

Theaetetus

EUCLIDES: Are you just back from the country, Terpsion – or have you been back some time? 142a

TERPSION: A fair while. Actually I was looking for you, in the market-place, and I was surprised that I couldn't find you there.

EUCLIDES: That's because I wasn't in town.

TERPSION: So where were you? a5

EUCLIDES: I was going down to the harbour, when I met Theaetetus being carried back to Athens from the army camp at Corinth.

TERPSION: Alive or dead?

EUCLIDES: Alive, but only just; he's in a bad way, from some wounds too, but what is really bringing him down is the sickness that has broken out in the army. b1

TERPSION: Not dysentery, I suppose?

EUCLIDES: Yes, dysentery. b5

TERPSION: That's quite a man we'd be losing!

EUCLIDES: A fine example to us all, Terpsion; only just now I was listening to people showering praises on his conduct in the fighting.

TERPSION: There's nothing strange about that; it would be much more of a surprise if he hadn't shown that sort of quality. But why didn't he think of stopping off here in Megara? c1

EUCLIDES: He was hurrying to get home – I kept begging him to stay here, and telling him it was for his own good, but he didn't want to. So then I saw him on his way, and as I left him I recalled once again how wonderfully prophetic Socrates had proved to be about him, as about so much else. I think it was just before his death that he encountered Theaetetus, then a young lad. They got together, and by the end of c5

Plato

d1 their conversation¹ Socrates was totally in awe of the boy's natural qualities. When I went to Athens he relayed to me the exchange he'd had with him – and well worth the hearing it was; he said the boy would certainly become someone to reckon with if he made it to the right age.

d5 TERPSION: That's turned out true enough, it seems. But what was their discussion like? Could you give a report of it?

143a EUCLIDES: Zeus, no! Or at any rate not just like that, off the cuff. But I did make notes at the time, as soon as I got home. Later on I would go back over it all in a leisurely fashion and write it up, and then every time I arrived in Athens I would ask Socrates again about anything I'd not remembered, making the corrections when I got back to Megara.

a5 The result is that I have pretty much the whole discussion written up.

TERPSION: Yes, I've heard you say that before. I've always been meaning to ask you to show it to me, and putting it off – till this moment. What's to stop us going through it now? I'm myself quite ready for a rest, anyway, after my journey from the country.

b1 EUCLIDES: In fact I saw Theaetetus all the way to Erineum,² so I'd not be against a rest myself. Come with me, and the slave will read to us while we put our feet up.

TERPSION: A good idea.

b5 EUCLIDES: Well, Terpsion, here's the book. I didn't write it out with Socrates reporting the discussion as he reported it to me, but instead had him in direct conversation with the people he said were there. These, c1 he said, were the geometer, Theodorus, and Theaetetus. To avoid the trouble of writing out the narrative bits between the speeches – like 'And I said' or 'And I told *him*', whenever Socrates was talking about himself, or 'He assented', or 'He wouldn't agree' when he was talking c5 about the respondents – well, I took out all that, and simply had him conversing directly with them.

TERPSION: And quite reasonably so, Euclides.

EUCLIDES: So, boy, take the book and start.

d1 SOCRATES: If it had been Cyrene I cared about more, Theodorus, I would be asking you how things were there – whether there were any young people in Cyrene interested in geometry or philosophy of some

¹ Or 'dialogue' (*dialegesthai/dialogos*). See Introduction, Section 5.

² I.e., most of the way to Athens, and a considerable distance by foot.

Theaetetus

sort; as it is, I'm less fond of the people there than I am of people here, d5
 and I'm keener to know which of *our* young people are expected to turn
 out respectably. That's just what I try to find out for myself, so far as
 I can, and I also ask any others I see the young wanting to spend their
 time with. You yourself have no mean following, and justly so; you e1
 deserve it, especially for your geometry. So if you've encountered
 anyone worth talking about, I'd be delighted to know.

THEODORUS: Well, Socrates, there is one lad I've met, among your e5
 fellow-citizens, whose quality absolutely demands that I talk and you
 hear about him. If he were beautiful, I'd be afraid to be enthusiastic about
 him in case anyone should think I was lusting after him. But as it is, and
 don't be cross at my saying so, he's not a beauty, but with his snub nose
 and bulging eyes he rather resembles you, though both features are less
 pronounced in his case than in yours. So I can be straight with you: 144a
 among all the people I've ever yet come across – and I've got together
 with a good many in my time – I've never known anyone with such
 wonderful natural gifts. So incomparably quick at learning, yet excep-
 tionally quiet-tempered, and with a courage, too, that's second to none. a5
 I would not have thought such a combination possible, nor do I see it
 occurring in anyone else. Those who are as sharp, quick, and retentive as
 he is are generally unstable and short-tempered, rushing around and
 shifting about like vessels with no ballast, and more manic than
 courageous; the weightier ones are somewhat sluggish in approaching b1
 their studies, and brimming with forgetfulness. This lad approaches
 study and inquiry so smoothly, so unerringly, and so effectively – and
 with great calm, like the noiseless flow of olive oil from the jar – that one b5
 wonders how someone so young can carry all this off so well.

