

Perception, True Opinion and Knowledge in Plato's Theaetetus

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Several years ago Mr. J. Xenakis proposed an interpretation of some aspects of the passage in the *Theaetetus* in which the thesis that ἐπιστήμη is αἴσθησις receives its final refutation (184B4-186E12).¹ Although I agree in the main with his interpretation, I believe that it can be supported more strongly. Thus an analysis of this passage is the first task of this paper. But on the basis of that analysis, I want to show also how this passage is related to what follows in the dialogue, the long discussion beginning with the thesis that knowledge is true opinion but turning almost immediately to a discussion of the nature and possibility of false opinion and ending with the wax block and aviary models (187A1-200D4).²

The criticism of the thesis that ἐπιστήμη is αἴσθησις begins with the distinction between what the soul apprehends through the sense-organs and what it apprehends "by itself". Whatever Plato's views about the soul might be at his writing of the *Theaetetus*, he wants to distinguish between those characteristics which the soul apprehends through the sense-organs and those characteristics which are called "common to everything" (ἐπὶ πᾶσι κοινόν -184C4-5). In spite of his expressed desire to be precise (184C1-7), Plato has some difficulties and ambiguities in his terminology. His general point is to show that knowledge cannot be equated with αἴσθησις. But he does speak, on the one hand, of what the soul "perceives" (αἰσθάνομαι - 184E8-185A2) when he talks about the particular objects of the various senses, e.g. colors, tastes, sounds, etc. On the other hand he also speaks of what the soul "perceives" (again αἰσθάνομαι - 185C8) when he talks about the κοινά, characteristics which are somehow different from those apprehended via the individual sense-organs. The ambiguity in αἰσθάνομαι leaves two questions to be answered.

¹ J. Xenakis, "Essence, Being and Fact in Plato: An Analysis of One of Theaetetus' 'Koina,'" *Kant-Studien* vol. 44 (1957-58), pp. 167-181. The main thrust of Mr. Xenakis' interpretation is in section IV.

² The argument against the thesis that knowledge is true opinion is contained in the brief passage in 200D5-210C7.

First, what sort of object is “perceived” through the sense-organs? Plato could mean either a particular object with a particular color or taste, etc., or he could mean the relevant sense-data. Plato’s introduction of the *κοινά* and his saying that the soul “perceives” these along with what it “perceives” through the sense-organs might be thought to favor the former interpretation, but it would also be consistent with saying that the soul apprehends the *κοινά* in relation to its sense-data. Although I should have to admit that a more detailed study of the earlier portions of the *Theaetetus* where Plato discusses the interaction of object and sense-organ would help to decide the issue, it seems that Plato did not clearly decide whether the soul perceives sense-data or physical objects.

Second, what is the sense of “perceive” in each of these cases? Does the soul “perceive” one set of characteristics via the sense-organs, e.g. colors, sounds, etc., and does it “perceive” a different set of characteristics when it operates “by itself”, e.g. being, sameness, otherness, etc.? To use “perceive” in both of these senses causes difficulties. Plato apparently wants to distinguish between two sets of characteristics, but he also might want to distinguish between these characteristics in terms of two different operations of the soul. Using “perceive” in both these ways leads to some very basic ambiguities.

Plato’s general point, I believe, is this. Perception (*αἴσθησις*) cannot be knowledge because in perception simply are none of the *κοινά*. These become a factor only when we make comparisons between the things which are perceived, and, more importantly, they enter the picture when the “truth” about them becomes an issue. To paraphrase the argument in 185E ff., the soul, when it operates “by itself” (*αὐτῆ δι’ αὐτῆς* or *αὐτῆ καθ’ αὐτήν*), deals with certain characteristics which are not “viewed” (*ἐπισκοπεῖν*) through the sense-organs. The chief of these is “being” (*οὐσία* – 186A2), and this characteristic “most of all pertains to everything” (186A2-3). In addition to this, there are similarity and dissimilarity, sameness and otherness, beauty and ugliness, and goodness and badness. But the point is that these are not involved until the soul starts to make comparisons between its sensations or perceptions, “reflecting within itself upon the past and present in relation to the future” (186A9-B1). The same point is made again in the following lines: all sensations (*παθήματα*) reach the soul via the body, but reflecting upon them (making judgments about them) is something which the soul does on its own. The

