PLATO

COMPLETE WORKS

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THEAETETUS

Plato has much to say in other dialogues about knowledge, but this is his only sustained inquiry into the question 'What is *knowledge?' As such, it is the founding document of what has come to be known as 'epistemology', as one of the branches of philosophy; its influence on Greek epistemology—in Aristotle and the Stoics particularly—is strongly marked. Theaetetus was a famous mathematician, Plato's associate for many years in the Academy; the dialogue's prologue seems to announce the work as published in his memory, shortly after his early death on military service in 369 B.C. We can therefore date the publication of* Theaetetus *fairly precisely, to the few years immediately following Theaetetus' death. Plato was then about sixty years of age, and another famous longtime associate, Aristotle, was just joining the Academy as a student (367).*

*Though it is not counted as a 'Socratic' dialogue—one depicting Socrates inquiring into moral questions by examining and refuting the opinions of his fellow discussants—*Theaetetus *depicts a Socrates who makes much of his own ignorance and his subordinate position as questioner, and the dialogue concludes inconclusively. Socrates now describes his role, however, as he does not in the 'Socratic' dialogues, as that of a 'midwife': he brings to expression ideas of clever young men like Theaetetus, extensively develops their presuppositions and consequences so as to see clearly what the ideas amount to, and then establishes them as sound or defective by independent arguments of his own. The first of Theaetetus' three successive definitions of knowledge—that knowledge is 'perception'—is not finally 'brought to birth' until Socrates has linked it to Protagoras' famous 'man is the measure' doctrine of relativistic truth, and also to the theory that 'all is motion and change' that Socrates finds most Greek thinkers of the past had accepted, and until he has fitted it out with an elaborate and ingenious theory of perception and how it works. He then examines separately the truth of these linked doctrines—introduced into the discussion by him, not Theaetetus—and, in finally rejecting Theaetetus' idea as unsound, he advances his own positive analysis of perception and its role in knowledge. This emphasis on the systematic exploration of ideas before finally committing oneself to them or rejecting them as unsound is found in a different guise in* Parmenides, *with its systematic exploration of hypotheses about unity as a means of working hard toward an acceptable theory of Forms. Socrates establishes a clear link between the two dialogues when, at 183e, he drags in a reference back to the conversation reported in* Parmenides.

Theaetetus *has a unique format among Plato's dialogues. The prologue gives a brief conversation between Euclides and Terpsion, Socratics from*

nearby Megara (they are among those present for the discussion on Socrates' last day in Phaedo*). For the remainder, a slave reads out a book composed by Euclides containing a conversation of Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus that took place many years previously. Since ancient sources tell us of Socratic dialogues actually published by Euclides, it is as if, except for the prologue, Plato is giving us under his own name one of* Euclides' *dialogues! The last line of the work establishes it as the first of a series, with* Sophist *and* Statesman *to follow—as noted above,* Parmenides *precedes. In* Theaetetus *Socrates tests Theaetetus' mettle with the geometer Theodorus' aid and in the presence of his namesake Socrates, another associate of Plato's in the Academy; in the other two works, first Theaetetus, then young Socrates will be discussion partners with an unnamed visitor from Elea, in Southern Italy, home to Parmenides and Zeno—a very different type of partner. Socrates and his midwifery are superseded.*

Despite its lively and intellectually playful Socrates, reminiscent of the 'Socratic' dialogues, Theaetetus *is a difficult work of abstract philosophical theory. The American logician and philosopher C. S. Peirce counted it, along with* Parmenides*, as Plato's greatest work, and more recently it has attracted favorable attention from such major philosophers as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle.*

J.M.C.

142 EUCLIDES: Are you only just in from the country, Terpsion? Or have you been here some time?

TERPSION: I've been here a good while. In fact, I have been looking for you in the market-place and wondering that I couldn't find you.

EUCLIDES: Well, you couldn't, because I was not in the city.

TERPSION: Where have you been, then?

EUCLIDES: I went down to the harbor; and as I was going, I met Theaetetus, being taken to Athens from the camp at Corinth.

TERPSION: Alive or dead?

b EUCLIDES: Alive; but that's about all one could say. Badly wounded for one thing; but the real trouble is this sickness that has broken out in the army.

TERPSION: Dysentery?

EUCLIDES: Yes.

TERPSION: What a man to lose!

EUCLIDES: Yes. A fine man, Terpsion. Only just now I was listening to some people singing his praises for the way he behaved in the battle.

TERPSION: Well, there's nothing extraordinary about that. Much more to

c be wondered at if he hadn't distinguished himself. But why didn't he put up here at Megara?

Translated by M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat.

e reason; your geometry alone entitles you to it, and that is not your only claim. So if you have come across anyone worth mentioning, I should be glad to hear.

