PHI 332 – First Writing Assignment

# Theatetus

In the dialog Theatetus, Socrates is having a conversation with Theatetus and is attempting to obtain a definition of knowledge. During this conversation, Theatetus proposes a definition of knowledge as “Knowledge is perception”, which Socrates recognizes to be the same definition proposed by Protagoras however, in a slightly different form. Socrates clarifies that man is a measure of all things, and that everything appears in a slightly different way to everyone. The same wind that Socrates finds to be cold, may not have the same effect on Theatetus, and hence perception is different for everyone and that perception is true, and hence Knowledge is Perception. However this definition has a few fallouts, as Socrates later points out. However to understand these fallouts we need to understand Protagoras’s character.

Protagoras was a sophist. That is he was a kind of a teacher back in the Ancient Greek and Roman empires. Sophists used to use the tools of philosophy, logic, athletics and others to teach young nobles. The sophists used to charge big sums of money to teach the children and give them wisdom and only taught those willing to pay. From this character we can infer that Protagoras was considered a wise man and people took his word to be true and hence hired him to be a teacher.

Socrates uses this fact to propose his counter argument to the above stated definition. He says that if knowledge is perception, and everyone perceives certain things in a different way, then no two people’s knowledge is the same, and that every man is knowledgeable and wise in his own right. If that is true, then why is Protagoras considered to be so wise and knowledgeable, and then why must we pay Protagoras money for us to receive his knowledge if our knowledge is already true and accurate based on what we perceive.

In the specified passage, Socrates gives the above mentioned arguments to counter Protagoras’s definition of knowledge and then concludes that Protagoras’s definition is false and that he may have said these words only to capture the attention of others. He uses the premise of Protagoras considering himself as a wise man and then introducing a paradox in Protagoras’s character to reach this conclusion. He says that if Protagoras’s claim is true, then what right does Protagoras have to call himself wise and a sophist, if everyone who is around him is also equally wise. These premises can be considered to be true as we know Protagoras was a sophist.

I feel this argument is perfectly sound. It is not a very powerful argument, but it is however, enough to break Protagoras’s relativistic theory which breakdowns upon its own inconsistency. However, some other, more powerful counter arguments can also be made. For example, according to Protagoras’s theory, only what you perceive is true, and if something is in your memory, then you are not perceiving it and hence anything in your memory is not true. And that no to perception are alike so everything appears like a different “truth” to everyone. However we can safely assume that there are some universal truths and if everyone perceives it differently then it cannot be universal, and hence we cannot say knowledge is perception. Same way, Protagoras is bound to agree that a few things in his memory are the truth, and hence more than just perception is true and the whole statement collapses upon itself again.

In conclusion, I can say that Socrates gives logically sound arguments to disprove the theory of knowledge proposed by Protagoras and Theatetus.