself false in every conceivable one of those worlds, that is already a complete self-refutation.

Finally, we may ask why, in accordance with my global interpretation of the *Theaetetus,* the strategies which we have seen used against Protagoras should be presented as a Socratic legacy. They arguably fall, in one way or another, under item 6 in the ten principles of midwifery listed on pp. 33–4 above: Socrates' expertise in refutation. To get clearer about this, a useful guide is Socrates' critique in the *Euthydemus* of the closely related puzzle, also associated with the name of Protagoras (286c2–3), that it is impossible to speak falsely. We will see in part II of the *Theaetetus* that Socrates' legacy, without a metaphysical backing, is by itself not quite sufficient to give a positive account of how falsity can in fact occur (pp. 133–4 below). But already in the highly Socratic *Euthydemus*

he offers negative objections to the denial of falsity which are strongly mimicked in the *Theaetetus*' criticisms of Protagoras.[89]

One of Socrates' questions to Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who propound the falsity paradox, is how, if no one is ever wrong either in speech or in thought, these two sophists can present themselves as experts who have something to teach (287a1–b1)—a clear forerunner to the main point developed in the *Theaetetus*' first critique of Protagoras (pp. 54–6 above). And the same passage contains almost equally clear antecedents of the self-refutation argument deployed in the second critique of Protagoras. At 287e4–288a1 we find Socrates subjecting the thesis which denies falsity to a dilemma strongly reminiscent of the first movement (170c2–8) of the *Theaetetus*' self-refutation argument. 'Do you say that I was wrong, or not? For if I was not wrong not even you will refute me, for all your wisdom… But if I was wrong, what you are saying is still incorrect, when you claim that it is impossible to be wrong.'[90]

These links to the *Euthydemus* should be enough to confirm that the refutation of broad Protagoreanism in the *Theaetetus* is meant to be read as displaying to us an authentic Socratic legacy. Generically, this legacy is to be located in the skill of exposing intrinsic incoherence—or, in the idiom of the midwife model, in the skill of testing which pregnancies are authentic and viable and which not. More specifically, it manifests itself in one of Socrates' characteristic devices for exposing the incoherence of sophistic positions.

3. Value Relativism (172a1–c1)

It would be hard to think of a passage that is at the same time as widely admired and as infrequently discussed as the self-declared Digression (172a1–177c4) that stands at the heart of the *Theaetetus*. In antiquity its wording, especially its proclamation of godlikeness

[89] For *Euthydemus* as re-creating an early Socrates, see p. 10 n. 18 above.

[90] Cf. Burnyeat (2002: 41), who classifies it as a self-refutation argument. Although in the *Euthydemus* context this actual label may mislead (in that the dilemma is being invoked there in response to a quite different thesis, not to the denial of falsity itself), the dilemmatic argument palpably *is* an antecedent of the *Theaetetus* self-refutation argument, and especially of its first movement at 170c2–8.

as the key to virtue, was constantly echoed by Platonists, becoming the official formulation of their moral goal.[91] In modern times some other themes from it, especially the anecdote of Thales—so busy looking at the stars that he fell down a well—have drawn close scholarly scrutiny;[92] but no one has made much progress with integrating the Digression, taken as a whole, into the dialogue in which it is found. Most general discussions of the dialogue—whether explicitly or implicitly—have taken its self-description as a 'digression' at face value and largely excluded it from consideration.[93]

The context within the *Theaetetus* is Socrates' critique of the relativism embodied in Protagoras' dictum 'Man is the measure of all things'. Down to this point, as we have seen, Socrates has succeeded in arguing that in at least two cases the Measure Doctrine fails. First, it cannot be applied to matters involving expertise: the popular consensus that the layman has more tendency to be wrong than the expert has been vindicated by the dilemmatic argument in favour of the existence of false beliefs at 169d3–170c9 (pp. 57–91 above). Secondly, the Measure Doctrine cannot be applied to itself, because if everyone were equally a measure of truth then Protagoras would have to concede that the vast majority of people, who believe the Measure Doctrine to be false, are right (170e7–171c7; pp. 59–61 above).

That partial victory, however, does not yet altogether eliminate the threat that relativism poses. For, Socrates remarks as the Digression opens, there are plenty of people who are selective relativists, applying their relativism particularly to a set of key 'political'

91 The fullest survey of this tradition remains Merki (1952). See also Passmore (1970), Roloff (1970), Annas (1999, ch. 3: 'Becoming Like God: Human Nature and the Divine'), and Reuter (2001). I have myself examined it as a theme in Plato's dialogues, including *Theaetetus,* in Sedley (1999). In the present chapter I have thought the *Theaetetus* Digression out again from scratch; in doing so I have benefited from discussions with Alice van Harten in particular.

92 Esp. Blumenberg (1976).

93 Ryle (1966: 158), 'philosophically quite pointless'; according to McDowell (1973: 174) the Digression has the function of a modern footnote or appendix. There are more substantial discussions by Barker (1976), Polansky (1992: 134–48), Rue (1993), Bradshaw (1998), Butti de Lima (2002), Spinelli (2002), and Blondell (2002: 289–303), among others. Burnyeat (1990: 31–9) remains the most serious attempt with which I am familiar to integrate the Digression into the dialogue as a whole. Ioppolo (1999*a,* pp. xxxvii–xli) has the merit of emphasizing the Socratic nature of the Digression. There are also valuable remarks on the subject in Caizzi (2002, esp. 86). I have sketched my own interpretation in Sedley (1999: 311–14).

or 'civic' values.[94] These diminished relativists[95] would concede to Socrates that there is an absolute fact of the matter when it comes to determining what is *beneficial,* as when we rightly entrust life-and-death decisions to doctors or navigators rather than rely on our own untutored preferences. But they believe that the core values by which society is governed *are* irreducibly relativized, to individuals and socio-political groups, depending entirely on local civic practices, laws, norms, and preferences. The specific values which are mentioned as succumbing to such relativism are initially threefold: (*a*) fair (*kala*) and foul (*aischra*), terms which in Greek usage span the aesthetic and the moral; (*b*) just and unjust; (*c*) pious and impious.[96] It is the first two pairs that most familiarly invite relativist analysis, since it can seem obvious—and had seemed obvious to some Greeks at least since Herodotus had catalogued the weird and wonderful practices of neighbouring cultures—that local custom alone determines aesthetic, moral, and judicial norms. There was also a

[94] The earliest known representative of this school of thought is Socrates' own teacher Archelaus (on whom cf. p. 161 below), said to have considered justice to be purely conventional (νόμῳ; D.L. II 16). Although the same relativist position is hard to pin on any named 5th-century sophists (cf. Bett 1989), it is one that Plato presents as widespread (not only here but also in *Laws* X 889e3–890a9), and we have no reason to disbelieve him: even today moral relativism has fairly few philosophical proponents but is nevertheless widely believed or assumed.

[95] This natural reading of 172b7–8, ὅσοι γε δὴ μὴ παντάπασι τὸν Πρωταγόρον λόγον λέγουσιν, as 'those at any rate who do not absolutely propound Protagoras' thesis' is supported by 177c6–d7. Caizzi (2002, esp. 83–4) argues for the rendering 'those who do *not at all* propound the thesis of Protagoras'. But I am not convinced that she has found any unassailable parallel for a negated παντάπασι with this meaning. Her two passages where παντάπασι indisputably sits within the negated clause, *Rep.* 540d1–2 and *Laws* 811c6, can both be, and frequently are, understood as matching the traditional rendering of the *Theaetetus* passage, i.e. 'not absolutely'. At *Eryx.* 401c6 (and e3, which she compares) παντάπασι may easily be construed as external to the negated clause, and I suspect that that alone is why it permits the reading 'absolutely not', i.e. 'not at all'. The *Theaetetus* passage clearly matches the former type. If I am right, further evidence will be needed before it can be shown that her alternative rendering is linguistically possible.

[96] Readers using the Levett translation (at least as printed down to 2003) should be warned that the references to piety in the Digression do not show up adequately in it. At 172a2 'the pious and impious' is rendered 'what is sanctioned by religion and what is not', while at 176b2 'pious' becomes 'pure'. Most other translations likewise fail to keep a consistent translation between the two passages. McDowell's 'in conformity with religion or not…religious'—is the least misleading among the English translations I have checked. In this respect the most accurate I have seen is Valgimigli, 'santo…santità', although she misconstrues the continuation of the latter, μετὰ φρονήσεως, on which see p. 75 below, and also uses a non-matching translation for ἀνόσια at 176d1. See also n. 32 below.

widespread if not prevalent perception among fifth- and fourth-century intellectuals that, at least so far as justice is concerned, the local provisions that structure it have been artificially imposed for the sake of social expediency, and do not reflect any antecedent principles of right and wrong given in nature. So it is no surprise that justice turns out to be the main focus as Socrates develops his objections to this brand of moral relativism. The fair and foul are not further considered in the Digression.[97] Piety, on the other hand, continues to play a subtle role. I shall return in due course to the extremely important lessons about piety. But in order to reach that stage we must follow the order of events which Socrates dictates, with a strong initial focus on the paradigmatic case of justice.

4. *Broadening Perspectives (172c2–176a1)*

The main function of what follows (172c2–174b8) is to exhibit justice as not after all the relative value that so many believe it to be. The impression of its relativity arises from the narrow perspective that is enforced if one concentrates on issues of justice and injustice within the city—in the law courts, the assembly, the council. The law courts above all are emphasized, largely because of the constant, if oblique, allusions to Socrates' own imminent trial. It is here worth recalling the *Gorgias,* where there are many equally pointed references to the philosopher's inability to defend himself in court, thanks to his refusal to practise the debased form of rhetoric which the law courts value. Bear in mind too the Cave simile in the *Republic.* There the prisoner who escapes from the cave's world of shadows, but returns to enlighten his fellow citizens, looks foolish 'in the law courts and elsewhere' (517d8) when he is forced to argue about mere shadows of justice, making it no surprise that the unliberated prisoners would like to kill him (as implied at 517a4–6). These same oblique predictions of Socrates' eventual condemnation in court are just as strongly present in the *Theaetetus* Digression, where once again it is emphasized how comic the philosopher will seem in court (174c2–6). What is lacking here—as my

[97] Caizzi (2002: 78–81) helpfully cites *Laws* 889e3–890a9 as helping to explain why καλὸν now recedes: unlike 'just' and 'pious', the highly relativistic 'atheists' there allow that there is a natural as well as a merely conventional καλὸν. (Note, however, that Polus at *Gorg.* 483c8–484a2 makes the same claim for 'just' as well.)

global interpretation predicts—is the metaphysics of the Cave, with its distinction between the sensible world inside the cave and the intelligible world outside it. Instead, the contrast between the chained and the released prisoners is represented by one between those who frequent the law courts, described as slaves, and philosophers, who alone count as free. Socrates explains this difference between the judicial and the philosophical realms as due to rigidly enforced time-limits,[98] which constrain legal speeches but not philosophical discourse. Its relevance to Socrates' own fate will be brought back into focus in the closing lines of the dialogue, where, eerily reminding us that the philosopher's free use of time is not altogether invulnerable to the slavish demands of the law courts, Socrates says he must now leave, postponing further philosophical discussion until the following day, in order to attend a hearing with the king Archon at which he will answer Meletus' indictment. (Readers familiar with the *Euthyphro* will be aware that, in the dramatic world created by Plato, on the way to this hearing Socrates will meet the religious zealot Euthyphro, and, before proceeding to the hearing, engage Euthyphro in a conversation devoted explicitly to the nature of piety. This may not be insignificant for our understanding of the Digression.)

So far, in the opening part of the Digression, the philosopher's lack of aptitude for the legal process has been presented in largely familiar terms, establishing a link with Plato's earlier attempts, from the *Apology* onwards, to account for Socrates' failure to secure an acquittal. But next we are going to see that old theme exploited for a new purpose—to vindicate the status of justice as an absolute value.

The philosopher's indifference to the world of the assembly, the law court, and the council is portrayed in almost comically extreme terms. Not only does such a philosopher not know the way to the marketplace and other places of political and legalistic commerce, or indeed know anything else about the political and social affairs of the city, he does not even know that he does not know these things (173c7–e1). The obviously exaggerated diagnosis serves to make the philosopher the polar opposite of those self-styled worldly experts whom Socrates in the *Apology* describes himself as having interrogated: on questions of real ethical importance they had proved not

[98] Cf. *Apol.* 37a6–b2, where Socrates attributes his expected condemnation to the short time allotted to capital trials at Athens and his consequent inability to persuade the jury.

only to be ignorant on the matters in hand but, even worse, to be ignorant of their very ignorance.[99] The philosopher, it turns out, treats mundane matters in exactly the way that non-philosophers treat the true concerns of philosophy. By making the philosopher the mirror image of worldly 'experts', Socrates has already embarked on what by the end of the Digression will be his demarcation of two contrasting realms inhabited by them, the one realm inherently mortal, the other divine.

Should we be bothered by the exaggeration in this picture of the philosopher? As is often pointed out, Socrates himself certainly knew his way to the marketplace, where he spent much of his time. He also appears at the end of the dialogue to know how to get to the law courts, leaving the scene of the dialogue for the court of the king Archon without any hint that he does not know the way (although we might remind ourselves that the philosopher not only does not know his way to the law courts, he does not even know that he does not know it).

In reply to this worry, it is vital to bear in mind that the philosopher described here is never fully identified with Socrates himself. Socrates is speaking, not of all philosophers, but of their 'leaders' (173c7–8), a device which, although formally employed only in order to exclude unworthy dabblers in philosophy from consideration, perhaps also signals a degree of idealization.[100] His own apparently unique god-given mission as midwife to his fellow citizens, we may take it, has kept his mind more within the city than would be the case for the idealized philosopher whom he is describing.

As the Digression proceeds, we will see Socrates' picture of ideal philosophical detachment further developed into what has often come over to readers as advocacy of a callous disregard for his fellow citizens. The philosopher's interest in broad definitional questions about justice and man, we will learn, makes him relatively indifferent to practical questions regarding actual justice between actual human beings. It is a mistake to try to explain away this prominent feature of the Digression. That a life of pure intellectual endeavour, or 'contemplation', as it came to be known, is superior to one devoted to civic virtue, more godlike, and for these reasons more worthy of the philosopher, was a doctrine which Plato would

[99] *Apol.* 21b1–22e6. This theme finds an echo at 176d5–6: the unphilosophical are that much more the sort of people they think they are not for the very fact of not thinking it.

[100] My thanks to Alice van Harten for this suggestion.

enunciate at the climax of the *Timaeus* (89d2–90d7),[101] and which his pupil Aristotle would advocate in largely similar terms at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[102] It is important that we should try to understand and contextualize this recurrent thesis of ancient ethics, rather than seek ways of reading the texts that will save our philosophical heroes from saying it in the first place.

Now is not the right moment to pursue so ambitious an agenda. But it is the right moment to observe how the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is being presented by Plato as that doctrine's harbinger, with his distinction between a lower, civic morality and a higher one of godlike self-distancing. The message of the Digression is that Socrates did not himself fully lead this latter, godlike life, presumably because his divine mission as midwife tied him to his fellow citizens:[103] that is why, as we have seen, the idealized philosopher whom he portrays is not directly identifiable with Socrates himself. Nevertheless, it is implied, his life pointed towards this philosophical ideal, both, we may speculate, through his minimalist approach to the political and legal affairs of the city, and because his midwife role itself led him to focus on the broad definitional questions that transcend the particular and the local.

It may at the same time be significant that the fully depoliticized philosopher whose progress we shall be pursuing in the Digression ends up authentically *just*. There is no indication that this justice, and the state of understanding in which it consists, will thereafter be applied to the affairs of the city: on the contrary, he will have left the city behind in all but body (173e2–3, quoted below). But the fact that Socrates emphasizes justice, rather than, for example, pure wisdom, as the divine attribute which the philosopher will attain looks like a hint that his philosophical ideal could yet, in the right circumstances, be harnessed to the good of the city. That is—bearing in mind the return to the Cave in the *Republic*—philosophy as Socrates understood it is such that it might be *re*politicized, even if that is not what he himself envisaged.

[101] Is this in contradiction with the *Republic,* where philosophers are expected to govern? No. That obligation arises only in the special context of an ideal city which has given them their philosophical education. Philosophers in ordinary cities like Athens are *not* required to do the same (*Rep.* 520a6–c1).

[102] I explore the relation between the *Timaeus* and *Nicomachean Ethics* on this in Sedley (1999).

[103] Cf. Socrates' opening words, 143d1–6: he cares for the philosophical advancement of Athenians more than that of Cyrenaeans.

How do these considerations fit with Socrates' barrenness? In Chapter 1 (pp. 33–4) I listed ten principles underlying midwifery, each of which has to be mastered by Socrates in his midwife role, and which therefore appear to constitute an exception to his self-declared intellectual barrenness. A concern with universal definitional truths was, indeed, one of those items (no. 3). It is slightly less obvious how his political non-involvement should be similarly accommodated within the principles of midwifery, but an answer is to hand. In the Socratic dialogues, it is precisely Socrates' understanding of how expertise functions that convinces him that politics, as conventionally understood and conducted, is no expertise (e.g. *Protagoras* 319b1–d7; *Gorgias, passim*). And that may suffice to bring his choice of political minimalism broadly under item 8, the expert midwife's understanding of the nature of expertise itself.

The ensuing passage deserves to be quoted in full (173e1–174b6):

> SOCR. … His reason for this detachment from them [i.e. civic matters] is not reputation. The reality is that only his body is in the city and lives there, while his mind, thinking all these things small and of no worth, devalues them and flies everywhere, in Pindar's words, ‘in the depths of the earth’, doing plane geometry, ‘and above the heaven’, doing astronomy, and investigating in every respect the entire nature of the whole of each of the things there are, and never settling for anything near at hand.
> THEOD. What do you mean by this Socrates?
> SOCR. Like in the story of how Thales, when he was doing astronomy, and looking upwards, fell into a well, Theodorus. An elegantly witty Thracian slave-girl is said to have teased him for wanting to know the things in the heaven while not noticing what was right in front of him at his feet. The same jibe will do for everyone who spends their time on philosophy. For the reality is that such people do not notice their neighbour: not just what their neighbour is doing, but practically whether he is a man or some other creature. What he does ask, and work hard to investigate, is what a man is, and what, as distinct from other kinds, it is appropriate for a nature of this kind to do or undergo.

This is a highly complex piece of writing, which responds well to the two-level reading that I have advocated for the *Theaetetus* as a whole. What Socrates—the metaphysically unsophisticated Socrates portrayed in the dialogue—intends seems to be the following. The philosophical type always seeks the broadest possible view on things. To get his broad perspective, he roams everywhere in thought, like one who, in the otherwise unknown passage of Pindar quoted here,

flies ‘in the depths of the earth and above the heaven’. His ventures ‘in the depths of the earth’ are taken by Socrates to represent plane geometry, those above the heaven astronomy, as in both cases he makes explicit.[104]

That philosophers should be saddled with these mathematical concerns, and by the mathematical tyro Socrates of all people, is not as surprising as might at first appear, in that all along he has made it clear that he is using ‘philosophy’ in a sense broad enough to embrace the mathematical sciences: dramatically, this has the function of treating Socrates' addressee, the geometer Theodorus, in a courteously inclusive way.[105] But in addition, for those of us tracking the Platonic subtext, it surely adumbrates the *Republic*'s integration of the mathematical sciences into philosophical training.

Socrates is at the same time appropriating, and reinterpreting in his own favour, the old calumny from Aristophanes' *Clouds* of Socrates the mad scientist suspended in his basket and ‘inquiring into the things up above and all those in the depths of the earth’, a calumny that was now coming back to haunt him at his imminent trial (*Apology* 18b4–8, 19b3–c6).[106] The real, and favourable, meaning of his guilt on this score, Socrates here makes clear, is that his crime has been to take the broadest possible perspective on everything, a perspective which in their own way the mathematical sciences share.

It is true that the distance travelled by the soaring soul is exaggerated by Pindar's words. Geometry, first of all, is literally ‘land-measuring’. The geometry referred to is far likelier, the commentators point out, to be concerned with the surface of the earth than with its depths. Correspondingly, astronomy is in its very nature the mathematics of what is in the heaven, not above it. If

[104] The reference to plane geometry, as distinct from the geometry of solids, is made fairly explicit by χαὶ τὰ ἐπίπεδα γεωμετροῦσα, ‘and doing the geometry of planes’, 173e5–6, and translators' preference for more mundane renditions like ‘measuring the plains’ (Cornford), or ‘geometrizing the earth, measuring its surfaces’ (Levett, at least down to 2003) do not fully convey this. McDowell's ‘ “in the depths of the earth” and on the surfaces when it does geometry’ is too loose, but in some ways closer to the spirit of the text.

[105] See Campbell (1861, ad 172c). At 172c9–d1 ‘those who have been brought up in philosophy *and similar activities* ’ seem to be equated with 172c4–5 ‘those who have devoted a long period of activity to the philosophies’. That these include Theodorus' own activity, geometry, is confirmed by 143d3, ‘geometry or some other philosophy’.

[106] For similar reappropriations of this same charge, cf. *Crat.* 401b7–9, *Phdr.* 269e4–270a8. Compare also *Pol.* 299b7–8.

the talk of 'in the depths of the earth' has any direct appropriateness to the present passage, it is merely to the accident that befell Thales: in concentrating on the heaven he did, in a fairly literal sense, end up in the earth's depths.

However, if I am right about the *Theaetetus*' two-level strategy, we should not rest content with interpreting Socrates' own meaning, but go on once again to ask what Platonic subtext may be present. Travelling *to* the heaven, if that is taken as it is by Socrates to symbolize astronomical study, is already a vital Platonic means to philosophical enlightenment. But it is Pindar's reference to a journey 'above the heaven' that endows it with its greater significance. In the imagery of the myth in Plato's *Phaedrus,* above the heaven are the Forms, accessible to the gods and to those souls whose charioteers, during their procession round the outer perimeter of the heaven, manage to steal a look into the realm beyond. If we acknowledge this intertextual link with a dialogue of Plato's maturity, likely to be close in date to the *Theaetetus,* we can recognize an authorial allusion to the Platonic two-world view. The philosopher's flight to the heaven, his act of intellectual self-distancing from civic concerns, is for Plato his transportation from the sensible to the intelligible world, where the truly non-relativized paradigm of justice, and the other Forms, are to be found.

The indirect allusion to Forms is confirmed by the end of the passage just quoted, where the philosopher's almost exclusive focus on the universal definitional question 'What is a human being?', while having no explicit metaphysical content, has often and understandably been assumed to refer to Forms.[107] The message is once again implied that, although Socrates did not himself see the metaphysical implications of his ideas, he was the midwife who brought Platonic metaphysics to birth. His constant search for universals invited and inspired the discovery of the transcendent realm populated by Forms.[108]

And how about the geometry of planes, conducted by the philosophical mind when it swoops down into the depths of the earth?

[107] Cornford (1935: 85 n. 1), 'A clear allusion to the theory of Forms'. One could, more specifically, think of *Ti.* 69a6–90e3, the one Platonic context where a Form of Human Being might be thought to be under investigation (cf. 30c2–d1 for the clear implication that there is such a Form, in contrast to the youthful Socrates' hesitation on the point at *Prm.* 130c1–4; cf. pp. 107–8 below). I am grateful to Malcolm Schofield for discussion of this.

[108] Cf. Aristotle, *Met.* M 9, 1086^{b} 2–10.

Just as this mind's flight to and beyond the heaven can, to a Platonic ear, indicate Platonist metaphysics, so the geometry of planes should suggest Platonist physics, as described in the *Timaeus*. Although physics is a discipline that in its very nature cannot attain knowledge, dealing as it does with a realm which is inherently unstable, its highest achievement[109] lies in the analysis of the four primary stuffs—earth, water, air, and fire—into particles identifiable with four regular solids, and of those solids into a set of absolutely primary triangles. Thus the geometry of planes is the basis of Platonic physics, and, whatever Socrates himself may intend, to a Platonic ear it is surely this discipline that the philosophical mind is practising when it swoops down from heaven to earth. In this way, the dual description 'in the depths of the earth…and above the heaven' sums up the two main halves of the Platonic enterprise (*Timaeus* 29b3–c3): the entirely stable mode of discourse (*logos*) focused on the intelligible world of Forms, to which astronomy is the privileged entry route (*Timaeus* 47a1–b3, 90a2–d7), and the inherently unstable kind of discourse, concerning the nature of the sensible world, which the *Timaeus* itself displays in its most sophisticated form.[110]

The next passage (174b9–175b7) returns to the philosopher's ineptitude in the law courts, and relates it, first, to his incapacity for vituperation of others, and, secondly, to his amused incredulity at the kind of thing that people are praised for. When a eulogy vaunts its subject's vast landholdings or long pedigree, these too seem paltry to the philosopher, implicitly because his own domain incorporates the *whole* of space and time. Here too, then, the breadth of the philosopher's perspective is his weakness in worldly matters but his strength in intellectual ones.

There follows (175b8–d7) yet another hint that this Socratic breadth of perspective somehow maps onto a Platonic metaphysics:

> But when he himself, my friend, drags somebody upwards, he secures someone's willingness to progress from the question 'What wrong am I doing you, or you me?' to an investigation of justice itself and likewise injustice—what each of them is, and how they differ from everything and from each

[109] Cf. *Ti.* 53d4–7.

[110] That even this highly intellectualized physics cannot deliver knowledge is, I shall argue later (Ch. 6 §3), a lesson of Socrates' argument at 206e6–208b12.

> other—or when he progresses from the question 'whether a king, possessor of much gold,[111] is happy' to an investigation concerning kingship and human happiness and unhappiness in general—what sorts of thing they are, and how it is appropriate for human nature to obtain the one and escape the other—when on all these questions that small-minded and shrewd lawyer-type has to give an account, the tables are turned. Suspended high up, he gets dizzy, and looking down from a great height he is perplexed and puzzled by the unfamiliarity of the situation; and with his stammering he makes himself a laughing-stock, not to Thracian girls or to anyone else who is uneducated—for they don't notice him—but to all who have been brought up in the opposite of a slavish way.

Here the philosopher is envisaged forcing a non-philosopher to confront philosophical questions, with comic results. The description of this forcing as his 'dragging somebody upwards' has long been recognized as a pointed use of the language of the Cave, where enlightenment is a painful process, requiring the prisoner to be forcibly dragged up into the outside world. In the present case, however, the prisoner (or 'slave', in the preferred idiom of the Digression) is not philosophical material, trained as he has been in the ways of the law courts. Consequently, dragging him into the realm of universals serves merely to expose his confusion, leaving him a laughing-stock reminiscent of those ill-prepared interlocutors made to look silly by Socratic questioning. Such an allusion to the effects of his own elenchus may be all that Socrates intends, and there is no reason why even the reference to investigating 'justice itself and likewise injustice' should necessarily imply a Platonic metaphysics. (The same locution can be used in Socratic dialogues to sharpen the focus of an inquiry, without metaphysical overtones. Cf. *Protagoras* 330d8–e1, where 'piety itself' is contrasted with other pious things, almost exactly as 'justice itself and likewise injustice' are contrasted with 'What injustice am I doing to you, or you to me?' in the present passage.)

Once again, however, there is an alternative, Platonic mode in which the lines can be read. Prompted by the Cave reminiscence, we may want to take the envisaged inquiry into the nature of kingship,

[111] Following Madvig, I am reading the apparent quotation at 175c4–5 as εἰ βασιλεὺς εὐδαίμων κεκτημένος ταΰ χρύσιον. Here ταΰ (rather than the τἀῦ of the MSS) would be the neuter of the adjective ταΰς, recorded by Hesychius as meaning 'much'. This is supported by the reading πολύ that in some MSS and ancient sources follows or replaces τἀῦ (see app. crit. of OCT).

happiness, and 'justice itself' to hint at the *Republic*'s agenda, structured by the transcendent Forms as the objects of the philosopher king's knowledge. The *Republic* allusion in fact finds strong confirmation at the end of this same speech of Socrates', where he once more contrasts the philosopher with the rhetorician, remarking that the latter lacks, among other things, the skill 'to harmonize his words correctly into a hymn to the life of gods and happy men' (175e7–176a1). There is a clear reminiscence here of *Republic* X 607a3–5, where, as the dialogue draws to a close, hymns to gods and encomia upon good men remain the sole poetic genres welcomed in Plato's ideal city. The echo not only corroborates the systematic parallelism between Socrates' view of justice and the agenda of the *Republic,* but also introduces a new theme, the human ideal of godlikeness, which will from now on take centre stage.

5. God (176a2–177c4)

We thus come to the lines which were to make the Digression, throughout later antiquity, the *locus classicus* for the Platonic ideal of 'becoming like god so far as is possible' (176a2–c2):

> THEOD. If you could persuade everyone of what you are saying, Socrates, in the way that you are persuading me, there would be more peace and fewer evils in the human race.
> SOCR. But Theodorus, it is neither possible for evils to be destroyed—there must always necessarily be something opposite to good—nor for them to get a foothold among the gods, but of necessity it is mortal nature and this realm here that they haunt. That is the reason why one should also try to escape from here to there as quickly as possible. To escape is to become like god so far as is possible; and to become like god is to become just and pious, with wisdom.[112] But you see, my friend, it is not all that easy to persuade people that the motive for which most people say you should avoid badness and pursue goodness is *not* the reason for practising the one rather than the other—that is, not to seem bad, and to seem good. That's an old wives' tale, it seems to me. As for the truth, I would put it in this way: god is absolutely in no way whatsoever unjust, but as just as is possible, and there is nothing more like him than any of us who succeeds in becoming as just as possible.

[112] 176b1–2, δίχαιον χαὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι. The explicit reference to piety is lost in Levett's 'pure' (above, n. 16). Cornford goes further by leaving it out altogether: 'to become righteous with the help of wisdom'.

This passage demands minute attention. We have already seen how the philosopher's understanding of justice is enhanced as he distances himself from what passes for justice in civic contexts, learns to strip away its local relativities, and broadens his perspective into an altogether universal one. We have now found out where this process ends. He has acquired a god's-eye view, or, as Socrates puts it, become as like god as it is possible for a human being to become. But where we might have expected the end result to be an intellectual one—a perfect understanding of what justice is—what it proves to be is something more than that. The philosopher has himself *become* just. (He has become pious too, but discussion of that must wait a little longer.)

This convergence of moral understanding and moral improvement is quintessentially Socratic. And perhaps the most important single legacy of Socratic ethics to Plato is the following. The things conventionally regarded as good, such as health and wealth, and even supposed virtues like justice and courage, in reality are good only if used wisely. Used unwisely, they become on the contrary great evils. It follows that these supposed goods are at best derivatively or dependently good. The only thing that is underivatively good is wisdom itself, to whose guidance other things owe whatever goodness they may possess. This fundamentally Socratic value system, worked out by Plato in the *Meno* (87e5–89a5; cf. 99e6), *Euthydemus* (278e3–282e5), and *Phaedo* (68c5–69e4), and still visible in the *Republic* (591b5–7, 621c5–6; cf. 619c6–d1), is what underlies the present passage too. In Plato's view, those popular or ‘demotic’ (*Phaedo* 82a11–b3; *Republic* 500d6–8, *Laws* 968a1–4) virtues which consist in nothing more than externally good habits learnt by rote—little more than what Socrates in the above passage calls merely *seeming* good[113]—fall short of genuine goodness precisely because they are not guided by wisdom. Hence his standard marker-phrase for authentic, because intellectualized, virtues is ‘with wisdom’ (*meta phronēseōs*; sometimes *meta nou,* ‘with intelligence’)[114]—exactly as here in the *Theaetetus,* where to become like god is to become ‘just and pious, *with wisdom*’.[115] It recalls

[113] More directly, the reference is likely to be to the pretence of being just which Adimantus, playing devil's advocate in *Rep.* II (362e1–367e5), suggests will serve us as well as actually being just.

