

The Uninitiates and Their Ontological Position: A Critique of Pure Materialism in Theaetetus 155e-156a

Introduction

Your observation that "the uninitiates in Theaetetus 155e-156a are not all together in the Sensible Realm, because they don't admit comings to be" represents a profound insight into Plato's critique of materialist philosophy and reveals a crucial paradox in their ontological position^[1]. The uninitiates, who limit reality to what they can "grasp firmly in their hands," actually occupy a more restrictive philosophical position than even a complete embrace of the sensible realm would allow^[2].

The Uninitiates' Ontological Limitations

Beyond Simple Materialism

The uninitiates described in Theaetetus 155e-156a represent what we might call "crude materialism"—a philosophical position that reduces all reality to tangible, graspable objects^[1] ^[2]. However, their rejection of "doings, comings to be, or anything invisible" places them in a position that is paradoxically more limited than the sensible realm itself^[3]. While the sensible realm, as understood in Platonic philosophy, includes processes of becoming and temporal change, the uninitiates reject even these dynamic aspects of material reality.

The Rejection of Temporal Process

The critical insight in your observation lies in recognizing that the uninitiates' rejection of "comings to be" (γενέσεις) actually removes them from full participation in the sensible realm^[2]. The sensible realm, as Plato understands it throughout the Theaetetus, is fundamentally characterized by flux, change, and temporal becoming^[4]. By refusing to acknowledge processes of becoming, the uninitiates paradoxically limit themselves to a static conception of material reality that fails to account for the dynamic nature of sensible experience.

The Philosophical Implications

A Truncated Materialism

The uninitiates' position represents what we might call "truncated materialism"—a form of materialist philosophy that is internally inconsistent because it fails to acknowledge the full range of material phenomena^[1] ^[3]. Their insistence on limiting reality to what can be physically grasped excludes:

- **Temporal processes:** The very changes and transformations that characterize material existence
- **Relational properties:** The comparative and contextual aspects of material objects
- **Dynamic interactions:** The flux and movement that constitute the material world's fundamental nature

The Paradox of Static Materialism

This creates a fundamental paradox: the uninitiates claim to be the most "realistic" or "practical" philosophers by focusing only on tangible objects, yet their rejection of becoming means they cannot adequately account for the basic facts of material existence^{[2] [3]}. They occupy a philosophical position that is neither fully materialist (since they reject material processes) nor capable of transcending materialism (since they refuse to acknowledge invisible realities).

Relationship to Plato's Broader Critique

The Incomplete Nature of Pure Empiricism

Plato's portrayal of the uninitiates serves as a critique of philosophical positions that attempt to ground knowledge exclusively in sensory experience while simultaneously limiting that experience to static objects^{[4] [5]}. This critique anticipates modern discussions about the limitations of purely empirical approaches to knowledge, which must acknowledge temporal processes and relational properties to provide adequate accounts of reality.

The Need for Dialectical Engagement

The uninitiates' "hard and repellent" character, as Theaetetus observes, stems from their refusal to engage with the full complexity of reality^[5]. Their position represents a form of philosophical dogmatism that closes off the dialectical investigation necessary for genuine philosophical understanding^[6]. By rejecting "doings" (πράξεις), they eliminate the active, investigative dimension of philosophical inquiry itself.

The Three-Dimensional Framework Revisited

Exclusion from Multiple Dimensions

Using the three-dimensional framework we previously discussed, the uninitiates exclude themselves from:

1. **The Active/Passive Dimension:** By rejecting "doings," they eliminate the active processes that constitute reality
2. **The Coming to Be/Just by Itself Dimension:** By refusing to acknowledge becoming, they attempt to limit reality to static being while failing to achieve genuine stability
3. **The Invisible/Visible Dimension:** By rejecting anything invisible, they confine themselves to a narrow range of visible phenomena while excluding the formal structures that make visibility possible

A Position Outside the Full Ontological Spectrum

The uninitiates thus occupy a peculiar position that places them outside the full spectrum of ontological possibilities^{[1] [2]}. They are neither fully engaged with the sensible realm (due to their rejection of becoming) nor capable of transcending it (due to their rejection of invisible realities). This makes their position philosophically untenable and explains why Plato characterizes them as "uncultured" (ἄμουςοι).

Contemporary Relevance

Modern Philosophical Parallels

The uninitiates' position finds parallels in various forms of reductive materialism that attempt to explain all phenomena in terms of static, measurable entities while excluding temporal processes and emergent properties^{[1] [3]}. Like their ancient counterparts, such positions often end up being less comprehensive than a full engagement with material reality would require.

The Persistence of Ontological Reductionism

Contemporary debates about consciousness, emergence, and the nature of scientific explanation often involve similar tensions between attempts to ground reality in tangible, measurable entities and the need to acknowledge processes, relations, and temporal development^{[7] [3]}. The uninitiates' position serves as a cautionary example of how philosophical reductionism can become self-defeating when it excludes aspects of reality that are necessary for a complete account of the very phenomena it seeks to explain.

Conclusion

Your observation reveals a crucial insight into Plato's sophisticated critique of materialist philosophy in the Theaetetus^{[1] [2]}. The uninitiates are not simply committed to the sensible realm; rather, they occupy a philosophically impoverished position that excludes them from full engagement with either sensible or intelligible reality. By rejecting "comings to be," they fail to acknowledge the temporal and processual dimensions that are essential to the sensible realm itself, creating a form of materialism that is internally inconsistent and philosophically inadequate^[3].

This analysis demonstrates why Plato views the uninitiates as representing a dead end in philosophical development rather than a viable alternative to more sophisticated forms of inquiry^{[5] [6]}. Their position serves as a foil that highlights the need for philosophical approaches capable of engaging with the full complexity of reality across multiple ontological dimensions, including the temporal processes and invisible structures that make coherent experience possible.



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