SOCRATES: That's good news. Which of our citizens is his father?

THEODORUS: I've heard the name, but I can't remember it. No
 matter – he's the middle one in this group that's approaching us now. c1
 He and his friends there with him were rubbing themselves down with
 oil just now on the track outside; I think they've finished and are coming
 over here.³ See if you recognize him.

SOCRATES: I do. He's the son of Euphronius of Sunium, who was, c5
 yes indeed, very much the sort of man you described the lad as being.

³ We are evidently to picture the conversation taking place in a gymnasium; the boys have been training on a running track.

Plato

He was well respected in many ways, and to cap it all he left very substantial wealth when he died. But I don't know the lad's name.

d1 THEODORUS: His name, Socrates, is Theaetetus; as for his inheritance, I think some of the trustees have ruined it. Despite that he's also amazingly generous with his money, Socrates.

d5 SOCRATES: He sounds like a paragon, this one. Tell him to come and sit here by me.

THEODORUS: I shall. Theaetetus, come over here by Socrates!

e1 SOCRATES: Yes, please do, Theaetetus, so that I can check for myself what sort of face I have. Theodorus says I have one like yours. But now if each of us had a lyre and Theodorus said both instruments were tuned in a similar way, would we immediately take his word for it, or would we have tried to find out first whether he was speaking as a musical expert?

THEAETETUS: We would have asked that first.

e5 SOCRATES: And we would believe him if we found he was an expert, but if we found he was no musician, we wouldn't trust him?

THEAETETUS: True.

i45a SOCRATES: And in the present case, I imagine, if we've any interest in whether our faces are similar or not, we should ask whether or not he's speaking as an expert in painting.

THEAETETUS: I think we should.

SOCRATES: So is Theodorus an expert painter?

a5 THEAETETUS: Not so far as I know.

SOCRATES: And he's not an expert in geometry either?

THEAETETUS: Oh, he's certainly that, Socrates!

SOCRATES: Is he also expert in astronomy, arithmetic, music, and everything else that goes to make an educated person?

a10 THEAETETUS: I certainly think he is.

SOCRATES: So if he claims that we're similar in some physical respect, whether by way of praising or of criticizing us, it's not worth paying him the slightest attention.

THEAETETUS: Perhaps not.

b1 SOCRATES: But what if he were to praise one of us for the state of our soul – for our goodness and wisdom? Wouldn't the one who heard him praising the other be justifiably keen to check on the object of the praise, and the other to show what he was made of?

b5 THEAETETUS: Certainly, Socrates.

Theaetetus

SOCRATES: So see here, my dear Theaetetus: in this case the showing is for you to do, the inquiring for me, because the fact is that however many foreigners or citizens Theodorus may have praised to me, he has never praised anyone as he did you just now.

THEAETETUS: That would be a fine thing, Socrates. But just watch out that he wasn't joking. b10 c1

SOCRATES: That's not Theodorus' style. Don't try ducking out of what we agreed, pretending that our friend here was only joking, because otherwise he'll actually be forced to give evidence against you; and no one's going to charge *him* with perjury. Be a man and stick by our agreement. c5

THEAETETUS: I'll have to, if that's your decision.

SOCRATES: So tell me – I suppose you're learning a bit of geometry from Theodorus?

THEAETETUS: I am.

SOCRATES: And a bit about astronomy, and music, and arithmetic? d1

THEAETETUS: I'm keen to, anyway.

SOCRATES: I am too, my boy, whether from Theodorus or from anyone else I think has some understanding of such things. All the same, while I get on well enough with these subjects in most respects, there's one thing about them that puzzles me, and I'd like to explore it with you and the others here. Tell me: to learn is to become wiser⁴ about the subject one's learning about, isn't it? d5

THEAETETUS: Obviously. d10

SOCRATES: And I imagine wise people are wise through wisdom.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And this isn't different at all from knowledge? e1

THEAETETUS: What isn't?

SOCRATES: Wisdom. Aren't people wise about the things they know about?