THEODORUS: Well, Socrates, I think you ought to be told, and I think I ought to tell you, about a remarkable boy I have met here, one of your fellow countrymen. And if he were beautiful, I should be extremely nervous of speaking of him with enthusiasm, for fear I might be suspected of being in love with him. But as a matter of fact—if you'll excuse my saying such a thing—he is not beautiful at all, but is rather like you, snub-nosed, with eyes that stick out; though these features are not quite so pronounced in
144 him. I speak without any qualms; and I assure you that among all the people I have ever met—and I have got to know a good many in my time—I have never yet seen anyone so amazingly gifted. Along with a quickness beyond the capacity of most people, he has an unusually gentle temper; and, to crown it all, he is as manly a boy as any of his fellows. I never thought such a combination could exist; I don't see it arising elsewhere. People as acute and keen and retentive as he is are apt to be very
b unbalanced. They get swept along with a rush, like ships without ballast; what stands for courage in their makeup is a kind of mad excitement; while, on the other hand, the steadier sort of people are apt to come to their studies with minds that are sluggish, somehow—freighted with a bad memory. But this boy approaches his studies in a smooth, sure, effective way, and with great good temper; it reminds one of the quiet flow of a stream of oil. The result is that it is astonishing to see how he gets through his work, at his age.

SOCRATES: That is good news. And he is an Athenian—whose son is he?

c THEODORUS: I have heard the name, but I don't remember it. But he is the middle one of this group coming toward us. He and his companions were greasing themselves outside just now; it looks as if they have finished and are coming in here. But look and see if you recognize him.

SOCRATES: Yes, I know him. He's the son of Euphronius of Sunium—very much the kind of person, my friend, that you tell me his son is. A distinguished man in many ways; he left a considerable property too. But I don't know the boy's name.

d THEODORUS: His name, Socrates, is Theaetetus. As for the property, that, I think, has been made away with by trustees. All the same, he is wonderfully open-handed about money, Socrates.

SOCRATES: A thoroughbred, evidently. I wish you would ask him to come and sit with us over here.

THEODORUS: All right. Theaetetus, come here beside Socrates.

SOCRATES: Yes, come along, Theaetetus. I want to see for myself what
e sort of a face I have. Theodorus says I am like you. But look. If you and I had each had a lyre, and Theodorus had told us that they were both similarly tuned, should we have taken his word for it straightaway? Or should we have tried to find out if he was speaking with any expert knowledge of music?

THEAETETUS: Oh, we should have inquired into that.

SOCRATES: And if we had found that he was a musician, we should have believed what he said; but if we found he had no such qualification, we should have put no faith in him.

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's true.

SOCRATES: And now, I suppose, if we are interested in this question of our faces being alike, we ought to consider whether he is speaking with 145
any knowledge of drawing or not?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I should think so.

SOCRATES: Then is Theodorus an artist?

THEAETETUS: No, not so far as I know.

SOCRATES: Nor a geometer, either?

THEAETETUS: Oh, there's no doubt about his being that, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And isn't he also a master of astronomy and arithmetic and music—of all that an educated man should know?

THEAETETUS: Well, he seems to me to be.

SOCRATES: Then if he asserts that there is some physical resemblance between us—whether complimenting us or the reverse—one ought not to pay much attention to him?

THEAETETUS: No, perhaps not.

SOCRATES: But supposing it were the soul of one of us that he was b
praising? Suppose he said one of us was good and wise? Oughtn't the one who heard that to be very anxious to examine the object of such praise? And oughtn't the other to be very willing to show himself off?

THEAETETUS: Yes, certainly, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then, my dear Theaetetus, now is the time for you to show yourself and for me to examine you. For although Theodorus often gives me flattering testimonials for people, both Athenians and foreigners, I assure you I have never before heard him praise anybody in the way he c
has just praised you.

THEAETETUS: That's all very well, Socrates; but take care he wasn't saying that for a joke.

SOCRATES: That is not Theodorus' way. Now don't you try to get out of what we have agreed upon with the pretence that our friend is joking, or you may make it necessary for him to give his evidence—since no charge of perjury is ever likely to be brought against him. So have the pluck to stand by your agreement.

THEAETETUS: All right, I must, then, if that's what you've decided.

SOCRATES: Tell me now. You are learning some geometry from Theodorus, I expect?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I am.

SOCRATES: And some astronomy and music and arithmetic? d

THEAETETUS: Well, I'm very anxious to, anyway.

SOCRATES: And so am I, my son—from Theodorus or from anyone who seems to me to know about these things. But although I get on with them pretty well in most ways, I have a small difficulty, which I think ought to

be investigated, with your help and that of the rest of the company.—Now isn't it true that to learn is to become wiser[1] about the thing one is learning?

THEAETETUS: Yes, of course.

SOCRATES: And what makes men wise, I take it, is wisdom?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

e SOCRATES: And is this in any way different from knowledge?

THEAETETUS: What?

SOCRATES: Wisdom. Isn't it the things which they know that men are wise about?

THEAETETUS: Well, yes.