[114] See esp. Reuter (2001) for the significance of this qualification.

[115] Some translators—e.g. Fowler, Valgimigli (although Ioppolo 1999*a*), p. xxxix, in her introduction to the latter avoids the same error)—misleadingly treat this phrase as merely adding wisdom to the list of virtues thus acquired. Campbell (1861, ad loc. was, as far as I know, the last commentator to recognize the full significance of the expression.

Socratic dialogues like *Laches* (192c8), as well as middle-period productions such as *Phaedo* and *Republic*. Its Socratic credentials are confirmed by Aristotle, who (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13, 1144^{b}19–21) dissents from Socrates' identification of virtues as kinds of wisdom, but approves his thesis that they are 'not without wisdom' (*ouk aneu phronēseōs*).

In the light of this significant use of 'with wisdom', we can work out the full contrast intended by Socrates in the *Theaetetus* Digression. Civic justice is at worst a sham perpetrated by political and judicial manipulators, and even at best is no more than demotic virtue, enacted in local laws whose function is precisely to instil the appropriate habits and appearances, not understanding. (That laws should themselves be so drafted as to confer a degree of moral understanding is an ambition that surfaces only in Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*.[116]) This same civic justice is also, along with the laws which embody it, strongly coloured by local relativities. By standing back from it, and eventually acquiring a global god's-eye view of the true nature of justice, one acquires the wisdom that both gives one an understanding of justice as an absolute value, and makes one an authentically just person.

This progression strikingly parallels the philosopher's escape from the Cave in *Republic* VII. There the shadows of statues which for the chained prisoners constitute the whole of reality are, in one of their functions, identified with the fraudulent illusions of justice perpetrated in the law courts (517d4–e3). It is an easy guess that even the man-made statues that cast those shadows represent instances of merely demotic justice. True justice is to be found only after an intellectual ascent to the intelligible world outside the cave. For Plato, that true justice is a Form, itself fully understandable only in the light of a yet higher entity, the Form of the Good, represented in the allegory by the sun.

It is in constructing this metaphysical hierarchy that Plato goes beyond anything authentically Socratic, and also beyond the ascent to true justice described in the *Theaetetus* Digression. To prefigure the Platonic metaphysical division between two worlds, one of being, the other of becoming, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus*

[116] See Bobonich (1991; 2002: 93–119).

distinguishes between a divine and a mortal realm: we each, by our personal decision whether to let our minds be trapped within the distorting confines of the city or to break free of it in thought and emulate god, choose which of these worlds to inhabit. And in the divine world, where Plato will in due course place his moral Forms, what Socrates offers in the meantime is, in a word, god.

Confirmatory evidence of this correspondence between Socratic god and Platonic Forms is found at *Republic* VI 500b8–d1, where, to persuade the masses to accept philosopher rulers, the philosopher's devotion to the Forms is redescribed in quasi-religious terms, although, Socrates subsequently insists (500d10–e4), without any departure from the truth:

> 'You see, Adimantus, one who truly focuses his mind on the things that are has no leisure to gaze down at human affairs, to grapple with them, and to become filled with envy and hostility, but rather to look to things which are ordered and for ever unchanging, and, seeing that they neither wrong nor are wronged by each other,[117] but all remain in rational good order, to imitate these and liken himself to them as far as possible. Or do you think there is any way that one could fail to imitate the thing with which one admiringly associates oneself?'
> 'It's impossible', he said.
> 'So a philosopher, by associating himself with what is divine and orderly, becomes orderly and divine so far as is possible for a human being.'

The role of Forms here, as divine objects of imitation, matches closely the role assigned to god in the *Theaetetus* passage. One important merit which Platonic Forms share with Socratic god is clearly their absoluteness. Localized instances and types of justice are unavoidably relativized to the perspective of the city, coloured by local conditions, laws, customs, judging subjects, and a host of other factors, and for this same reason are inevitably compresent with some degree of injustice;[118] whereas Justice itself, defined by Plato as a certain harmonious relation of parts (*Republic* IV), is, like any Form, above such relativities. In the *Theaetetus* Digression

[117] It is hard to be sure how seriously to take these words (the numbers 50 and 77 do not wrong each other either, but that hardly makes either or both of them a model of justice). However, since the Forms are themselves made intelligible by the Good, Plato could intend seriously the idea that their interrelation is a moral one (my thanks to Richard Kraut and Robert Wardy for this thought).

[118] Cf. *Rep.* V 479a5–b2, where the same point is made for piety too, among other predicates.

Socrates' god represents a justice similarly free of relativities. Unlike the justice manifested in civic institutions, Socrates here calls god 'absolutely in no way whatsoever unjust' (176b8).

Nevertheless, the main point of the parallel *Republic* passage in its immediate context (see 500d4–9) is that these divine models could, *if necessary,* become the philosopher's basis for creating demotic virtue in the city. The close intertextuality suggests that Socrates' perfectly just god might likewise be used as a practical political paradigm, even if that was not part of Socrates' own vision.

The parallelism with the theory of Forms is corroborated by what follows shortly after the remarks on becoming like god (176e3–177a3):

> My friend, there are standards (*paradeigmata*) set up in reality. The divine standard is supremely happy, the godless one is supremely wretched. Because they don't see that this is so, their folly and extreme stupidity blind them to the fact that their unjust behaviour is making them become like the one standard and unlike the other. The penalty they pay for this is to lead a life resembling the standard which they are making themselves become like.

The reference to *paradeigmata* here has often been seen as alluding, directly or indirectly, to Platonic Forms, the same term being favoured by Plato to convey the Forms' function as models which particulars to a greater or lesser degree imitate.[119] I have little doubt that the reminiscence is deliberate, but equally little that Socrates is not himself referring to those metaphysical absolutes.[120] The

[119] *Rep.* 500e3, *Prm.* 132d2, *Ti.* 28a7, 29b4, 39e7, 48e5, 49a1; cf. *Euthyphro* 6e4. In the fragments of the *Peri ideōn,* Aristotle regards paradigmatism as *the* hallmark of Platonic Forms: see Alexander, *In Ar. Met.* 83.19–22.

[120] In particular, the inclusion of a bad as well as a good paradigm does not sound entirely in keeping with familiar Platonic metaphysics. *Rep.* V 475e6–476a8 is a virtually unique exception to the generalization that bad Forms are absent from Plato's ontology. Note in particular that *Rep.* VI 500b8–d1, quoted on p. 77 above, gives every appearance of discounting bad Forms. Plato does of course frequently acknowledge that virtues have opposites (*Rep.* 402c2–5; *Euthyphro* 5d2–5; etc.), but almost never in the context of transcendent Forms. Contrast value-neutral pairs of opposites like large and small, which are unproblematically both included among Forms. I take the difference to arise from the privative nature of bad properties: there need be no one specific Form of badness, or ugliness, because there are limitless ways of deviating from a perfectly good, or beautiful, standard; so badness in all its varieties may prove to be definable merely in terms of deviation from the relevant good ideal—unlike a symmetrically related pair such as large–small or odd–even, each of which has its own intrinsic nature and is therefore not adequately definable in terms of its opposite's absence. The principle that knowledge of good is the same as knowledge of bad (*if* Socrates is advocating this at *Phd.* 97d5, which is by no means certain) therefore makes excellent sense for a pair of opposite values, but should not be too readily assumed to extend, *mutatis mutandis,* to all pairs of opposites. My contention here is not that Plato definitively excludes bad Forms (and he does, after all, make some headway in *Rep.* IX towards constructing an ideally unjust paradigm), but that there are understandable reasons for his striking reticence about them.

wording, taken in context, makes it virtually explicit that the good paradigm which we are urged to imitate is, once again, god. The language of paradigms is Plato's way of conveying his acknowledgement that Socrates paved the way for the Platonic metaphysics of moral absolutism, not by anticipating the doctrine of Forms, but by his characteristic faith in the absolute goodness of god.[121] By doing this, he broke with what Plato saw as the moral relativism of the preceding tradition, and kept open the space that Platonic Forms would later fill.

It is that faith that will shortly become our main concern. First, however, notice another religious aspect of the Digression. Socrates' next words are these (177a3–8):

> But suppose we say that, if they don't abandon their cleverness, even when they die that place which is pure of evils will not accept them, and they will continue for ever to have, here, the likeness that obtains between their mode of being and themselves, bad people in bad company: they will hear our words just like clever rogues listening to idiots.

This brief glimpse of eschatology brings out a vital aspect of the entire Digression. As an excursus, it shares many of the features of the myths with which Plato loves to crown his dialogues: an eloquent declaration of faith that there is divinely dispensed justice in the world, founded on the bigger picture and looking beyond the range to which dialectical argument can aspire. Typically a Platonic myth focuses on the dispensation of justice in the afterlife. Here in the *Theaetetus* Digression Socrates' single reference to the afterlife is both brief and inexplicit. Instead, the theme that everyone reaps the rewards of their justice or injustice by being allocated to the appropriate realm is applied primarily to our present existence: even in this life, we make the choice whether to inhabit the divine realm, as a

[121] In the Socratic dialogue *Euthyphro,* 6e4, the (non-transcendent) form of piety is itself called a ‘paradigm’ or ‘standard’ (*paradeigma*) by Socrates, and this has rightly been seen as foreshadowing a tenet of Plato's metaphysics. If, as is conceivable, that passage too is being recalled here, the hint confirms how natural the transition is from true Socratic piety, founded on absolute standards, to Platonic transcendentalism. Cf. *Rep.* V 472b3–e2 for an assimilation of perfect particulars as paradigms to Forms as paradigms.

philosopher's intellect does, or the godless world of seedy intrigue in which the gifted but unphilosophical enmesh themselves. The afterlife is mentioned as a mere continuation of that choice between the divine and the godless realms, its details left altogether vague.

Here yet again Plato is busy reconstructing a distinctively Socratic projection of reward and punishment. As is well known, the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* is agnostic about the afterlife, and makes his forecast that no harm will befall him independent of any firm eschatological convictions.[122] The *Theaetetus* Digression offers a theodicy in the same general spirit. Its message is that both heaven and hell are the company you keep—that of those who are like you, but above all your own. *Where* this may occur, and whether before or after death, is not its real concern. Thus the Digression, while not a myth, serves as the Socratic equivalent to, and antecedent of, a Platonic myth. Perhaps to mark this partial equivalence of function, it is placed not at the end of the dialogue, where a Platonic myth would most commonly be positioned, but at another structurally significant point, the dialogue's exact centre.[123]

Although I have described this approach to eschatology as distinctively Socratic, and have implicitly contrasted it with the colourful and detailed myths of reward and punishment in the afterlife displayed in dialogues from the *Gorgias* (late in the early period) to the *Phaedrus* (late in the middle period), it does also prefigure Plato's own more muted treatments of eschatology in dialogues post-dating the *Theaetetus,* notably *Timaeus* and *Laws.* Here too the topology of the afterlife is de-emphasized,[124] and in the *Laws*X myth much the same emphasis as in the *Theaetetus* replaces it: that your reward or punishment is the company you keep, whether in this life *or* beyond

[122] *Apol.* 40c5–41c7; cf. McPherran (1996: 247–71) for a full defence of this reading. Cf. also *Crito* 54a8–d2, where the references to justice in the afterlife are once again cursory.

[123] The structural point I learnt from Polansky (1992: 141 n. 95). The ancient scribal practice of recording line-numbering even for prose texts (scribes were paid by the line) would have made it easy for Plato to calculate the Digression's position in a working draft of the dialogue. Whether we should pay attention to such structural features is largely a matter of taste. But for those who believe the alternative proem to the *Theaetetus* that circulated in antiquity (p. 1 n. 1 above) to have been an authentic variant from Plato's own pen it may be significant that it was said to be of more or less the same number of lines as the surviving one: we might speculate that Plato, when substituting a revised proem (our present one), preserved the original proem's length in order to keep the Digression at the dialogue's exact centre.

[124] Cf. Saunders (1973).

it (904b6–905b2). This illustrates a point of some importance to my overall interpretation. The re-evaluation of Socrates in the *Theaetetus* is not exclusively backward-looking, historical, and apologetic. In re-evaluating Socrates it also, where desirable, *reappropriates* his ideas for Platonism.

The theme of 'becoming like god' is itself another such case. That the object of our emulation should be god, more directly than the transcendent Forms, is an idea which, once ignited in the *Theaetetus,* continued to dominate Plato's thinking to the end, showing up notably in the *Timaeus* and *Laws.*[125] It culminates in the celebrated dictum of *Laws* IV, in unmistakable paraphrase of the *Theaetetus*: 'It will be god who, par excellence, is the measure of all things for us, rather than a man, as some people claim' (716c4–6).

6. Piety

It is by now high time to bring piety into the story. The pairing of justice and piety at the start of the Digression as the two virtues demanding to be derelativized is itself of some significance. Among the five cardinal virtues—justice, piety, moderation, courage, and wisdom—Socrates has a track record in Plato's dialogues of treating justice and piety as standing in an especially close relation to each other.[126] In the *Euthyphro* (12b4–d3) he asks whether piety might not be definable as a part of justice. In the *Protagoras* (330b6–332a1) he argues that the two virtues are in fact identical, working from the premiss that they are inter-predicable: piety is just, and justice pious. One reason for their close association might be their functional similarity, both virtues being typically manifested in external behaviour towards others, whether human or divine. But the more evident link in the *Theaetetus* Digression is that both are, at any rate in their civic context, governed by rules and customs (*ta nomima*; 172a3) and

[125] I catalogue and discuss some relevant passages in Sedley (1999). In addition to the dialogues listed above, note *Rep.* X 613a7–b1, a relatively banal use of the same concept, and *Phdr.* 252c3–253c6—both probably very close in date to the *Theaetetus.*

[126] For parallels from the preceding Greek tradition, cf. McPherran (1996: 51 n. 63), and for a full study of the relationship between these two virtues in antiquity, Diehle (1968). In the Platonic corpus the one departure from this close association is, I suggest, at *Alc.* 121e3–122a8, where a distinctively Persian perspective on the four cardinal virtues treats *wisdom,* not justice, as if it either embraced or were identical with piety.

by public opinion (172b5), making them the most ostensibly culture-relative of the virtues.

Also of great importance is the rarely noticed fact that in the *Theaetetus* piety is putting in a reappearance after a mysterious absence. It is a well-known enigma for interpreters that in book IV of the *Republic* Plato reduces Socrates' fivefold set of cardinal virtues to four, quietly dropping piety from the standard list. Its equally sudden reappearance is among the most significant Socratic features of the Digression. I shall have more to say about this shortly, but it is worth speculating even on the basis of what we have already learnt that what licenses the return of piety to centre stage may be the idea, expressed in the mouth of Socrates, that the way to moral improvement lies in imitation of god. Gregory Vlastos argued convincingly that the basis of Socratic piety is service to god, where god is conceived as an essentially good being. The way to serve god is, on this account, not by sacrifice and other rituals, but simply by leading a morally good life.[127] Recalling the same principle makes it easier to see how piety might turn out, as Socrates maintains in the *Protagoras,* ultimately to be nothing over and above justice and the other virtues: all five are, from different perspectives, one and the same science of being good. This Socratic doctrine that the virtues are identical to each other, so paradoxically defended in that earlier dialogue, starts to take on a richer profile in the *Theaetetus,* when we learn that by becoming like god you ‘become just and pious, together with wisdom’ (176b1–2). By getting more distant from mankind and closer to god, you acquire the authentic virtue of piety thanks to sharing god's moral and intellectual outlook, and in the very act of doing so you also acquire true justice, properly conceived as an absolute value informed by a godlike state of the intellect.

In the light of all this, it is remarkable how much we are told about justice in the Digression, yet how little about piety. It seems that the lessons about the latter virtue, mentioned in only two, albeit strategically placed, passages, are ones we are left to work out for ourselves. What then are these lessons? The parallelism to justice says it all. Becoming just, let us recall, starts with the philosopher's intellectual detachment from the civic environment in which both demotic justice and its fraudulent imitations are located: the law

[127] Vlastos (1991, ch. 6).

courts, assembly, council, and all legal and political institutions governed by man-made rules. It is not hard to work out that becoming pious must start with a similar philosophical detachment, but this time from the temples, the cults, the festivals, and the other religious institutions of the city. Some of these may well embody what we could call demotic piety, although others undoubtedly, in Socrates' eyes, fall short even of that, shamefully misrepresenting gods as bad and quarrelsome and thus setting the worst possible model for emulation.[128] What all have in common is their relativization of the pious to local perspectives, dependent on civic practice and belief. Only when we detach ourselves intellectually from such practices, and approach instead an understanding of god's true nature, can we aspire to genuine piety.[129]

Almost inevitably that process of derelativization will subtract, one by one, the anthropomorphic traits which characterize and differentiate the individual deities of Greek religion. The result will be a conception of the gods as (*a*) free of all human failings and morally perfect; and (*b*) not differentiated from each other by the characteristics that traditional religion imposes on them. True piety appears to be founded on just such a reformed conception of divinity.[130] If Socrates, for his part, has privileged insight into this divine nature, we may try connecting his insight to the fact that his mission as midwife is one directly imposed on him by god (cf. principle 1, p. 33 above). Early in the dialogue he argued that despite appearances to the contrary his midwifery can only be a force for the good, because 'no god is malevolent to mankind' (151d1). It is his account of piety that links that earlier insight to what he is now implicitly advocating, a radical break from the particularized and morally variable divinities of Greek religion.

[128] *Euthyphro* 6a7–9; cf. *Rep.* II 377a1–383c7. Socrates' objections in these passages to the misrepresentation of divinity as having human failings follow in the tradition of Xenophanes (cf. n. 50 below). They do not in themselves amount to a denial of the individual deities in question, although they may, as Socrates himself suspects in the former passage, have been taken by his accusers to point that way.

[129] That is, in existing cities like Athens a true philosopher will detach himself from religious institutions as much as he will from the law courts and assembly. This is not to exclude the likelihood that in an ideal city there would be an appropriate form of worship (cf. *Rep.* IV 427b6–c5), just as there would be appropriate law courts (*Rep.* 433e3–434b8).

[130] Such a move, from the rejection of locally relativized religious beliefs to the revelation of a unitary and perfect divine nature, had strong antecedents in Xenophanes (B10–16, 23–6, 34 DK).

If such is the Digression's message about piety, why did Socrates not make it explicit?[131] Here it will help to call on the findings of Myles Burnyeat in a ground-breaking article entitled 'The Impiety of Socrates'.[132] Burnyeat points out that in Plato's *Apology* Socrates never directly rebuts the charge against him that he does not believe in the gods that the city believes in, but only the charge of atheism, which he did not actually face (at *Apology* 26b8–c8 Plato makes Meletus, in a misguided—and much debated—moment, substitute the stronger charge of atheism, conveniently allowing Socrates to concentrate on rebutting this). Moreover, in referring back to the Delphic god whose cryptic oracle set him on his mission of interrogating the self-styled experts, Socrates speaks simply of his service to 'the god', never to 'Apollo'. Likewise Socrates' personal 'divine sign' is sent simply by 'the god' (40b2). It is not that Socrates shows any inclination to monotheism, but it does seem clear that his belief in the essential goodness of divinity prevents his acknowledging the often mutually antagonistic deities worshipped by the Athenians, whether in local or in pan-Hellenic cults.

A background of studied caution about Socrates' theology makes immediate sense of what we encounter in the *Theaetetus*. Here it is worth stressing that Socrates' mission, as redescribed in the famous Midwife passage early in the dialogue, appeals to just the same homogenized and anonymous kind of divinity as Burnyeat finds in the *Apology*'s version of that mission. The only deity mentioned by name is Artemis: Socrates, in explaining the tradition that midwives (literal midwives, that is) are women beyond their own childbearing years, refers to what is popularly said about Artemis' patronage of childbirth (149b9–c3). But in then proceeding to outline his own god-given mission as intellectual midwife, he speaks simply of 'the god' (*ho theos*), using a masculine form which excludes any direct

131 One relevant consideration, though surely not sufficient to account for Socrates' laconic treatment of piety, is a disanalogy with justice: while god himself is supremely just (176b8–c1), it would be contrary to usual Greek practice to call him 'pious', and Socrates does not do so here, despite the fact that in other respects the parallelism of justice and piety is carefully maintained (176b1–2, d1). The same limitation would of course apply to courage and moderation, neither of which can be attributed to gods. Apart from justice, the only other cardinal virtue shared with the gods is wisdom, and this, as we have seen, plays a different role in the account from the other virtues.

132 Burnyeat (1997*a*).

reference back to Artemis,[133] but equally without reference to any other previously named divinity.[134] Those who make progress under Socrates' midwifery are those 'to whom the god grants it' (150d2–6). 'The god' and Socrates himself are jointly responsible for the process of midwifery (150d8–e1). Many such people believe Socrates' questioning to be malicious in intent, not realizing that he is acting out of benevolence and that 'no god is malevolent to mankind' (151c5–d1). This last remark confirms that what Socrates refers to simply as 'the god' is not necessarily meant to be the only god, but that like any god he is in his own intrinsic nature good. In the *Apology* Socrates' mission of interrogation was his 'service to the god', while in the *Theaetetus* it sounds more like a partnership between the two of them; but we should have no doubt that the very same divine mission is being redescribed, albeit with a new set of metaphors, and that the underlying theology remains a Socratic one.

In the light of these considerations, it is not hard to see why the Digression is so reticent on the subject of piety, and leaves us to work out its nature from the parallel case of justice. If true piety means radically distancing oneself from local cult practices and beliefs, in much the same way as true justice means distancing oneself from the law courts, to present Socrates as openly saying this might have been little less hazardous decades after his execution than it had been in that event's immediate aftermath, when the *Apology* is presumed to have been written. Whether Socrates himself was, in life, equally guarded about his theological views is a question we can scarcely hope to answer with any confidence, although his condemnation may suggest that he was not.

What can be said with greater confidence is that the Socrates of the *Theaetetus,* with his divine mission and his subtly encoded

[133] The masculine noun θεός can designate a goddess, but the masculine article ὁ cannot. Hence at the end of the dialogue, 210c6–7, 'Both I and my mother have been allotted the role of midwife by god (ἐκ θεοῦ)', where 'god' refers to Artemis in his mother's case but not in Socrates' own, he omits the definite article, thus this time keeping the gender appropriately indeterminate.

[134] This pointedly anonymized usage in the *Theaetetus* seems to me to lend strong support to Burnyeat's interpretation of 'the god' in the *Apology,* against the rejoinder of Reeve (2000), who argues that the expression refers throughout straightforwardly to Apollo (although I happily concede that Socrates' artful vagueness is designed to *permit* such an understanding). I am not of course denying that in middle-period dialogues Plato does allow Socrates to acknowledge individual divinities, including Apollo.

distrust of local religious custom, is recognizably the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*. And it is this same Socrates' moral religiosity and consequent commitment to absolute values that Plato, by carefully interlacing it with themes from the *Republic* and other dialogues of his maturity, celebrates as having blazed a trail for his own greatest discovery, the transcendent realm of moral Forms.

7. The Final Critique of Protagoras (177c2–179b9)

The Digression ended, Socrates resumes his frontal attack on the full-scale Measure Doctrine. But why is any resumption needed, given the success of the earlier self-refutation argument? Socrates will make the answer clear at the very end of this final section (179a10–b9):

> SOCR. It will, then, be reasonably said against your teacher [Protagoras] that he must of necessity agree that one person is wiser than another, and that someone like that is a measure, but that there is no necessity whatsoever for an ignoramus like me to become a measure, *in the way that earlier the argument in his support was necessitating my being a measure whether I wanted to or not.*
>
> THEOD. Yes, Socrates, that seems to me what above all convicts the thesis, although it is also convicted by the way it makes other people's beliefs authoritative, beliefs which turned out to consider his theses quite untrue.

Protagoras, Socrates is pointing out, earlier (167d3–4) informed us that we have to be measures of our own truths, whether we like it or not. By adding in this final section a new and—as Theodorus agrees—more decisive argument against Protagoras (we will turn to it shortly), Socrates is implicitly conceding that the Protagorean strategy he recalls here, of making it compulsory for everyone to be a measure, is indeed a possible device for resisting the self-refutation argument. According to a defence along these lines, the one thing to which the Measure Doctrine does not apply would be itself; hence those who disagree with Protagoras are not, in this one special case, measures of truth, and the self-refutation argument collapses. Such an exception was, as I argued in Chapter 1 (p. 48), subtly implicit in the Measure Doctrine right from the start, and there is nothing manifestly incoherent about it. Rather than

engage with a new defence of Protagoras along these lines, Socrates has chosen not to rely solely on the self-refutation argument, but to return finally to the question of expertise. In creating this order of attack, Plato has, as we shall now see, ensured that the decisive knockout blow against Protagoras lies in the most Socratic of all the arguments. For understanding of expertise is a salient characteristic of Plato's early Socrates, and it featured (p. 34 above) among the ten principles of Socrates' midwifery in the *Theaetetus*.

At the opening of the Digression (above, pp. 63–4) Socrates sketched a criticism of Protagoras which he will now resume and develop in full. Whatever Protagoras may say about sensible properties such as hot, values like good and (its virtual synonym) beneficial could never be determined by individual appearances. This is formally argued by appeal to the concealed reference to the *future* that such terms embody. When a city enacts a law, it does so in the belief that this law is beneficial; but whether it in fact *is* beneficial is determined, not by the legislation itself, but by how things will turn out in the future. Experts are people who have the capacity to foresee the future effects of present causes. You may be an infallible judge of whether you are hot now, but if you think you are about to get feverish while your doctor thinks you are not, it would be absurd to suggest that you are both equally right about *that*. What is in this example said about medicine, Socrates argues, applies equally to any expertise you care to name.

This new argument comes to a beautifully Socratic climax. At 178d8–179a9 Socrates applies the same principle to two types of case. First, while we are all equal judges of what is tasty, when it comes to preparing a banquet a professional chef is a better judge than you or I of what *will* be tasty; and similarly Protagoras himself, as a professional expert in rhetorical argument, is a better judge than you or I of what *will* prove persuasive in the law courts. Secondly, legislation aims at the beneficial, and this too depends on the future: it is in the light of later developments that a city's legislation may well prove not to be beneficial.

This climax exploits a web of Socratic themes from the *Gorgias* (esp. 464a1–465e1). Cookery and rhetoric are there denounced as mutually analogous pseudo-expertises, the former focused on the body, the latter on the soul. What makes them fall short of real expertise is twofold: (1) an authentic expertise, for example in

legislation,[135] aims for the beneficial, whereas cookery and rhetoric aim for pleasure, without regard to benefit; (2) cookery and rhetoric achieve their aims through a mere empirical knack, not founded, as a proper expertise is, on causal understanding of how they will bring about their results. Protagoras is here being teased, by means of the dense intertextuality with the *Gorgias,* over the methodologically suspect status of his own calling. And yet, Socrates implies with a delicious touch of condescension, *even* pseudo-expertises such as Protagoras practises pride themselves on their predictive power, and therefore cannot afford to treat all judgements as equally authoritative. Above all it must be genuine expertises that succeed in the predictions they make, for reasons set out in the *Gorgias*: any expertise entails an understanding of the *causes* of its own products, while a pseudo-expertise simply generalizes from experience and predicts on that basis. But both, in their different ways, place the prediction of outcomes at the heart of their methodology.

That the critique of Protagorean relativism should end on this note, with such direct exploitation of themes from the *Gorgias,* is pointedly suggestive. It serves to remind us that the basis of this final refutation of Protagoras, founded on the predictive powers of expertise, is a Socratic legacy. For the Socrates portrayed throughout Plato's early dialogues, and above all in the *Gorgias,* was one who persistently scrutinized the basis and structure of expertise, which he tended to identify with the basis and structure of virtue itself. By his tireless insistence on working out what distinguishes the expert from the non-expert, and on respecting the contrast between the two, it was he who built the essential case against relativism that has now, for the first time, been fully articulated.

135 That legislation is, properly understood, an expertise aiming at the good or beneficial is a Socratic thesis articulated at *Hipp. Ma.* 284d1–e9, as well as in the *Gorgias.*

4 Perception

1. Perception and Flux (179c1–183c7)

We now leave behind the critique of broad Protagoreanism, and resume that of narrow Protagoreanism, the version which corresponds much more closely to Theaetetus' definition 'Knowledge is perception'. As we saw in Chapter 2 §2, universal flux was introduced in the first place as the necessary condition of perception's infallibility. Appearances which are the fleeting and private products of instantaneous encounters between ever-changing subjects and objects cannot even in principle conflict with each other: no perceptual appearance, therefore, could ever falsify another, and knowledge can indeed be perception. It is now time for Socrates to ask whether this theory can survive scrutiny.

For despite the now completed refutation of broad Protagoreanism, the original perceptual theory remains intact, as Socrates admits (179c1–d5). And what remains intact is not merely the weakened thesis that every perception is true and a case of knowledge (179c2–7), but also the stronger thesis which, as in Theaetetus' original definition, fully identifies knowledge with perception (179c7–d1). One might have thought that the stronger thesis, according to which there are no cases of knowledge over and above perception, was no longer tenable, now that Protagoras has been forced to admit that there is expertise about the future which can hardly be thought perceptual. But actually the entire critique of broad Protagoreanism has limited itself to extracting from him the admission that there are both true and false *opinions,* including those about the future. Nothing explicit about the existence of expert *knowledge* has been added.[136] That restraint was methodologically prudent, since defining what

[136] The nearest he has come has been to demonstrate *degrees of wisdom* (171d5–7). One might interpret the early discussion at 145d7–e7 (pp. 18–19 above) as associating even the comparative 'wiser' with the possession of at least some knowledge. But the point is not made explicit either there or in the refutation of Protagoras, and instead the kind of wisdom vindicated is nothing more than 'true thinking' (170b9).

knowledge is is the whole purpose of the dialogue, as yet unfulfilled; but it also serves to leave Theaetetus' original definition undamaged, and ready for the refutation which it only now faces.

Socrates' new line of attack, at 179c1–183c7, is to probe the character of the Heraclitean flux posited as underwriting the infallibility of perception. Theodorus remarks that in Ionia (the region which includes Heraclitus' native city of Ephesus) there are swarms of Heracliteans, and that they behave in a way consistent with their belief in total instability, refusing to pause the discussion at any point, firing off enigmatic locutions all the time, and responding to requests for clarification with more such obscurities and evasions. The portrayal is light-hearted, but we should not for that reason dismiss it as mere fiction. Plato's own earliest philosophical influence was said to be an Athenian named Cratylus, an extreme Heraclitean who according to Aristotle actually ended up abandoning language altogether, believing things to be changing too fast to be captured by speech.[137] And we will see below good reason to suspect that actual Heracliteans like Cratylus really did make a practice of radically reforming language to adapt it to their view of reality.

