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Final Paper

In this paper, I will examine the definition of knowledge as perception asserted by Theaetetus in Plato’s work of the same name. I will begin by showing how Protagoras’ measure doctrine and Heraclitus’ flux theory support this definition, then summarize a refutation of the Heraclitean doctrine given by Socrates. Finally, I will consider how a Heraclitan may defend the flux doctrine against Socrates’ refutation.

Protagoras’ measure doctrine maintains that individuals each experience a unique and subjective reality that is formed from their perceptions. Under this doctrine, there is no difference between appearance and reality; what seems for an individual is true for that individual, and only that individual. Socrates illustrates this concept by appealing to a blowing wind that barely bothers one person, while making another feel extremely cold. According to Protagoras’ doctrine, the wind itself does not possess the attribute of being cold or not cold. Rather, the wind is “cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold” (*Theaetetus* 152b). To shift the quality of coldness from the wind itself to those that experience it is to make the noteworthy assumption that there is no objective, absolute fact regarding the characteristics of the wind. By removing the possibility of any external truth in the world, and limiting fact to only that which is perceived, this assumption acts as a metaphysical underpinning for the measure doctrine.

The idea that perception solely shapes an individual’s reality implies that perception is infallible, since there is no objective truth against which it can be disproven. Given that perception is infallible, it must then be the case that an individual will always perceive what is true, at least from their perspective. This provides crucial support for Theaetetus’ definition that perception is knowledge, as an individual can only gain an understanding of what *is* through perceiving.

The Heraclitean flux doctrine states that everything is in a state of becoming; that is, everything is constantly changing. This universal state of becoming occurs because everything has the property of motion, which itself can be exhibited actively, for objects of perception, or passively, for perceptive faculties. Socrates explains this idea by appealing to an eye seeing a white object (which I will call a stone for clarity). The eye has passive motion, in that it is a relatively fixed point around which other objects move. Because the stone can move through space and be seen anywhere in the eye’s field of vision, it has active motion. The stone does not exist as white before the act of perception; for whiteness to actually be generated, the motions of the eye and the object must intersect, meaning the eye looks at the point in space that the stone is currently occupying. Only in that moment does the eye become a “seeing eye”, while the stone is “filled with whiteness” and becomes white (*Theaetetus*, 156e).

As a consequence of the Heraclitean doctrine, the process by which whiteness is generated is intimately connected with the moment that the object is seen. Since everything is always in motion, the stone and the eye will continue changing even after whiteness is generated, leading to a different perception at a later point in time. That time contributes to a unique experience of whiteness implies that, if one simply closes and reopens their eyes, they would perceive a completely different instance of whiteness in the stone. This lends credence to the idea that perception is unique to the perceiver.

The Heraclitean doctrine establishes strict conditions under which an object can be perceived. Namely, the interaction between a perceptive tool and the object on which it is focused results in a unique experience, differing both between individuals and at different points in time. Similar to Protagoras’ doctrine, this uniqueness means that qualities of objects uniquely exist only to those who perceive them. Since the objects of perception are always in motion, prohibiting the existence of an object that is perceived the same way by all, the result of perceiving can never be false to an individual at that point in time, and can thus be considered knowledge. In this way, the Heraclitean doctrine provides metaphysical support for Theaetetus’ definition that perception is knowledge.

In his evaluation of the Heraclitean flux doctrine, Socrates first makes a distinction between two specific types of motion: spatial movement and alteration, where alteration is any change to some quality of an object. If a thing must always be in motion, as is maintained by the Heraclitans, Socrates argues that it must be in motion in both ways. Otherwise, a thing would occupy the contradictory state of having motion and being still at the same time. Perceiving something, then, must require both the percipient and the object of perception to be in constant motion, even as the perception is being made. For the white stone example, the whiteness must be “passing over into another color, lest it be convicted of standing still in this respect” (*Theaetetus* 182d). That the color of the stone is changing means that one can never actually label the stone as white; in a sense, one can perceive but cannot document their perceptions in a useful, actionable manner. Therefore, if a thing must necessarily always be changing, then perceiving it does nothing to aid in gathering knowledge about it. The only way that the flux doctrine can be true is if there is a type of cosmic stability that allows objects to remain still when they are perceived. This stability, then, would refute the flux doctrine’s fundamental idea that everything is always in motion.

Where Socrates believes that the lack of one type of motion contradicts the definition given in Heraclitus’ doctrine, a Heraclitan might instead argue that only one type of motion is necessary to satisfy their definition. Socrates argues that an object with only one type of motion contradicts the Heraclitean definition because it is “both moving and standing still,” and thus cannot be named or documented (*Theaetetus* 181e). This seems like an extremely weak argument from which Socrates has concluded that there must be a contradiction. The Heraclitans have not intended to make a contentious assumption by stating that all objects experience motion, instead focusing their arguments on the interactions between different classes of motion. Though the Heraclitean definition of motion could benefit from some clarification, Socrates seems to be pedantically attacking a premise that is generally accepted. It seems that while the Heraclitans use this doctrine to explain the world around them in a bottom-up approach, Socrates is rejecting the use of his senses in favor of an *a priori* definition of motion. To the Heraclitans, an object need only have one type of motion to be considered ‘in motion’ overall. Lacking one type of motion could even be encouraged, because objects do need to have some stability for certain observations to be made. Therefore, objects lacking one type of motion can still be documented, and knowledge can still be gained from perceiving.

The Heraclitan might support their counterargument by considering a banana sitting on a table. The banana is not moving relative to an individual but can age very obviously over a few hours. Intuitively, one should be able to document the banana’s spatial position even as it is altered through aging. It is difficult to understand why the banana must also be moving in space, relative to the individual, in order to be fit Socrates’ interpretation of motion. To the Heraclitans, certain properties of objects can be perceived, provided the object’s type of motion (or lack thereof) is conducive for such a task. The banana’s position can be perceived and documented, even as it ages, as long as it moves within the field of vision of the viewer. Likewise, the banana’s aging can be accurately documented when it is relatively still. In both cases, the individual is observing a cross-section of the banana’s characteristics that is visible when it does not have that type of motion. It should still meet the criteria necessary to be in motion without undergoing both spatial change and qualitative alteration. With this objection, the Heraclitan would show that Socrates’ thoughts on motion lead to unintuitive consequences that do not accurately explain the world.