SOCRATES: So knowledge and wisdom will be the same thing?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now this is just where my difficulty comes in. I can't get a
146 proper grasp of what on earth knowledge really is. Could we manage to put it into words? What do all of you say? Who'll speak first? Anyone who makes a mistake shall sit down and be Donkey, as the children say when they are playing ball; and anyone who comes through without a miss shall be King and make us answer any question he likes.—Well, why this silence? Theodorus, I hope my love of argument is not making me forget my manners—just because I'm so anxious to start a discussion and get us all friendly and talkative together?

b THEODORUS: No, no, Socrates—that's the last thing one could call forgetting your manners. But do make one of the young people answer you. I am not used to this kind of discussion, and I'm too old to get into the way of it. But it would be suitable enough for them and they would profit more by it. For youth can always profit, that's true enough. So do go on; don't let Theaetetus off but ask him some more questions.

SOCRATES: Well, Theaetetus, you hear what Theodorus says. You won't
c want to disobey him, I'm sure; and certainly a wise man shouldn't be disobeyed by his juniors in matters of this kind—it wouldn't be at all the proper thing. Now give me a good frank answer. What do you think knowledge is?

THEAETETUS: Well, I ought to answer, Socrates, as you and Theodorus tell me to. In any case, you and he will put me right, if I make a mistake.

SOCRATES: We certainly will, if we can.

THEAETETUS: Then I think that the things Theodorus teaches are knowl-
d edge—I mean geometry and the subjects you enumerated just now. Then again there are the crafts such as cobbling, whether you take them together or separately. They must be knowledge, surely.

SOCRATES: That is certainly a frank and indeed a generous answer, my dear lad. I asked you for one thing and you have given me many; I wanted something simple, and I have got a variety.

1. The words 'wise' and 'wisdom' in the argument which begins here represent the Greek *sophos* and *sophia*. The point of the argument will come across more naturally in English if readers substitute in their mind the words 'expert' and 'expertise'.

THEAETETUS: And what does that mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Nothing, I dare say. But I'll tell you what I think. When you talk about cobbling, you mean just knowledge of the making of shoes?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's all I mean by it.

SOCRATES: And when you talk about carpentering, you mean simply the e
knowledge of the making of wooden furniture?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's all I mean, again.

SOCRATES: And in both cases you are putting into your definition what the knowledge is of?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But that is not what you were asked, Theaetetus. You were not asked to say what one may have knowledge of, or how many branches of knowledge there are. It was not with any idea of counting these up that the question was asked; we wanted to know what knowledge itself is.—Or am I talking nonsense?

THEAETETUS: No, you are perfectly right.

SOCRATES: Now think about this too. Supposing we were asked about 147
some commonplace, everyday thing; for example, what is clay? And supposing we were to answer, 'clay of the potters' and 'clay of the stovemakers' and 'clay of the brickmakers', wouldn't that be absurd of us?

THEAETETUS: Well, perhaps it would.

SOCRATES: Absurd to begin with, I suppose, to imagine that the person who asked the question would understand anything from our answer when we say 'clay', whether we add that it is dollmakers' clay or any b
other craftsman's. Or do you think that anyone can understand the name of a thing when he doesn't know what the thing is?

THEAETETUS: No, certainly not.

SOCRATES: And so a man who does not know what knowledge is will not understand 'knowledge of shoes' either?

THEAETETUS: No, he won't.

SOCRATES: Then a man who is ignorant of what knowledge is will not understand what cobbling is, or any other craft?

THEAETETUS: That is so.

SOCRATES: So when the question raised is 'What is knowledge?', to reply by naming one of the crafts is an absurd answer; because it points out c
something that knowledge is of when this is not what the question was about.

THEAETETUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Again, it goes no end of a long way round, in a case where, I take it, a short and commonplace answer is possible. In the question about clay, for example, it would presumably be possible to make the simple, commonplace statement that it is earth mixed with liquid, and let the question of whose clay it is take care of itself.

THEAETETUS: That seems easier, Socrates, now you put it like that. But I believe you're asking just the sort of question that occurred to your name- d
sake Socrates here and myself, when we were having a discussion a little while ago.

Aristides the son of Lysimachus;[4] and there have been very many others. Sometimes they come back, wanting my company again, and ready to move heaven and earth to get it. When that happens, in some cases the divine sign that visits me forbids me to associate with them; in others, it permits me, and then they begin again to make progress.

There is another point also in which those who associate with me are like women in child-birth. They suffer the pains of labor, and are filled day and night with distress; indeed they suffer far more than women. And this pain my art is able to bring on, and also to allay.

b Well, that's what happens to them; but at times, Theaetetus, I come across people who do not seem to me somehow to be pregnant. Then I realize that they have no need of me, and with the best will in the world I undertake the business of match-making; and I think I am good enough—God willing—at guessing with whom they might profitably keep company. Many of them I have given away to Prodicus;[5] and a great number also to other wise and inspired persons.

Well, my dear lad, this has been a long yarn; but the reason was that I have a suspicion that you (as you think yourself) are pregnant and in c labor. So I want you to come to me as to one who is both the son of a midwife and himself skilled in the art; and try to answer the questions I shall ask you as well as you can. And when I examine what you say, I may perhaps think it is a phantom and not truth, and proceed to take it quietly from you and abandon it. Now if this happens, you mustn't get savage with me, like a mother over her first-born child. Do you know, people have often before now got into such a state with me as to be literally ready to bite when I take away some nonsense or other from them. They never believe that I am doing this in all goodwill; they are so far from d realizing that no God can wish evil to man, and that even I don't do this kind of thing out of malice, but because it is not permitted to me to accept a lie and put away truth.