After undertaking to consider the opposite camp as well—those like Parmenides and Melissus who believe in entirely stable being—Socrates launches his scrutiny of the flux theory (183c1–183c7). The question is, just *how* radical is the flux to which this party is committed? It is very important to bear in mind the purpose of the inquiry. It is sometimes implied in the discussions of this passage that its aim is simply to ensure that the Heracliteans' flux should be as radical as it can possibly be, and that the upshot will be that when that is achieved an unacceptable consequence follows, the collapse of language, with the result that extreme or total flux is refuted. That, if so, would be a strategy of little utility or relevance to Socrates' main argument. What he has to do rather, and what he surely does do, is to find out how radical the flux needs to be *in order to preserve the definition of knowledge as perception.*[138] The upshot will be that, in

[137] Aristotle, *Met.* Γ 5, 1010^a 7–15. At an earlier stage, when he was still speaking, Cratylus is said to have used a lot of hissing sounds (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* III 16, 1417^b 1–3, quoting Aeschines of Sphettus), presumably as part of an attempt to capture the flux of things. See further, Sedley (2003*b,* ch. 1 §5), where I defend the historicity of Aristotle's account of Cratylus.

[138] This demand is well recognized by Denyer (1991: 100–3). Cf. Burnyeat (1990: 46): 'The extension of flux to the point where language is emptied of all positive meaning must be something to which Theaetetus is committed by the project of finding sufficient conditions for his definition to hold good.' I have not in the existing literature found much help on how this project is carried out, but in what follows I offer my own answer.

order to be radical enough to ensure that result, the flux will also have to be too radical for the definition to admit of being stated.

We need to start by recapitulating and amplifying the perceptual theory that we first encountered in Chapter 2 (pp. 42–7 above), based on 155e3–160e5. Every perception is an interaction between a subject and an object. The subject may be thought of either as the perceiver, or more specifically as the relevant sense-organ. In the case of seeing a stone as white, three aspects of the process are described (156d3–e7), although we need not think of them as temporally distinct. (1) The eye and the stone come together to generate both whiteness and the matching (twinned) vision of whiteness. (2) In between the two of them, vision is travelling rapidly from the eye, whiteness from the stone. (3) The eye has been filled with vision and become a seeing eye, while the stone has been filled around with whiteness and become white. The eye and the stone are 'parents', and undergo slow change without altering their place. The vision and the whiteness which it perfectly represents are their inseparable twin offspring, and undergo rapid motion involving change of place—a feature no doubt primarily designed to account for the high (if non-uniform) speed at which the distance senses operate, although it is taken to occur even in the contact senses (cf. 159e1–5 on taste).

The parents are themselves bundles of ever-shifting relativities.[139] Specifically, the stone is a bundle of whiteness, hardness, and whatever other properties the subject is now perceiving, while the perceiver is the bundle of perceptions (visual, tactile, etc.) now being experienced. These constituents being themselves mere fleeting relativities, the parents consisting of them are inferred to have no endurance through time either, so that neither the perceiving subject nor the stone endures as the same perceptual parent: even this 'slow change' is enough to ensure their constant replacement by new perceivers and new objects. From moment to moment the world moves on. Each instantaneous perception incorrigibly reveals its immediate object or 'twin', but can never be prolonged or repeated, and therefore can never be brought into conflict with another perception (157e1–160c6).

[139] See pp. 46–7 above.

Thus the perceptual theory has clearly introduced two kinds of change: the locomotive change of the twins themselves, and the qualitative change undergone by the parents. In embarking on his criticism at 181c2–d7, Socrates starts by making this explicit, calling the two kinds of change 'motion' (*phora*) and 'alteration' (*alloiōsis*). The question is put (181d8–e2), will the Heracliteans say that everything is undergoing both these kinds of change? The answer is affirmative: otherwise they will be introducing as much stability as change. This may at first sight look like a doxographical question about what Heracliteans happen to believe, but although it is not made explicit we must assume the main point of the question, and of the answer, to be to ensure that the flux is sufficient to guarantee the incorrigibility of perception which the flux doctrine is meant to be underwriting. And that means specifying more change than has previously been made explicit.

We already knew that the twins, which combine to constitute both perceiver and object, are in rapid *locomotion* between the two, and that the perceiver and object thus constituted are themselves undergoing constant, albeit slow, *qualitative* change (as we are carefully now reminded at 181c9–d3). But are the twins also undergoing constant *qualitative* change, and are the parents in constant *locomotion*? In both cases, they must be. Nothing is specifically said about the locomotion of the parents, but it is not hard to work out that they must be constantly undergoing *some* degree of locomotion in relation to each other in order to ensure the total instability of the relativities in which their constitutive properties consist. (It is here important to notice that locomotion, as defined at 181c6–7, includes not just translocation but also turning on the spot, which will allow observers to change their perspective without necessarily always shifting location.) What is made rather more explicit—because it is the case on which Socrates' refutation will hinge—is that the twins must be undergoing qualitative change as well as locomotion: the whiteness that flows between an eye and an object cannot remain the *same* shade for any length of time whatsoever (182c6–d4).[140] This is

[140] That the 'white' object and the 'whiteness' at 182d1–3 are respectively parent and offspring should be clear, given the recent repetition of the twins doctrine at 182a4–8; cf. Cooper (1967: 104–5). I can see little plausibility in the alternative view (e.g. Cherniss 1936: 9–11; McDowell 1973: 183–4; cf. discussion by Silverman 2000, esp. 141–4) that the whiteness which constantly undergoes change is abstract or universal whiteness, i.e. what it is for something to be white. There are no such entities in the Heraclitean ontology under consideration. It is much easier to read the constant change of the whiteness etc. as the colour twin's continuous replacement by different colour twins.

the first time that the constant qualitative change of the twin offspring has been recognized, but it is only what was to be expected: if, for example, a parent such as a stone is, as we already knew it must be, in constant qualitative change, including change of colour, it follows directly that its offspring, for instance this or that shade of white generated by the stone in interaction with some seeing eye, must have no duration either.

This explicit recognition of the twins' constant qualitative (as well as locomotive) change leads Socrates into a new question (182c9–e7): given the kinds of change that must be perpetually going on, what can we succeed in *saying* about anything? The answer turns out to be 'Nothing', because the object of your discourse will be vanishing before you can get the words out.

We will turn shortly to the details of this finding, and to the lesson drawn from it. But first I must pause to emphasize a key point that seems to have been missed in the modern discussions of this passage. It is regularly assumed that the eventual upshot is a 'collapse of language', which is being ingeniously forced upon the Heracliteans by Socrates, and which they are expected to recognize as too high a price to pay for their flux doctrine. This misses the point of the passage.

It is the Heracliteans themselves who have, from the outset, been presented as voluntarily self-denying about the use of language. There are no determinate subjects or predicates, they told us, in that whatever you speak of as one thing (i.e. as a subject), or of one kind (i.e. as bearing a predicate), will also turn out to be the opposite (152d2–6); words such as 'be', 'something', 'something's', 'mine', 'this', and 'that' must be banned (157a7–b7); and in conformity with these strictures they themselves make a practice of talking in riddles (179e3–180b3). Even allowing for a degree of humour in this last description, the fact remains that the move to outlaw determinate uses of subjects and predicates is presented as one made by the Heracliteans on their own behalf, and *not* by Socrates against them.

We must remember, once again, Plato's early mentor Cratylus, whose commitment to flux became so extreme that he ended up

abandoning language altogether. The radical reform of language described cannot credibly be considered the speaker Socrates' own ad hoc invention, and must to some extent reflect the actual linguistic practices of Heracliteans like Cratylus.

Nor, indeed, is there anything historically implausible about it if they did develop their master's ideas in this direction. Recall once more their cardinal principle: you should not say that anything 'is' anything—either a determinate subject or a determinate predicate—because, whatever you call it, it will equally turn out to be the opposite. Now compare, by way of example, two classic Heraclitean sayings about god: 'One thing, the wise, wants and does not want to be called the name Zēn' (B32); 'The god: day, night; winter, summer; war, peace; satiety, hunger. He varies just as <fire>,[141] when mixed with perfumes, receives names according to the savour of each' (B67). Both the god's name (Zēn, a variant for 'Zeus' that also means 'life') and his predicates are radically unstable, in that you cannot correctly apply one of them without its opposite following in its wake. Notice even the characteristic Heraclitean avoidance of 'be' in the opening of the second quotation (conveyed by my colon, albeit inadequately, in that Heraclitus' sentence is perfectly grammatical Greek).[142]

The linguistic strategy that seems to have been developed by the anonymous Heracliteans reported in the *Theaetetus* is a thoroughly intelligent one, making real philosophical capital out of Heraclitus' notoriously enigmatic modes of expression, and doing his philosophical writings greater justice than the mainstream doxographical tradition was ever to achieve. By locating flux primarily in the instability of subjects and predicates, due to each one's entailment of its own opposite, it constructs a Heraclitean theory of flux which harmonizes impressively with Heraclitus' own Delphic utterances, and which seeks to capture the deep-seated truth about the way the world is.

What Socrates is seeking to do, then, in this final phase of his argument against the Protagorean–Heraclitean theory is not to confront the Heracliteans with unexpected and embarrassing

[141] I here adopt Diels's plausible supplement < πῦρ >, but nothing in my argument turns on it.

[142] For the inseparability of life and death, even as attributes of god, cf. B62, 'Immortals mortals, mortals immortals, living the others' death and dead the others' life' (note again the characteristic avoidance of 'be').

implications for the use of language, but to find out exactly *how* self-denying about language they must themselves be setting out to be in order to maintain their position.

At 182c9–d7 Socrates raises the questions in the following terms:

> SOCR. If then things were only moving and not altering, we would presumably be able to say with what particular qualities the moving things are flowing. Or what do we say?
> THEOD. Just that.
> SOCR. But since not even this remains, the flowing object's flowing white, but it changes, so that there is flux of this very thing, whiteness, and change to another colour, so that it should not be convicted of remaining in this state, is it ever possible to speak of some colour in such a way as to refer to it correctly?
> THEOD. How could it be, Socrates—or anything else of the kind—given that as one speaks it is constantly slipping away because of its flux?

This envisaged threat of sentences becoming out of date before they have even been fully uttered will be familiar to anyone who has listened to the techniques of commentators on fast-moving sports. However, Socrates' argument turns, not on the *speed* of the change so much as on its constancy. Given that things' colours and other perceptual properties are not the same for any length of time whatsoever, whereas even a single word necessarily takes time to utter, no attempt to refer to a colour can be judged any more successful than unsuccessful,[143] just as the Heracliteans warned us from the outset.

Note how Socrates' question is applied, not to things generally, but specifically to the items which feature in the 'twins' ontology. The whiteness in the visual encounter with a stone (156c7–157a4) must be not only in fast change, i.e. locomotion, between stone and eye, but also in slow change, i.e. qualitative change, so as to guarantee the perception's unrevisability and unfalsifiability.

So far, then, Socrates has merely made explicit what we already either knew or could easily work out. It is only thereafter that the flux theory is pushed to an unexpected new extreme (182d8–e7). The other 'twin' in the encounter, sight, must also be radically unstable, not merely in the sense that the content of sight is constantly changing, e.g. from white to grey, which we would of course expect, but in respect of the very fact of *seeing*:

[143] For this recurrent Platonic theme, cf. *Crat.* 439d8–11, *Ti.* 50b3–4.

SOCR. And what are we going to say about any kind of perception, for example that of seeing or hearing? Shall we say that it ever stays in the condition of seeing or hearing?
THEOD. We shouldn't, given that everything is changing.
SOCR. In that case we should not say that we are seeing something any more than not seeing it, nor speak of any other sense rather than its negation, if at any rate everything is changing in every way.

Why so? Not just because Heracliteanism is antecedently committed to leaving nothing stable. There must, as I have insisted all along, be a motive connected with the goal of preserving the Protagorean–Heraclitean theory of knowledge as perception. Presumably—although this is not made explicit—the point is that one of the things that we perceive is the actual fact that we are seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.[144] Consequently, if you remained in one of these perceptual states for any duration whatsoever, there would be time to revise the judgement that you are seeing, or hearing, or smelling, and to conclude that on reflection your current experience is merely a hallucination or dream. If it were a hallucination or dream, it would still of course be *true* (as explained at 157e1–160c6); but it is the second-order perception about one's current perceptual modality that is now at issue. It is to avoid any element of falsifiability in this that not only the seeing of white, but even the very fact of seeing, must be no more than instantaneous.

Socrates is now ready for the killer blow (182e8–183a1):

SOCR. And yet knowledge is perception, according to what we and Theaetetus said.
THEOD. We did say that.
SOCR. So when asked what knowledge is, we answered with something that is no more knowledge than not knowledge.
THEOD. It looks that way.

The formal point of the refutation is as follows. The definition offered by Theaetetus, 'Knowledge is perception', can survive only if it interprets the definiens, perception, as something so unstable that at every moment it is turning into its own opposite. But that concession renders the definition itself as unstable as the definiens, no more true than false.

[144] It was left for Aristotle (*DA* III 2) to make this explicit; but when Plato's Socrates mentions at *Charm.* 168d3–169a5 that there may be a way in which seeing of seeing and hearing of hearing are possible, he probably has the same point in mind.

It is not immediately clear how we got from 'Seeing (etc.) should no more be called seeing than not-seeing (etc.)' to 'Perception should no more be called perception than non-perception'. One possibility is that Socrates has omitted a step: we must not only be saved from ever revising our judgement as to whether we are (for example) seeing or merely hallucinating, but also as to whether we are *perceiving at all* or merely hallucinating.

However, I doubt this. In the passage on illusion at 157e1–160c6 all delusions, even dreams, were implicitly brought under the heading of veridical perceptions, the Protagorean–Heraclitean theory not in fact having been designed to allow for any states of consciousness *other* than perception.[145] It therefore seems safer to respect the letter of the text and to let the argument stop one step earlier, with the move which saved the judgement that we are using this or that specific sense from ever becoming subject to revision.

In that case, the final failure of Theaetetus' definition will rest on the consideration that, while defining knowledge as perception, it has to regard every actual *case* of perceiving, through whichever of the senses it may be, as one in which the perception through that sense has ceased to be a perception before one has finished referring to it as a 'perception'. The only way that the perception as such could have endured would have been if it were constantly changing from, say, seeing to hearing to smelling etc., but it is not clear what it would even mean for a single perception to endure in *that* way; instead, not unreasonably, it is inferred that no single act of perceiving can have any duration whatsoever. If there are no enduring specific perceptions, the generic term 'perception' can never be applied to anything actual. One might be tempted to respond that the term could still apply generically to perception *as such*: we are all enduringly perceiving, albeit not enduringly seeing, hearing, etc. But to introduce any such universal genus is already to go beyond the Heraclitean ontology of fleeting particulars, and to look to the underlying Platonic lesson of the passage, to which we will turn shortly.

First we must look at the broader lesson which Socrates draws from the refutation (183a2–b6). It is here that, as regularly read, the passage is taken to conclude that radical flux leads to the collapse of language. That is surely not the conclusion. Rather, the final upshot

[145] Cf. p. 46 above on judging subjects as bundles of perceptions.

is that language will need even more restrictions than the Heracliteans already aim to impose. That it must get by without determinate subject and predicate expressions has been previously established; I have suggested that such modes of discourse are intended as fully in the spirit of Heraclitus himself, and arguably, far from being an abandonment of truth, as representing the one way in which language *can* capture the truth about the world. The new turn of the screw is to show us that this mode of discourse must after all give up any claim to secure determinate truth-values: the subject of a sentence cannot hold its reference long enough for a predicate to be attached to it. So the Heraclitean language must in addition get by without locutions implying determinate truth-values: that things are 'thus' and 'not thus', as Socrates puts it. And even this is presented by Socrates, not as a complete abandonment of language (see especially 183b4–5),[146] but as involving the fatal concession that every 'answer' on any subject is equally correct (183a4–6).

One might think that to say this is to invalidate language as a whole, and certainly that further consequence could have been argued, but in fact it is not. Both the immediate context and the regular use of 'answer' in the dialogue confirm that Socrates means something more restricted: this is a collapse, not of language, but of *dialectic*. The Socratic method par excellence, dialectic is centred on the investigation of universal truths, especially definitions, by means of question and answer, and every one of the forty-three occurrences of 'answer' in the dialogue outside this passage refers to dialectical answering, in most cases the proffering of a definition.

Hence the upshot of Socrates' refutation of the flux thesis is that, if as the perceptual theory requires there is literally nothing stable, there is nothing about which one's dialectical answer could hold

[146] Unfortunately the textual reading is uncertain just at the point where Socrates is allowing the Heracliteans a locution which they can perhaps legitimately retain. They are no longer allowed to say 'thus' and 'not thus', since, I take it, each term would incorrectly imply an enduring truth-value (enduring for at least the time it took to utter the expression); but they may perhaps be allowed 'not even thus', οὐδ' οὕτως, 'said in an indefinite sense' (183b4–5). This expression, which does not seem to differ sufficiently from the outlawed locutions, is found only in the Vienna MS, and οὐδ' ὅπως is the better-supported reading. I am not sure what this latter could mean, but a simple emendation to οὐδέ πως, 'not even somehow', might be the solution. The point of adding 'said in an indefinite sense' would be that πως can also mean 'in some specific way' (see LSJ, *s.v.* II), in which case it would barely differ from 'thus'. For a discussion of other possibilities, see McCabe (2000: 115 n. 88).

true, and hence in particular there are no definitions.[147] The Heracliteans are expected to insist that discourse of their own favoured kind can continue, the indeterminacy of its referring terms, and even (as they must now agree) of its truth-values, accurately capturing the flux of the actual world. If, that is, this now means that their assertions are, taken as a whole, no more true than false, there is no reason to assume that they will not welcome the consequence; indeed, it could even be to real-life Heracliteans that Aristotle is referring when he reports that, according to some people, Heraclitus himself makes assertions which openly violate the Principle of Non-Contradiction (*Met.* Γ 3, 1005^{b}23–6). Socrates' objection is not that such a view of things cannot be adequately expressed in language, but simply that it postulates a world in which there can be no dialectic, and, more specifically, no definitions. Consequently, Theaetetus' definition of knowledge really does undermine itself: it is a definition that presupposes a world in which there can be no definitions.

2. Plato and Flux

What Socrates has discovered, then, is that his own patented philosophical method, dialectic, is incompatible with a doctrine of total flux. Looking back to Theodorus' amusing depiction of the Heracliteans at 179e3–180c6, we can now see the telling relevance of his remark (179e8–180a1) that these people absolutely refuse to engage in dialectical question and answer.[148]

But what conclusion should we infer Socrates to have reached about the perceptual theory and the doctrine of flux on which it is founded? Once again the interpreters divide into camps. The doctrinal school of interpretation will hold that the conclusion applies only to the sensible world: thanks to the existence of a stable world of intelligible Forms, words retain a stable reference and the possibility

147 Socrates concludes at 183a6–8 that every answer will be equally correct, 'as will saying that things are thus and not thus—or, if you prefer, *become* thus and not thus, in order not to make them stationary by the way we speak'. 'Become' is, it is true, not a normal part of the terminology of definitions, but Socrates is here envisaging a reformed, Heraclitean dialectic.

148 This aspect is well brought out in the discussion of the passage by McCabe (2000, ch. 4).

of rational discourse is rescued.[149] (By rational discourse they normally mean language as such, but if I was right in the previous section we should substitute *dialectic* for this—fortunately, since Plato never denies that we can talk about the sensible world, whereas he does, as I shall amplify below, deny that dialectic about it is possible.) The non-doctrinal camp limits the function of 179c1–183c7 to the refutation of the Protagorean–Heraclitean theory, with no inferences to be drawn about the nature even of the sensible world, beyond (at most) the conclusion that it cannot be in total flux. Here once more, I submit, to demand a straight choice between the two competing readings impoverishes the text.

Socrates, the speaker, is altogether unaware of the existence of an intelligible world over and above the sensible: this is well conveyed by the way in which, having seen off the Heracliteans, he now refuses to continue with a discussion of Parmenides' static being, confessing that he is unlikely to understand it (183c8–184a6).[150] To that extent, I think, the non-doctrinal interpretation is correct: Socrates is simply revealing a flaw in the internal logic of Protagoreanism, without any positive metaphysical agenda of his own.

But Plato, exercising authorial control, ensures that the Platonic implications are kept in view. In analysing flux in terms of perpetual becoming without being, he can hardly fail to be aware that he is bringing to his readers' minds the radical bipartition, first introduced in the *Republic,* between the becoming of the sensible and the being of the intelligible. Compare the account of sensibles developed in *Republic* V (478e7–479b10) as a basis for acknowledging separated Forms:

> ‘Now that this has been established, I shall say, let him give me a reply, our good man who does not think there is a Beautiful itself and a Form of Beauty itself which always stays the same way in the same respects, but does believe in the many beautiful things—that lover of spectacles who is quite intolerant of anyone who says that the Beautiful is one thing, and likewise the Just and so on. “Of these many beautiful things, my friend,” we will say, “is there any that will not turn out ugly? And of the many just things, any that will not turn out unjust? And of the many pious things, any that will not turn out impious?” ’

[149] Cf. Cornford (1935: 101).

[150] From the point of view of authorial strategy, this task can be said to be being held in reserve for the *Sophist,* where the stranger from Elea will have all the metaphysical expertise necessary to criticize Parmenides successfully.

> 'No,' he said. 'It's inevitable that they should turn out in a way beautiful and in a way ugly, and so too for the other things you are asking about.'
>
> 'What about the many double things? Do they turn out half any less than double?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'And large and small things, and heavy and light things: whichever of these we say, will the things be called by them any more than by their opposites?'
>
> 'No,' he said. 'Each thing will always hang on to both.'
>
> 'Then *is* each of the many, any more than it *is not,* whatever someone says it is?'

There is a good deal of scholarly disagreement about the precise Platonic metaphysics implied by this passage, and it is not my intention to reopen the dispute. For on any reading (even one where the 'many beautiful things' are limited to types rather than tokens, as some interpreters believe),[151] it would be implausible to deny that the fluidity of particulars as described here, and the fluidity of everything as described in the Heraclitean theory of the *Theaetetus* (especially at 152d2–e1), bear a striking and non-accidental resemblance. Both accounts emphasize that each bearer of a given property will also turn out[152] to bear the opposite property, so that it will not be more correctly described by the one than by the other.[153] And both infer from this that such items cannot correctly be said to 'be'—that is, as I understand it,[154] to be whatever is predicated of them. In the *Republic* passage that inference is just beginning to emerge: the 'many beautiful things' are said in the immediate sequel to 'fluctuate between being and not being'; it is in the subsequent two books that the verb 'become' is used to describe this intermediate state, just as in the *Theaetetus.*

[151] e.g. Gosling (1960); Irwin (1977); contra, White (1978).

[152] The verb φαὶνεσθαι followed by a simple predicate is used in both passages, and may be translated e.g. 'turn out'. That it does not mean *merely* 'appear' is suggested in both passages by the direct inference from how something 'turns out' to what it is correct to call it.

[153] I avoid talk of 'compresence' of opposites, because this is often understood as excluding a temporal succession of opposite properties, whereas Plato does not consider 'F at time T, but un-F at time T_1' relevantly different from 'F in aspect A, but un-F in aspect A_1', where the aspects in question may be contemporaneous: cf. *Smp.* 210e6–211a5. An item's 'turning out' (see previous note) to have opposite properties covers both of these.

[154] The meaning of 'be' in this passage is much disputed, but 479b6–10 favours taking it to be functioning in a predominantly predicative way (I am reluctant to talk about different 'meanings'). Cf. the illuminating discussion in Brown (1994: 220–8).

To acknowledge that the Heraclitean thesis developed in the *Theaetetus* corresponds to one half of this two-world metaphysics of being and becoming does not require a perfect identity between the two. What matters from the point of view of the interpretation I am proposing is the following: Plato is asking us to notice how the Heraclitean world whose profile Socrates develops prefigures the sensible world as analysed in Platonic metaphysics. To say that the Platonic sensible world is Heraclitean in character is no novelty, but articulates a widely favoured reading of Plato which goes back at least to Aristotle.[155] Whether or not we believe Aristotle (as I myself do) when he tells us that Plato originally learnt this Heracliteanism from his early mentor Cratylus, we have at least now seen very good reason to accept Aristotle's accompanying assertion that Plato's sensible world *is* a Heraclitean one. For Plato himself seems to be telling us just that by contriving so close a parallelism between the *Theaetetus* and *Republic* passages.

The *Theaetetus* has shown Socrates arguing that, if the entire world is in flux, dialectic is impossible. How then is dialectic to be rescued? The Socrates of the dialogue, who has no inkling of a realm of Being separate from the sensible world, has seen no further than the need to abandon any doctrine of total flux. But that is not Plato's own position: he would point, rather, to the recognition of stable Forms as the necessary condition of dialectic, since dialectic is about Forms, not sensibles. This is made abundantly clear by the *Republic,* which, having distinguished particulars from Forms in the way we have seen, goes on explicitly to make these latter the sole objects of dialectic (511b3–c2).[156] Thanks to the postulation of Forms, Plato, unlike Socrates, can afford to leave the sensible world in a state of total flux which excludes all being (*Timaeus* 27d5–28a4).

From our privileged viewpoint we are enabled to recognize in Socrates, not the discoverer of these metaphysical truths, but the one who paved the way to them by developing the expertise of dialectic. It was Socrates, the philosopher who turned philosophy from the physical world to the world of pure discourse, who intuited that the ineliminable ambiguities of the sensible world bar it from being the subject of that dialectic.

[155] Aristotle, *Met.* A 6, 987^{a} 32–^{b} 7. Cf. Irwin (1977) for a defence.

[156] Cf. *Prm.* 135b5–c4, on the need for Forms if dialectic is to be possible.

3. Plato and Perception

There remains the question whether the relativist theory of perception, as set up at 156a2–157c3, has now been formally refuted. Once more we must distinguish between speaker and author. Socrates, the speaker, has concluded that the amount of flux needed to make perception infallible is more than can be tolerated, so if he were to allow the perceptual theory to survive at all that would have to be in a less extreme form. Since perception's infallibility is not in any case his own thesis, and will be definitively rejected at 184b3–187a3 when he argues that perception cannot even be true, let alone infallible, Socrates could perfectly well accept the compromise of simply reducing the degree of flux. But it is idle to pretend that he does. The entire Heraclitean theory of perception is now left behind, and in particular Socrates will no longer deny that the objects of perception have 'being'.[157] As far as he is concerned, the theory has outlived its usefulness.

That, however, does not rule out a Platonic subtext, of the kind that should by now be becoming familiar. For the interactive analysis of perception, worked out by Socrates in primarily epistemological terms, corresponds to a significant degree with Plato's own thinking on the physics of vision, as expounded in the *Timaeus* (45b2–46c6, 67c4–68d7). What Plato will supply there is a theory of the particles which underlie visual interaction, and which, much as in the *Theaetetus* account, travel (through a suitably illuminated medium) both from the perceiving subject and from the perceived object, combining to produce actual vision. This theory was almost certainly original with Plato.[158] Because Socrates no more had a physics than he did a metaphysics, his own account of how perception would have to function in an intrinsically fluid world lac1ks the physical substructure that the *Timaeus* supplies. But readers of the *Theaetetus* are enabled to glimpse how his grasp of the *epistemology* of perception foreshadows the physics that Plato will later work out.[159] It would be

157 First at 185a9; see Owen (1953: 86). Cf. however n. 37 below.

158 O'Brien (1970) shows that it did not, as once thought, have antecedents in Empedocles.

159 As often, this strategy of reading a Socratic idea in the *Theaetetus* as a *foreshadowing* of something Platonic saves us from having to be bothered by the lack of a complete fit between the Socratic and Platonic theses. Cf. Burnyeat (1990: 16–17) for the point—which does not, however, damage the above interpretative strategy—that the *Timaeus* account differs in specifying enduring particles underlying the perceptual traffic.

unwise to push this parallelism too far,[160] especially as the other four senses are not, in the *Timaeus,* founded on the same kind of two-way interaction. But vision is treated as the paradigm sense both in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Timaeus* (as it was in the entire ancient tradition), and the degree of correspondence between the two accounts is unlikely to be accidental.

In the other cases where Socrates has turned out to be anticipating a Platonic doctrine, that has been by reference to interests that the semi-historical Socrates of Plato's early dialogues was already shown pursuing—the dialectical method, for example, and the conviction that god is absolutely good—interests which, I have argued in Chapter 1 §11, are in the *Theaetetus* implicitly justified as integral to Socrates' maieutic expertise. In the case of perceptual relativity, it is less immediately obvious that we are dealing with a concern that Plato could present as having been historically Socratic, or that could be located among the Socratic principles of midwifery. Nevertheless, a passage in the Socratic dialogues does point that way. I mean *Protagoras* 356c4–e4, where Socrates, advocating (perhaps hypothetically) an expertise in the measurement of pleasure, brings up for comparison the case of seeing or hearing things at a distance. Their size, their solidity, and most such properties, he says, are misleadingly conveyed by appearances, seeming greater close up, smaller at a distance; the key to establishing them accurately is therefore not to rely on 'the power of appearance', but to apply 'the expertise of measurement'. It seems, on this evidence, that Socrates' constant concern with the nature and structure of expertise (principle 8, p. 34 above) was, according to Plato's construal of it, founded in part on a contrast between, on the one hand, skilled precision and, on the other, untutored reliance on direct sensory impressions, which, as here, he recognized to fluctuate unstably between opposites because always relativized to a current perspective.

If this is correct, we can read Socrates' partial anticipation of the *Timaeus* account of perception in the following way. The historical Socrates is to be credited with the contrast between untutored sense-perception and trained expertise, a contrast which in part I of the *Theaetetus* lies never far below the surface. He appreciated in particular that sense-perception is inherently unstable because it consists in a constantly variable relativity between observer and object;

[160] As Fine (1998) warns.

and that is why, in his own chosen field of ethics, he valued and sought skills which would transcend all such relativities. His fundamental intuition about perceptual relativity was the starting point for the physics of vision which Plato would later develop, as the affinities between the two accounts serve to remind us.

More immediately, however, that same Socratic contrast between expertise and sense-perception has work to do in the final argument of part I of the *Theaetetus,* to which we can now turn.

4. A Priori and Empirical (184b3–185e1)

At the end of his refutation of the Heraclitean theory (183b7–c3), Socrates concludes as follows:

> Well then, Theodorus, we have got rid of your friend [Protagoras], and we no longer concede to him that every man is the measure of all things, except where someone is wise. And we will not concede that knowledge is perception, not at any rate on the theory that everything is changing, unless Theaetetus here has some other account to give.

Socrates here draws a line. The refutations of both broad Protagoreanism and narrow Protagoreanism are now complete. But the latter has been refuted, as Socrates makes clear, only in the Heraclitean form in which he has developed and criticized it. It still remains a theoretical possibility that Theaetetus' definition, which makes perception the sole measure of truth, could be defended on some other basis. What therefore remains, after a quick word about Parmenides (see above, p. 100), is for Socrates to show that Theaetetus' definition is inherently faulty, regardless of any particular perceptual theory one might adopt. This is what he undertakes at 184b3–187a3.