THEAETETUS: Of course. e5

SOCRATES: So knowledge and wisdom are the same thing?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, this is the very thing that I'm puzzled about, and can't get a proper hold on for myself – what knowledge actually is. So can we give an answer? What do all of you say? Which of us will be the first to speak? The one who tries and misses will sit down and be donkey, as children say 146a

⁴ 'Wiser': i.e., more expert.

Plato

a5 when they play ball, and so will the next one who misses, and so on; anyone who gets through without missing will be king over us and make us answer any question he wants. – Why the silence? I don't suppose, Theodorus, that my love of discussion is making me a boor, so keen am I to have us engage in conversation together, and become friends who talk to one another?

b1 THEODORUS: Boorish is the last thing that would be, Socrates! But please get one of the lads to answer your question. I'm unused to this sort of discussion myself, and I'm too old to get used to it either, whereas
 b5 it will suit them, and do much more for them than it would for me; youth truly gives room for improvement in everything. Go on as you started, and don't let Theaetetus off: question him!

c1 SOCRATES: You hear what Theodorus says, Theaetetus. I don't think it'll be your wish to disobey him, and it wouldn't be right in any case, when a wise person gives instructions in such matters, for the younger not to listen. So take your courage in your hands and tell me: what do you think knowledge is?

THEAETETUS: I'll have to do it, Socrates, seeing that the two of you
 c5 are telling me to. In any case, if I do somehow miss the target, you'll both set me right.

SOCRATES: Definitely we will – at any rate if we can.

THEAETETUS: Well, I think the things one can learn from Theodorus
 d1 are knowledges,⁵ that is, geometry and the subjects you just mentioned; cobbling too, and the skills that belong to other craftsmen – each and every one of these is nothing other than knowledge.

SOCRATES: That's certainly a brave answer, and a generous one, my
 d5 friend: you're handing over a whole collection of things when you were only asked for one, and a mixed bag instead of something simple.

THEAETETUS: Can I ask why you say that, Socrates?

SOCRATES: It's probably nothing, but I'll tell you what I'm thinking. When you mention cobbling, you're not talking, are you, about anything other than knowledge of the making of shoes?

⁵ Theaetetus here uses the plural of *epistēmē*, 'knowledge'; this is perfectly natural in Greek, because *epistēmē* does duty both for knowledge in general and for any form or branch of it. 'Knowledges' is scarcely English, but to introduce 'forms' or 'branches', or even 'examples', of knowledge here – or to substitute the singular for the plural – would be unhelpful; Socrates' response to Theaetetus' proposal, at any rate, in the following lines, will be to take him as identifying knowledge with what are in fact forms/branches/examples of it, while not recognizing that this is what they are. Knowledge for Theaetetus, according to his present account, is just geometry, cobbling, carpentry ...

Theaetetus

THEAETETUS: I'm not.

d10

SOCRATES: And what about when you talk about carpentering? Are you treating that as anything other than knowledge of the making of wooden objects?

e1

THEAETETUS: Here too, no.

SOCRATES: So in both cases you're marking out what each is knowledge *of*.

e5

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But what was asked for, Theaetetus, wasn't what things knowledge is of, or how many knowledges there are; we didn't ask the question what knowledge is because we wanted to count examples of knowledge, but because we wanted to know what the thing, knowledge, might be in itself. Or is there nothing in what I'm saying?

e10

THEAETETUS: No, you are absolutely right.

SOCRATES: Now think about the following. Suppose someone put the same question to us about some everyday thing that's ready to hand: clay, for example – what is it, actually? Wouldn't we be a laughing stock if we replied to him 'potter's clay and ovenmaker's clay and brickmaker's clay'?

147a

a5

THEAETETUS: Possibly.

SOCRATES: Because I suppose first of all we'd be expecting the questioner to understand whenever we said 'clay' in our answer, whether we add 'figurine-maker's' or refer to any other craftsman who uses clay. Or do you think anyone will understand the name of a thing at all if he doesn't know what the thing is?

b1

THEAETETUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Then anyone who doesn't know what knowledge is won't understand what knowledge of shoes is either.

b5

THEAETETUS: No, he won't.

SOCRATES: Then anyone who's ignorant of what knowledge is won't understand what cobbling is, or indeed what any other expertise is.

THEAETETUS: That's so.

b10

SOCRATES: Then if someone is asked what knowledge is and he answers with the name of some expertise or other, the answer is absurd. He's offering knowledge of something when that wasn't what he was asked for.

c1

THEAETETUS: It seems so.

Plato

SOCRATES: And I think we can also say he's taking an awfully long way round when he could be giving a short and everyday answer. In the case
 c5 of clay, for example, I suppose he could have answered the question in an easy and simple way by just saying 'Clay will be earth thoroughly mixed with liquid', and leaving out whose clay it is.