So begin again, Theaetetus, and try to say what knowledge is. And don't on any account tell me that you can't. For if God is willing, and you play the man, you can.

THEAETETUS: Well, Socrates, after such encouragement from *you*, it would e hardly be decent for anyone not to try his hardest to say what he has in him. Very well then. It seems to me that a man who knows something perceives what he knows, and the way it appears at present, at any rate, is that knowledge is simply perception.

SOCRATES: There's a good frank answer, my son. That's the way to speak one's mind. But come now, let us look at this thing together, and see whether what we have here is really fertile or a mere wind-egg. You hold that knowledge is perception?

4. Aristides is one of the two young men whose education Socrates discusses in *Laches* (see 178a–179b).

5. A famous Sophist. See *Protagoras* 315d, 337a–c, 340e–341c, 358a–b.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But look here, this is no ordinary account of knowledge you've come out with: it's what Protagoras used to maintain. He said the very 152
same thing, only he put it in rather a different way. For he says, you know, that 'Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.' You have read this, of course?

THEAETETUS: Yes, often.

SOCRATES: Then you know that he puts it something like this, that as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you—you and I each being a man?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that is what he says.

SOCRATES: Well, it is not likely that a wise man would talk nonsense. So b
let us follow him up. Now doesn't it sometimes happen that when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels cold and the other not? Or that one of us feels rather cold and the other very cold?

THEAETETUS: That certainly does happen.

SOCRATES: Well then, in that case are we going to say that the wind itself, by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we listen to Protagoras, and say it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold?

THEAETETUS: It looks as if we must say that.

SOCRATES: And this is how it appears to each of us?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But this expression 'it appears' means 'he perceives it'?

THEAETETUS: Yes, it does.

SOCRATES: The appearing of things, then, is the same as perception, in c
the case of hot and things like that. So it results, apparently, that things are for the individual such as he perceives them.

THEAETETUS: Yes, that seems all right.

SOCRATES: Perception, then, is always of what is, and unerring—as befits knowledge.

THEAETETUS: So it appears.

SOCRATES: But, I say, look here. Was Protagoras one of those omniscient people? Did he perhaps put this out as a riddle for the common crowd of us, while he revealed the *Truth*[6] as a secret doctrine to his own pupils?

THEAETETUS: What do you mean by that, Socrates? d

SOCRATES: I'll tell you; and this, now, is certainly no ordinary theory—I mean the theory that there is nothing which in itself is just one thing: nothing which you could rightly call anything or any kind of thing. If you call a thing large, it will reveal itself as small, and if you call it heavy, it is liable to appear as light, and so on with everything, because nothing is one or anything or any kind of thing. What is really true, is this: the things of which we naturally say that they 'are', are in process of coming to be, e

6. Protagoras of Abdera was a fifth century B.C. philosopher and sophist; this appears to have been the title of his book.

The verb 'to be' must be totally abolished—though indeed we have been led by habit and ignorance into using it ourselves more than once, even in what we have just been saying. That is wrong, these wise men tell us, nor should we allow the use of such words as 'something', 'of something', or 'mine', 'this' or 'that', or any other name that makes things stand still. We ought, rather, to speak according to nature and refer to things as 'becoming', 'being produced', 'passing away', 'changing'; for if you speak in such a way as to make things stand still, you will easily be refuted. And this applies in speaking both of the individual case and of many aggregated together—such an aggregate, I mean, as people call 'man' or c
'stone', or to which they give the names of the different animals and sorts of thing.

—Well, Theaetetus, does this look to you a tempting meal and could you take a bite of the delicious stuff?

THEAETETUS: I really don't know, Socrates. I can't even quite see what you're getting at—whether the things you are saying are what you think yourself, or whether you are just trying me out.

SOCRATES: You are forgetting, my friend. I don't know anything about this kind of thing myself, and I don't claim any of it as my own. I am barren of theories; my business is to attend you in your labor. So I chant incantations over you and offer you little tidbits from each of the wise till d
I succeed in assisting you to bring your own belief forth into the light. When it has been born, I shall consider whether it is fertile or a wind-egg. But you must have courage and patience; answer like a man whatever appears to you about the things I ask you.

THEAETETUS: All right, go on with the questions.

SOCRATES: Tell me again, then, whether you like the suggestion that good and beautiful and all the things we were just speaking of cannot be said to 'be' anything, but are always 'coming to be'.[13]

THEAETETUS: Well, as far as I'm concerned, while I'm listening to your exposition of it, it seems to me an extraordinarily reasonable view; and I feel that the way you have set out the matter has got to be accepted.

SOCRATES: In that case, we had better not pass over any point where our e
theory is still incomplete. What we have not yet discussed is the question of dreams, and of insanity and other diseases; also what is called mishearing or misseeing or other cases of misperceiving. You realize, I suppose, that it would be generally agreed that all these cases appear to provide a refutation of the theory we have just expounded. For in these conditions, 158
we surely have false perceptions. Here it is far from being true that all things which appear to the individual also are. On the contrary, no one of the things which appear to him really is.