A large part of the passage is devoted to establishing the precise relation between the senses, considered as that *via* which we perceive (expressed in Greek by the word for 'through'),[161] and the soul, viewed as the subject of all judgements. What, Socrates asks (184d7–185a10), is the minimal thought that you can entertain about a pair of perceptual objects, such as a colour and a sound?

[161] In opting for 'via', which I choose in order to emphasize the idea of intermediacy, rather than the instrumental 'by means of' defended by Burnyeat (1976*a*), I have been influenced by an unpublished paper by Justin Broackes. But the choice between these two senses does not affect my main interpretation.

It is simply that they both 'are'. Greek usage does not invite us to distinguish whether by this he means that they both exist, or that they both are something or other, e.g. pleasing.[162] What is important is that the attribution of being here is meant to be not a sophisticated but a minimal thought, which underlies even the simplest predications. But banal as this minimal thought may be, Socrates argues that it already exceeds the capacity of any sense—sight, for example, cannot pronounce on the being of the sound, nor can hearing pronounce on the being of the colour. From 'being' (*ousia*), the class of these 'common' predicates[163] is extended (185a11–186b1) to numbers, to topic-neutral concepts such as like and unlike, and eventually even to values such as fair (*kalon*) and foul (*aischron*). All of these, Socrates and Theaetetus agree at 185d6–186a1, are deployed by the soul through its own resources, independently of the senses.

Once more a Platonic bell is being rung: are these 'common' items not familiar occupants of the world of Forms? Hence here if anywhere Platonizing readers of the *Theaetetus* tend to identify a clear allusion to Platonic transcendent Forms. But caution is imperative. All that Socrates has done is isolate a set of predicates to which we have access independently of the use of our sense-organs.[164] It seems reasonably harmless for us to label these a priori, and they constitute a broad class which includes the kinds of predicates on and with

[162] Thus when at 185c5–6 'is not' as well as 'is' is predicated of *everything,* it cannot be non-existence that is meant, since few if any of the things in question are non-existent. But that does not mean that 'being' *tout court,* which amounts to existence, is excluded from the verb's scope here, since this does not normally function as an altogether discrete sense of the verb. See esp. Brown (1994).

[163] Here and hereafter I use 'predicates' for these commons, because (cf. pp. 115–16 below) in this part of the dialogue they are considered purely in a predicative capacity.

[164] On one interpretation, there are occasions when we do have access to being through a sense-organ, namely when we ask whether some perceived object 'is' e.g. red, since that does not exceed the capacity of a single sense. Those who favour this reading may wish to cite 185b9–c2 (cf. the remarks of Cooper 1970: 131–2 and Modrak 1981: 43), where Socrates maintains that if it were to become possible to ask regarding a colour and a sound '*Are* they salty or not?' this would be done by the sense of taste. I doubt if this can stand as evidence, because it is an extreme counterfactual, as is emphasized by the fact that he uses the dative ({z; c1), not 'through', to indicate how it would be done 'by' the sense of taste. Rather than follow those who take this dative to be a lapse from what Socrates has established as the correct usage (e.g. Kanayama 1987: 39–40; Bostock 1988: 121 n. 35), we should read Socrates as saying that in this utterly counterfactual situation the sense of taste would take on the unifying role of judging agent normally assigned to the soul, and that it is purely for that reason that, like the soul in actual fact, it would have access to being. I therefore favour the alternative reading that *all* thoughts about being, including predicative being, are the work of the soul acting by itself, as is strongly indicated by 185e1: there, with Socrates' enthusiastic approval, Theaetetus says that 'about everything' (περὶ πάντων) the 'commons', including being, are accessed by the soul through its own resources and not through the senses. We must take it, then, that all the soul can access through the sense-organs is sense-objects themselves, by becoming aware of red, sweet etc., and not truths in which these properties feature, such as that this object is red. This will become very important in the interpretation of the Dream theory (pp. 158–9 below).

which Socratic dialectic was already starting to be exercised in the early dialogues—it being precisely their a priori nature that makes them suitable objects of dialectical rather than empirical investigation, thanks to the presupposition that the essential data are directly available to our souls, rather than requiring empirical input (cf. principle 2, p. 33 above). I do not intend 'a priori' as a loaded term, informed by Kantian or any other presuppositions, but just as a handy way to categorize those entities, predicates or concepts, *whichever they may be,* that Socrates regards as capable of being understood by dialectical investigation. That these should, as here, include *values,* along with the mathematical and logical terms, is philosophically controversial, but it can hardly be denied that Plato's Socrates regularly does treat values as belonging to this class, not just here but throughout the dialogues.

The question just how wide the class's boundaries should be set is one which troubled Plato. At *Parmenides* 130b3–e4 Plato's youthful Socrates, although confident that this same class (there represented by the Forms) contains both (*a*) topic-neutral items such as likeness and (*b*) values, admits his reluctance to include in it objects that might be thought adequately apprehensible through the senses, such as (*c*) man, fire, and water, and, more problematic still in his eyes, (*d*) hair, mud, and dirt. His reluctance with regard to (*c*) and (*d*) is reprimanded by Parmenides; and, correspondingly, the more enlightened Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is made to indicate that for him even (*c*) and (*d*) do constitute proper subjects of dialectic. For it can hardly, it seems to me, be a coincidence that this Socrates specifically offers, as bona fide examples of definienda, both 'man' (or 'human being'), at 174b4–6,[165] and 'mud', at 147c4–6.[166]

[165] See p. 69 above.

[166] See p. 21 above, where I translate πηλός as 'clay', as the context requires (cf. the preceding references to clay); but it is the same word that is conventionally translated 'mud' in the *Parmenides* passage, and its definition at *Tht.* 147c4–6 as 'earth mixed with moisture' tends to confirm this equivalence.

Implicitly, scientific investigation even of items such as these is at bottom a task for the soul's own resources.

The protection of the realm investigated by dialectic from having to accommodate such mundane occupants had, it seems, been a regrettable by-product of the radical two-world separation associated with Plato's middle-period thought.[167] A useful antidote to that dialectical parochialism lies in a return to a less exclusionist and more Socratic outlook. It was, after all, Plato's semi-historical Socrates who had been shown offering 'bee' as a model scientific definiendum from which something might be learnt about the criteria for a successful definition of virtue (*Meno* 72a6–d1). In Plato's later work a similar broadening of scope will be maintained: not only will the generic Form of 'animal' play a pivotal role in the *Timaeus* (30c2–31a1), but even such humble items as 'angling' and 'weaving' will be subjected to rigorous dialectical analysis. As the stranger from Elea will insist in the *Politicus* (266d4–11), dialectical methodology should focus on truth, without regard to considerations of dignity. Here then, once again, we find in the *Theaetetus* the rediscovery of a Socratic legacy which points the way forward to Plato's late work. Considerations such as these at the same time confirm the need for caution about imposing our own presuppositions about what items might for Socrates count as proper objects of dialectical, theoretical, or a priori investigation.[168]

Leaving aside this question of demarcation, more needs to be said about Socrates' move away from empirical research. That this represented Socrates' own historic contribution had already been flagged up in the *Phaedo,* where Socrates autobiographically describes his decision in his 'Second Voyage' to study reality in discourses (*logoi*) rather than in things (99d4–e6): in context, this is naturally read as a move from empirical science to dialectic. It is now, in the *Theaetetus,* equally clearly flagged up in the course of the

[167] This kind of protectionism is most evident in the 'finger' passage at *Rep.* VII 523a1–525a5, where the impression is conveyed that no Form is required for an item so directly given in perception as a finger. It may, however, represent just a brief phase in Plato's thought, given the Forms of artefacts that are recognized both in the probably earlier *Crat.* 389a5–390e5, and in *Rep.* X 596a5–597d4.

[168] It is left unclear whether these further items should be added to the catalogue of 'commons'. The argument for adding them might—mimicking 184e8–185b9—be along the lines that you can neither *smell* that the *brown* thing is mud, nor *see* that the *malodorous* thing is mud. But it would be unwise to assume that such a move is intended.

present discussion. Here, despite the fact that Socrates has cast himself as a mere ignorant interrogator, when the discussion turns to the soul's capacity to study the 'commons' independently of sense-perception Socrates is portrayed as—quite exceptionally for this dialogue—making an open declaration of his own conviction: 'And as well as being beautiful', he says to Theaetetus at 185e5–9, 'you have done well in saving me from a very long discourse, if it is your own belief that the soul examines some things through its own resources, but others through the body's faculties. *For that is what I thought as well, but I wanted you to think it too.*' Plato could hardly have made it clearer that in his eyes this distinction between the a priori and the empirical was to be credited to Socrates himself.

The reason why, exceptionally, Socrates permits himself to reveal his own hand here, despite his avowed intellectual barrenness, is no doubt once more that the tenet in question is a principle on which his avowed expertise of midwifery is itself founded (see principle 2, p. 33 above). But Socrates' willingness, indeed eagerness, to assert it as his own view is more pronounced than any other element of assertiveness he shows in the dialogue. It can be read as Plato's way of highlighting a pivotal Socratic insight.

So much for the distinction between empirical and a priori. But need it have any metaphysical implications? Are the contents of the latter class necessarily to be identified with separated Forms? We must wait to see how the argument proceeds.

5. Truth and Knowledge (186a2–187a3)

It is the location of being, in particular, on the a priori side of this boundary that underpins the crucial final phase of the argument, which now ensues.

At 186a9–b1 Theaetetus remarks that it is the soul that considers the being (*ousia*) of values, calculating (*analogizomenê*) in itself the past and present in relation to the future. Here he is beyond doubt recalling what was said a little earlier (177c6–179b9) about the capacities of the expert, the person who predicts the future on the basis of past and present. Hence 'being', at any rate as Theaetetus understands it, may appear no longer to be restricted to the ontologically innocent sense in which it features, explicitly or implicitly, in everyday assertions (pp. 105–6 above). Instead (or in addition) he

seems to have bestowed on it a richer profile. If this is not yet the philosopher's notion of being, as conveyed by such imperfect translations of *ousia* as 'reality', 'substance', and 'essence', it is at any rate something more demanding and less readily grasped than the force of everyday predications.

This apparent enrichment of the term gains in credibility soon after, when Socrates adds the following crucial remark (186b11–c5):

> Hence there are some things which, from the moment of birth, are naturally available for humans and animals alike to perceive—those experiences which reach through the body to the soul. But as for calculations (*analogismata*) about these things, with regard to being (*ousia*) and benefit, it is with difficulty and over a long time and through a great deal of effort and education that they become available, to those to whom they do become available.

In the second sentence of this passage, Socrates appears to distinguish those who do not stop at merely experiencing sense-perceptions but go on to apply the demanding notions of being and benefit to their contents. Technically, he could mean that virtually all humans do this, but no other animals: thus, so far as 'being' is concerned, the very ability to think propositionally—that is, to grasp everyday being such as in the thought that the cat 'is' on the mat—takes at least the first year of life to develop, and is already enough to distinguish humans from non-human animals. However, when he distinguishes these cognitive acts with the otherwise almost unattested noun *analogismata,* which I have translated 'calculations', that clearly suggests a reference to the work of the expert, given Theaetetus' preceding use of the cognate verb *analogizesthai* in what we have seen to be a corresponding sense. Besides, Socrates' declaration that only those who persevere with their education can aspire to these 'calculations' suggests something more than the ability to entertain everyday propositional thoughts.[169]

If so, it may seem that the 'being' (*ousia*) which is among the objects of these calculations ought itself not to be common or garden being, but rather that kind of 'reality' that only a few human beings—primarily philosophers—can grasp: the unchangeable being, in fact, which according to advanced Platonic metaphysics exclusively characterizes the intelligible world.

[169] It does not follow that they are limited to authentic experts, since at 178d8–e8 even chefs and rhetoricians can successfully predict outcomes, despite being Socratic paradigms of pseudo-experts (see pp. 87–8 above).

On the other hand, Socrates cannot himself fully have seen this, because the 'calculations' in question are said by him to be 'about these things', that is, about sense-contents. If Socrates has started to see the link between knowledge and essences, he certainly has not got as far as the latter's metaphysical separation from sensibles.[170] In fact, since Socrates started out invoking a low-level concept of being, it is likely that he himself still intends no more than that: what takes years of hard study is not the ability to entertain thoughts which include 'be' and 'benefit' as such, but to achieve the *analogismata*—expertly informed inferences from prior data—about these that Theaetetus has now brought into the discussion. We may take these 'calculations' to be appraisals of what things are and of how to achieve beneficial results—appraisals which are characteristic marks of the expert; but, at least in Socrates' eyes, they do not import any kind of being over and above that expressed by ordinary uses of the copula. The fact that the turn which the discussion has taken points readers towards a far richer sense of being is no accident, but it corresponds to Plato's more than to Socrates' take on the argument. Socrates means only to point out that being and benefit—understood in a quite untechnical sense—can become the subjects of demanding expertises.[171] We should leave the contrived ambiguity in place, and read on.

Whatever kind of 'being' may be intended, it plays a key part in the final refutation of Theaetetus (186c7–e12), which can be summarized as follows:

(1) Knowledge entails accessing truth.
(2) Accessing truth entails accessing being (*ousia*).
(3) Perception cannot access being (as already demonstrated).
(4) Therefore perception cannot access truth.
(5) Therefore perception and knowledge are not the same thing.

Here too we face our usual interpretative dilemma. It could be that, in line with the thin notion of being with which Socrates opened, perception's incapacity to be knowledge lies simply in its inability to

[170] The same point emerges from 186b6–9, d2–3.

[171] While Plato's motive for reminding us of his metaphysics should be clear, it is less clear why his speaker, Socrates, includes these remarks. It seems likely enough that, since grasping truth is no more than a necessary condition of knowledge (as the Jury passage in part II will remind us, see pp. 149–50 below), Socrates assumes these *analogismata* to be an additional factor in knowledge. If so, however, they play no further part in the argument, being effectively replaced in part III by *logos*.

entertain propositional thoughts, all of them explicitly or implicitly expressed by the assertion that so and so 'is' such and such. If perception cannot think propositionally, a fortiori it cannot entertain any *true* propositions, and therefore cannot aspire to the status of knowledge. But it could equally be that he is assuming the much richer notion of being that emerged later on. Knowledge in this context would then be, not everyday cognition, but the state of mind of the expert, and especially of the philosopher. The argument will be that knowledge in this strong sense requires access to Being in *its* strong sense—that is, a grasp of the ultimate reality of each thing, such as, in Plato's eyes, can be found only at the level of Forms.[172] Correspondingly, 'truth' (*alētheia*) too would require a stronger sense, and one is readily forthcoming: the word can (as in the Sun simile of *Republic* VI, at 509a7[173]) be used to single out eternal verities, and thus to connote the deep truth on which philosophical inquiry is focused.

This ambiguity about the scope of 'being', 'truth', and 'knowledge' mirrors and continues the earlier ambiguity about the 'commons'—are they mere a priori predicates, or transcendent Forms? But by now we should be welcoming and exploiting these ambiguities, rather than struggling to resolve them. Once again, a division of labour between Socrates and Plato can be imposed by the reader. Socrates can be assumed still to intend no more than the weaker readings of 'being', 'truth', and 'knowledge'. This fits best not only with the hard core of his argument, but also with the fact that in the remainder of the dialogue the 'knowledge' which he investigates continues to include everyday cognition in its scope. The stronger, Platonizing reading, which was first casually introduced by Theaetetus, is thereafter continually hinted at by the text, but constitutes no indispensable part of Socrates' own argument.

The Socratic dimension to the argument can be located in the identification of being as a member of the set of a priori predicates, those which lie beyond the reach of perception. For this has proved already sufficient to ground the insight that perception cannot be

[172] This might seem to conflict with Socrates' readiness in these closing pages of part I to restore to the objects of perception the 'being' that was denied to them by the Protagorean theory (157b1–7). But Plato is careful to make him assign them both being *and not-being* (185c4–7), thus maintaining their conformity to the status of sensibles as characterized at *Rep.* 478d5–479d5.

[173] Cf. *Phd.* 65b9 (very reminiscent of our passage), 99e6; *Rep.* 585c1–d4; *Ti.* 29c3, 90c1–2. There are numerous further examples in Plato.

knowledge. As for Plato, he as the author of the *Republic* had started from the Socratic method of a priori investigation, but had gone on to redefine it as an ascent from the world of becoming to the pure being of the Forms; and the argument which he places in Socrates' mouth strongly hints at an enriched conception of knowledge, founded on that ontology. In the systematic ambiguities of *Theaetetus* 184b3–187a3, we can discern how natural was the progression from the Socratic method to the Platonic. Once more, Socrates emerges as the unwitting instigator of that progression, the midwife who brought Plato's transcendental epistemology into the world.

6. The Unity of Consciousness

It is often said, especially in the wake of Myles Burnyeat's work,[174] that this final section of part I represents a new philosophical advance for Plato. As late as book VII of the *Republic* (the famous 'finger' passage at 523a1–525a5), Plato's Socrates was talking as if the intellect and the senses were operating on parallel planes, each in its own way making judgements. This is seen as then being overthrown by *Theaetetus* 184b7–186a1, where Plato, still in the voice of Socrates, argues that a single unified entity, the soul, conducts all cognitive operations, some by instrumental use of the senses, others altogether without them. Why, if my story is correct, should Plato be donating his own new discovery to Socrates?

It is not, I think, a question of donation. The insight that the rational soul itself is the subject of perception is one that Plato had already arrived at by the time he wrote *Republic* X.[175] What he is doing now in the *Theaetetus* is recognize its Socratic pedigree.

[174] Burnyeat (1976*a* ; 1990: 58).

[175] Burnyeat (1976*a* : 34–6) sees the *Rep.* VII error as continuing in *Rep.* X , 602c4–603a9, in the distinction between a part of the soul that measures and a part that judges by sensory appearances. But the clear implication of τoύτῳ at 602e4 and διάνoδα at 603b10, as Burnyeat (1999: 223 n. 12) has since acknowledged, is that both functions are carried out by the intellect itself, albeit by different parts or aspects of it. Indeed, the surprising and rarely noticed bipartition of the rational part here is surely motivated precisely by the need to avoid attributing either of the conflicting judgements to irrational perception itself. There seems to be no contradiction between this passage and the argument of *Tht.* 184d1–5, and I cannot see that anywhere in *Rep.* X are powers of judgement assigned to perception. Even if we find in VII a philosophical aberration which Plato later corrected, that correction should be recognized as already presupposed in X . Of course, *Rep.* X does not assume the *complete* unity of consciousness, if that is taken to exclude soul division, but there is no reason to think that Plato ever, even in the *Theaetetus,* abandoned soul division; the silence about it in the *Theaetetus* reflects rather its irrelevance to the dialogue's theme and the fact that it is not part of Socrates' legacy to Plato.

Plato's Socrates famously treats the soul itself as a purely rational entity. That, however, leaves the question how the soul is functionally related to the body, its parts, and their operations, and the Socratic view on this is most clearly articulated in the *First Alcibiades* (129b5–130e7).[176] There Socrates forcefully argues that the soul is always the true agent, the bodily organs, including the eyes, merely its instruments. In this way, the division of labour between soul and senses worked out in the *Theaetetus* can be recognized as the reassertion and meticulous elaboration of a fundamentally Socratic insight—the acknowledgement of the soul both as the true self and as the sole agent of all cognitive acts (principle 10, p. 34 above).[177] It is this insight that enables Socrates to progress so satisfactorily beyond the Protagorean epistemology constructed in the early part of the dialogue, in which, as we have seen (pp. 46–7), an individual perceiver could be no more than a ‘bundle’ of perceptions, with no further entity available in Protagoras' ontology to unify the bundle.[178]

7. Outcome

It remains to ask what positive findings about knowledge Socrates takes to have emerged from the final refutation of Theaetetus' definition. At 187a3–6 he puts it as follows: ‘Nevertheless, we have at least progressed so far as not to seek knowledge in perception at all, but in whatever you call the thing which the soul has when, all by itself, it is busying itself over the things-which-are (*ta onta*).’ The

[176] The authenticity of *Alcibiades* has been widely doubted—though see now, in favour of authenticity, Desclos (1996), J.-F. Pradeau's introduction to Marbœuf and Pradeau (1999), and (the most fully argued) Denyer (2001). Whether or not it is from Plato's hand, it is almost certainly a product of the early Academy, representing a Platonic view of Socrates (‘un texte platonicien qui ne serait pas de Platon’, as Pradeau (Marbœuf and Pradeau 1999: 27) sums up this view).

[177] This link to Socrates' largely moral interest in the soul is confirmed by the pointedly Socratic locution at 184d3, ‘some one entity, whether the soul or whatever one ought to call it’, recalling Socrates' curious reticence about naming the soul at *Crito* 47d3–6.

[178] Cf. p. 47 n. 11 above.

name for this activity or capacity, they go on immediately to agree, is 'judging' (*doxazein*). What is less clear is whether Socrates is assuming that this judging must always be about the objects of the senses. His reference to 'the things-which-are' does not in itself indicate any such assumption, for the 'commons' too are certainly included as beings (186b6–9). How wide, then, should we take the term's scope to be?

It must be admitted that the entire foregoing argument has been focused on cases where an individual does not stop at registering sensory experiences but goes on to reason *about the objects or contents of those experiences.* The idea of reasoning about the 'commons' in their own right has not even been aired. On the other hand, whereas previously Socrates spoke explicitly of reasoning about 'experiences' (186c2–3, 186d3),[179] it is unlikely to be an accident that he now in his summing up speaks more broadly of reasoning about 'the things-which-are'. And, looking ahead, he will certainly be ready in the Aviary passage (Ch. 5 §6 below) to assume that there are knowledge of and calculation about numbers, which are included among the 'commons'. Probably, then, we should take at its face value this broadening of scope. The actual argument of 184b3–187a3 may have been concerned with how we proceed from sensory experiences to the attainment of truth about their direct objects, but the general lesson, in Socrates' eyes, is simply that knowledge is located in reasoning, the activity in which we make use of the 'commons'. What the object of that reasoning should be is a question he carefully leaves open.

In doing so, he is allowing that knowledge need not be of empirical objects, and may in principle be of those a priori items, the 'commons'. The commons, I have stressed, are not yet Platonic Forms. But it is important, in Plato's eyes, that Socrates' refutation of Theaetetus' brand of empiricism should at least be seen to open the door to knowledge of the commons, items whose independent reality it is left for Plato himself to discover.

Rather, then, than infer from this passage that Socrates is assuming the objects of knowledge to be, or include, sensible particulars, we would do well to concentrate on the following consideration.

[179] At 186d3 'in reasoning about those things' (περὶ ἐκείνων, although only McDowell of the translators I have consulted translates 'those things' rather than 'these things') does not have to refer to the 'experiences' (παθήματα) in the previous line, but in the light of 186c2–3 it probably does.

Socrates' interest in the commons has been exclusively in their use as *predicates*. The being, sameness, oppositeness, etc. that he has considered in his examples have been treated as predicable of sensible properties.[180] By broadening his conclusion in the way we have seen from talk of our reasoning about sensory experiences to our reasoning about 'the things-which-are', he has made it clear that nothing in his argument turned on the requirement that the subjects, to which the commons are attached as predicates, should be sensible particulars.

What he has *not* yet done is discuss those mental operations which take the commons in their own right as *subjects*. But since these are the sort of operations typified by Socratic definitional inquiries, one of which is under way right now, we are hardly expected to conclude that he has no awareness that such mental operations exist. Indeed, one particular feature of the foregoing discussion strongly suggests otherwise. Although his examples were all, as I have said, cases where commons function as predicates of sensible subjects, he persistently describes them, somewhat surprisingly, as cases of the soul considering the commons 'all by itself' (*autē kath' hautēn*)—a classic Platonic expression for pure intellectual inquiry altogether independent of empirical input, which would normally be about Forms (see especially *Phaedo* 64e8–66a10). This power of the soul to conduct pure inquiries is, then, heavily hinted at by the direction in which Socrates' ideas are moving. His journey is not yet complete, however. For that, we must wait for his progress to the Aviary model of thought in part II of the dialogue, where he will for the first time add the notion of considering an object of thought in *its* own right, independently of its empirical instances (see especially p. 143 below).

8. Retrospect on Part I

Socrates' announced role as the barren midwife of others' brainchildren is at best an ambiguous one. Part I of the dialogue has served to

[180] Even at 186a9–b1, where Theaetetus speaks of how the soul considers pairs of opposite value terms 'in relation to each other', he proves (via the allusion to 178b9–179a9) to mean cases where we decide whether some course of action is good or bad by relating how it has turned out in the past and present to how it will turn out in the future.

remind us how, for all the open-endedness of his inquiries portrayed in Plato's early dialogues, a considerable theoretical substructure is already in place there. I have suggested (see especially Chapter 1 §11) that this entire substructure falls within the principles governing the maieutic 'expertise' which Socrates professes. Above all, he has acquired from it key insights about how an expertise is constituted and functions, views which are put to work by his critiques, in the *Theaetetus,* of both relativism and empiricism. Again, his midwifery is a god-given mission, which has helped him to his understanding of god's essential goodness, and this in the Digression has enabled him to uphold the absoluteness of values against any form of moral relativism. Furthermore, the dialectical nature of his midwifery entails an understanding of which kinds of entity may be studied by reliance on our souls' own inner resources and which may not, amounting to a distinction between, roughly speaking, the a priori and the empirical; and this distinction underlies, in particular, his final criticism of Theaetetus' empiricist definition of knowledge. Last but by no means least, his expertise in examining souls surely lies in the immediate background to his pivotal insight that the soul is the single agent of all cognitive activity, perception included.

How we may hope to progress from these insights to the construction of a fully Platonic metaphysics has been constantly hinted at in the dialogue, although Socrates himself is represented throughout as not privy to that vision. But it is what Socrates did understand, and did contribute to philosophical progress, that has had the lion's share of attention. And that will be even more the case in part II of the dialogue, to which we now turn.

5 Falsity Puzzles

1. Why Falsity?

The official topic of part II is the definition of 'knowledge' as 'true judgement'. The de facto main topic, however, will turn out to be false judgement. It will be my contention that beneath the latter topic lies the even more fundamental—and much more Socratic—theme of cognitive psychology. To that extent, the dialogue will continue to celebrate and to develop insights which Plato is eager to credit to his midwife.

As we have seen (pp. 114–15 above), part II opens with an agreement that knowledge has now been shown to reside not in perception but in the soul's internal reasoning function, properly called 'judgement' (187a3–9). Knowledge cannot very well be straightforwardly identified with judgement as such, true and false alike, but Theaetetus is ready to chance his arm and suggest that knowledge be defined as *true* judgement (187b5–6).

I must here enter an apologetic note about translation. The Greek word for 'judgement' is *doxa,* and its cognate verb, for 'judge', is *doxazein.* These same words, when they occur in Plato, are frequently translated by the variants 'belief'–'believe' and 'opinion'– 'opine'. It is very hard, without obscuring the point or producing very unnatural English, always to maintain a single translation, and although 'judgement'–'judge' will be my preferred translation I will sometimes, without warning, substitute 'belief'–'believe'.

Socrates' problem is the following: what sense can we make of this notion of 'true judgement', unless we can explain what a *false* judgement is? In asking the question, he is resurrecting a philosophical issue which in one form or another (false statements, false names, false judgements, false pleasures) we see troubling Plato in a whole series of dialogues (*Euthydemus, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophist, Philebus,* even *Timaeus*). But why make Socrates bring it up here? My suggested answer is twofold.

First, the ability to distinguish serious dialectical argument from sophistry, and to maintain a healthy distance from the latter, is a leading component in Plato's own evaluation of Socrates. It is after all a principal basis on which Plato forged his radical contrast between Socrates and the sophists, a contrast which, however little it may have been apparent to the citizens of fifth-century Athens, is still with us today thanks to Plato's dominant influence on the entire subsequent tradition. That radical contrast is exhibited by Plato above all in the *Euthydemus,* where the handling of one version of the falsity puzzle by the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus and in turn by Socrates is among the prize exhibits.[181] More directly pertinent to the *Theaetetus* is the puzzle's link to Protagoras: we learn from the *Euthydemus* (285e9–286c9) that the denial of falsity was seen as equivalent to Protagoras' notorious slogan that 'It is impossible to contradict': every conceivable position on a given question is true, and can be vindicated by someone prepared to defend it. To confirm this link to Protagoras, we may note that the second of the falsity puzzles which Socrates will shortly be raising, 'It is impossible to believe what-is-not', has already been put verbatim into Protagoras' mouth in part I of the dialogue (167a7–8). This fact gives part II of the dialogue a much closer continuity with part I than is generally recognized by modern scholarship, although the point was already familiar to the ancient commentators.[182]

The second reason for Plato to introduce the topic of falsity is that, while he does not view his teacher as having entirely solved this cluster of puzzles, he does, as we shall see, recognize that Socrates had an understanding of cognitive psychology which went most of the way towards a solution. In part II of the dialogue he will show us what are the Socratic insights that bear on the question, and hint at how they foreshadow his own definitive solution in the *Sophist.*

However, the initial puzzle must be why Plato, or anyone, thought false belief puzzling in the first place. Unless we can answer that

[181] I agree with Jackson (1990) that Socrates does not in *Euthydemus* himself resort to sophistic methods.

[182] Proclus, *In Plat. Prm.* 657.5–10: see Sedley (1996*a.* 82 n. 3). If the Protagorean pedigree of the second falsity puzzle is not actually mentioned in *Theaetetus* part II, that may be both because Protagoras is deemed already to have been formally refuted and dismissed at 183b7–c7, and because the 'not-being' version is somewhat ill suited to the Protagoras of part I, who has been fictionally portrayed as banning all 'being' in favour of 'becoming'.

question, the attempted solutions will lose much of their philosophical point.

2. The Knowing-and-Not-Knowing Puzzle (188a1–c9)

In a nutshell, the claim made by the initial puzzle is:

You cannot judge falsely that A is B, whether you know A, or B, or both A and B, or neither A nor B.

Only the last of these four cases is illustrated (188b8–10): 'is it possible for someone who knows neither Theaetetus nor Socrates to get it into their mind that Socrates is Theaetetus or Theaetetus Socrates?' But we may well take him to have the same example, mistaking one person for another, in mind throughout.

Why are these four cases all thought to be problematic? The most familiar approach to an answer is to suggest that Plato has somehow come to equate knowledge of a thing with omniscience about it: if you know A at all, you know *everything* about A, in which case you know that it is not B, and cannot falsely judge that A is B; if, on the other hand, you do not know A, you know nothing about it, so that you could not even entertain a judgement about it. No very satisfactory account has been offered of how Plato might have arrived at this strangely extreme dichotomy, nor am I aware of any example of it in operation outside the *Theaetetus*. It is true that Socrates does insist, with Theaetetus' agreement, that there is no midway position between knowing something and not knowing it (188a1–b2). But however we read this all-or-nothing assumption about knowledge, we would do well to seek a better explanation of it than the equation of knowing A with being omniscient about A.