soul makes its comparisons and reflects about them with regard to their "being" (οὐσία – 186B7) and usefulness. The use of οὐσία cannot but be important when it is connected with the following lines where it is maintained that one cannot attain "truth" without attaining "being" (186C7) and further that attaining knowledge is attaining "truth." From these lines it is possible to infer, if my paraphrase is correct, that Plato is saying that there is a direct connection between attaining "being" and attaining knowledge since the notion of "truth" is connected with both. And he spells out the implications further; knowledge is not in our sensations but in our reasoning about them (186D2-3).

If one were to press the case that Plato has changed his views in the later dialogues, the above passage would be an excellent place to begin. This passage rather plainly states that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) resides in reasoning about our sensations (παθήματα) and not in the sensations themselves. Further, the passage states that in order to have knowledge we have to apprehend "being" and "truth". But it does not seem to follow from this that Plato is indirectly hinting at a view he has earlier expressed, notably in the *Phaedo*, that knowledge results only when Forms are apprehended and that for this apprehension the senses are to be dispensed with as quickly as possible. The same view can be found in the *Republic* along with a very sharp distinction between knowledge and opinion in terms of their corresponding objects. The view that in the *Theaetetus* Plato is indirectly attempting to point out the need for Forms is Cornford's³ and, in my opinion, Robinson has shown it to have severe difficulties.⁴

A more plausible interpretation of the passage is as follows. What Plato is attempting to point out is that αἰσθησις, in so far as it is only the passive reception of sensory impressions or sense-data (or even in so far as it is apprehending the characteristics of physical objects) cannot give us anything which can be called "true." It is only

³ F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), pp. 102ff. About the passage just discussed Cornford says that "to the Platonist, however, who is familiar with the associations of 'reality' (i.e. οὐσία) and 'truth', the passage will mean more than this" (p. 108). And Cornford of wants to infer that the terms "reality" and "truth" are references to the world Forms without which knowledge is impossible (pp. 108-109). But such an inference has many problems as Robinson has pointed out (see n. 4 below).

⁴ R. Robinson, "Forms and Error in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *Philosophical Review*, LIX (January, 1950), 3-30.

when we make judgments *about* what is perceived that the notion of “truth” becomes important. And further, Plato seems to be saying that in this reasoning or judging process, “being” and “truth” have the most important roles to play. In spite of the fact that the list of the κοινά is a large one, including “being” and “non-being”, similarity and dissimilarity, sameness and otherness (185 C9-D4), Plato focuses upon “being” as the most important and most pervasive of these (186 A2-3), and precisely because αἴσθησις does not deal with these, it cannot be equivalent to ἐπιστήμη. But the meaning of “truth” and “being” here are crucial, and the interpretation of this section depends on what is meant by these terms.

However, before elaborating the meaning of these terms, I should point out that in this final section (184 B5-187 A6) of the first part of the dialogue (i.e. the examination of the “ἐπιστήμη equals αἴσθησις” thesis) there are two lists of the κοινά which the soul deals with when it operates “on its own” (185 C9-D4 and 186 A2-8). Moral and aesthetic terms appear in the second list and not in the first, whereas numerical terms appear in the first and not in the second. Similarity and dissimilarity appear in both along with terms which appear to be connected with the discussion of the *Sophist*, i.e. “being” and “non-being”, sameness and otherness. The only terms which appear in both these lists and which are not mentioned in the *Sophist* are similarity and dissimilarity and the value terms. The terms which appear in the *Theaetetus* are used in the *Sophist* as parts of Plato’s views about statements and language in general, pointing to what I think Plato is trying to accomplish in these critical sections of the *Theaetetus*.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Plato does want to point out in the *Theaetetus* some features of ἐπιστήμη which αἴσθησις does not have. I suggest that because these are 1) that αἴσθησις does not deal with “being” and 2) that it does not yield truth, Plato is maintaining that knowledge is propositional. In order to have knowledge there must be truth, and further, truth requires statements or propositions. If this claim is correct, then Plato is making a logical point about αἴσθησις, namely that in it no statements or judgments about what is perceived are involved. Plato is saying that the concepts of truth and falsity do not apply to αἴσθησις but apply only when judgments are made. I do not believe Plato to be saying that in order for there to be knowledge there must be an apprehension of Forms as Cornford maintains. Such an interpretation would be introducing another element into the discussion which does not seem to be neces-