THEAETETUS: That is perfectly true, Socrates.

13. An alternative translation would be: 'the suggestion that nothing is, but rather becomes, good, beautiful or any of the things we were speaking of just now'.

SOCRATES: Well then, my lad, what argument is left for the person who maintains that knowledge is perception and that what appears to any individual also is, for him to whom it appears to be?

THEAETETUS: Well, Socrates, I hardly like to tell you that I don't know
b what to say, seeing I've just got into trouble with you for that. But I really shouldn't know how to dispute the suggestion that a madman believes what is false when he thinks he is a god; or a dreamer when he imagines he has wings and is flying in his sleep.

SOCRATES: But there's a point here which *is* a matter of dispute, especially as regards dreams and real life—don't you see?

THEAETETUS: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: There's a question you must often have heard people ask—the question what evidence we could offer if we were asked whether in
c the present instance, at this moment, we are asleep and dreaming all our thoughts, or awake and talking to each other in real life.

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates, it certainly is difficult to find the proof we want here. The two states seem to correspond in all their characteristics. There is nothing to prevent us from thinking when we are asleep that we are having the very same discussion that we have just had. And when we dream that we are telling the story of a dream, there is an extraordinary likeness between the two experiences.

SOCRATES: You see, then, it is not difficult to find matter for dispute,
d when it is disputed even whether this is real life or a dream. Indeed we may say that, as our periods of sleeping and waking are of equal length, and as in each period the soul contends that the beliefs of the moment are preeminently true, the result is that for half our lives we assert the reality of the one set of objects, and for half that of the other set. And we make our assertions with equal conviction in both cases.

THEAETETUS: That certainly is so.

SOCRATES: And doesn't the same argument apply in the cases of disease and madness, except that the periods of time are not equal?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that is so.

SOCRATES: Well now, are we going to fix the limits of truth by the clock?
e THEAETETUS: That would be a very funny thing to do.

SOCRATES: But can you produce some other clear indication to show which of these beliefs are true?

THEAETETUS: I don't think I can.

SOCRATES: Then you listen to me and I'll tell you the kind of thing that might be said by those people who propose it as a rule that whatever a man thinks at any time is the truth for him. I can imagine them putting their position by asking you this question: 'Now, Theaetetus, suppose you have something which is an entirely different thing from something else. Can it have in any respect the same powers as the other thing?' And observe, we are not to understand the question to refer to something which is the same in some respects while it is different in others, but to that which is wholly different.

SOCRATES: But when the active factor finds Socrates ill, then, to begin with, it is not in strict truth the same man that it gets hold of, is it? Because here, as we saw, it has come upon an unlike.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

e SOCRATES: Then this pair, Socrates ill and the draft of wine, generates, presumably, different things again: a perception of bitterness in the region of the tongue, and bitterness coming to be and moving in the region of the wine. And then the wine becomes, not bitterness, but bitter; and I become, not perception, but percipient.

THEAETETUS: Yes, quite.

SOCRATES: And I shall never again become *thus* percipient of anything
160 else. A perception of something else is another perception, and makes another and a changed percipient. Nor again, in the case of that which acts on me, will it ever, in conjunction with something else, generate the same thing and itself become such as it now is. From something else it will generate something else, and itself become a changed thing.

THEAETETUS: That is so.

SOCRATES: Nor will I become such for myself or it such for itself.

THEAETETUS: No.

SOCRATES: But I must necessarily become percipient of something when
b I become percipient; it is impossible to become percipient, yet percipient of nothing. And it again, when it becomes sweet or bitter or anything of that kind, must become so for somebody, because it is impossible to become sweet and yet sweet for no one.

THEAETETUS: Quite impossible.

SOCRATES: It remains, then, that I and it, whether we are or whether we become, are or become for each other. For our being is, by Necessity's decree, tied to a partner; yet we are tied neither to any other thing in the world nor to our respective selves. It remains, then, that we are tied to each other. Hence, whether you apply the term 'being' to a thing or the term 'becoming', you must always use the words 'for somebody' or 'of something' or 'relatively to something'. You must not speak of anything
c as in itself either being or becoming nor let anyone else use such expressions. That is the meaning of the theory we have been expounding.

THEAETETUS: Yes, that's certainly true, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then since that which acts on me is for me, and not for anyone else, it is I who perceive it too, and nobody else?

THEAETETUS: Undoubtedly.

SOCRATES: Then my perception is true for me—because it is always a perception of that being which is peculiarly mine; and I am judge, as Protagoras said, of things that are, that they are, for me; and of things that are not, that they are not.

THEAETETUS: So it seems.

d SOCRATES: How then, if I am thus unerring and never stumble in my thought about what is—or what is coming to be—how can I fail to be a knower of the things of which I am a perceiver?

THEAETETUS: There is no way you could fail.

SOCRATES: Then am I perhaps talking nonsense? But think now. You say that seeing is perceiving and sight is perception?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

e SOCRATES: Then a man who has seen something has come to know that which he saw, according to the statement you made just now?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But you do say—don't you?—that there is such a thing as memory?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Memory of nothing? Or of something?