This supposed mistake on Plato's part is frequently, in turn, attributed to an assimilation of all knowledge to direct *acquaintance*—a usage of 'knowledge' and 'know' which has no exact English equivalent but is well represented in French by 'connaître', typically to 'know' a person or thing, as distinct from 'savoir', typically to 'know *that* …'.[183] However, there seems little immediate plausibility in the idea that if you are acquainted with A you cannot hold any

[183] e.g. Runciman (1962); McDowell (1973, esp. 194–8); Fine (1979*b*); Bostock (1988).

false beliefs about A, especially since one might well suppose that acquaintance itself comes in degrees—being slightly acquainted, well acquainted, intimately acquainted, etc. More important, knowledge is a capacity for attaining truths, which are propositional in structure, as we have seen affirmed in the closing pages of part I, and this does not fit the acquaintance model at all comfortably. Because Greek standardly uses the formulation 'I know X, what it is', the bare choice between acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge can easily mislead. For this typical case of Greek 'knowing' involves acquaintance ('I know X') but has an implicitly propositional content ('what it is') as well.

How can we make progress with this problem? Take the version of the puzzle which turns on the impossibility of judging one thing you know to be another thing you know. As this is naturally read, an example would be that someone who knows both Anaxagoras and Protagoras, whether the familiarity comes from meeting, seeing, hearing, or reading them, or just through a vague memory of hearing about them, could not confuse the one with the other. Yet did not Mussolini notoriously do exactly that when he began a speech with the declaration 'The Greek philosopher Anaxagoras (pardon my erudition) said that man is the measure of all things'?[184]

Of course, if knowing them were assumed to entail not just some degree of familiarity with them, but omniscience about them, then the mistake could not be made. But, the assumption would, as I have said, be an astonishing one to allow oneself. Fortunately, no such assumption is required.[185] The puzzle already looks troubling if we make just the much weaker and more plausible assumption, already hinted at by the common Greek idiom mentioned above, that *to know something is to know what it is, and to know someone is to know who they are.*

In favour of this, note first that the convertibility of 'know X' with 'know who (or what) X is' is well recognized as Platonic. Indeed, there are at least two demonstrable instances of it in the *Theaetetus* (147b2–7, 196d8–12).[186]

[184] This blunder is immortalized in Timpanaro (1976: 68).

[185] The suggestion which follows is one which, in outline, I learnt from Myles Burnyeat's lectures on the *Theaetetus* in the 1970s. As far as I know he has not used it in print.

[186] Translated literally, each of these passages first speaks of knowing what X is, then refers back to that same cognitive state as one of simply knowing X. Some of the available translations disguise this feature in the interests of idiomatic English. For a translation of the former passage which exhibits the usage, see p. 24, ll.7–11 above.

Secondly, we can plausibly further assume that for knowing who or what X is it is a necessary and sufficient condition that one *be able to tell X from any other person (or thing)*. This is, in fact, a close approximation to the final definition of knowledge considered in the *Theaetetus,* one whose intuitive appeal Socrates brings out by dubbing it 'what the many would say' (208c7). It is also partly implicit at *Republic* VII 534b8–c5: 'Isn't it the same about the good? Whoever can't define it with an account by *distinguishing the Form of the Good from all other things*…will not be admitted to *know the good itself or any other good thing*.'

Jointly, these two plausible assumptions yield a third: *it is a necessary condition of knowing something that one be able to tell it from any other thing.*[187] That assumption, if it is indeed Plato's, may help account for a curiously recurrent motif in the *Theaetetus*: the unchallenged insistence that you cannot simultaneously know and not know the same thing.[188] Normally Plato's Socrates would happily admit that such simultaneous compresence in a single subject of a pair of opposites, φ-ing and not-φ-ing, is possible, so long as the φ-ing and the not-φ-ing are done in different respects.[189] But if knowing a thing is assumed to have at its core the ability to tell that thing from any other thing, it is hard to see how one could in some respect possess that capacity with regard to a given thing yet at the same time in some other respect lack it. Being able to tell it from some things but not from others, for example, would not yet qualify as any kind of knowing, given Socrates' ubiquitous assumption that knowledge is such as never to err.[190]

This ascription, if justified, leaves Plato with a view of knowledge which on the one hand can (in accordance with 188a1–b2) be described as all-or-nothing, in that it does not come in degrees, but on the other does not, with extreme implausibility, assume that if you know a thing at all you know everything there is to know about it. Far from it: it sets a quite modest standard for knowledge, which would at first sight

[187] I prefer 'any other thing' to 'all other things', since the latter might be misunderstood as implying that whoever knows X has also to be aware of all other things so as to have distinguished X from them. The point is the weaker one that whoever knows X can distinguish X from any other thing *if called upon to do so,* whether or not they have prior familiarity with those things.

[188] Cf. 163d1–7, 165b2–6, 188a10–b1, 191b7–8, 196c1–2, 7–8, 199a8–9, c5, 203d4–6; discussion in Crivelli (1996).

[189] e.g. *Hipp. Ma.* 289c1–5.

[190] e.g. *Charm.* 171d2–172a6; *Meno* 97c2–10; *Rep.* 477e4–478a1; *Tht.* 207d8–208b3.

appear to leave ample room for error: I might be able to tell you from any other person I meet or hear of, but be quite mistaken about where you were born and how much money you have in your bank account.

The advantage of this understanding of 'know' is as follows. If Mussolini had not, in the suggested sense of 'know', known Anaxagoras—not known who he was in the sense of being able to tell him from any other person—he could reasonably be said to have been unable to entertain any thoughts that were specifically about *Anaxagoras*: Anaxagoras (the person, as distinct from the mere name) could not feature in his judgements, and therefore, *inter alia,* Mussolini could not make any false judgements about him. What, on the other hand, if he did in the very modest stipulated sense 'know' Anaxagoras? There is at least one type of mistake he still could not make about him: he could not think that Anaxagoras was, for example, Protagoras. For if he had thought this, it would have immediately followed that he after all lacked the required ability to tell Anaxagoras from anyone else; in which case he did not know him in the first place and could not be making a judgement about him, true *or* false. Needless to say, the same goes for his knowledge of Protagoras and *his* availability to feature in Mussolini's judgements.

So far we have a puzzle about false judgement which we can sum up with the following example:

(*a*) You cannot believe *that Anaxagoras is Protagoras,* because for Anaxagoras even to feature in your thoughts you must know who he is, i.e. be able to tell him from other people, including Protagoras; in which case you could not also believe that he *is* Protagoras.

The example evidently turns on an identity mistake. Is the puzzle limited to these? To see how it might in principle be extended, consider first the following:

(*b*) You cannot believe *that Anaxagoras is the author whose book began 'Man is the measure…',* because believing that would mean *either* a failure to distinguish Anaxagoras from Protagoras (in which case you would not know who Anaxagoras was, and therefore could not be thinking about him), *or* a failure to distinguish the author whose book began 'Man is the measure …' from the author whose book began 'All things were together' (in which case you would not know who the author whose book began 'Man is the measure …' was, and would not be thinking about him).

If (*b*) is still, in formal terms, the denial of an identity mistake, it has a much more descriptive content than (*a*), entailing a false belief about what its subject did. Can we go further? Could Socrates' problem about falsity not extend to what even in surface grammar are false descriptive beliefs, founded on predications rather than identifications? Although the majority of interpreters deny that it can, a strong case can be mounted for just that expectation.

Both identifications and predications typically take the linguistic form 'X is Y', and it is unlikely that Plato made a sharp distinction between the predicative and identity senses of 'is'. Whether he *ever* made such a distinction, and even whether the distinction is a correct one to make, can be disputed.[191] But for present purposes it is enough to note that even those who attribute the distinction to Plato usually locate his arguments for it in the *Sophist,* which the stylistic evidence indicates to be considerably later in date than the *Theaetetus.* If that is right, he cannot in the *Theaetetus* be assumed to have knowingly restricted the puzzle to false identifications. Nor, it is true, can he be assumed to have knowingly *extended* it to false predications, given that for all we know he may not at the time have regarded these as a distinct kind of linguistic expression. Thus no interpretation based on our own distinctions between senses of 'be' can expect to get very far. But since Plato bills the puzzle as one about false belief in general, we must suppose that either (1) he simply failed to notice that false predications are invulnerable to it, or (2) he had reason to think that they are *not* invulnerable to it. We will see when we come to the Other-judging and Wax Tablet models of false judgement that Socrates clearly *has* considered false predications. This makes (1) unlikely, and should encourage us to see if (2) can be supported.

Consider, then, the following:

(*c*) Theodorus cannot (at 143e8) have believed *that Theaetetus was ugly,* because, given that Theaetetus was actually beautiful (185e3–5: true beauty belongs to the soul, not the body), Theodorus was failing to distinguish ugly from beautiful; in which case, it follows that he did not know what ugly is, so was not thinking of ugly at all.

(*d*) You cannot believe *that eating people is good,* because if you did you would be failing to tell good from bad; in which case

[191] For doubts as to whether the *Sophist* is distinguishing senses of 'be', cf. esp. Bostock (1984), Denyer (1991: 130–4), Brown (1994). Against the reading of *Sph.* 255c14–15 that sees Plato as distinguishing two senses of 'be', see Dancy (1999).

you would not know what good is, and therefore would not be thinking of good at all.

These diagnoses pick out the predicates ‘ugly’, ‘beautiful’, ‘good’, and ‘bad’, and treat them as things of which it can be said to be either true or false that someone knows what they are. There is nothing obviously incoherent about this. The standard Greek way of doing it is to place the definite article before the neuter singular form of the adjective in question, producing the phrase ‘the ugly’, ‘the good’, etc. This is, among other things, Plato's regular way of picking out some predicate as the subject of a definitional (‘What is X?’) inquiry.

The principle at stake may look uncomfortably like the ‘Socratic fallacy’, discussed above in Chapter 1 §8: if you cannot define X, you cannot use the concept of X significantly. However, the requirement being set for ‘knowing’ something falls far short of any Socratic notion of definition: it is no more than the ability to recognize the subject if you should encounter it.

We have found, in short, a good prima facie case for puzzlement about how one can stand in such a cognitive relation to the terms featuring in a judgement—whether the judgement be identificatory *or* predicative in form—as to enable that judgement to be significant yet false.

That predicative as well as identificatory judgements have turned out to be included, both in the puzzle and in the candidate solutions, is of great importance. For I shall be arguing in the present chapter that one leading aim of part II is to exhibit the extent of Socrates' contribution to the eventual successful resolution of the falsity problem. That problem, as discussed and resolved in the *Sophist,* certainly has all kinds of falsity within its scope, and indeed the example on which the solution is demonstrated is a false predication, ‘Theaetetus flies’. If false predications were meant to be excluded from the *Theaetetus* discussion, that link would be unnecessarily and disappointingly weakened.

3. The Being-and-Not-Being Solution (188c10–189b9)

With Socrates' first suggested solution, which now follows, we are on much more familiar ground: to hold a false belief is simply to believe what-is-not about something, and all other cognitive aspects

of the judgement, such as one's knowledge or ignorance of the terms involved in it, can be sidelined (188d3–5).

Unfortunately the solution falls quickly to an objection which constitutes, in a way, a second falsity *puzzle,* alongside the knowing- and-not-knowing one: to believe or judge what-is-not would be to believe nothing, which would be not to believe at all; hence the 'belief' in question, far from being a false belief, would not even be a belief.

This reflects the classical version of the falsity puzzle previously articulated in the *Euthydemus* (283e7–284c8) and *Cratylus* (429d1–6). The difference is that, while in both those dialogues the puzzle problematizes *saying* or *speaking* what-is-not, in the *Theaetetus* it problematizes *believing* or *judging* what-is-not.[192] But the analogy between the two versions is strong. The *Euthydemus* version relies on 'say' or 'speak' being a 'doing' word: just as to do nothing is not to act at all, so too to speak what-is-not, i.e. nothing, is not to speak at all. The *Theaetetus* version relies on 'believe' or 'judge' being a cognitive act analogous to seeing or hearing: you cannot believe what-is-not any more than you can perceive what-is-not.

This 'not-being' version is close to the one in which the falsity puzzle was to be tackled head on, and defeated, in the *Sophist.* That eventual solution has two main components.

One is propositional complexity: a statement consists of, minimally, a subject expression and a predicate expression; one may speak falsely by attaching to some subject a predicate which 'is not' merely to the extent of not being one of *that subject's* actual predicates. Socrates actually seems to anticipate this solution from the outset.[193] For he introduces the not-being solution as follows: 'Perhaps it's simply that one who believes things-which-are-not *about anything* cannot fail to have false beliefs, no matter what further state of mind he is in' (188d3–5). The words which I have emphasized acknowledge the basic subject–predicate structure of statements. In recognition of this, the objection immediately raised by the imagined interlocutor acknowledges the move Socrates has made, but maintains that it does not suffice: 'who in the world is going to judge what-is-not, whether about one of the things that are *or* by itself?' (188d9–10; cf. 189b1–2).

[192] Cf. also *Rep.* V 478b6–c2, you can't believe (δοξάζειν) what-is-not, maintained as a premiss by Socrates himself.

[193] This point is extremely well made by Burnyeat (2002).

This objection is, so far as it goes, quite correct in Plato's eyes. For the definitive solution will succeed only when it has, in addition to such a recognition of propositional complexity, also acquired the second component of the *Sophist* solution: this is to demystify 'what-is-not' as merely equivalent to 'what is *other*'. For this reason, 'what-is-not' need not be complete non-being, but can be combined with plenty of being: being other than X does not preclude being Y and Z, and positively entails being *other*. Now although Socrates does not directly enunciate this second element of the solution, he does make two gestures towards it.

The first gesture lies in a silence. In explaining the preceding knowing-and-not-knowing puzzle, Socrates took considerable care to point out that these are mutually exclusive alternatives, that is, that there is no further possibility beyond either knowing a thing or not knowing it (188a1–b2). When he next turns to being and not-being, however, he makes no such observation, and this may be intended by Plato as a gentle pointer towards the solution. By his silence he is implicitly acknowledging that the simultaneous compresence of being with not-being is, unlike that of knowing with not knowing, a possibility. Indeed it is a possibility that has already been formally noted in part I of the dialogue (185c4–7): both 'is' and 'is not' are said of everything.

The second gesture lies in the initial move that Socrates now proceeds to make in response to the being-and-not-being puzzle. It turns precisely on the reinterpretation of not-being as some kind of otherness.

4. 'Other-Judging' (189b10–191a5)

Socrates' new idea for a solution seems to be prompted by a casual-sounding but highly significant phraseology which he has just used in finally rejecting the not-being account of false belief (189b4–6):

> SOCR. Then holding false beliefs is something other than believing things which are not.
> THT. Yes, something other, it seems.

This commonplace use of 'other than' for 'not' foreshadows the second component of the *Sophist* solution. It is, I suspect, no

coincidence that Socrates' next move picks up on the germ of that very idea. False judgement, he suggests, is a kind of 'other-judging'. A false belief is not concerned with what-is-not, but with interchanging one of the things-which-are with some *other* of the things-which-are, for example beautiful with ugly, just with unjust, odd with even, cow with horse.

It is quite clear that these are chosen as terms that typically feature in the predicate position, so that a false judgement will be one of the form 'X is ugly' where the truth would have been 'X is beautiful': (the) beautiful has been swapped for (the) ugly in the predicate position.[194] We may note in passing this strong confirmation that the falsity puzzles were never meant to be limited to false identifications, but can include predications too (cf. pp. 124–5 above). Moreover, since other-judging is offered as a possible solution to the being-and-not-being puzzle, we can be equally confident that this puzzle too was assumed to cover ordinary predications such as 'Theaetetus is ugly', there diagnosed problematically as judging what-is-not, namely ugly, of Theaetetus.

The Other-judging diagnosis is understood by Socrates as equivalent to the following:

(1) A judges that X is F;
(2) but X is un-F;
(3) therefore A judges that what is un-F is F.

(I use 'F' and 'un-F' because the items in question are typified by pairs of opposites such as beautiful–ugly and odd–even; but they also include coordinate items in a single range, so related that nothing could be both, e.g. horse-cow.)

The difficulty on which Socrates now proceeds to trade is that (3) is ambiguous between the harmless

(3*a*) There is something un-F which A judges to be F and the self-evidently absurd
(3*b*) A makes the judgement: 'What is un-F is F'.

[194] '(The) X' is not specifically the Form of X (what Plato typically calls 'the X itself'), just the predicate X, however construed metaphysically. Note, however, that even when the Form *is* at issue, as (if controversially) at *Phd.* 74c1–3, the same constraint is invoked as Socrates will be invoking in the present discussion (190b2–c4): no one has ever entertained the thought 'Equality is Inequality'.

What then follows is a move designed to interpret (3) as the absurd (3*b*). As an antidote to any suspicion that Socrates' motives here are mischievous or even sophistical, we should bear in mind that the new move is a pivotal event in the development of Plato's thought. For what Socrates offers is the diagnosis of belief, and all thinking, as *internal speech*. Here is the relevant stretch of dialogue (189d7–190a10):

> SOCR. So in your judgement it is possible to set down one thing in one's mind as being not that thing but another?
> THT. Well, yes.
> SOCR. So when someone's mind does this, isn't it also necessary that it is thinking either both those things or one of them?
> THT. Yes, it must be, either simultaneously or in turn.[195]
> SOCR. Excellent. And do you call thinking the same thing as I do?
> THT. What's that?
> SOCR. A discourse (*logos*) which the soul runs through when addressing itself about whatever the topic of inquiry may be (at least on this account, which I'm telling you without actually possessing the knowledge).[196] It strikes me that, when thinking, this is what it does: it holds a conversation, asking itself questions and answering them, saying yes and no. And when, having determined the answer, however slowly or quickly it may have fastened upon it, it has reached the stage of saying the same thing without wavering, we label this its 'judgement'. So what I for my part call judging is speaking, and I call judgement spoken discourse—spoken, however, not to someone else or vocally, but silently to oneself. What about you?
> THT. Yes, I do too.
> SOCR. So when someone judges one thing another thing, he is also, it seems, saying to himself that the one is the other.

What are we to make of Socrates' sudden announcement of his own conviction, that thinking takes the form of silent internal question and answer? He can hardly have forgotten his declared role as barren midwife, of which he is if anything carefully *reminding* us by his insistence that he is not actually claiming knowledge on the

[195] There has been much dispute as to what point is being made here. I take it that if thought were *not* internal discourse it might be possible to think simultaneously of both terms involved in the judgement, but that, as soon as it turns out to be reducible to internal discourse, we will have to conclude that the two terms are thought of successively, in their order of utterance.

[196] I am placing a comma after σχοπῇ in 189e7, rather than the usual full stop, which makes what follows a very unusual asyndeton.

present point.[197] Plato has to have a definite strategic purpose in allowing him this exceptionally forthright suspension of his self-declared intellectual infertility.

The only comparable moment in the *Theaetetus* is one we have already encountered at 185e5–9 (p. 109 above), where Socrates declares his own endorsement, in enthusiastic agreement with Theaetetus, of a distinction between the a priori and empirical modes in which the soul operates. When discussing that earlier passage I proposed that Socrates' declared belief (no more an explicit knowledge claim, note, than he is making in the present passage) was a sign of what Plato acknowledges as his master's special contribution to cognitive psychology, one exempted from his usual barrenness because it is a principle of midwifery itself. Much the same can be said about the analysis of thought as silent self-interrogation and response. Thinking is interpreted as replicating within the soul the form of Socratic dialectic, with judgement identified, not with thought as a whole, but with its final stage or outcome.

How far this analysis is already detectable in the early dialogues is a tricky question. It is never overtly stated there, and in fact its open assertion as a tenet of cognitive psychology is a feature exclusive to Plato's later work, starting right here in the *Theaetetus*. (For subsequent recurrences, see *Sophist* 263d6–264b5, *Timaeus* 37b3–8, and *Philebus* 38c2–e8.) But Plato is surely right to imply that it was already Socratic in origin and inspiration. In the *Charmides* (166c7–d6), at a point where Critias has just complained about Socrates' attempt to refute him, Socrates responds that what he has been doing to Critias is no different from what he might well do to himself, namely cross-question himself out of fear that he may inadvertently think he knows something which in fact he does not know. The Socrates of the *Gorgias* (505c1–507b7), in the temporary absence of a willing interlocutor, keeps the argument going in question-and-answer form all by himself. And in the *Hippias Major* the anonymous dialectician who is continually cited by Socrates as challenging him turns out at the end to be nothing other than his own inner voice, even though, as he tells us, what it says may be only what anyone might have said (298d6). Pointers like these confirm

[197] Cf. pp. 31–3 above on Socrates' avowal of ignorance. Brainchildren are not necessarily items of knowledge, and can even turn out to be false—like Theaetetus' own, as described at 210b4–10. But in disavowing knowledge here Socrates is clearly seeking to mitigate the severity of this departure from his official barrenness.

that Socrates, as portrayed in the early dialogues, could be plausibly interpreted as already having viewed dialectic not just as a particularly effective method of argument, but as embodying—even if perhaps in idealized form—the essential processes of rational thought.

Returning to Socrates' argument, we can now see how he has engineered a fatal blow to the Other-judging solution. When we left it, we were faced with a choice between the two readings of (3) ('therefore A judges that what is un-F is F'):

(3*a*) There is something un-F which A judges to be F and the self-evidently absurd
(3*b*) A makes the judgement: 'What is un-F is F'.

The analysis of thinking, including judgement, as internal speech is called upon to make explicit the absurd (3*b*),[198] leaving the innocent (3*a*) out in the cold. If the un-F and the F are to feature in the judgement at all, it seems that they must both be named, and this absurd formulation is the result. Clearly, as Socrates invites Theaetetus to agree (190c1–3), no one, not even a lunatic, would entertain a thought of this form. We may illustrate his *reductio ad absurdum* with two examples (both, it should be noted, naturally taken as false *predications*) which the passage itself has suggested Socrates has in mind:

(i) You *mistook my horse for a cow* ' You judged a horse to be a cow ' You said to yourself 'A horse is a cow'.
(ii) Theodorus *believed Theaetetus to be ugly* ' Theodorus judged what is beautiful to be ugly ' Theodorus said to himself 'What is beautiful is ugly'.

Remarkably this failed explanation of false belief as other-judging contains virtually all the ingredients of the successful explanation in the *Sophist*: that belief is internal discourse; that this discourse, like all discourse, takes the form of linguistically linking one item to another item, both items being 'things which are'; and that the

[198] Socrates can be accused of a fallacy, substitution in an intentional context: if Fido is a dog but you think that Fido is a cat, it does not follow that you think a dog is a cat, not at least in the sense conveyed by (3*b*). On these opaque-context substitutions in Plato, including the *Theaetetus,* see above, p. 22, where I argue that there is no reason to expect him to be wise to the fallacy. If so, it remains a possibility that he considers the present refutation decisive, or at least has no answer to it.

falsehood lies in the fact that the item attached is *other* than the things which belong to the subject in question. We must therefore ask ourselves why Socrates in the *Theaetetus* fails where his successor as Plato's main speaker in the *Sophist* will succeed.

Take the specimen false statement or belief diagnosed in the *Sophist,* 'Theaetetus flies', said when Theaetetus is in fact sitting (*Sophist* 262e13–263b13). The *Theaetetus*' Other-judging diagnosis would come out as an absurdity along the following lines:

I utter internally a statement (*logos*) which attaches to someone who is sitting a thing-which-is other than *his* things-which-are, namely flying: 'Someone who is sitting is flying'.

The *Sophist*'s successful diagnosis should be approximately:

I utter internally a statement (*logos*) which attaches to Theaetetus (who is sitting) things-which-are other than *his* things-which-are, namely 'Theaetetus flies'.

There is no difficulty about seeing how the *Sophist* account succeeds where the *Theaetetus* account failed. But what would Plato himself want to present as the salient difference between the two discussions, such that the Socrates of the *Theaetetus,* even if brought to the brink of understanding, did not take the final leap? A full answer to this question would require an extended discussion of notoriously controversial interpretative questions raised by the *Sophist.* For present purposes I can do no more than point in what seems to me the right direction.

The obvious structural difference between the two accounts is their order of procedure. The *Theaetetus* account starts from false belief, and analyses it in terms of the underlying sentence. The *Sophist* starts with a long exercise in metaphysics, examining the kind 'other' and how it is distributed ontologically in relation to kindred genera. Otherness, i.e. not-being, turns out to be distributed in a pattern which exactly mirrors the things-which-are (258d5–e5). For example, the ontological class of that which is large is mirrored by the ontological class of that which *is not* (or 'is other than') large. The relevant way in which these latter, the non-beings, also have being is by being *other*—that is, in this case, other than large.

Such, at least as I understand this much-disputed argument, is the key to the final diagnosis of false statement (and thereby of false belief too) at 263b4–13: the relevant way in which the flying falsely

attributed to Theaetetus counts as something-which-is is not, as one might have expected, the fact that there *is* such a thing as flying; rather, it is that flying *is* in the sense that it *is other* than Theaetetus' actual things-which-are.[199]

We can now see that the function of ‘being’ in the *Theaetetus* passage is quite different. There a false statement or judgement was one that attaches to a subject something which ‘is’, e.g. the ugly, in the sense that *there is* such a thing even if it happens not to be instantiated here. This had the consequence that the only way Socrates could find to lay bare the error was to say that the false-judger mistook one of the things-that-are for some ‘other’ of the things-that-are; and it was the subsequent attempt to embody that mistake in a declarative sentence that led to the failure of the entire diagnosis. The *Sophist* account, by contrast, does not depend on any such interchange between two coordinate ‘things-which-are’. It would not matter if the attribute attached to Theaetetus by the false statement were *not* among the things there are, e.g. ‘drawing a square circle’, or ‘flying faster than light’; even these, assigned to Theaetetus, would have yielded a falsity. For the diagnosis locates the falsity in the attribution to Theaetetus of a predicate which is-not (i.e. is other) in the sense of not-being (or being other than) *his,* but which is not thereby a total non-being because it also *is,* namely *is other*. This account avoids the *Theaetetus*' interchange between two coordinate things-which-are, and therefore does not invite the fatal rewording which there derailed the entire Other-judging solution.

On the above basis, we can perhaps now work out how far Plato in the *Theaetetus* sees Socrates as having progressed towards his own eventual solution to the not-being version of the falsity puzzle. The three main ingredients were already at Socrates' disposal. (1) The

[199] I here rely on a non-standard reading of the key lines 263b9–11, which I obtain by keeping the transmitted text but reassigning the speakers: ‘ΞΕ. Τὰ μὴ ὄντα ἄρα ὡς ὄντα λέγει σχεδόν, ὄντως δέ γε ὄντα ὕτερα, περὶ σοῦ’ (‘So it [a false statement] does more or less say, as being things-which-are about you, things-which-are-not, but which at least really *are other* ’). This is not an entirely easy construal, partly because the final position of σχεδόν in its clause is rare (although not unparalleled; cf. *Crito* 44d4). But it makes excellent sense and a fitting conclusion to the whole analysis, whereas the conventional division of the text, with or without the favoured emendation of ὄντως to ὄντων in 11, yields poor grammar and worse sense. In ancient texts speaker-assignment was marked by punctuation only, not indication of name, and because in *Sph.* σχεδόν is several times used as a one-word reply by the interlocutor a scribe or reader may well have assumed that it should be so construed here too, adding the punctuation mark as a result.

equivalence between 'not' and 'other than' is a commonplace of Greek diction, as Socrates' apparently casual use of it at 189b4 has subtly reminded us. (2) The analysis of a sentence (*logos*) into a name (*onoma*) plus a 'description' (*rhēma*) is by no means a new discovery in the *Sophist,* but widespread in Plato's dialogues, and already virtually explicit at the beginning of the quintessentially Socratic *Apology* (17b9–c2).[200] And (3) the appreciation of how beliefs embody assertoric sentences has a specifically Socratic pedigree, as I have argued above. What was beyond Socrates, however, was to construct the kind of map of reality which charts and explains the distribution of being-other in the world. That metaphysical enterprise lies at the heart of the *Sophist,* where it is recognized as a necessary preliminary to the solution of the falsity puzzle. In short, Socrates had access to all the ingredients of a successful solution, bar one: metaphysics.

5. The Wax Tablet (191a5–196c9)

We now turn aside from examination of falsehood in terms of being and not-being, the trail which, although ultimately the right one, Socrates is prevented from following to its end because not enough of a metaphysician. Instead, he adopts a new approach based on what is his real strength, cognitive psychology, a necessary implement in the intellectual midwife's toolkit (p. 33 above).

The critique of the Other-judging model of false judgement ends by returning us to a version of the not-knowing puzzle (190c5–e1):

> So if speaking to oneself is judging, no one who is saying both things and judging about them both and grasping them both with his soul would say and judge that the one is the other…. Yet if he is judging about only one of the two, and not the other at all, he is never going to judge that the one is the other.…So neither by judging about both nor about one of them is it possible for other-judging to occur.

As is evident here, the Other-judging model has all but brought Socrates back to the original knowing-and-not-knowing puzzle: how can you have a cognitive relation to two items sufficient for both to feature in your judgement yet insufficient to preclude your confusing the one with the other?

[200] See further, Sedley (2003*b,* ch. 7, §7).

This leads Socrates to propound a new model of thinking: the Wax Tablet. The soul contains a wax tablet or block in which we record, by imprinting them, all the things that we want to remember, whether these be empirical or a priori (191d6–7, 'whatever things we see or hear or ourselves conceive of'). These imprints, so long as they last, are identifiable as both memories and items of knowledge (191d9). Their value varies according to both the quantity and the quality of the wax, for some people's mental wax is less plentiful, and some people's is impure, too hard or too runny, while others' is just right (191c9–d2, 194c5–195a4). False judgement can therefore occur when a new perception is matched to the wrong imprint, i.e. to the wrong memory or piece of knowledge. It is the variable quality of the mental wax that is most prominently invoked to account for this possibility of error, although excessive distance from the perceived object is also mentioned in passing (191b4, 193c1–2), and in principle Socrates might invoke the variable quality of the sense-organs as well.

The obvious importance of this development is that it illustrates how knowledge could be such as to permit mistakes. Knowledge is now equated with memory, and memories can be sharper or fuzzier according to the mental qualities of those who possess them. Provided that your set of stored imprints of A, B, C, etc. successfully distinguishes A from B and from all the others, you can presumably still be said to 'know' A; yet your imprint of A could still be fuzzy enough to let you misidentify a *perceived* B or C as an A. Indeed, it is a familiar datum of experience that this happens: I *know* quite distinctly who Tom, Dick, and Harry are, but seeing Harry approaching I mistake him for Tom because my recalled images of them are too imprecise.

Why do the items known include not only what we have perceived but also what we have conceived? The text makes it unambiguous that Socrates does not see the Wax Tablet model as catering for mistakes made about objects of thought, but only about objects of perception: this is explicit at 195c7–d2, and implicit throughout 192a1–194b6, the long catalogue which classifies (*a*) cases where error is explicable by the model and (*b*) cases where it is not.[201] He must therefore have in mind cases where, on perceiving something,

[201] I shall not be discussing this in detail, but refer the reader to Burnyeat (1990: 95–100) for a lucid explanation of the cases where false judgement is possible.