sary for the refutation of the thesis. Thus it is difficult to see how the introduction of Forms could be Plato's point here. He rather seems to be making a distinction between *ἐπιστήμη* and *αἴσθησις*, not in terms of a distinction between the intelligible things apprehended in the former and the perceptible things apprehended in the latter, but instead in terms of a distinction between the non-propositional character of *αἴσθησις* and the propositional character of *ἐπιστήμη*. Many more problems are, of course, left to be solved with regard to what knowledge is, and these will occupy the remainder of the dialogue, but it does appear that its propositional character is sufficient at this point to distinguish it from *αἴσθησις* and that this is all Plato needs to show for the moment. But as is stated in the dialogue, these arguments only show that knowledge is not perception (187A1-6); we have yet to find out positively what it is and whether it is true opinion or something else.

I shall consider another passage in the *Theaetetus* which seems to support my view because it, like the passage just discussed, considers what the soul does when it reasons or judges. Approximately two Stephanus pages after the discussion of *αἴσθησις*, the participants turn to a definition of "thought" (*διάνοια*) in 189E4-190A6. "Thought" is the discourse (*λόγος*) of the soul with itself (*αὐτὴ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἢ ψυχῇ* – 186E6-7). The language here is very similar to that used in the earlier passage about the *κοινά* and seems to refer back to it. This discoursé is unspoken and is the result of the soul's silent questioning and answering which ends in its forming an opinion. By means of affirmation and denial (*φάσκοντα καὶ οὐ φάσκοντα*) an opinion is formed; having an opinion (*δοξάζειν*) is a form of discourse on the part of the soul with itself. This passage seems to mean that "thought" is propositional; it is expressed in statements, and these statements can be positive or negative. Having an opinion or making a judgment according to Plato, then, is saying that a certain proposition is true or false. The statement can be positive or negative since it is the result of affirmation or denial.

The fact that this passage and the one in 185-187 discuss what appear to be operations peculiar to the soul (as opposed to the passive reception of sensations), and their similarities of language justify reading them together. Although the former seems to be talking about the operations of the soul "on its own", while the latter talks about "thought," both seem to be maintaining that the making of statements or judgments is involved in each case. What this leads to, I think,

is that Plato considers both knowledge and opinion to be propositional in character; both are expressed in statements of the form, "x is y." But an immediate qualification must be made. To say that "x is y" is highly ambiguous until we are certain of the senses of "is" and know what "x" and "y" stand for.

Plato could very easily be maintaining that knowledge and belief are propositional (knowing that x is y, etc.) but still not be clear about the various kinds of propositions or statements; he could hold that knowing and believing take this form, but he could be unclear about the further distinctions which have to be made in order to get rid of the difficulties which arise when the various senses of "is" and "is not" are not properly distinguished. And these, along with some other difficulties, seem to cause the problems in the *Theaetetus*. The mention of "truth" in the *κοινά* passage and the elaborate discussion of falsehood in the following sections seem to indicate that Plato was trying to discover what it is that can properly be called true or false. In short, he is concerned about statements.