THEAETETUS: Of something, surely.

SOCRATES: That is to say, of things which one has learned, that is, perceived—that kind of 'something'?

THEAETETUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: And what a man has once seen, he recalls, I take it, from time to time?

THEAETETUS: He does.

SOCRATES: Even if he shuts his eyes? Or does he forget it if he does this?

THEAETETUS: That would be a strange thing to say, Socrates.

164 SOCRATES: Yet it is what we must say, if we are to save our previous statement. Otherwise, it's all up with it.

THEAETETUS: Yes, by Jove, I begin to have my suspicions too; but I don't quite see it yet. You explain.

SOCRATES: This is why. According to us, the man who sees has acquired knowledge of what he sees, as sight, perception and knowledge are agreed to be the same thing.

THEAETETUS: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: But the man who sees and has acquired knowledge of the thing he saw, if he shuts his eyes remembers but does not see it. Isn't that so?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

b SOCRATES: But to say 'He doesn't see' is to say 'He doesn't know', if 'sees' is 'knows'?

THEAETETUS: True.

SOCRATES: Then we have this result, that a man who has come to know something and still remembers it doesn't know it because he doesn't see it? And that's what we said would be a most extraordinary thing to happen.

THEAETETUS: That's perfectly true.

SOCRATES: Then apparently we get an impossible result when knowledge and perception are identified?

THEAETETUS: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: Then we have got to say that perception is one thing and knowledge another?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I'm afraid so.

c SOCRATES: Then what *is* knowledge? We shall have to begin again at the beginning, it seems. And yet—whatever are we thinking about, Theaetetus?

THEAETETUS: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: Are you also able to consider whether they are like or unlike each other?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I may be.

SOCRATES: Now what is it through which you think all these things about them? It is not possible, you see, to grasp what is common to both either through sight or through hearing. Let us consider another thing which will show the truth of what we are saying. Suppose it were possible to inquire whether both are salty or not. You can tell me, of course, with what you would examine them. It would clearly be neither sight nor hearing, but something else. c

THEAETETUS: Yes, of course; the power which functions through the tongue.

SOCRATES: Good. Now through what does that power function which reveals to you what is common in the case both of all things and of these two—I mean that which you express by the words 'is' and 'is not' and the other terms used in our questions about them just now? What kind of instruments will you assign for all these? Through what does that which is percipient in us perceive all of them?

THEAETETUS: You mean being and not-being, likeness and unlikeness, same and different; also one, and any other number applied to them. And obviously too your question is about odd and even, and all that is involved with these attributes; and you want to know through what bodily instruments we perceive all these with the soul. d

SOCRATES: You follow me exceedingly well, Theaetetus. These are just the things I am asking about.

THEAETETUS: But *I* couldn't possibly say. All I can tell you is that it doesn't seem to me that for these things there is any special instrument at all, as there is for the others. It seems to me that in investigating the common features of everything the soul functions through itself. e

SOCRATES: Yes, Theaetetus, you would say that, because you are handsome and not ugly as Theodorus would have it.[31] For handsome is as handsome says. And besides being handsome, you have done me a good turn; you have saved me a vast amount of talk if it seems to you that, while the soul considers some things through the bodily powers, there are others which it considers alone and through itself. This was what I thought myself, but I wanted you to think it too.

THEAETETUS: Well, it does seem to me to be so. 186

SOCRATES: Now in which class do you put being? For that, above all, is something that accompanies everything.

THEAETETUS: I should put it among the things which the soul itself reaches out after by itself.

SOCRATES: Also like and unlike, same and different?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: What about beautiful and ugly, good and bad?

31. Cf. 143e.

THEAETETUS: Yes, these too; in these, above all, I think the soul examines
b their being in comparison with one another. Here it seems to be making a calculation within itself of past and present in relation to future.

SOCRATES: Not so fast, now. Wouldn't you say that it is through touch that the soul perceives the hardness of what is hard, and similarly the softness of what is soft?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But as regards their being—the fact that they are—their opposition to one another, and the being, again, of this opposition, the matter is different. Here the soul itself attempts to reach a decision for us by rising to compare them with one another.

THEAETETUS: Yes, undoubtedly.

c SOCRATES: And thus there are some things which all creatures, men and animals alike, are naturally able to perceive as soon as they are born; I mean, the experiences which reach the soul through the body. But calculations regarding their being and their advantageousness come, when they do, only as the result of a long and arduous development, involving a good deal of trouble and education.

THEAETETUS: Yes, that certainly is so.

SOCRATES: Now is it possible for someone who does not even get at being to get at truth?

THEAETETUS: No; it's impossible.

SOCRATES: And if a man fails to get at the truth of a thing, will he ever be a person who knows that thing?

d THEAETETUS: I don't see how, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then knowledge is to be found not in the experiences but in the process of reasoning about them; it is here, seemingly, not in the experiences, that it is possible to grasp being and truth.

THEAETETUS: So it appears.

SOCRATES: Then in the face of such differences, would you call both by the same name?