I connect it not to a sensorily derived imprint but to a conceptual one. It is not hard to supply examples of this, because we have already at 185a11–186b1 been presented by Socrates with a list of those items that the soul accesses through its own resources without sensory input: examples are being and not-being, like and unlike, same and different, numbers, odd and even, beautiful and ugly (or 'fair and foul'), and good and bad. So the mistakes which the Wax Tablet can account for will include not just the case it invokes by way of illustration, that of mistaking a distant Theaetetus for Theodorus or vice versa, but also that of seeing Theaetetus and falsely judging him to be ugly, by connecting him to the imprecise 'ugly' imprint in your mental wax, or seeing eleven people and thinking that they are twelve by connecting them to your 'twelve' imprint. (The latter example is in fact clearly acknowledged at 195e5–6.)[202] In this way, yet again, we find that false predicative judgements, as well as misidentifications, are being consciously catered for (cf. pp. 123–5, 128 above).[203]

The upshot of the Wax Tablet model is that mistakes are possible in those cases where the subject of your judgement, whether or not it is something that you know (i.e. for which you have an existing imprint in your mental wax), is something which you perceive but connect to a different and inappropriate imprint. I add 'and inappropriate' because it clearly would not be a false judgement if, seeing Theaetetus, I were to connect my visual image not to my 'Theaetetus' imprint but to my 'man' or 'beautiful' imprint; but it would be a false judgement if I were to connect it to my 'Theodorus', 'woman', or 'ugly' imprint. The most important point to emerge is that the subject of my false judgement must come to feature in that judgement not by my use of the relevant knowledge that I possess

[202] I am here siding with McDowell (1973: 214–16, 218–19) against Burnyeat (1990: 104–5 n. 40). Burnyeat cites 195a5–8 against this interpretation, taking it to refer to conceptual identity mistakes, against which see next note.

[203] Cf. 195a5–8: 'For when they see or hear or *think of* (ἐπινοῶσιν) something, being unable to assign each speedily to its respective imprint, they are slow, and by wrongly assigning them they mis-see, mishear, and *misthink* (παρανοοῦσι) lots of things.' This could mislead. Since Socrates is explicit soon afterwards that the current model is catering only for cases where we link *perception* to thought (195c7–d2), 'think of' and 'misthink' cannot allude to cases where we make a conceptual mistake, e.g. a misidentification, about an object which is itself thought and not perceived (as proposed by Burnyeat 1990: 91 n. 32). Rather, I suggest, he will have in mind a case where we do not merely see or hear things and try to identify them, but also *evaluate, count,* etc. (' 'think of') these perceived objects, and do so wrongly (' 'misthink').

(whether that be my knowledge of Theaetetus, of man, or of beautiful), but purely by perception, which, as part I has demonstrated, is not itself any kind of knowledge.

In the Other-judging discussion, Socrates analysed all thinking as internal discourse. Has that assumption now been superseded, in the Wax Tablet, by a *non*-discursive model, that of connecting percepts to imprints? This is most unlikely. For when at 195e1–196b7 Socrates seeks to expose a gap in the Wax Tablet theory, its inability to explain how someone can mistake 7 + 5 for 11, he makes clear his assumption that if the Wax Tablet *could* explain this it would be explaining how someone can *ask himself* how much 7 + 5 is and *reply* that it is 11. We must take it then that whatever explanatory power the Wax Tablet model possesses is achieved not by providing a non-discursive mode of judgement, but by permitting the internal discourse to have a different content from that previously envisaged.

The point will then presumably be as follows. Where the Other-judging model resulted in impossible internal utterances like 'A cow is a horse', the Wax Tablet will substitute the benign alternative 'The object that I am perceiving in the distance is a horse'. In fact, once we appreciate this, it becomes clear that Plato, in the later *Philebus* (38b12–e4), offers a fully articulated illustration of true and false judgement which is entirely consonant with the Wax Tablet and makes explicit how we should assume the wording of a false judgement to run. Judgement, Socrates remarks there, arises from the combination of memory and perception (already a clear pointer to the Wax Tablet mode of analysis). For example, in the distance you indistinctly see a human shape. You ask yourself 'Whatever is this thing that appears (*phantazomenon*)[204] to be standing by the rock under a tree?' (38c12–d1). And you reply, either correctly 'It [i.e. the thing that appears] is a man', or incorrectly 'The thing I can see is a dummy left by some shepherds' (d9–10). That is, the subject of the sentence in which the judgement consists is there referred to under its *perceptual* description only; and that is how the internal verbalization of a false judgement is saved from the self-contradiction that the Other-judging model generated. The coherence of the *Theaetetus* and *Philebus* passages is so close that we may be confident that

[204] The *Philebus* passage here supplements the *Theaetetus* ' findings by introducing the concept of φαντασία—explained at *Sph.* 264a4–b4 as the combination of perception with judgement—in order to take due account of the rich propositional content of the sensory appearance described.

this revised verbalization is integral to the Wax Tablet solution to the falsity problem.

In the *Philebus* Socrates goes on (38e9–39c6) to elaborate the theory beyond anything specified in the *Theaetetus*: the internal statement (attributed to an internal 'scribe') is accompanied by a matching mental image (the work of an internal 'illustrator'), and if the judgement is false then so too is this attached image. But it is made quite clear that the judgement's falsity is determined by that of the internal statement, while that of the image is secondary or derivative. He proceeds (39c10–40b1) to take the model still further, applying it to judgements about *future* things which we 'see' (cf. 40a10) in our mind's eye.

It is only the first stage of the *Philebus* account that clearly takes up and clarifies the *Theaetetus* account of perceptual false judgements. But it constitutes very good evidence as to how Plato viewed the Wax Tablet as solving the problem of what enables false judgements—at least perceptual ones—to retain their discursive structure without resulting in self-contradiction.

Why then is the model rejected in the *Theaetetus* itself? Formally this is because it is limited to false judgements about the objects of perception, and Socrates points to the need to account for conceptual mistakes like the one mentioned above, the false judgement that 7 + 5 is 11. As he sees it, both the terms which are falsely identified in such a judgement would have to be impressions in the mental wax—presumably ones put there conceptually rather than empirically (cf. 191d5–7)—and the Wax Tablet model simply fails to explain how we can judge one of these imprints to be the other. Confusing 12 with 11 would entail saying to yourself '12 is 11'.

It is easy to feel that Socrates, or Plato, has—however interestingly—blundered here. Just because 7 + 5 is in fact 12, it does not follow that someone who judges that '7 + 5 is 11' judges, let alone internally articulates, that '12 is 11'. But of course Socrates does not think so either. He is merely reapplying the earlier paradox, that if judgement is internal discourse then, for example, someone who mistakes a horse for a cow would have to be saying internally 'A horse is a cow'. All that has saved us from that paradox in the intervening Wax Tablet account is the possibility that the horse comes to feature in the internal discourse not as 'a horse', but as e.g. 'the object I can see in the distance'. Since in the case of pure arithmetical calculations that revised formulation seems to be

precluded (we are not perceiving the items featured in the sum), the old paradox reasserts itself: someone who, as a result of adding wrongly, confuses 12 with 11 will have to be saying internally '12 is 11'. In short, what we have here is not a *new* fallacy, but the resurfacing of the old one,[205] and one which, for better or worse, is driving Socrates' entire discussion of false judgement.

Even given the Wax Tablet's failure to account for these conceptual mistakes, we might have expected Socrates' response to be that it needs to be supplemented, rather than rejected. Yet rejected it is: 'We must then declare false judgement to be something other than the interchange of thought in relation to perception' (196c4–5). In the next section we will find out the ostensible reason: the Aviary model which now supersedes the Wax Tablet is designed to cater for both the perceptual *and* the conceptual cases of false judgement. There is therefore no relevant role left for the Wax Tablet.

Yet, curiously, this does not prove to be a definitive rejection of the Wax Tablet model. That the model, so far as it goes, still offers a satisfactory account of empirical judgements is something that Socrates will be made to acknowledge casually at the end of the dialogue when he reuses its 'memory trace' vocabulary (209c7).[206] Moreover, Plato himself clearly regarded it as a net gain, because in the *Philebus,* as we have seen, it becomes his own favoured analysis of judgement.

What I therefore suggest is that, in context, the rejection of the Wax Tablet model is Plato's way of representing Socrates' quest for a unified model of judgmental processes, one which can cater for the successes and failures not just of empirical judgement but also of operations in pure thought—the very stuff of the dialectical method which Socrates pioneered. If Plato himself foresees (and his Socrates is at the end of the dialogue permitted at least to glimpse) how the Wax Tablet can after all survive, that is because he has in mind the cognitive psychology developed in *Republic* V–VII, and still maintained in the *Timaeus,* which is no longer unified, but *limits* the operations of judgement (*doxa,* there better translated 'opinion') to the empirical realm. On a Socratic, unified model of thought, the empirical Wax Tablet can play no useful role. The model's eventual

[205] For the nature of the fallacy, see n. 18 above.

[206] For this point see Burnyeat (1990: 102). Burnyeat himself takes 196c4–5 (quoted above) not as a rejection of the Wax Tablet theory but as an admission that what has been quoted will not suffice as a *definition* of false judgement.

vindication will be as one component in a dual epistemology, mapped onto the Platonic two-world ontological schema.[207]

6. The Aviary (196d1–200c6)

The new approach which ensues involves scrutinizing knowledge more closely, asking not *what* knowledge is (for that is the uncompleted task of the entire dialogue), but what *kind* of thing it is.[208] What Socrates means to ask is: is 'know' a potentiality word or an actuality word? This potentiality–actuality distinction has, thanks to Plato's pupil Aristotle, become so basic a part of our conceptual toolkit that it may be hard to imagine a time when it was still a novelty. But there had been very little deployment of it in Plato's work before the present passage, and in a way the entire Aviary model is his earliest attempt to elucidate the distinction and to apply it to the case of knowledge.[209]

Socrates' way of labelling 'know' as a potentiality word is to link it to merely 'possessing' something as opposed to 'having' it. (The Greek word for this latter is *echein,* which sometimes carries the stronger sense 'hold'. Socrates occasionally in the passage uses it to name the genus of which mere 'possessing' is one species, but more precisely invokes it to name the other species of that genus, active 'holding'.) If knowledge is a potentiality,[210] to know something is to possess it, that is, for it to be at your disposal in the way that a bird you once caught and put in a cage is now available to you to grab whenever you want to, whether or not you actually do so. And that

[207] For an ancient Platonist interpretation of the Wax Tablet as representing the empirical half of Plato's dual epistemology, see Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* ch. 4, and Sedley (1996*b*). That there is (1) no ἐπιστήμη of particulars and (2) no δόξα of Forms seems to me overwhelmingly the natural way to read *Rep.* V 479e4, especially in the light of *Rep.* VI 508d4–10 and *Ti.* 27d5–28a4, 51d3–52a7 (see p. 179 n.). I assume the explanation of (2) to be that Forms are cognized, if at all, in a way that does not admit of error, approximately along the lines developed by Aristotle in *DA* III 6, whereas δόξα is inherently fallible. In defence of (1) cf. also Sedley (2003*b* : 101 n. 5).

[208] For the question, raised by Socrates himself here (196d8–197a7), of the possible impropriety of asking what something is like before you have determined what it is, see above, pp. 25–7.

[209] In an important discussion of the antecedents of the Aristotelian distinction, Menn (1994, esp. 81–5) highlights the significance of both this passage and *Euthydemus* 280b5–282a6 (on which see immediately below).

[210] What was to become the standard word for 'potentiality', δύναμις, occurs just once in the passage, at 197c7.

is exactly what knowledge is like, because you may know something but fail to make active use of the knowledge.

If the potentiality–actuality distinction was not yet part of Plato's regular repertoire at the date of the *Theaetetus,* why is it here implicitly credited to Socrates? The probable answer takes us back to principle 8 (p. 34 above), Socrates' expertise about expertise itself. First, in Plato's dialogues a favourite Socratic thesis about expertise is that it is a capacity for opposites. The doctor is the best person not only at saving life but also at taking it; whoever is best at guarding your money is best at stealing it; and so on.[211] This might already be deemed sufficient to underwrite Socrates' insight that acquisition of a mere capacity could never guarantee its active use in all appropriate circumstances. And we may add that more or less the same distinction, between mere possession of a tool or other asset and its active use, is put into Socrates' mouth as part of his key defence of Socratic ethics at *Euthydemus* 280b5–282a6.[212] Plato had good reason, then, to regard the distinction as part of his Socratic legacy.

Socrates invites Theaetetus to envisage the soul as containing, instead of a wax tablet, an aviary filled with knowledge-birds which we have caught and imprisoned in it during our lifetimes.[213] There are a variety of operations that we perform with these birds, and for which a vocabulary is needed. Giving birds to others is 'teaching', acquiring them from others is 'learning', and possessing them in your own aviary is 'knowing'. Socrates expresses his puzzlement as to what name one should give to the act of grabbing a knowledge-bird from within one's own aviary, since both 'learn' and 'know' seem inadequate (198a1–199a6). In the end he gives up the search for a name (it was left for Aristotle to supply it: 'contemplate'[214]) and contents himself with explaining false judgement: reaching for the answer to a question is like grabbing a bird, and selecting the wrong answer is like grabbing a dove instead of a pigeon (199a9–b6). Birds, even in a cage, are hard to catch with your hands, and it is only too easy to end up grabbing the wrong one; the analogy thus brings out how, once we appreciate that knowledge is no more than a potentiality, the space we have been

[211] e.g. *Rep.* I 333e3–334b6; *Hipp. Mi. passim.*

[212] For the *Euthydemus* ' standing as a Socratic dialogue, see p. 10 n. 18 above.

[213] On the pointed exclusion of innate knowledge at 197e2–3, see p. 29 above.

[214] θεωρεῖν; see e.g. *DA* II 5, 417^a21-9 .

seeking in which false judgement can occur is naturally located between the possession of knowledge and its successful retrieval.

My main reason for saying, at the end of the last section, that this new account supersedes rather than supplements the Wax Tablet is that it is clearly designed to account even for the empirical mistakes previously explained by appeal to that model. For example, it is set up to explain not only mistakes of arithmetical calculation, such as '7 + 5 ' 11', but also cases which involve counting *external objects* (198c1–2), a kind of task for which the Wax Tablet was earlier deemed adequate (195e1–8), and also *reading* (198e3), another case of matching perceived objects to one's own concepts. So we must take it that a reading mistake, say misreading *w-a-t-e-r* as 'waiter', is now explained as seeing the written letters, asking yourself which of the words that you know is represented by them, and grabbing (i.e. exercising) your knowledge of one which closely resembles the right one, much like grabbing a dove instead of a pigeon. Likewise, miscounting the members of a football team as ten would be asking how many they are but grabbing the 10-bird, instead of the probably adjacent and certainly very similar 11-bird.[215] Our mental aviaries are said to contain *all* our knowledge (197e3–6), and one should not hesitate to take Socrates at his word here. There is nothing, in context, to suggest that this does not include knowledge of individuals like Theaetetus and Theodorus, as in the Wax Tablet account.

It is nevertheless true that the focus of the Aviary discussion is distinctly more intellectual and less mundane than the range of examples considered in connection with the Wax Tablet. For example, even when discussing empirical operations like counting and reading, Socrates focuses on the activities of experts—in arithmetic and grammar respectively (198a5, e3). While, as I have argued, this does not mean the Aviary is not meant to cater for mundane empirical judgement too, the difference in emphasis does, I think, represent a kind of philosophical progress on Socrates' part. In now abandoning a model of judgement as exclusively concerned with sensible subjects for one which caters for judgements about conceptual subjects as well, Socrates is developing a cognitive psychology commensurate with his earlier insights that on some things the soul

[215] Note, incidentally, that in Greek usage counting is *predicative* in form. 'These men are ten', confirming yet again that predications are included in the problematized false judgements; cf. pp. 123–5, 128, 136 above.

focuses via the senses, on others entirely through its own internal resources (185e3–7), and that these latter are the subject matter of expertise (186b11–c5).

In discussing that earlier passage (pp. 105–9 above), I loosely represented this as the announcement of a fundamental Socratic distinction between empirical and a priori predicates. In now graduating from the Wax Tablet model of judgement to the Aviary model, Socrates has made the corresponding move as regards *subjects*. He has arrived at an account of thought which can explain what is involved in processes of reasoning and judgement which take not (as at 185a8–186c6) empirical but conceptual items as their subjects. Since Socratic dialectic characteristically takes just such items as its subjects of inquiry, there is a very strong sense in which the cognitive psychology now sketched is, and is intended by Plato to be recognized as, Socrates' own.

The Aviary contains another equally important clue to the progress of Socrates' own cognitive psychology. One of the model's most important features is that it emphasizes *taxonomy* as vital to the assimilation and proper use of knowledge. The knowledge-birds in our aviaries organize themselves largely into flocks (197d5–10). This is one of the dialogue's several pointers to Plato's method of Collection and Division as itself a Socratic legacy. That Socrates was in fact the originator or inspiration[216] of this method is not very widely recognized, but the evidence is powerful. It is not just that when the method is first formally introduced in the *Phaedrus* (265c8–266c8) Socrates presents himself as a 'lover' (*erastēs*) of it—although this surprising locution clearly does at least hint at an association with the historical Socrates, whose unique specialism was 'matters of love'.[217] Much more important is that on the two exceptional occasions when Plato's Socrates sketches his own proposals for defining problematic concepts currently under dispute—piety at *Euthyphro* 12d5–7, and rhetoric at *Gorgias* 463a6–465e1—the definitions take the form of differentiation within a genus.

[216] In the late *Philebus* (16c5–e4) Plato seems to vote against the former option by putting a version of the method into the mouth of Socrates (who again, as in the *Phaedrus,* is its 'lover', 16b6) but making him attribute it to an ancient tradition, usually read as being Pythagorean.

[217] This claim, made in the *Symposium* (177d7–8, 198d1–2, 201d5; cf. 193e4–5), reflects a tradition about Socrates, also found in Aeschines of Sphettus, that represented *erōs* as his speciality: see Ioppolo (1999*b*).

Socrates shows a similar interest in genus–species taxonomy elsewhere too, for example at *Meno* 73e1–74a3. In the *Theaetetus* itself this same interest in division is detectable in the Digression, when Socrates sums up philosophical inquiry about anything as the project of asking how that thing differs from all others (174b4–6, 175c2–3).[218] (Among the ten principles of midwifery which I listed in Chapter 1 (pp. 33–4 above), Socrates' respect for taxonomy can be placed under principle 4, his concern for well-formed definitions.)

Note too an aspect of the Aviary account which is closely linked to taxonomy. While some of the birds fly in large flocks and some in small, yet others fly singly, weaving in and out of all the flocks (197d9–10). These last sound as if they correspond to the group of topic-neutral concepts already picked out at the end of part I (185a8–186b6), exemplified by being, otherness, sameness, oppositeness, and similarity.[219] If so, they are a forerunner to the five Greatest Kinds, a set which to the first three—being, otherness, and sameness—adds change and rest, and whose pattern of interaction will underlie Plato's eventual solution to the falsity puzzle in the *Sophist* (cf. pp. 131–4 above). Change and rest belong, as a pair, primarily to metaphysical inquiry, and for this reason do not play any significant part in the Socratic dialogues, making their absence from Socrates' list unsurprising. By contrast, being, otherness, sameness, oppositeness, and similarity are basic concepts deployed by Socrates throughout his definitional inquiries. To this extent, the way in which these topic-neutral concepts are displayed in the *Theaetetus* reflects, once again, Socrates' own distinctive contribution to the emergence of Platonism.

All this, then, is built into the Aviary model of thought: the capacity to inquire about a priori entities in their own right; taxonomy as basic to the proper use of knowledge; and the special importance of the topic-neutral items that will play such a huge part in the metaphysics of the *Sophist*. And all of it displays a Socratic pedigree. Just one insight is missing, and Plato is careful to make us notice its absence: there is no *innate* knowledge (197e2–3; cf. item (*d*), p. 35 above). That is, in terms of Plato's mature theory of recollection, Socrates has failed to provide the appropriate

[218] Cf. D. Frede (1989).

[219] The list compiled by Theaetetus at 185c9–d2 acknowledges (ἔτι; c10) some separation between this group and the arithmetical (and therefore not entirely topic-neutral) items that follow.

mechanism for cognitive access to Forms. Most of the necessary cognitive psychology is in place, but not the discarnate soul's direct cognition of being.

In the previous section I pointed out that the equation of judgement with internal discourse is never abandoned by Plato's Socrates, either in the Wax Tablet discussion or in the later reprise of that model in the *Philebus*. There is therefore equally little reason to suspect that it is meant to be excluded from the Aviary model, even though it is not explicitly mentioned there. We can take the full Aviary account of false belief to involve asking oneself a question and silently articulating an answer, the one difference from the Wax Tablet being that the answer is arrived at, not by connecting a percept to a pre-existing imprint, but by grabbing a knowledge-bird already stored in one's soul. In the *Philebus*' example of seeing a man in the distance and mistaking him for a dummy (p. 137 above), the soul would ask 'What is that object I can see over there?', and would answer by reaching for the appropriate bird and grabbing a similar but wrong one, so as to say 'The object I can see over there is a dummy'. The arithmetical case would therefore presumably involve asking oneself 'What is 7 + 5?', grabbing the 11-bird in error, and as a result saying to oneself '7 + 5 is 11'. It does not require the absurdity of saying to oneself '12 is 11', any more than the Wax Tablet account required the absurdity, when one mistakes Theaetetus for Theodorus, of saying to oneself 'Theaetetus is Theodorus'.

Why then does the Aviary fail as an account of false judgement? For ease of discussion, I shall divide Socrates' announcement of his objections into three parts (199d1–8):

> [1] I mean, first, the fact that while having [i.e. grabbing] knowledge of something he is ignorant of this very thing, not because of ignorance but because of his own knowledge. [2] And secondly, that he should judge that this is that and that this—how can it fail to be a great illogicality, that the soul should know nothing, and be ignorant of everything, of which it has acquired knowledge?[220] [3] For on this account there is nothing to prevent ignorance, once acquired, from making one know something, and blindness from making one see, if it is also going to be the case that knowledge ever makes one ignorant.

[220] I translate d4–5 in this paraphrastic fashion rather than with the more literal 'that having acquired knowledge the soul should know nothing and be ignorant of everything', in which ignorance of *everything* would neither plausibly follow from what precedes nor fit the analogy in the lines that come next.

To follow the detail here it is important to see that in (1) 'having' refers, as stipulated earlier, to the *grabbing* of a knowledge-bird, while in (2) and (3) the fact of having 'acquired' knowledge refers to its inactive *possession.*[221]

With this in mind, we can work out that the first objection, in (1), is that the false judgement has been diagnosed as caused not by latent knowledge which we fail to activate, but by the activated knowledge: in the specimen case, it is the activation of one's knowledge of 11 that leads to a mistake about 11, namely to its confusion with 12. To account for an error about X by pointing to use of one's knowledge of X as the cause is in Plato's eyes a formal contradiction, since it amounts to making knowledge the cause of its own opposite, ignorance. I shall return to this causal thesis shortly.

(2) switches from the active use of knowledge to its latent possession. The person falsely judging has confused 12 with 11, and therefore betrays ignorance about both numbers. The Aviary explanation of false judgement, he will mean, reduces every mistake to one of confusing one's knowledge of X with one's knowledge of Y (see especially 199c10–11); this analysis, every time it is applied, seems to show up the pieces of 'knowledge' in question as being in reality pieces of ignorance. For if you confuse two bits of knowledge with each other, how can they be called 'knowledge' at all?

(3) is formally a continuation of (2), but it in fact applies equally to both (1) and (2). It turns on a causal principle which is ubiquitous in Plato's works, including the Socratic dialogues, and most prominently in the *Phaedo,* but which is likely to strike few chords with modern readers. *Opposites cannot cause opposites.* There is no space here to explore the history of this principle in Plato's thought,[222] but a few words of explanation are in order.

While modern views of causality tend to focus on how *changes* are brought about, to Plato the paradigmatic examples of causes are ones which we might scarcely recognize as causal at all: wisdom makes you wise, beauty makes things beautiful, etc. One attraction of focusing on such cases is that they make causal relations look, not mysterious and inscrutable, but on the contrary the most self-evident

[221] The verb for 'be acquired', παραγίγνεσθαι, is used of latent potentialities at 197c8.

[222] I have discussed it fully in Sedley (1998*b*).

of all truths.[223] Other causal relations are then judged by this standard, and some fare better than others. If 'Heat makes things hot' is a self-evident causal truth, 'Fire makes things hot' has plausible credentials too, given only that heat is an inalienable property of fire. But 'Hard work makes you hot' or 'Eating curry makes you hot' would look far less credible to Plato, if only because heat is *not* an inalienable property of hard work or of eating curry, and indeed it is easy to dream up circumstances in which these activities could lead to your getting, on the contrary, cold.

Sketchy though this diagnosis is, it will have to suffice here as the conceptual background to a matching causal thesis which Plato's speakers often invoke in arguments, including here: opposites cannot cause opposites. If it is a self-evident truth that knowledge makes you knowledgeable, it is a self-evident falsehood that knowledge makes you ignorant. As Socrates puts it in (3), to think otherwise would be as ridiculous as believing the converse, that ignorance makes you knowledgeable, or, to take the equivalent defect in a different cognitive faculty, that blindness makes you see.

Importantly, this style of objection is one which started life in Plato's dialogues as a Socratic one. In the *Protagoras* (355d1–3) the idea of weak will, that someone can be overcome by pleasure and made deliberately to do something bad, is declared ridiculous by Socrates once pleasant and good have been equated, because it now amounts to saying that someone deliberately does what is *bad* because overcome by the *good*. And in the highly Socratic first book of the *Republic,* Socrates argues, against the idea that it is just to harm your enemies, that the ideal way to harm someone is to make them unjust, and that, as it is ridiculous that musicians should because of their music make people unmusical, so too it is ridiculous that the just because of their justice should make people unjust (335c9–d2). The same causal principle continued to be valued by Plato,[224] especially in the *Phaedo.* But the evidence just cited exhibits it as already established as a Socratic mode of refutation, an integral part of Socrates' dialectic. Its deployment by Socrates against his own last and best attempt at analysing false judgement is therefore to be

[223] 'Beauty makes things beautiful' should be taken to mean (*a*) that, if anything is beautiful, beauty is what is making it beautiful, and (*b*) that, if beauty has any causal impact on something, it will be the effect of making that thing beautiful.

[224] Cf. *Tht.* 189c5–d4 for a closely related concern about adverbial constructions like 'truly false', on which see further Sedley (1998*b* : 118–19).

read as a tribute to the critical (including self-critical) powers of Socratic dialectic.

Socrates has now finished his attempt at accounting for falsity, but Theaetetus has one last shot (199e1–6). Since the bits of knowledge involved in the false judgement have proved to be bits of ignorance, why not explain false judgement *that* way? Sometimes, in reaching for a knowledge-bird, one grabs an ignorance-bird instead. We might elucidate his suggestion with the arithmetical example, saying that one who judges 7 + 5 to be 11 has, in seeking the answer, got hold of a *misconception* about the number 11, namely that it is the sum of 7 and 5. Unfortunately, as Socrates points out in reply (199e7–200c6), all this move does is substitute one unexplained confusion for another. Instead of mistaking 11 for 12, the bad calculator has now mistaken a piece of ignorance for a piece of knowledge. That simply returns us to a second-order version of the question that has been haunting us since the start of this discussion: in what cognitive relation does he stand to each of the things he has confused with each other? If we ask that, our progress will spiral back through higher- and higher-order versions of the same explanatory models we have already tried out.

What has gone wrong is that the attempt to diagnose false judgements has ended up taking them to be internal mental processes which are themselves about further mental items, namely bits of knowledge. Picking the number 11 as the answer to the adding question was effectively explained as grabbing your *knowledge* of the number 11 (199b1–6). Small wonder then that the question how we can confuse 11 with 12 turns into the question how we can confuse our *knowledge* of 11 with our *knowledge* of 12. And that was the start of the final regress-objection, where it turns out that we can explain the mistaking of one mental item for another only by adding an extra wax tablet or aviary, which will in turn give us a new set of mental items to mistake for each other, and so on indefinitely.

What is missing, then, in the arithmetical example is a metaphysical separation of numbers from the cognitive states by which they are known. If only Socrates had stuck to explaining how we can mistake one *number* for another, and ignored the mistaking of one mental state for another, the regress would never have got started. But to do that Socrates would need to embark on the study of metaphysics, and to make a firm distinction between cognitive states and their objects. That move is, once again,

the task of Platonism.[225] If Socrates could not go all the way to a solution to the falsity puzzle, his neglect of metaphysics is yet again to blame.

7. The Jury (200d5–201c6)

To conclude part II of the dialogue, it remains for Socrates to put to rest the definition which served as the pretext for the entire discussion of false judgement: 'Knowledge is true judgement'. The conversation in which this is achieved palpably revives an earlier Socratic demonstration of the same point, found towards the end of the *Meno*—a dialogue widely regarded as written largely (though not exclusively) in Plato's historicizing Socratic vein. There true judgement is distinguished from knowledge on the ground that, although it is by definition never wrong and is for that reason beneficial and a good guide, it is not 'tied down', and therefore lacks the stability that knowledge possesses (*Meno* 96e1–98b5). Significantly for the interpretation of the *Theaetetus, that* true judgement is different from knowledge is something that the Socrates of the *Meno* places among the tiny handful of things that he would actually claim to 'know', even though he can do no more than conjecture *how* they differ (98b1–5). We may, for present purposes, ignore his conjecture on the latter question (regarding which see pp. 176–7 below), and simply note that although he there claims to know that knowledge and true judgement are different he does not reveal how he knows. It is that gap that the *Theaetetus* can be read as filling.

The point can be very briefly put. It is true, as Theaetetus observes (200e4–6) in what reads like a calculated reminiscence of the *Meno,* that true judgement never gets things wrong and therefore does nothing but good.[226] Still, Socrates replies, it is not knowledge. For

[225] The reasoning behind it is embodied in the argument at *Prm.* 132b3–e12, with which Parmenides thwarts the youthful Socrates' effort to conflate Forms with thoughts.

[226] See Burnyeat (1980: 174–6) for the point that the antecedent grounds of this assertion at *Meno* 96e1–97c5 are less naive than the present passage implies, since there true judgement is called a sound guide with reference to its guiding items which are already conditional goods like wealth and health (cf. 87e5–88c1). But is the *Theaetetus* ' omission of that aspect therefore a blunder, as Burnyeat infers? I prefer to press the intertextuality and to take the *Theaetetus* to be presupposing, and resuming, a discussion Plato expects his readers to recall.

a good orator will convince a jury of something that it cannot possibly know, its members not having been eyewitnesses to the crime in question. So an orator can make the jurors *judge* something to be the case without knowing it, and when it happens also to be true he brings about true judgement in them, still, however, without knowledge. It follows that true judgement is not the same thing as knowledge.

For the purposes of my interpretation, the most important thing to note is that this clarification of what was left unexplained in the *Meno* is overtly founded on Socrates' understanding of expertise: 'There is a whole expertise that provides you with the indications that it [true judgement] is not knowledge' (201a4–5). In other words, among the ten principles of midwifery (pp. 33–4), the relevant one for Socrates' insight on this point appears to be

8. The fact that midwifery is an expertise (*technê*) which Socrates has mastered gives him an understanding of what expertise itself is and how it functions.

However, it must be admitted that the actual way in which Socrates appeals to expertise to make his point is dripping with irony (201a7–b4). The expertise he has in mind, he tells Theaetetus, is 'that of those who are the greatest of all when it comes to wisdom, the people they call orators and litigators' (201a7–8). For the second time in the dialogue these people, whom the Socrates of the *Gorgias* denounces as pseudo-experts, are being facetiously treated as if they were the genuine thing. (For the earlier occurrence at 178d8–179a9, where the reminiscence of the *Gorgias* is unmistakable, see p. 87 above.) That here too, in the Jury passage, he is being ironic is confirmed by his pointed reference to the time constraints that operate in the law courts (201a10–b4): 'Or do you think that there are those who are such clever teachers that, to people who weren't present during a mugging or other act of violence, they can in the short time allowed by the water clock adequately teach the truth of what happened?'