Immediately after the "thought" passage, the following account of opinion is given: whenever someone has an opinion, he says "that one thing is another" (190A8-9). This seems to mean that opining is opining statements. If Plato is concerned with statements in the *Theaetetus*, problems about the nature of statements and their kinds provide a philosophical connecting link between the *Theaetetus* and that dialogue to which it is literarily tied, the *Sophist*. The *Sophist* is the dialogue in which a doctrine about statements is elaborated (though not with entire success); the propositional character of believing and knowing is at least implicit in the *Theaetetus*, although at a lower level of elaboration. But the passages from the *Theaetetus* discussed above would hardly be sufficient to establish this thesis. By discussing further parts of this section, I shall claim that in the *Theaetetus* Plato does have beginnings of the view that knowing and believing take the form "knowing that . . ." and "believing that...". But I shall claim that Plato has not solved the difficulties in this view because he has only partially elaborated the distinction between seeing something on the one hand and believing or knowing something on the other. The *Theaetetus*, I believe, is the place where he is beginning to see that such a distinction is necessary, but it seems that the equipment for making such a distinction is not fully developed there. Thus, my claim is that Plato does want to separate *αἴσθησις* from opinion and knowledge and that he makes this distinction on the grounds

that the latter two are propositional. Furthermore, Plato raises difficulties about the view which holds that believing x is y entails being acquainted (in more modern terminology) with what is named by the terms “x” and “y”. This view also seems to assimilate all cases of “x is y” to “x is identical with y.” That difficulties are raised about this view is a point of considerable significance. I shall discuss this significance at the end of this paper.

To substantiate my claims, I shall discuss two sections of the *Theaetetus*. First, I shall discuss the opening of the second section of the dialogue beginning with the examination of the thesis that knowledge is true opinion but turning instead to a discussion of false opinion and raising some difficulties about the relations between seeing, hearing, etc., and believing. Second, I shall discuss the aviary and wax block models which are put forward to explain how false beliefs or opinions are possible but which are rejected as inadequate models.

Just after Plato’s denial of the thesis that αἴσθησις is ἐπιστήμη ending at 187A6, the participants turn to the thesis that ἐπιστήμη is true opinion. But instead of immediately developing this thesis, they turn to an examination of false opinion and how it is possible. This problem serves as a connecting link between the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. The section in the *Theaetetus* begins with a rigid distinction between “knowing and not knowing” (188A5-6). In accounting for false opinion, then, one either knows or does not know Socrates and Theaetetus. If they are not known in this sense (and here “know” seems to be equal to “be acquainted with”), then one of them cannot be mistaken for the other; if they are both known, mistaking is again out of the question. This, of course, gets nowhere as an explanation of false opinion, and the field of investigation is changed from that of the “knowing” dichotomy to that of “being and non-being” (κατὰ τὸ εἶναι καὶ μὴ – 188C9-D1). This leaves us with an account of false opinion as δοξάζων τὰ μὴ ὄντα (188D2-5), a phrase as ambiguous here as it is in the initial stages of the *Sophist*. But a distinction is drawn between opining τὸ μὴ ὄν, 1) περὶ τῶν ὄντων and 2) αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό (188D8-10). False opinion, then, is opining “what is not” either “in relation to the things that are” or “absolutely.” And the point is further made that both of these are possible accounts of false opinion. The distinction appears to parallel closely the discussion of the *Sophist* in which these two senses of “what is not” are brought out. But in the case of that dialogue to conceive of τὸ μὴ ὄν αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό is impossible because such an “absolute” sense of

“non-being” cannot be given an intelligible interpretation for Plato. The phrase cannot be applied to anything and it is self-contradictory (cf. *Sophist* 237A-239B). To believe τὸ μὴ εἶναι in this sense is equivalent to believing nothing which is equivalent to not believing or opining at all. But to opine or believe “what is not” in the “relative” sense is shown to be possible in the *Sophist* because there it is assimilated to “what is other than . . .” or “what is different from . . .” In this sense believing τὸ μὴ εἶναι is believing that a given identifiable thing has certain characteristics which are “other than” the ones it actually has. According to the *Sophist*, this sense of τὸ μὴ εἶναι is expressed in statements, and the distinction between the “absolute” and the “relative” senses of τὸ μὴ εἶναι helps to account for falsity although as part of a far more elaborate set of views (cf. *Sophist*, 260-264B). Thus, the *Theaetetus* contains a distinction which is highly useful in the *Sophist*, but the important difference is that in the *Theaetetus* the account of false belief is given in *both* of these senses of τὸ μὴ εἶναι.