THEAETETUS: One would certainly have no right to.

SOCRATES: Now what name do you give to the former—seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling cold or warm?

e THEAETETUS: I call that perceiving—what else could I call it?

SOCRATES: So the whole lot taken together you call perception?

THEAETETUS: Necessarily.

SOCRATES: Which, we say, has no share in the grasping of truth, since it has none in the grasping of being.

THEAETETUS: No, it has none.

SOCRATES: So it has no share in knowledge either.

THEAETETUS: No.

SOCRATES: Then, Theaetetus, perception and knowledge could never be the same thing.

THEAETETUS: No, apparently not, Socrates; we have now got the clearest possible proof that knowledge is something different from perception.

SOCRATES: But our object in beginning this discussion was not to find 187
out what knowledge is not, but to find out what it is. However, we have made a little progress. We shall not now look for knowledge in sense-perception at all, but in whatever we call that activity of the soul when it is busy by itself about the things which are.

THEAETETUS: Well, the name, Socrates, I suppose is judgment.

SOCRATES: Your opinion, my dear lad, is correct. Now look back to the beginning. Wipe out all that we have said hitherto, and see if you can see b
any better from where you have now progressed to. Tell me again, what is knowledge?

THEAETETUS: Well, Socrates, one can't say that it is judgment in general, because there is also false judgment—but true judgment may well be knowledge. So let that be my answer. If the same thing happens again, and we find, as we go on, that it turns out not to be so, we'll try something else.

SOCRATES: And even so, Theaetetus, you have answered me in the way one ought—with a good will, and not reluctantly, as you did at first. If c
we continue like this, one of two things will happen. Either we shall find what we are going out after; or we shall be less inclined to think we know things which we don't know at all—and even that would be a reward we could not fairly be dissatisfied with. Now what is this that you say? There are two forms of judgment, true and false; and your definition is that true judgment is knowledge?

THEAETETUS: Yes. That is how it looks to me now.

SOCRATES: Now I wonder if it's worth while, at this stage, to go back to an old point about judgment—

THEAETETUS: What point do you mean?

SOCRATES: I have something on my mind which has often bothered me d
before, and got me into great difficulty, both in my own thought and in discussion with other people—I mean, I can't say what it is, this experience we have, and how it arises in us.

THEAETETUS: What experience?

SOCRATES: Judging what is false. Even now, you know, I'm still considering; I'm in two minds whether to let it go or whether to look into it in a different manner from a short while ago.

THEAETETUS: Why not, Socrates, if this appears for any reason to be the right thing to do? As you and Theodorus were saying just now, and quite rightly, when you were talking about leisure, we are not pressed for time in talk of this kind.

SOCRATES: A very proper reminder. Perhaps it would not be a bad mo- e
ment to go back upon our tracks. It is better to accomplish a little well than a great deal unsatisfactorily.

THEAETETUS: Yes, it certainly is.

SOCRATES: Now how are we to proceed? And actually what is it that we are saying? We claim, don't we, that false judgment repeatedly occurs and one of us judges falsely, the other truly, as if it was in the nature of things for this to happen?

known; suppose they come to their decision upon hearsay, forming a true judgment: then they have decided the case without knowledge, but, granted they did their job well, being correctly persuaded? c

THEAETETUS: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: But, my dear lad, they couldn't have done that if true judgment is the same thing as knowledge; in that case the best juryman in the world couldn't form a correct judgment without knowledge. So it seems they must be different things.

THEAETETUS: Oh, yes, Socrates, that's just what I once heard a man say; I had forgotten, but now it's coming back to me. He said that it is true judgment with an account[38] that is knowledge; true judgment without an account falls outside of knowledge. And he said that the things of which there is no account are not knowable (yes, he actually called them that),[39] while those which have an account are knowable. d

SOCRATES: Very good indeed. Now tell me, how did he distinguish these knowables and unknowables? I want to see if you and I have heard the same version.

THEAETETUS: I don't know if I can find that out; but I think I could follow if someone explained it.

SOCRATES: Listen then to a dream in return for a dream. In my dream, too, I thought I was listening to people saying that the primary elements, as it were, of which we and everything else are composed, have no account. Each of them, in itself, can only be named; it is not possible to say anything else of it, either that it is or that it is not. That would mean that we were adding being or not-being to it; whereas we must not attach anything, if we are to speak of that thing itself alone. Indeed we ought not to apply to it even such words as 'itself' or 'that', 'each', 'alone', or 'this', or any other of the many words of this kind; for these go the round and are applied to all things alike, being other than the things to which they are added, whereas if it were possible to express the element itself and it had its own proprietary account, it would have to be expressed without any other thing. As it is, however, it is impossible that any of the primaries should be expressed in an account; it can only be named, for a name is all that it has. But with the things composed of these, it is another matter. Here, just in the same way as the elements themselves are woven together, so their names may be woven together and become an account of something—an account being essentially a complex of names. Thus the elements are unaccountable and unknowable, but they are perceivable, whereas the e 202 b

38. 'Account' translates *logos*, which can also mean 'statement,' 'argument', 'speech', and 'discourse'.