There is a palpable echo here of the earlier Digression, where (172d4–e4) the slavish time constraints imposed in court are singled out for their contribution to the intellectually and morally shabby conduct of orators and litigants, when compared with philosophers' free use of time. In short, we are left in no possible doubt that the

'expertise' which provides Socrates with his evidence is no expertise at all. But that, once we make due allowance for the irony, is in a way the whole point. What confirms the difference between true judgement and knowledge is precisely the corresponding difference between a pseudo-expertise like rhetoric, neither founded on knowledge nor capable of imparting it, and authentic expertises, whose deployment of knowledge is a ubiquitous assumption in the Socratic dialogues.[227]

8. Retrospect on Part II

Although there are numerous philosophically important aspects of part II that have been brought out in the modern literature, I have chosen to concentrate on a pattern which I feel has been missed, thanks to the almost universal assumption that it is Plato himself who is shown working out his ideas. In one way this is true enough. The analysis of thought as internal discourse, the perception–memory model of false judgement, the importance of taxonomy to the effective use of knowledge, the singling out of the topic-neutral genera that will later form the core of the five Greatest Kinds—all these point forward to prominent features of Plato's late work, as I have sought to show. But what is missing from such a picture, and what I have tried to supply by way of remedy, is an appreciation of the way in which all this, and much more in the passage, is a working out of Plato's *Socratic* legacy. Socrates' project of de-emphasizing the physical world and turning to pure dialectic underlies the progression by which the Aviary supersedes the Wax Tablet. The methodology of Socratic dialectic, including its nascent interest in taxonomy, informs the Aviary model itself. Socrates' techniques of refutation also play a key part in the exposure, expressed out of his own mouth, of these same models' shortcomings. And finally his expertise about expertise enables him to see off the definition 'Knowledge is true judgement', which is formally under consideration.

In short, Socratic insights into cognitive psychology have proved seminal. But the reason for the failure of Socrates' cognitive

[227] e.g. *Apol.* 22c9–e1.

psychology to explain false judgement is not among the things that he can recognize: it is his inattention to metaphysics. It remains for Plato to investigate the ontology of the entities which the mind interrelates when forming a false judgement. And that task, to be undertaken in the *Sophist,* will not fall to Socrates.

6 Accounts

1. The Dream (201b6–202d7)

In the third and final part of the dialogue Socrates and Theaetetus move beyond the disappointment of part II by asking what must be *added* to true judgement to make it knowledge. The candidate answer is that some kind of 'account' is the missing ingredient; hence the new definition of knowledge up for consideration is 'Knowledge is true judgement plus an account'. They proceed to consider critically three candidates for what this 'account' might be.

The word for 'account' is *logos,* which has already featured in previous chapters as 'discourse', such as the soul utters internally in forming a judgement (p. 129). It is also more specifically the word for a 'statement'—that is, minimally, a single declarative sentence, which for Plato, especially in the *Sophist,* is the primary locus of truth and falsehood. But in the dialogues the dialectical business of defining something is also sometimes called 'giving [or "giving and receiving"] a *logos*' of it, and readers often get the justified sense that *logos* serves as one of Plato's preferred terms for 'definition'. In the *Phaedo* (76b5–6) and *Symposium* (202a5–9) the criterion that anyone who knows something can 'give a *logos* of it' is an obvious precursor of the present proposal in the *Theaetetus* (cf. 202c2–3 in particular), and there can be little doubt that there *logos* is tantamount to 'definition'. Later in the *Theaetetus,* starting at 206c7–8 (p. 169 below), Socrates will be reviewing some of the relevant senses of *logos*; but the usage of the term that predominates at the beginning of part III is a very specific application of the 'definition' one: to indicate an account which analyses a thing by listing its elements.

This use of *logos* for what is in effect an inventory of components does not necessarily embody a distinct meaning of the Greek term, rather than a distinct philosophical proposal for how a thing's *logos,* in the sense of 'definitional account', should be structured. However,

it is likely that Socrates has been influenced by the widespread use of *logos* for a financial 'account', 'tally', or 'reckoning'.[228] If so, we might think of this use as giving rise to a live metaphor in the passage, and perhaps even as having inspired the 'inventory of components' idea. Our own word 'account' captures the same semantic duality neatly.

The first and more celebrated of the two formulations of this proposal is the Dream theory at 201b6–202d7. It is known as the Dream simply because Theaetetus and Socrates appear to be comparing theories each recalls dimly, as from dreams: 'Hear a dream in exchange for a dream,' says Socrates (201d8). This is, on the surface, an allusion to the familiar activity of swapping dreams soon after waking up,[229] the point being that, like rapidly fading dreams, the theories that Theaetetus and Socrates once heard are a struggle for them to recall. In conformity with this expectation, Theaetetus will later (202c5–7) confirm that his dream was indeed just like Socrates'. It is uncertain how much more significance can be attached to the word,[230] but it is not unlikely that for Plato 'dream' here, as sometimes elsewhere, additionally implies 'hypothesis'.[231]

The following seven principles underlie the Dream Theory:

(1) Complex things have a *logos,* which consists in a list of their elements, while, for this very reason, their elements themselves do not have a *logos,* since what is authentically an element is not further reducible to elements of its own.
(2) Elements can be named.
(3) Elements, viewed as such, cannot have anything further said of them, not even that they 'are'.
(4) Elements are unknowable, but complexes are knowable (plus truly judgeable).
(5) Elements are perceptible.
(6) All things, us included, consist of elements.
(7) Letters of the alphabet are an example of elements; syllables are an example of complexes.

Thus the basis of the Dream Theory is cognitive asymmetry. You get to know something by an account of what it consists of, an inventory

[228] My thanks to Stephen Menn for impressing this point on me.

[229] That is all this same expression means when used twice by Damascius in his *Life of Isodore,* frr. 25, 3 and 131, 12 Zintzen.

[230] For discussion of the possible connotations, see Burnyeat (1970: 103–6).

[231] Cf. Sedley (2003*b* : 165).

of its components; but when you have reached that account, you can go no further in the same direction, since what the thing consists of does not itself consist of any further thing. The ultimate elements can be perceived and named, but not analysed, and therefore not known.

What are a thing's ‘elements’? To Aristotle (*Metaphysics* β 3, 998[a]20–[b]8), when asking himself the same question, two competing answers suggest themselves: (*a*) universal kinds, and (*b*) components:

> [There is a puzzle] about the principles, whether it is the genera that one should take to be elements (*stoicheia*) and principles, or rather the primary things contained in each thing and of which it consists. For example, it is the elements and principles of voice, and not voice taken generically, that appear to be the primary things out of which vocal articulations are constituted. And what we call the elements of mathematical proofs are the things whose demonstrations are contained in the demonstrations of all or most of the remainder. Again with regard to bodies, both those who say that there are many elements of which they are constituted and composed and those who say that there is one say that these are their principles: Empedocles, for example, says that fire, water etc. are the elements of which existing things consist by containing them, and does not mean them as the genera of existing things. In addition to these, if you want to scrutinize the nature of other things too, for example the nature of a bed, it is by finding out what parts it consists of and how they are combined that you know its nature.
> On these arguments, genera would not be the principles of existing things. But if we know each thing through definitions, and the genera are the principles of definitions, the genera must also be the principles of definable things. And if what it is to get knowledge of existing things is to get knowledge of the species in virtue of which existing things are spoken of, when it comes to the species it is the genera that are their principles.

This dilemma, between nominating constituents or components as the ‘elements’ of things and nominating instead the universals which feature in their definitions, closely mirrors an interpretative choice which we, as readers of the Dream theory, should be prepared to confront. The former option uses ‘elements’ in its most fundamental sense as the primary constitutive parts of any complex or system. Aristotle, as we have seen, illustrates this sense with four examples: (1) alphabetic letters (which were themselves regularly called by the same word, ‘elements’), viewed as the primary elements of speech or voice; (2) mathematical ‘elements’, as the term was later to be used in the title of Euclid's *Elements*; (3) earth, air, fire, and water, frequently dubbed the ‘elements’ in physical theory—a usage of

which Plato is actually reported to have been the originator;[232] (4) the component parts of any complex object, e.g. the bits of timber etc. that make up a bed.

Note how in the second and fourth cases Aristotle puts particular emphasis on the component elements of a system or complex as that through which we come to *know* it—a further potential correspondence to the Dream theory, where the list of a thing's elements is offered as the addition which converts true judgement into knowledge. Although in the fourth case, that of the bed,[233] he allows that knowledge also requires a grasp of how the parts fit together, he does not treat this additional formal aspect as a further 'element': the main basis of the knowledge posited is the grasp of the material components themselves. The competing argument for genera as 'elements'[234] is equally epistemological: things are known through their definitions, and genera are the starting points of definitions.

In the light of Aristotle's testimony, we had better give due consideration to both types of option when interpreting the Dream theory. There is a strong tendency among modern[235] interpreters to favour, or even assume, the second option, focusing on what we might call 'conceptual' components, such as those listed in a definition. Thus the *logos* of 'man' might be a list of components such as animal, mortal, rational, etc. Almost inevitably these components, whether or not they are all genera, would be universals.

But that reading makes a very poor fit for the seven principles which I have listed. First, it is scarcely credible that Socrates would have casually mentioned principle (5), that elements are perceptible (202b7), if he had universals in mind. It is a commonplace of Platonic thought that what is accessible to the senses is limited to *particulars* and their properties, while universals, whether at the level of species or genera, are accessible only to the intellect. Although the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* is no metaphysician, his

[232] Eudemus fr. 31 Wehrli.

[233] The example is adapted from the argument linked to Antiphon by Aristotle at *Ph.* II 1, 193[a] 9–17: since a thing's nature is defined as its internal principle of change and rest, the 'nature' of an artefact is its matter, e.g. the wood constituting a bed, because when a buried bed sprouts what grows is wood, not bed.

[234] That this thesis is not Aristotle's own ad hoc invention is shown by its attribution to 'some people' (1014[b] 11) in the parallel chapter, *Met.* Δ 3.

[235] Not only modern. As Stephen Menn has persuaded me (and intends to amplify in a future article), Simplicius, *In Ar. Phys.* 18.10–17 (provided one does not endorse Diels's excisions), already seems to favour this interpretation, as a reader immersed in Aristotle indeed might well do.

handful of philosophical proposals in the dialogue includes the thesis that there are some things that the mind studies not through the senses but purely through its own resources (185e3–7), and also the formulation of the Aviary model of thought, superior to the Wax Tablet precisely because it can account for judgements we make about things we are not perceiving. Hence the Socrates constructed in the *Theaetetus* is, for all his innocence of Platonic metaphysics, not one to make the mistake of assuming universals to be perceptible.

Secondly, alphabetic letters are meant to be an *example* of 'elements', and not merely to provide an analogy for them. This is plausibly inferred from their description at 202e3 as 'hostages' for the theory. Now at 203b2–4 it is made clear that, while you cannot state the elements of a single letter, you *can* state its kind and thus its conceptual components as envisaged above. Asked by Socrates to give a *logos* of the letter S, Theaetetus replies, 'How could someone state the elements of what is an element? After all, Socrates, S is an unvoiced sound, a mere noise when the tongue makes a sort of hissing.' This seems close to being a successful definition, by differentiation within a genus. Yet it is emphatically not a *logos* in the sense required by the Dream theory.

Thirdly, the idea that any universal might be only nameable, and not an object of definition and knowledge, has no obvious parallel in Plato's thought. On the contrary, for Plato universals (provided that one endorses the widespread consensus that Forms are, *inter alia,* universals) are the objects of definition and knowledge par excellence. At most one might speculate whether the highest principle of all might be indefinable and unknowable, there being no higher genus or principle under which it can be brought. But in fact Plato's best-publicized candidate for such a role, the Good in *Republic* VII, is explicitly both knowable and definable (534b8–c5).[236] This feature of the Dream, then, is hardly one that Plato would have supplied out of his own stock of assumptions; and it is no easier to imagine who else might have been its author.

Overwhelmingly the most natural reading, I submit, is that the *logos* envisaged, far from being one which ascends to the generic components of the definiendum, on the contrary descends into its material components. This perfectly fits Socrates' use of syllables

[236] For a convincing and elegant explanation of how the Good can be known according to Plato, see Reeve (2003: 50).

and letters to exemplify complexes and simples, letters being explicitly treated here as vocal rather than written symbols: resolution of a spoken word into syllables may continue down to the level of primary sounds, i.e. letters, but those letters, though audible, nameable, and even describable, are not further subject to resolution. Transferring this mode of analysis to ordinary physical objects, we find that the Dream theory is an essentially reductionist one, whereby things are understood by analysing them into their irreducible material components.[237]

There is strong confirmation for this materialist interpretation of the Dream in the fact that Aristotle too, as we have seen, leads off with the letters of the alphabet as exemplifying 'elements' in the same sense, that of 'components', directly comparing them to the material constituents into which Presocratic physicists like Empedocles analysed all bodies. Aristotle's articulation of the arguments for such an account additionally confirms the intrinsic plausibility of the fundamental idea, that the key to knowing a thing is its analysis into its ultimate components.

Thus understood, the theory is surely not, as many have supposed, attributable to some historical individual, such as Antisthenes,[238] but is intended to be recognized as the product of Socrates' own creative thinking. This becomes self-evident as soon as one realizes that the theory's main tenets are drawn from Socrates' own findings in part I of the dialogue.[239] Here I have two particular aspects of the theory in mind.

First, according to the Dream theory elements can be perceived, and named, but, viewed as elements, cannot have anything further said of them, not even that they 'are' and 'are not'. There is an

[237] This very obvious reading seems to have had no serious proponents since Taylor (1926: 344–6), apart from Sayre (1969: 120–30) and G. Adalier, 'Materialism in the *Theaetetus* ', a 1999 Duke University dissertation which I have not seen.

[238] Burnyeat (1990: 164–73) indicates some new sympathy for the Antisthenes hypothesis, which he strongly rejected in his earlier (1970).

[239] The idea that the Dream is based on part I of the dialogue was sketched forty-five years ago by Meyerhoff (1958), and developed by Sayre (1969: 120–30). If their suggestion has often passed unnoticed, that is perhaps because they missed the relevance of *Tht.* 184b3–187a3, and concentrated instead on earlier items in the part I discussion, tenets which are plausibly read as having by now been rejected by Socrates (cf. Burnyeat 1990: 139). The findings of 184b3–187a3 *are,* on the other hand, connected with the Dream by D. Frede (1989: 34–5), but for reasons that are not clear to me she thinks they would make a hopelessly inadequate basis for the theory.

obvious and non-accidental way in which this trades on the findings in the concluding section of part I (184b3–187a3). There it emerged (see Chapter 4 §4) that all the soul can apprehend through one of the senses is a primary object of perception, such as the colour red. It cannot go beyond that apprehension, not even to the extent of attributing being and not-being to the perceived object.[240] Any thoughts about the sense-object's being and not-being this or that fall to the soul, independently of the senses. But red itself, *qua* red rather than *qua* being something, *is* perceived—is, that is to say, a content or object of sensory awareness—and there is no hint that putting the name 'red' to it should, like saying that it 'is', be excluded from the things that the soul can do when operating in this perceptual mode.[241]

So the perceptibles might indeed be said to emerge from part I as objects which, taken in their own right, can be named but not said to 'be'. It is not Socrates' intention, either in the final upshot of part I or in the Dream theory, to deny being to perceptibles; it is simply that *qua* perceptibles, i.e. *qua* objects apprehended by this or that sense-organ, they are limited to e.g. red, warm, pungent, and do not include any component of being.

In this regard, the Dream departs from the findings of part I only in the following way. part I, when extending beyond being and not-being the list of items that cannot be accessed through perception because they are 'common' to the objects of two or more sense-modalities, gives as examples terms which are typical items of philosophical dialectic—same, other, like, unlike, one, two, opposite, etc. The Dream theory similarly extends beyond being and not-being its list of things that cannot be said of an element *qua* element, and does so on the matching ground (cf. the earlier term 'common'; 185e1) that they are things that 'run around and are applied to everything, being other than the things to which they are applied' (202a4–5). But the examples chosen are not a priori entities like the 'commons' of part I. Instead, Socrates lists 'it', 'that', 'each', 'only', and 'this'—very much the sort of terms that you might use while seeking to individuate something by actually pointing it out. If, seeing red, you

[240] In n. 29, pp. 106–7 above, I argued that *no* questions about 'being', not even whether some perceived object 'is red', can be addressed through the senses. The redness itself is accessed in that way, but the predication is regarded by Socrates as a matter for the mind acting through its own resources: you cannot see or hear being.

[241] Cf. Cooper (1970); Burnyeat (1990: 61–5).

say ‘red’, you are reporting something irreducibly primitive, but if you point and say ‘Only this is red’, you are already going beyond your primitive datum, adding extraneous information about its being, its determinate location, its relation to other things, and so on (‘extraneous’ because from the fact that these terms are applicable to things other than red it follows that they go beyond being simply alternative designations of it). The way in which, in place of the a priori predicates typically used for the taxonomy of universals, the Dream theory switches its attention to terms better suited to directly indicating empirical objects coheres well with the fact (as I have argued it to be) that its ‘elements’ are envisaged as items given in immediate perceptual encounters, and not as universal concepts.

The second way in which the Dream theory draws on part I of the dialogue is closely related to the first. The elements are, according to the Dream theory, unknowable. This is readily understood by relying on 186c7–e12, where from a sense's inability to gain access to being it was inferred that perception cannot be knowledge; from that finding it appears to follow directly that the objects which are apprehended uniquely through some sense are in themselves unknowable. If the only way in which red can be apprehended is by perception, and to perceive something falls short of knowing it, then it seems to follow that red cannot be known.

The fact that Socrates has himself generated these materials for the Dream theory should, as I have said, suffice to show that it is not a borrowed theory. But neither, for that matter, is it ultimately his own, given his decisive rejection of it in what follows. Rather, I take it, it represents his attempt to characterize, in his own terms and drawing on his own insights, the epistemological implications of Presocratic reductionist physics. On the basis of his critical analysis of empiricism in part I of the dialogue, Socrates articulates in the Dream theory what might be seen as a typically Presocratic bottom-up programme for knowing the world by starting from primary elements simply given in direct experience. He does so in order to demonstrate, in the sequel, just why such a programme is not in fact a coherent basis for knowledge: if you start from what is unknown, you will never build up to something knowable.

In this way the Socrates of the *Theaetetus,* much like the Socrates of the *Phaedo,* is made to symbolize the rejection of Presocratic physics. And here, in brief, we can discern a function for the whole Dream passage within the *Theaetetus,* in accordance with the

interpretation I have been sketching. Socrates, the message runs, being no metaphysician, could not take us all the way to Platonism. But he did already see what was wrong with Presocratic materialism as a basis for understanding the world, and rejected it accordingly.[242] His insight that reductionist analysis of the physical world cannot yield knowledge defined the end of the Presocratic era, and paved the way for Platonism.

If one were forced to pick out a single Presocratic whom Socrates might have especially in his sights, the first name to come to mind would be that of Anaxagoras, who himself analyses the world into combinations of such directly perceived entities as the hot and the cold, the bright and the dark.[243] But I would not want to suggest a one-to-one fit with Anaxagoras' theory, which does, after all, separate off at least one thing, mind, as *not* being reducible to these amalgams of opposites. Interestingly enough, for this reason a better fit would be with the modified version of Anaxagoras' system developed by his follower Archelaus, who seems to have differed from his master in making mind too the product of a mixture rather than a separate first cause.[244] I say 'interestingly enough' because Archelaus, an Athenian, was in fact said to have been Socrates' own teacher. It is not inconceivable that Plato, in representing Socrates' rejection of a typically Presocratic programme for knowing the world, should have had in mind the version which Socrates had himself as a young man been taught.

But most important is that, however rare or common theories of this kind may have been among early Greek thinkers, Plato himself perceives them as typical. In the *Sophist* (242c4–d4, 243d6–e2) one

[242] One reason for the materialist interpretation of the Dream becoming unfashionable is no doubt the difficulty of seeing why Plato would, at so late a stage in the dialogue's progress, show serious interest in a theory of the kind. The difficulty recedes once we recognize it as a historical reconstruction—why Socrates rejected Presocratic materialism. Another reason is Wittgenstein's (1953: 21) far more exciting comparison of the Dream theory to his own logical atomism in the *Tractatus*.

[243] I support the thesis of Schofield (1980) that the *only* constituents in Anaxagoras' system are opposites like hot–cold, wet–dry, bright–dark. The prevailing view, however, is that stuffs like flesh and gold are also included as primary. For present purposes it does not matter much, so long as it is clear that all Anaxagorean constituents are primitive items given in perception. For the Dream theory too does not specifically limit the 'elements' to perceptible *properties*, thus in principle allowing other primitive objects of experience such as air and fire to serve in the same role, as they do for many Presocratic thinkers.

[244] 60A4, II 46 line 5 in DK, immediately followed by an account of the origins of the world which does not, as Anaxagoras' does, make mind the cause.

major faction of thinkers is represented as reducing the whole of reality to two or three items, such the wet and the dry, or the hot and the cold.[245]

We should also bear in mind that within the *Theaetetus* itself a reductionist style of definition has already been canvassed in at least one case, namely the apparently successful definition of mud, early in the dialogue (147c3–6), as 'earth mixed with moisture'. This is not *simply* a list of empirical components, since 'mixed with' adds a formal relation between the components, but it still at least gestures towards a reductionist mode of analysis. It is also worth recalling that at 157b8–c1 the Secret Doctrine canvassed the phenomenalist thesis which analyses an entire empirical object as a mere bundle of sensible properties.[246] This too, although the theory of which it was a part has by now been formally rejected by Socrates, may be meant to contribute to the reader's understanding of how the Dream theory operates.

Rather than take the Dream theory to represent any one thinker, it is safer to say that it sums up an entire preceding tradition of reductionist analysis. This may among other things explain why, whereas Theaetetus heard the outline definition from 'someone' (201c7), the detailed version which Socrates goes on to spell out is one he thinks he has heard from 'some people' (201e1). The switch to this plural would fit well with generalization about an entire tradition.

The reductionism embodied in the Dream theory is a form of materialism, and therefore does not in itself constitute a specifically epistemological thesis. Nevertheless, it is a mature Platonic view, most famously articulated at the end of *Republic* V, that epistemology and ontology cannot be separated, in that knowledge must be understood partly in terms of the ontological status of its objects.

[245] The hot-and-cold theorists could very well represent Archelaus: they are said to make their chosen pair of opposites cohabit and to 'marry them off' (ἐκδιδόναι, *Sph.* 242d4), for which cf. Archelaus 60A4 (3) DK. Cf. also Aristotle, *Met.* A 3, 984b 5–6; *Ph.* II 193a 21–8, where a whole school of thought is generically characterized as tracing everything's 'nature' back to its primary material elements; and Empedocles, e.g. B21 + 23.

[246] As I have pointed out (pp. 46–7) this thesis treated the *objects* of sensory experience thus, as bundles of sensible properties, but their subjects otherwise, as bundles of perceptions. It is only the first half of the 'bundle' theory that the Dream theory might be said to recall. This is characteristic of the reasons why excessive concentration on the Secret Doctrine of perception has vitiated some previous attempts to connect the Dream with part I (n. 12 above).

Socrates has, early on in the *Theaetetus,* implicitly distanced himself from this latter view, arguing that the question what knowledge is is separate from, and independent of, the question what knowledge is of (146e4–11). But now, towards the end of the dialogue, he is beginning to see how hard it is to enforce that separation. His predecessors' empiricist assumptions about the nature of knowledge flowed directly from their bottom-up account of the nature of reality itself. This development may well foreshadow the Platonic thesis of the *Republic* and the *Timaeus,* which, as I have said, interprets knowledge directly in terms of its objects. I shall return to that possibility in the final section of this chapter.

2. The Critique of the Dream Theory (202d8–206c2)

What then does Socrates think is wrong with a bottom-up theory of knowledge? His refutation of the Dream theory is long and complex, and I shall here try to sketch only its main outlines, since its details do not bear directly on the main contentions of this book.[247]

Socrates' critique focuses on the Dream theory's requirement of cognitive asymmetry, according to which the kind of account which yields knowledge is built up from starting points which themselves are simply given, and not known.

The word for 'complex' (*syllabê*) means 'syllable' as well, just as the word for element (*stoicheion*) also means 'letter', making it entirely natural that Socrates takes as his example of a complex the first syllable of his own name, 'SO'. The dilemma about this syllable, articulated by Socrates at 203c4–6, sets the main agenda:

> OK, then. Do we say that [1] the complex is both the elements, and, if there are more than two, that it is all the elements? Or that [2] it is one single form that has come into being when they were combined?

This dilemma offers us a choice between what we can conveniently call [1] reduction and [2] emergence.

On [1], the complex just *is* its elements, that is, the 'sum' or conjunction of them, variously referred to in the ensuing discussion—see especially 204b7–e13—as 'all' (singular or plural), and as

[247] Cf. fuller and highly illuminating discussions—though with different conclusions from mine—in Burnyeat (1990: 134–209), Harte (2002: 32–47).

their ‘number’. On this reductionist view, when you have listed the ultimate elements of something you have finished saying what it itself is. (The fact that the letters constituting a syllable must be arranged in a certain order is never noted or exploited by Socrates in this discussion, and should probably be judged irrelevant to it.)

On [2], the elements are what went into the complex in the first place, but they have now been superseded by something new that has emerged. At 203e2–5 this is described as something that has been produced *from* the combination of the elements but is *different* from them. Socrates' description of this second option suggests the modern terminology of ‘emergence’, often applied to the emergence of life from structures of inanimate components.

> [1] implies a collection of distinct elements, which, however viewed, enumerated, or arranged (cf. 204b10–c3), is the same set. An example might be a book collection: wherever my individual books are at a given time—on the shelf, on my desk, lent to friends, mislaid—they still remain jointly the same book collection. Socrates' own examples at 204b10–d12 seem likewise to be things plausibly regarded as identical to the sum of their parts, however distributed: (*a*) the number 6, simply counted out, is the very same thing as $2 \times 3, 3 \times 2, 4 + 2$, and $3 + 2 + 1$; (*b*) a given quantity of length or area is identical to the number of units it consists of; (*c*) an army is the same thing as its own number. The non-arithmetical example (*c*) may seem the hardest to grasp, but I take the point to be that an army, like a book collection, is something that retains its identity so long as all its members continue to exist, however they may be distributed. Whether the individual soldiers of the army are in battle, on home leave, or in marching formation, it remains one and the same army, so long as they continue to constitute it.
> [2], by contrast, makes the elements mere *ingredients,* no longer actively present in the resultant complex. An easy example would be cake. The flour, eggs, and milk that were a cake's original ingredients are no longer its parts; instead something altogether new has superseded them, namely cake. The parts of the cake are not flour, eggs, etc.: they are slices, crumbs, etc. *of cake*. This, presumably, is the main reason why in the argument that follows Socrates will take it that, on the assumption of [2], a complex does not have parts. A cake does of course have parts in so far as slices, crumbs, etc. are parts, but *in the sense relevant to the Dream theory* it does not, because the parts of cake are still just cake. Hence there is nothing

that you could know about the whole that you did not also know about the parts. The 'parts' or 'elements' postulated by the Dream theory were not of this kind, but were supposed to be epistemologically independent of the complex.

On the basis of the distinction between [1] and [2], Socrates' argument moves as follows.

203c7–e1.	Assuming [1], the complex just is the elements, so anyone who knows the complex *ipso facto* knows the elements. For example, if 'SO' is the same thing as S and O, anyone who knows the syllable must know the letters S and O. This would, however, be enough to demolish the cognitive asymmetry on which the Dream theory is founded.
203e2–204e10.	Assuming [2], on the other hand, the complex does not consist of parts, because what consists of parts is the sum of those parts, which would bring us back to [1]. Apparently the only way to avoid this is to deny that the 'whole' is the same thing as the sum of parts, so that the whole does not, as the sum does, consist of parts.
204e11–205a7.	But parts *must* be parts of a whole. Denying that sums are wholes is no way out, because both 'whole' and 'sum' are definable as what you have so long as nothing is missing.
205a8–d3.	So if, as on [1], the complex is the same as its elements, both are equally knowable; if, as on [2], the complex is not the same as its elements, the complex has *no* parts, and hence is unknowable. Either way, the Dream theory cannot survive.
205d4–e8.	The dilemma restated.

This refutation has been the subject of intense scrutiny and criticism, and it is not my purpose to review the disputes about it. I shall limit myself to saying why I think it fails, mainly in order to argue that Plato is unlikely to have been aware of the fallacy.

Early on, at 203c7–e1, Socrates argues against the reductionist thesis on the grounds that, if the complex is identical with the elements, you could not know the complex without knowing the elements. This is a move of great interest, with an illuminating analogue in much more recent debates about consciousness. There is a natural temptation for those who deny the identity of mental with neurophysiological states to point out that one could in principle know all about some subject's brain state yet not know at all what it is like to be that subject, i.e. know that subject's state of

consciousness. This party thus argues against the identity of something with what constitutes it on the ground that, were the two identical, to know that which constitutes it would be *ipso facto* to know the thing constituted by it. Socrates in the *Theaetetus* makes the reverse inference: if something were identical with its constituents, to know the thing would be *ipso facto* to know the constituents.

Both types of argument may invite the objection that in intentional contexts such as those introduced by ‘know’ the usual rules about substitution of identical terms have to be suspended (the so-called fallacies of ‘referential opacity’).[248] For example, water is hydrogen plus oxygen. From this we can infer that when Plato drank water he was drinking hydrogen plus oxygen. But from the fact that Plato *knew* that he was drinking water we cannot infer that he *knew* that that he was drinking hydrogen plus oxygen.

But this kind of fallacy is easily overlooked. There are numerous instances of it in Plato, including a number in the *Theaetetus* itself.[249] It seems to me overwhelmingly probable that Plato regards his argument as a successful objection to any thesis according to which knowledge of a thing can be derived from its analysis into things which are themselves not known.[250]

A weightier objection might appear to be that Socrates' disjunction between [1] and [2] was not exhaustive. Why did he not consider the following third option?

[3] A complex is the sum of its elements *plus some formal component*—arrangement, structure, function, or the like.

This additional component would correspond, more or less, to the ‘form’ which Aristotle combines with matter to generate substances. It would then be possible to say that it is in virtue of knowledge of its form that we can come to know the entire complex. It is very likely that Plato's own inclinations would point in the same direction, at least to the extent of making form the primary object of knowledge,

248 Cf. Brandt and Kim (1967, esp. 534–7).

249 See above, p. 22, and p. 131 n. 18, and Williams (1972). Celebrated arguments in Plato which the same fallacy might well be diagnosed as underlying include *Gorg.* 467c5–468e5 and *Phd.* 74c1–5.