Clearly something is wrong in the *Theaetetus* because the participants are unable to give a satisfactory account of false opinion. The distinction between these senses of “non-being” is not maintained nor even mentioned in the long sections on the wax block and aviary models which seem designed to show not so much that knowledge cannot be true opinion as to point out Plato’s realization of the difficulties which must be overcome in order to solve the problem of falsity. I suggest that the difficulties lie, on the one hand, in the reply which applies “believing what is not true” to both senses of τὸ μὴ εἶναι,⁵ and, on the other hand, in the assimilation of believing or opining to seeing, believing, touching, etc.

The argument which immediately follows the distinction between the “absolute” and “relative” senses of “non-being” illustrates well, I think, the difficulties that are involved. The argument runs that if one sees or hears something, then it can be said that one sees or hears “some one thing”. Moreover, this one thing “is” or “exists” (εἰ εἶναι γέ τι ὁραῖ, τῶν ὄντων τι ὁραῖ – 188E7). If this holds for seeing and hearing, etc., then, it is argued, it must hold for believing as well. Thus the “object” of believing should also be considered as “something which is one” (εἶναι γέ τι – 189A6) and as “something which is” (εἶναι τι – 189A8). But if this is correct and serves to account for cases of true belief,

⁵ Actually, in the argument about to be discussed, it is the “absolute” sense of τὸ μὴ εἶναι which appears to dominate; believing “what is not” in this sense is equated with believing nothing or not believing anything at all.

then when someone believes falsely, he believes "what is not," and this is immediately assimilated to believing nothing or not believing at all. By this argument false opinion is impossible (189A10-12), and the conclusion is drawn that false belief is impossible in *both* the absolute and relative senses of "what is not" (189B1-2).

At least two possible interpretations of this passage can be given, both of which have important consequences for the interpretation of the remaining sections of the dialogue. First, the argument can be considered as displaying Plato's confusion and inability to distinguish between the "objects" of seeing, etc., on the one hand and the "objects" of believing on the other. The former we could call either physical objects or sense-data and the latter, statements or propositions. If this is the case, Plato is correct to say that they are both "one," but it seems clear that they are hardly "one" in the same sense. The first interpretation would maintain that Plato was impressed by the unity of both these "objects" and thus did not distinguish them, and, on this interpretation, it would be correct to say that this lack of a distinction is what gets Plato into difficulties. But what is wrong with this interpretation, I think, is that it overlooks the fact that the absurd conclusion of the argument is recognized by the participants and that they go on to look for a new account of false opinion. This leads me to offer a second interpretation which takes the *reductio* form of the argument into account. It appears to me that Plato is here attempting to point out that distinction which the first interpretation considers him to be failing to make; it seems that the argument is designed to show that what one sees or hears is something quite distinct from what one believes. The failure to draw this distinction is one of the crucial factors in making the argument come to its absurd conclusion that error is impossible. This is evidence for my view that Plato has, at least implicitly, the propositional character of opining or believing in mind since pointing out this difference in "objects" in one step, although an important one, in that direction. In view of the interpretation I have already given of the passages criticizing the equation of *αἴσθησις* and *ἐπιστήμη*, which indicates that one of the crucial differences between the two is that the latter is propositional, it is reasonable to suppose that Plato may be making the same sort of attack in the passage just discussed. What this *reductio* leads to in the dialogue is the consideration of the wax block and aviary models; the senses of "non-being" are dropped from the discussion.