39. The parenthesis may alternatively be translated: '(that was the word he used)'. The translation in the text expresses surprise about the claim that some things are not knowable at all. The alternative translation calls attention to the particular Greek word used for 'knowable'.

complexes are both knowable and expressible and can be the objects of true judgment.

c Now when a man gets a true judgment about something without an account, his soul is in a state of truth as regards that thing, but he does not know it; for someone who cannot give and take an account of a thing is ignorant about it. But when he has also got an account of it, he is capable of all this and is made perfect in knowledge. Was the dream you heard the same as this or a different one?

THEAETETUS: No, it was the same in every respect.

SOCRATES: Do you like this then, and do you suggest that knowledge is true judgment with an account?

THEAETETUS: Yes, certainly.

d SOCRATES: Theaetetus, can it be that all in a moment, you and I have today laid hands upon something which many a wise man has searched for in the past—and gone gray before he found it?

THEAETETUS: Well, it does seem to me anyway, Socrates, that what has just been said puts the matter very well.

SOCRATES: And it seems likely enough that the matter is really so; for what knowledge could there be apart from an account and correct judgment? But there is one of the things said which I don't like.

THEAETETUS: And what's that?

SOCRATES: What looks like the subtlest point of all—that the elements

e are unknowable and the complexes knowable.

THEAETETUS: And won't that do?

SOCRATES: We must make sure; because, you see, we do have as hostages for this theory the original models that were used when all these statements were made.

THEAETETUS: What models?

SOCRATES: Letters—the elements of language—and syllables.[40] It must have been these, mustn't it, that the author of our theory had in view—it couldn't have been anything else?

THEAETETUS: No, he must have been thinking of letters and syllables.

203 SOCRATES: Let's take and examine them then. Or rather let us examine ourselves, and ask ourselves whether we really learned our letters in this way or not. Now, to begin with, one can give an account of the syllables but not of the letters—is that it?

THEAETETUS: Well, perhaps.

SOCRATES: It most certainly looks like that to me. At any rate, supposing you were asked about the first syllable of 'Socrates': 'Tell me, Theaetetus, what is SO?' What would you answer to that?

THEAETETUS: That it's S and O.

SOCRATES: And there you have an account of the syllable?

40. 'Letters' translates *stoicheia*, which can also mean 'elements' more generally (and is so translated sometimes below). 'Syllables': in Greek *sullabai*, also translated below as 'complexes.'

THEAETETUS: That's perfectly true.

SOCRATES: Then correct judgment also must be concerned with the differentness of what it is about? d

THEAETETUS: So it seems, anyway.

SOCRATES: Then what more might this 'adding an account to correct judgment' be? If, on the one hand, it means that we must make another judgment about the way in which a thing differs from the rest of things, we are being required to do something very absurd.

THEAETETUS: How's that?

SOCRATES: Because we already have a correct judgment about the way a thing differs from other things; and we are then directed to add a correct judgment about the way it differs from other things. At that rate, the way a roller goes round or a pestle or anything else proverbial would be nothing e compared with such directions; they might be more justly called a matter of 'the blind leading the blind'. To tell us to add what we already have, in order to come to know what we are judging about, bears a generous resemblance to the behavior of a man benighted.

THEAETETUS: Whereas if, on the other hand, . . . ?[49] What else were you going to suggest when you started this inquiry just now?

SOCRATES: Well, if 'adding an account' means that we are required to get to *know* the differentness, not merely judge it, this most splendid of our accounts of knowledge turns out to be a very amusing affair. For 210 getting to know of course is acquiring knowledge, isn't it?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So, it seems, the answer to the question 'What is knowledge?' will be 'Correct judgment accompanied by *knowledge* of the differentness'—for this is what we are asked to understand by the 'addition of an account.'

THEAETETUS: Apparently so.

SOCRATES: And it is surely just silly to tell us, when we are trying to discover what knowledge is, that it is correct judgment accompanied by *knowledge*, whether of differentness or of anything else? And so, Theaetetus, knowledge is neither perception nor true judgment, nor an account added b to true judgment.

THEAETETUS: It seems not.

SOCRATES: Well now, dear lad, are we still pregnant, still in labor with any thoughts about knowledge? Or have we been delivered of them all?

THEAETETUS: As far as I'm concerned, Socrates, you've made me say far more than ever was in me, Heaven knows.

SOCRATES: Well then, our art of midwifery tells us that all of these offspring are wind-eggs and not worth bringing up?

THEAETETUS: Undoubtedly.

SOCRATES: And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be c better ones as the result of this inquiry. And if you remain barren, your

49. Reading *Ei ge dē . . .* for *Eipe dē* at 209e5.

companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don't know. This is all my art can achieve—nothing more. I do not know any of the things that other men know—the great and inspired men of today and yesterday. But this art of midwifery my mother and I had allotted to us by God; she to deliver
210d women, I to deliver men that are young and generous of spirit, all that have any beauty. And now I must go to the King's Porch to meet the indictment that Meletus has brought against me; but let us meet here again in the morning, Theodorus.