

Royal Institute of Philosophy

Theaetetus in Bad Company

Author(s): C. J. F. Williams

Source: *Philosophy*, Vol. 67, No. 262 (Oct., 1992), pp. 549-551

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal Institute of Philosophy

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3751707>

Accessed: 04-09-2018 18:35 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Royal Institute of Philosophy, Cambridge University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy*

Theaetetus in Bad Company

C. J. F. WILLIAMS

How did a nice boy like Theaetetus get mixed up with those two dreadful old men, Protagoras and Heraclitus? Commentators on Plato's *Theaetetus* have for a long time been discussing questions like this, and none more assiduously than Professor Myles Burnyeat in his recent edition of the dialogue.¹ They have concentrated on the question of what exactly the relationships were between the three of them, or what did Plato, or Socrates in the dialogue, suppose them to be. Using 'Theaetetus', 'Protagoras' and 'Heraclitus' as the names, respectively, of the theses 'Knowledge is perception', 'Man is the measure of all things' and 'Everything flows', the debate is whether Theaetetus implies Protagoras, which itself implies Heraclitus, or whether Heraclitus implies Protagoras, which itself implies Theaetetus, or whether both alternatives are true. Other combinations and permutations are possible. The debate is not purely *a priori*. Commentators do not merely argue over which of these doctrines *ought* to be regarded as entailing which, but they are interested in determining what Plato thought of the matter. Socrates is made to comment himself on the logical relationships between the various doctrines, and he may be suspected of shifting his ground on this issue as the dialogue progresses.

My concern is a different one. I am not asking what Plato's considered view is about the logical relationships between the three. I am asking how they ever got involved with each other in the first place, or more precisely, how did Theaetetus get involved with the other two. Why did Plato connect Theaetetus's first answer to the question 'What is knowledge?' with the theories of Protagoras and Heraclitus? Having placed his bet 'It seems to me that knowledge is nothing other than perception' (151e), he immediately finds himself associated with 'Man the measure' and '*panta rei*'. What brought them together in the first place?

The very first example introduced by Socrates to test the thesis that knowledge is the same as perception is the situation where one person claims that the wind is chilly and another person claims that it is not chilly. It is supposed that each reports accurately what she perceives; but it is impossible that both should be said to know what they say they

¹ *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company 1990), 7–10.

Discussion

perceive, since 'The wind is chilly' and 'The wind is not chilly' are contradictories. What is known is true, and since these two propositions cannot both be true, they cannot both be known. So if both express what is perceived, it cannot be the case that everything that is perceived is known. So Theaetetus's horse falls at the first hurdle.

But are they contradictories? To be contradictories, propositions like 'The wind is chilly' and 'The wind is not chilly' must be so related that the one asserts and the other denies the very same thing of the very same thing. If I say 'That man is ugly' and you say 'That man is interesting', you are not denying what I am asserting, because the man in question may be interesting without failing to be ugly. But even if I say 'That man is ugly' and you say 'That man is not ugly', we may fail to contradict each other because it turns out that we are not speaking about the same man.

Protagoras and Heraclitus come on to the scene as rescuers of Theaetetus from the objection that he has committed himself to the view that contradictory propositions can both be known. Protagoras says that what the person who says 'The wind is chilly' says of the wind is not what the person who says 'The wind is not chilly' denies of it. The person who says that the wind is chilly should really be represented as saying that the wind feels (or is) chilly to *her*; and the person who says that the wind is not chilly should really be represented as saying that the wind does not feel (or is not) chilly to *her*.² And being chilly to Margaret is not the same thing as being chilly to Paula. Protagoras can save Theaetetus by denying that the two propositions have a common predicate.

Heraclitus, on the other hand, denies that it is the same wind. He is concerned not so much with the predicate of the proposition as with the subject. Even if the predicate in the one person's proposition was 'is chilly' and the predicate in the other person's proposition was 'is not chilly', the propositions themselves would not be contradictories unless the subject was the same. But how, asks Heraclitus, can the wind that I feel be one and the same as the wind that you feel? 'Nothing is in itself one' (152d) is the very first clause of the 'secret doctrine' that Socrates later attributes to Heraclitus. Where no two propositions can have the

² There are many confusions at work in this passage. One arises from the failure to distinguish between 'x perceives that y is *F*' and 'y appears *F* to x'. I wonder if this does not give rise to another. Socrates is made to say, not that 'x perceives that' is the same as 'It appears to x that', but that 'It appears' is the same as 'perceive' (the infinitive). Could it be that in passing from '*aisthanetai (einai) to pneuma psuchron*' to '*phainetai (einai) to pneuma psuchron heautōi*', he took '*psuchron heautōi*' to be what the new idiom presented as the (more accurate) description of the content of the perception/appearing, taking '*heautōi*' to qualify '*psuchron*' rather than '*phainetai*'?

same subject there is no possibility of contradiction. Even if you say just 'It's chilly' and I say 'It's not chilly', we do not contradict each other unless we are speaking at the same place and at the same time. But how in a world of Heraclitean 'becoming' is identity of place and time to be determined? Heraclitus, no less than Protagoras, has let Theaetetus off the hook.

That, at the start, is all we can say about the relationship between the three doctrines. It is nothing so tight as entailment of one by another, or by each of the others, let alone mutual entailment of each by each. Rather, there are situations frequently occurring which we should naturally describe in such a way as to constitute them an objection to Theaetetus's thesis. Redescribed in the way required by the doctrine of Protagoras, or that of Heraclitus, they no longer constitute an objection. The old men have come to the rescue of the boy. Their defence need not be the only means of escape available to him. Indeed, since either by himself provides Theaetetus with a sufficient reply to the objection, the truth of neither doctrine can be regarded as a necessary condition of Theaetetus's theory being accepted. Closer relations may be developed later. But this is how the three get to know each other in the first place. It is not really so mysterious as some commentators have thought.³

University of Bristol

³ I am grateful to Michael Welbourne and Christopher Rowe for their comments on a draft of this note.