250 To this extent, the reading I propose is in tune with Gail Fine's ascription to Plato of the principle ‘Knowledge must be based on knowledge’ (or, as a variant on this, the ‘interrelation model’ of knowledge); see Fine (1979*a*), and further discussion in Annas (1982), Nehamas (1984), Bostock (1988: 243–50). However, as I shall make clear below, I depart from her reading of this interrelation as circular, in favour of a hierarchical interpretation which may very well leave at least one item to be known in an altogether underivative way.

although he would probably regard the 'form' in question as a metaphysically separated one. So why does the idea not surface here?

My first answer will of course be that the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* lacks the metaphysical insights that Plato's seasoned readers are expected to possess. But it is more directly pertinent to the context to point out that, on a hylomorphic account of this kind, the Dream theory would have collapsed anyway. For either the formal component is to be counted as one of the elements, in which case there is one of the elements which cannot be plausibly described as unknowable; or the formal component is *not* one of the elements, in which case enumeration of a thing's elements was not after all sufficient for knowing it.[251] The entire Dream theory depended on restricting the elements to primitive components given in perception alone. Hence the dilemma between [1] and [2] arose from the materialist spirit of Dream theory, and the exhaustiveness of the disjunction was justified in context.

At 206a1–c2 Socrates broaches his own conclusion. Our own experience of learning some system, such as the alphabet or music, confirms that knowledge of the elements (letters, notes) is both essential and in fact *prior* to knowledge of the complexes (syllables, harmonies) which they constitute. Knowledge of elements is 'more self-evident and more important' (206b7–8) than knowledge of complexes. He does not (as he is regularly reported) say here that elements are actually 'more knowable' than complexes, and indeed at 205b2–3 he has concluded that elements and complexes are 'equally knowable'. He seems to mean rather that they are more directly or underivatively knowable, in accordance with a familiar use of the adjective translated self-evident (*enargēs*).[252]

If it is the whole–part identity that makes complex and elements equally knowable, how can it allow the elements to be more *directly* knowable than the complex? Mustn't learning the complex be the very same act as learning the elements? Presumably not, because to know the complex is identical with knowing *every* element, whereas

[251] Cf. Aristotle, *Met.* H 3, 1043^{b} 4–13.

[252] Cf. *Rep.* 544b4, where the same comparative, ἐναργέστερον, refers back to the principle that a city's character is 'easier to learn' (368e8) and 'easier to see' (434d8) than a soul's, so that (545b5–c5) the former should serve as the reference point for getting to understand the latter. In the *Theaetetus* itself, note especially 179c6, where Theaetetus' definition 'Knowledge is perception' is equated with the thesis that perceptions and perceptual judgements are 'self-evident (ἐναργεῖς) and cases of knowledge'. Cognitive primacy, or (in the comparative) priority, seems to be the dominant notion.

you can get to know the elements one by one in advance of knowing the complex, and indeed as a means towards knowing it. In Socrates' own examples of reading and music, it is scarcely deniable that the learning sequence followed is exactly that.

The ‘elements’ of which Socrates says all this—alphabetic letters, musical notes—are still very much the kind of perceptible constituents assumed in the Dream theory. Nevertheless, the intuition which his parting shot conveys is highly Platonic in spirit: whatever the items may eventually turn out to be that knowledge is based on, they must themselves not only be known too, but must be more directly, self-evidently, or underivatively known than the items known on the basis of them. The model of knowledge which this hints at is, I think, Plato's own. It is not simply a coherence account of knowledge, based on a complex network of cognitions. It is essentially hierarchical. Some things are known derivatively, thanks to prior and more direct knowledge of other things. Such a hierarchy would, one supposes, have to have an absolute starting point in something known in an altogether underivative way. Such a role is indeed played by the Form of the Good in the *Republic,* and I see every reason to infer from Socrates' ground for rejecting the Dream theory that Plato still has that same kind of hierarchical metaphysics in mind as the true basis of knowledge.[253]

Socrates himself does not have Plato's hierarchical metaphysics in mind. But his intuitions about the order of acquiring knowledge, based on childhood learning experiences which start from something irreducibly primary, already point tellingly in that same direction. If Plato feels able to attribute these intuitions to his master Socrates, the acknowledgement no doubt owes much to Socrates' ubiquitous insistence on the primacy of definition in any investigation (item 4, p. 33 above).

3. The Second ‘Element’ Theory (206e6–208b12)

At 206b9–c2 Socrates takes his departure of the Dream theory, which he concludes must be a joke, whether intentional or

[253] Cf. n. 23 above. That Plato *ever* abandoned hierarchy in favour of a circular structure of knowledge is something of which I am not altogether convinced (the strong evidence for his continuing commitment, outside the dialogues, to the ultimate principles of the One and the Indefinite Dyad would have to be taken into account), but which I cannot pursue here.

unintentional. Moreover, he adds, it could be refuted in other ways. But *what* has been refuted? Not the definition of knowledge as true judgement plus a *logos,* which Theaetetus has remembered hearing from someone or other: that will continue to be discussed. And not the further equation of *logos* with an enumeration of elements, for that too will now continue to be considered as a live option, with explicit reference back to its formulation in the Dream theory (207b6). All that has been refuted, then, is the cognitive asymmetry of the Dream theory.

At 206c7–8 Socrates undertakes to list three things that Theaetetus' anonymous informant[254] may have meant by *logos* in saying that knowledge is 'true judgement plus a *logos*'. One is quickly dismissed as irrelevant: 'statement'.[255] Clearly the commonplace ability to articulate one's judgements into vocal assertions is not enough to make them knowledge, he points out.

The second possible meaning of *logos,* however, is to be taken seriously: 'the ability, when asked what each thing is, to render the answer to one's questioner by going through the thing's elements' (206e6–207a1). Socrates explains this with the example of Hesiod's line in the *Works and Days* (456), 'A hundred timbers has a wagon.' A non-expert might be able to list the complex (or 'syllabic') parts of a wagon, for example 'wheels, axle, yoke', etc. But only someone with knowledge could give a list of its hundred ultimate elements, presumably starting with so many spokes, so many dowels, etc.

What kind of a theory is being described, and what is its origin? In broaching this difficult and too rarely asked question, we can usefully start with the words quoted from Hesiod. It has, to the best of my knowledge, gone unnoticed that the original context is of direct

[254] 'OK then, what in the world does he want *logos* to signify to us? It seems to me that he means one of three things.' The reference is to the 'someone' of 201c7, Theaetetus' informant, and the meaning in question is therefore speaker's meaning. Of the eight translations I have consulted, Valgimigli alone recognizes this. All the others, apart from Levett, adopt formulations which make it sound as if Socrates were stating a fact of lexicography.

[255] '… making one's thought evident through the voice with descriptions (ῥήματα) and names (ὀνόματα)' (206d1–2). Here as often (esp. *Crat.* 431b3–c1; *Sph.* 262a1–d7), complete statements are taken to contain both 'names' and 'descriptions', cast in the role of subject and predicate respectively (cf. p. 126 above). Socrates' point in specifying it here is not to go back on his earlier assertion (189e4–190a8) that thought itself even without vocal articulation is already linguistic in form, but to insist that the internal utterance which when externalized makes a vocal 'statement' is not just any internal utterance, but one which already contains both a subject and a predicate.

significance for their interpretation. Hesiod's catalogue of farming advice has brought him to the need to possess your own wagon and oxen: you cannot count on being able to borrow them when you need them (453–4). But in order to have your own wagon, you must make sure you have ready the entire kit of parts (457). ‘A man whose wealth is in mere thought talks of constructing a wagon. He is a fool, *and does not know*: a hundred timbers has a wagon’ (455–6).[256]

It was surely the words which I have emphasized that first drew somebody's attention to their immediate sequel as implying a definition of knowledge. For it looks as if the need to be able to recite the inventory of all hundred wagon parts (not, of course, merely to be able to say how many there are) was read by somebody as Hesiod's own recommendation for how to acquire *knowledge* on the subject of wagons. I have not found any other traces of the interpretation, but Hesiod was widely revered as authoritative (as Heraclitus famously complained),[257] and it is conceivable that some Presocratic author had cited the line in support of the thesis that only when we have discovered all of a thing's constituent parts can we be said to know it. There is certainly no reason to assume that Plato himself is responsible for extracting this message from Hesiod, both because, as the ensuing refutation will confirm, he does not regard the Hesiodic view (if such it is) as in any way authoritative, and because in the present *Theaetetus* passage he fails to cite the context which would have brought out the full significance of Hesiod's line. Rather, what we have here is evidence that someone else's actual theory of knowledge is being alluded to: it is not purely Plato's own ad hoc construct. If I were forced to guess the source, I would suggest the atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, whom Plato notoriously never once names in his writings. The reason for thinking of atomic constituents will become a little clearer shortly.

A second serious problem, which I have never seen adequately addressed,[258] let alone solved, is why despite the demise of the Dream theory Socrates in this way immediately goes on to consider *another* theory in which a thing's *logos* is a list of its elements. There are two

[256] νήπιος, οὐδὲ τὸ οἶδ' ἑκατὸν δέ τε δούρατ' ἀμάξης.

[257] Heraclitus B40, 57, 106 DK.

[258] McDowell (1973: 252–3) does at least ask the question, and, if briefly and with little conviction, canvasses one possible answer (his item (1)). Most other discussion focuses on new points Plato wishes to make in refuting the theory without pausing to ask what the point of the theory itself is meant to be.

main differences from the Dream, each representing in its own way a philosophical advance.

First, the new theory's examples of 'elements', such as the spokes of a wagon-wheel, are functional parts with a definable formal aspect, and therefore are not entirely comparable to what I took, in the Dream theory, to be primitive material components given only in direct sensation. It seems a fair guess that in Plato's eyes 'elements' like these would be superior candidates for being ultimate constituents of bodies; and that suspicion is to some extent confirmed towards the end of the dialogue, where Socrates treats Theaetetus' 'constituents' as including such formal features as his own particular snubness, or snub nose (208c5–10).[259]

Secondly, In keeping with this rescued formal aspect of the elements, the revised theory quietly drops any mention of cognitive asymmetry. It is not entirely clear that this latter *can* be so simply done, because if knowledge of X depends on a *logos* which lists X's elements, and if elements do not have elements, we may seem to have little choice but to accept that the elements by which X is known are themselves unknowable—in short, back to cognitive asymmetry. However, in view of the firm refutation of cognitive asymmetry, combined with the absence of any mention of it here, we must assume Socrates to be leaving open the question *how* elements themselves are known, rather than condemning them to unknowability. Presumably in this special case of elements themselves they are known in some other way, e.g. by stating their function in the whole (cf. the previous paragraph). Let us keep the question as open as Socrates leaves it. The problem remains: why reiterate the element theory in this new form?

My contention is that only when we have understood the Dream theory correctly can we see the point of the revised element theory. What Socrates has in mind, I suggest, is not this time a Presocratic mode of analysis into primitive elemental stuffs, in the style of Anaxagoras and Empedocles, but the kind of structural element theory that had been pioneered by the early atomists, and that was

[259] For the point, see Burnyeat (1990: 140), who takes Theaetetus' snubness to be treated as a constituent. It may alternatively be that by 'and likewise the other things you consist of' Socrates means, not purely formal features like snubness of the nose and bulgingness of the eyes, but 'and so too for your other parts' (i.e. other than your nose). But, even if so, the same general point would survive, namely that a thing's constituents are to be understood structurally and formally, not in a narrowly material way.

to be articulated in a more sophisticated form by Plato himself in the *Timaeus.* Plato's version is based on analysis of stuffs, via geometrically defined particles, into primary triangles (cf. p. 72 above). According to the *Timaeus,* the things that conventional physics claims to 'know' as the world's 'elements'—earth, water, air, and fire—are in reality not even 'syllables' (48b3–c2; *syllabai,* the same word as I have hitherto translated 'complexes', but here used in its alphabetic sense of *minimal* complexes). They are analysable into particles with the forms of four regular solids, and those solids themselves further analysable into combinations of primary triangles. This already mirrors the revised element theory in the *Theaetetus,* where the ability to resolve an object only into its complex parts is declared cognitively insufficient (207a9–d2). In the *Timaeus* even the primary triangles are not proclaimed as the ultimate starting points of knowledge, but their own underlying principles are left mysterious: these are known only to god and to a favoured handful of human beings (53d6–7), and to pursue them would require a methodology alien to the current physical investigation (47c2–d1). It is not hard to conjecture from this that the ultimate principles are ones whose understanding requires high-level mathematics, much as, in another domain of inquiry, understanding of the Good no doubt does.[260] But so far as the term 'elements' is concerned, in the *Timaeus* it is the primary triangles that are so designated (54d6, 55a8, 55b4, 57c9, 61a7).[261] It seems then that, according to Plato's own physics, complex bodies may be analysed exhaustively all the way down to primary triangles, their ultimate 'elements', and those elements, while not having 'elements', i.e. constituents, of their own, could in theory be explained and known by appeal to some even more fundamental principles, presumably through some higher-level mathematical analysis.[262]

The revised element theory in the *Theaetetus* is so close in spirit to this Timaean physics that I find it hard to doubt that Plato has it, or something very like it, in mind. Unlike the Presocratic-style reductionist Dream theory, the *Timaeus*' physics resolves compound

[260] Cf. Cooper (1977).

[261] 56b5, where the pyramid is the 'element' of fire, is the only exception I have been able to find.

[262] This assumes that the ultimate analysis of the triangles would locate them in the intelligible realm, rather than treat them as imperfect and unstable particulars. To pursue this idea would involve some complex speculation about Plato's unwritten doctrines on the mathematicals.

bodies into ultimate ‘elements’ that may somehow be knowable, and which certainly have a form and a structural function within the whole. His speaker Socrates, to fit the historical retrojection, has to be referring not to the Timaean theory itself but to some unspecified forerunner of it—most probably to Democritean atomism, which resembles the Timaean theory in regarding its primary elements as more genuinely knowable than the physical compounds they constitute.

The question remains, even without cognitive asymmetry, whether such a resolution into elements is the route to *knowing* the compound bodies. Socrates can see that it is not, and what the *Theaetetus* sets out to exhibit is why.

Briefly, Socrates' objection to the revised element theory is the following (207d3–208b12). One might succeed in stating the elements of a given complex, but on another occasion misstate those same elements—as often in fact happens when in spelling you spell a certain syllable right but misspell the same syllable in a different word. Someone who did that could not be said to have ‘known’ the syllable, or complex, even on the first occasion. The point of this criticism is that getting something right on one occasion can guarantee no more than true judgement, and in itself lacks the reliability which characterizes knowledge. It is easy to see that the insight applied here is the thoroughly Socratic one from the *Meno* (96e1–98b5) that we have already met (pp. 149–50 above): the difference between true judgement and knowledge lies in the latter's *dependability.*

When combined with the refutation of the Dream theory, the refutation of the revised element theory will have the effect of explaining two insights underlying the philosophical direction that Socrates chose to take. He not only rejected existing (Anaxagorean-style) reductionist physics as a route to knowledge, but also saw that even an improved physics, along the lines of a reformed atomism, could never, in principle, be the basis of knowledge. We need to keep both of these insights in mind in order to see why Socrates' own search for knowledge abandoned physics altogether, and took instead the path that it did, that of pure dialectic. And if Plato would eventually, in the *Timaeus,* reinstate physics, that was certainly not as a means to knowledge, a cognitive state to which its methodology could never aspire (*Timaeus* 27d5–28a4, 29b3–d3), but as a mode of

investigation condemned to remain in the realm of less or more plausible 'judgement' or 'opinion' (*doxa*).

4. Statement of the Distinguishing Mark (208b12–210b3)

We are nearing the end of the dialogue. There is one relevant kind of *logos* left. It is, explains Socrates, 'the one which most people would say: to be able to state some sign by which the thing about which one is being asked differs from everything else' (208c7–8). Thus a *logos* is now taken to be a statement of the uniqueness of the object known, its differentiation from all other things.

On the one hand, this yields what is surely the most Platonic of all the definitions discussed in the *Theaetetus,* in conformity with the familiar pattern of Socratic definitional dialogues whereby, despite their eventual failure, each definition considered is, philosophically, an improvement on its predecessor. The definition here on offer, that knowledge is true judgement plus a statement of what makes the object uniquely what it is, might even be said to herald the method of Division which takes centre stage in several of Plato's late dialogues, starting around the date of the *Theaetetus* in the *Phaedrus.* For once we recognize knowledge's need for unique differentiation of its object, the natural next move is to seek a method for achieving unique differentiation, and the method of Division appears to be just such a method. We have already seen (pp. 143–4 above) how the Aviary model of thought also, in its own way, points forward to the method of Division.

On the other hand, paradoxically, the definition under offer is at the same time the most commonplace and therefore *un*philosophical of those considered, as Socrates indeed acknowledges by calling its notion of the *logos* required for knowledge 'the one which most people would say'. This, I take it, is because the simple ability to tell the object known from other things captures a very low-level and familiar criterion of knowledge—a point which I have already invoked in explaining the falsity puzzles (pp. 122–3 above). It is only when a *method* is added for achieving that differentiation that this account of knowledge will become philosophically adventurous. The mundane examples offered by Socrates show that he does not yet have such a method in mind. The *logos* of the sun would be, he says

(208d1–4), that it is 'the brightest of the things in the heaven that orbit the earth', while that of Theaetetus would (209b2–c10) pick out, not shared features like his having a snub nose and bulging eyes, but the unique features of *his* snub nose and *his* bulging eyes. To the extent that these examples focus on particulars rather than universals as objects of knowledge, that they offer no system for arriving at the final differentiation, and that the unique features that they select could well be regarded as inessential, they do not convey deep Platonic insights, but rather confirm Socrates' implied disclaimer when he calls this a popular criterion. The Platonizing implications of the definition are, in a way that by now we have come to expect, to be found in the Platonic subtext, not in Socrates' own words.

As in previous cases, we may expect that Socrates' grounds for rejecting the definition will convey the kind of critical insight that made him the midwife of Platonism. His opening contention is as follows (208e7–209d3). Being able to distinguish something from all other things is, in itself, a necessary condition even for having true judgement about it (for reasons which we have amply considered in connection with the falsity puzzles, pp. 123–5 above): until you have marked something off from all other things—at the very least by judging truly how it differs from them—it cannot even feature in your thinking as the individual thing that it is.

This now (209d4–210b3), finally, leads to a fatal dilemma about the cognitive relation in which the knower must stand to the added *logos*. If, on the one hand, it is enough to have *true judgement* about how the thing differs from other things, the added *logos* is redundant, because merely to have that thing featuring in your judgement in the first place already requires at a minimum that you judge truly how it differs from other things. If, on the other hand, the knower's cognitive relation to the *logos* has to be stronger than true judgement, it seems that it will be necessary to *know* how the thing differs from all other things. And that yields the circular definition that knowledge is true judgement plus *knowledge* of the object's difference from other things.

In this way, Socrates' parting shot is a thoroughly Socratic one: the rejection of a proffered definition on grounds of its concealed circularity. This was the motif that underlay his very first refutation in the *Theaetetus,* his rejection of the definition of knowledge as 'shoemaking (etc.)', on the ground that it is tantamount to the circular 'Knowledge is knowledge of making shoes, etc.' (pp. 23–7

above). We saw there how it reflects critical techniques which Plato strongly associates with Socrates. By a kind of ring composition, that same Socratic insight has put in a reappearance right at the end of the dialogue, laying low the final, and most promising, definition of knowledge that Socrates and young Theaetetus could conjure up.

It is not hard to work out that this same objection is equally threatening to *all* definitions of knowledge as true judgement plus something.[263] Whatever the something may be—whether justification, analysis, warrant, differentiation, or, as in the *Meno* (98a1–8), 'calculation of the cause'—the same problem will threaten to arise. It is not enough to have mere true judgement about the extra something, or simply to assert it, or for it merely to exist. The knowing subject can stand to it in no cognitive relation weaker than that of knowing it. And as soon as this is recognized, circularity sets in. Knowledge will be defined as true judgement plus knowledge of something.

Although it is normal to credit the discovery of this vicious circle to Plato in the *Theaetetus,* it in fact had an earlier history in his Socratic writings. In the *Meno,* a dialogue largely devoted to scrutinizing Socratic ideas, Socrates famously proposes (98a1–6) that correct judgement becomes knowledge when one 'binds' it by 'calculation (*logismos*) of the cause (*aitia*)'. He next rephrases this relation itself in causal terms: it is 'because of binding' (*desmōi,* 98a8) that knowledge differs from correct judgement, where 'because of' is expressed by a Greek dative, a standard Platonic way of indicating a cause.[264] And his immediately ensuing remark adds an eloquent twist in the tail. Here is the relevant sequence (98a6–b5):

> SOCR. … And this is why knowledge is something more valuable than correct judgement. And it is because of binding that knowledge differs from correct judgement.
> MENO. It certainly does seem that way, Socrates.
> SOCR. And yet I myself am speaking not as one who knows, but as one who is guessing. What I *don't* think is pure guesswork is that correct judgement

[263] Cf. Bostock (1988: 238–40). Since Plato wrote, a strategy has emerged for escaping this problem by appeal to epistemological externalism—the denial that only factors of which we are or can be aware have a bearing on justification. But as far as I can see it would be anachronistic to treat Plato as allowing for any such possibility.

[264] For Plato's causal locutions see Sedley (1998*a* : 115). Compare in particular *Phd.* 101b4–6, where 'Ten is more numerous than eight *by* [dative] two' is explicitly interpreted as causal.

> and knowledge are different. If there's anything else that I would claim to know—and there are precious few things of which I would claim that—this is one thing that I would add to the list of those that I know.

This subtle variation on a familiar theme, Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, is used to generate a paradox which looks far too carefully crafted to be dismissed as accidental.[265] Socrates here clearly distinguishes a Difference Thesis from a Causal Thesis. That is, he distinguishes the thesis that correct judgement and knowledge are *different,* from the thesis that a certain kind of binding is the *cause* of that difference. Yet he also claims to *know* that the Difference Thesis is true. How does he know? According to the Causal Thesis, in order to know the truth of the Difference Thesis he would have to have *bound* it by calculating the cause—that is, by calculating the cause of the difference between correct judgement and knowledge. But that is exactly what he denies that he has done: his proposal as to what causes the difference between correct judgement and knowledge is, he has now confessed, a mere guess on his part, and very far from being one of the tiny handful of things that he would claim to know. Whatever he may mean by 'guess' in this context, it inevitably falls far short of anything that could be called 'calculation', or indeed of anything that could be thought adequate to underwrite a knowledge claim.

To put the paradox in its most succinct form, Socrates has asserted (*a*) that he knows that these two cognitive states differ; (*b*) that the cause of their differing is something at which he can do no more than *guess*; and (*c*) that to know something you have to have *calculated* its cause. In view of the scarcely deniable incompatibility between guessing and calculation, it seems impossible that all three of (*a*)–(*c*) should be true.

In this way, Socrates lays a double snare. He warns us of the suspect status of his implicit definition of knowledge, by calling its key element a mere guess. But he also, even more subtly, draws our attention to where its fault may lie, by spotlighting the same question that will later be brought to the surface in the *Theaetetus*: if knowledge is true (or 'correct') judgement plus something, what is the minimum required cognitive relation between the knowing subject and the something? Socrates' confession that his own cognitive

[265] The planting of such booby traps is a recurrent feature of the *Meno*. See p. 26 n. 41 above for another example.

relation to that extra something is, in this instance, one of mere guesswork both undermines the definition itself and, more specifically, invites the killer question: if not mere guesswork, what *is* the required cognitive relation between the knowing subject and the extra something?

In this way, the *Theaetetus*' final failure to define knowledge as a species of true judgement builds on a suspicion which Plato had long ago depicted his Socrates as harbouring. I should add here that even as early as the quintessentially Socratic *Charmides* Plato had indicated, if only in passing, Socrates' and his interlocutor's shared assumption that knowledge (*epistēmē*) and opinion or judgement (*doxa*) have different objects[266]—the primary basis of the radical separation between these two cognitive states which Plato would impose once his two-world metaphysics was in place.

Even now, then, as the *Theaetetus*' arguments draw to a close, what we are witnessing is the working out of a recognizably Socratic agenda, with results that we are encouraged to see as pointing inexorably towards the Platonist epistemology of the *Republic*.

5. Retrospect and Prospect

Despite its failure, there is a further respect in which part III is more Platonic in spirit than anything that precedes it. In parts I and II the discussion of knowledge focused on ordinary cases of knowing *that*: knowing that the wind is cold, that such and such an action will be beneficial, that so and so committed the crime. part III has turned the focus onto the topic of knowing, of something, *what it is*. For in the definition of knowledge as 'true judgement plus a *logos*', the *logos* is a formula for definitively individuating some item, whether by internal analysis or by demarcation from other things. We must infer that the initial true judgement, which the *logos* is meant to back up, is not just *any* true judgement in which that same item features, but a preliminary picking out of that item. For instance, in the 'sun' example at 208d1–3, knowledge of the sun would no doubt have

[266] At *Charm.* 168a3–9 the object of knowledge is a *mathēma,* 'discipline'. The object of *doxa,* referred to but not specified, is undoubtedly assumed by Socrates to be something other than a *mathēma.* The respective objects of *doxa* and *epistēmē* here are of course not yet those later distinguished in the *Republic,* which would have exceeded Socrates' relatively undeveloped understanding of metaphysics.

been explicated roughly as (1) truly judging that the bright orange disc that you saw rising this morning is the sun, and (2) being able to describe that disc as 'the brightest of the things in the heaven that orbit the earth'. Such knowledge would be properly summed up as 'knowing what the sun is'. We were thus, as the investigation collapsed, not so far from Plato's paradigmatic model of knowledge: knowing of this or that Form, e.g. Justice, *what it is,* thanks to the ability when asked what it is to answer with its definition.

What, then, is the way forward for readers of the *Theaetetus* to take? Presumably they must retain the key notion of differentiation as the basis of knowledge: that to know something entails being able to distinguish it from all other things has been hinted at repeatedly in the course of the dialogue, and the Aviary passage has in addition revealed Socrates' insight that items of knowledge must be organized taxonomically. What they need to abandon is the idea that true judgement could ever be converted into knowledge by means of this power to differentiate.

The Platonist path that lies ahead is one on which knowledge—although nowhere formally defined—will be recognized as a state of mind that differs far too radically from true judgement to be defined as a species of it. As in *Republic* V–VII, generally agreed to pre-date the *Theaetetus,* so too still in the *Timaeus,* thought to be a considerably later production, the fully articulated Platonic position remains that knowledge and judgement (or 'opinion') are two entirely separate states of mind or faculties, each dealing with its own distinct set of objects. Knowledge is of what-is, the unchanging Forms, while mere judgement is of the sensible world, of items which perpetually 'become' without ever 'being'.[267]

That positive metaphysical distinction is not part of the equipment deployed by the barren midwife in whose unsettling company readers of the *Theaetetus* find themselves. But in developing and criticizing the Protagorean theory Socrates has shown the corresponding negative insight that a realm of perpetual becoming without being could not possibly constitute an object of knowledge (179c1–183c7). And in refuting the Dream theory and its sequel he has dipped his toe once again in metaphysical waters, showing that

[267] *Ti.* 51d3–52a7: true judgement (δόξα) and intellection (νοῦς) are two kinds (γένη) which arise independently (χωρίς) of each other, and the separate existence of Forms follows from this distinction. (Although Plato's preferred term in the *Timaeus* is νοῦς, at 37c2 and 46d7 he indicates its equivalence to ἐπιστήμη.)

Presocratic-style bottom-up analysis of the physical world is not the road to knowledge. His initial insistence that an inquiry into the definition of knowledge must set aside the question what the objects of knowledge are (146b7–8) has come to look increasingly shaky. The introduction of transcendent entities as proper objects of knowledge should, to Platonically informed readers, look like the option which now urgently beckons.

In ways which I have been cataloguing throughout this book, Socrates' critical powers are shown as having led us to the brink of that Platonist discovery. But from here on he was leaving us to make the journey alone. Or, in the idiom of the dialogue, we must ourselves now seek to give birth, and go on to find out whether our new brainchild is one that can be successfully reared. Socrates' investigations of perception, of true and false judgement, and of the difference between true judgement and knowledge, so brilliantly conducted in the *Theaetetus,* have been our antenatal class.

Additionally, we may by now feel that we have witnessed a reconstruction of Plato's own antenatal class. For Plato is the one person we know of on whom Socratic midwifery has already been exercised with complete success (cf. Chapter 1 §12 above). The *Theaetetus* has now taught us, in detail, how Socrates' unique skills were the catalyst that liberated Plato from the preceding tradition and brought him to the conception, delivery, and successful nurture of his own philosophy.

One feature of the dialogue as a whole deserves some emphasis at this point. In part I, the most prominent theme that I detected was the derivation of Plato's current—that is, middle-period—metaphysics from a Socratic background. In parts II and III the focus has shifted from the retrospective to the prospective. A growing proportion of our attention has been drawn to ideas which Plato has not yet systematically explored in writing but will make central to future dialogues—notably the method of Collection and Division, the solution of the falsity puzzle, and the incorporation of a satisfactory physics into his overall epistemology. The gradual progression from retrospect to prospect is itself an artfully contrived and philosophically significant structural feature, consolidating the dialogue's function—as I have presented it—of illuminating the continuity of Plato's past, present, and future work. But there is a price to pay. It is, I think, the fact that the projects I have just mentioned lie in the future at the time of writing that gives parts II and III, especially the

latter, that frustrating lack of concreteness which has long stood in the way of their interpretation. Intertextuality with future compositions is inevitably a different kind of enterprise from exploiting the reader's knowledge of an existing corpus of work. Or, to put it in terms of the dialogue's dominant metaphor, Socrates cannot so easily be exhibited as the midwife of brainchildren that have yet to be delivered and reared.

Although the *Sophist* is likely to be of considerably later date, it will be the dramatic continuation of the *Theaetetus,* and as he writes the closing pages of the *Theaetetus* Plato clearly has the sequel in mind. First a small clue: in illustrating the nature of a unique distinguishing mark, Socrates has said to Theaetetus that, once he has mastered this, 'if I meet you tomorrow, it will remind me and make me judge truly about you' (208c9–10); they will indeed meet tomorrow, and Socrates will be shown recognizing Theaetetus (*Sophist* 217d6–7).

Again, and more significant, the closing words of the dialogue are 'Right now I've got an appointment at the king's Stoa, to answer the writ that Meletus has served on me. Let's meet here again first thing tomorrow morning, Theodorus' (210d2–4). The first half of this closure reminds us of something mentioned in passing in the proem (142c5–6) but easily forgotten, that Socrates is in the last weeks of his life. It is therefore, at least symbolically, appropriate that its second half points forward to his replacement. For in the *Sophist,* when the next day's meeting takes place, Theodorus will turn up accompanied by an anonymous visitor, an Eleatically trained philosopher who by no stretch of the imagination can be accused of being innocent of metaphysics. This stranger will henceforth replace Socrates as Plato's main speaker, both in the *Sophist* itself and in its own dramatic sequel, the *Politicus,* dialogues in which Socrates will become an almost silent auditor. At least one of today's central inquiries, the one about falsity, will be continued and brought to a positive and successful conclusion. And the method of Division will take centre stage for the first time.

To put it in terms of the symbolism which I have been commending throughout this book, the midwife of Platonism will have finished discharging his role. The next task, that of articulating the logico-metaphysical truths of Platonism, must inevitably fall to someone else.

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