These models are interesting because they seem to contain as-

sumptions related to those operating in the *reductio* argument just discussed, which leads me to believe that they are meant to expose similar difficulties. Both models seem to be maintaining that believing or opining takes the form “x is y”; believing is believing “that one thing is another” (τὸ γε ἕτερον ἕτερον δοξάζειν – 190 D4-5). But the difficulties here arise in two ways. First, no distinction is made in the terminology of the models between the senses of “is,” and, in fact, the predominant sense seems to be the identity sense. Second, and most important, it seems that most of the difficulties occur because the “x” and “y” are taken to be names of things with which the holder of the belief is acquainted. The assumption seems to be that opining involves a kind of “grasping” of the object involved (e.g. ἐφαπτόμενος ἀμφοῖν τῆ ψυχῆ – 190 C 6-7). The case of the wax block implies that if a man has an imprint of something in his wax-block soul or knows or perceives it, then mistakes about it are out of the question. False opinion here is characterized as connecting the wrong imprint with the wrong perception. When this model is applied to numbers, they are treated in the same way as persons; hence, the man who thinks that seven plus five equals twelve is actually thinking that eleven is twelve, but, if he “knows” (is acquainted with) both eleven and twelve, then he cannot make mistakes about them. This model, then, will not account for false opinion. In the same way the aviary model introduces ἐπιστήμαι which can roughly be translated as “pieces of knowledge”. The perfect mathematician has these “pieces of knowledge” in his soul (τὰς ἐπιστήμας τῶν ἀριθμῶν - 198 A 10 - B 2), seeming to mean that he is acquainted with numbers and directly apprehends them. On this account, then, with all the “pieces of knowledge” about numbers flying around in his aviary-soul the mathematician makes a mistake and thinks that eleven is twelve when he grabs one “piece of knowledge” instead of another; presumably he mistakes the “piece of knowledge” of eleven for that of twelve. But if having a “piece of knowledge” means being acquainted with a number, it is difficult to see how mistakes occur at all since “knowing” a number in this sense would seem to be infallible. As the participants in the dialogue recognize, to mistake eleven for twelve one would have to both “know” and “not-know” each of these numbers. But, if this is the case, we have to introduce “pieces of misapprehension” along with “pieces of knowledge” to account for mistakes. In a “misapprehension” there is nothing to be acquainted with at all. The discussion leads the participants to the problem of distinguishing the

times when one has really gotten hold of a "piece of knowledge" from the times when one only has a "misapprehension". How is "knowledge" of a "misapprehension" known? In order to answer this question the participants have to introduce "knowledges of knowledges and misapprehensions" ad infinitum (200B5-C2).⁶

Thus neither model is able to account for falsehood. At this point, the participants return to their original task, the examination of the thesis that knowledge is true opinion, and the thesis in its simplest form is rejected in 210A-C. However, to examine this argument and the concluding thesis about knowledge is beyond the scope of this paper. I intend to deal with these elsewhere.

What conclusions can be drawn from the section of the *Theaetetus* under discussion here? I have pointed out that 1) Plato seems to differentiate between knowledge and perception on the grounds that the former involves statements, 2) he indicates in a reductio argument that the objects of seeing and believing are distinct, 3) he puts forward two senses of τὸ μὴ εἶναι in the reductio argument which are distinguished in the *Sophist* but which, in the *Theaetetus*, are not distinguished and give the reductio its appearance of being valid, 4) he gives an account of opinion which seems to be propositional but in which the terms seem to be names of things known by acquaintance, and 5) he gives two models which use the acquaintance terminology and he shows that neither of these can account for false opinion. It is significant that these arguments and their evident failure to account for false opinion are presented at all. That they are presented as having difficulties would seem to indicate that Plato had some idea of what these difficulties were. But did he have a more positive doctrine about statements in mind? The similarities with the *Sophist* suggest such a doctrine. I believe we could say that Plato constructed the *Theaetetus* to show that the doctrine about statements in the *Sophist* must be accepted. But this would involve looking deeper into Plato's purposes than would seem to be possible because of the dialogue form of his writing. A less dramatic claim, however, can be made. The arguments of the *Theaetetus* and the difficulties raised about them require, on philosophic grounds, a detailed elaboration of what statements are if false opinion is to be accounted for. Indicating that it is statements about something which are the

⁶ The translation of ἀγνοια as "misapprehension" and several points about the interpretation of the term were suggested to me by Gilbert Ryle.

proper objects of belief and that it is these which are true or false goes a considerable way towards solving these difficulties. What has been discussed of the *Theaetetus* thus far seems to indicate that the terms of a statement cannot refer to things which are known by acquaintance simply. Thus Plato seems to have realized that statements are involved in believing, and from the criticism of ἀσθησις he seems to have realized that they are involved in knowing also.

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