THEAETETUS: Now that you put it like that, Socrates, it seems so easy! And actually you may be asking the very sort of question that occurred
 d1 to us – me and your namesake Socrates here – just now when we were talking amongst ourselves.

SOCRATES: What sort of question was that, Theaetetus?

THEAETETUS: Theodorus was using diagrams to illustrate a point for
 d5 us about powers,⁶ in relation to a figure of three square feet and one of five square feet, namely that they are not commensurable in length with a figure of one square foot; and he proceeded in this way case by case until he reached a figure of seventeen square feet, where somehow or other he came to a halt. Well, this sort of thing occurred to us – given that the powers were apparently unlimited in number, we should try to combine
 e1 them into one, so that we'd have something to call all these powers.

SOCRATES: And did you find something like that?

THEAETETUS: I think we did. But see what you think.

SOCRATES: Go on.

e5 THEAETETUS: We divided the whole of number into two. Any number that can be produced by multiplying two equal numbers we compared to a square figure, and called it 'square' or 'equal-sided'.

SOCRATES: Good; well done.

THEAETETUS: So then any number between these, namely three, and
 148a five, and any other that can't be produced by multiplying equal numbers, but only by multiplying a greater by a less or a less by a greater, and is always contained by a side that's greater and a side that's less – this we
 a5 compared to an oblong figure, and called it an 'oblong' number.

SOCRATES: Very fine! And what was your next step?

THEAETETUS: Lines that as sides of a square produce the 'equal-sided'
 b1 plane numbers we marked off as 'lengths', and those that produce the

⁶ Which Theaetetus will shortly attempt to define as 'oblong numbers'. To understand this, we need to recognize at least the following: (a) that the mathematics of the time does without 'irrational' numbers; (b) that it therefore has to deal with what we call the roots of non-square numbers in a special way; (c) that this special way is geometrical in form; but (d) that the whole exercise is not just about numbers, but geometry too.

Theaetetus

‘oblong’ ones as ‘powers’ – on the grounds that while these are not commensurable in length with the other sort of lines, they *are* commensurable in the plane figures they have the power to produce. And we made another, similar distinction in relation to solids.

SOCRATES: Boys, no one on earth could give a better example! It seems to me there’s no danger of perjury on Theodorus’ part. b5

THEAETETUS: And yet, Socrates, I wouldn’t be able to answer your question about knowledge in the way I answered about lengths and powers, and I think it’s something of that sort that you’re looking for. So once again Theodorus does appear to be perjuring himself. c1

SOCRATES: How so? If it had been your running he was praising, and he said he’d never come across another young runner as good as you, do you think his praise of you would be any less truthful if you happened to finish behind the fastest runner at his best? c5

THEAETETUS: No, I don’t.

SOCRATES: And do you suppose, as I was saying just now, that finding out about knowledge is a small matter? Don’t you think it’s something for those at the top of their game in every way?

THEAETETUS: Zeus! Yes, I do – it certainly is for people at the very top.

SOCRATES: So be confident about yourself, believe what Theodorus said about you, and commit yourself completely to getting an account of knowledge: what, exactly, is it? c10 d1

THEAETETUS: If commitment is what counts, Socrates, the answer will appear.

SOCRATES: Come on then. You’ve just given us a good start. Try mimicking your answer about powers: just as there were many of them, and yet you covered them all with a single form, try now to apply a single account to the many knowledges there are. d5

THEAETETUS: You can be sure, Socrates, that I’ve made numerous attempts to figure it out, on hearing the questions they said you were asking. But the fact is that I can’t persuade myself that I’ve anything adequate to say myself, or that I’m hearing anyone else give the sort of account that you’re insisting on. On the other hand, I can’t stop worrying about it either. e1 e5

SOCRATES: Those are birth-pains, my dear Theaetetus. You’re having them because you’re not empty-headed, you’re pregnant.

THEAETETUS: I don’t know, Socrates. I’m just telling you how I feel. e10

Plato

- 149a SOCRATES: Then – how ridiculous of you! – you’ve not heard that I’m the son of a midwife? A very fine and muscular one, too: Phaenarete?⁷
 THEAETETUS: That much I have heard.
 SOCRATES: Haven’t you also heard that I practise the same art as she does?
- a5 THEAETETUS: Certainly not.
 SOCRATES: I can assure you I do. But don’t tell on me to everybody else. They don’t recognize this skill of mine, my friend, and it’s not one of the things they say I do, because they don’t know about it; instead they say I’m
 a10 very strange, and reduce people to puzzlement. You’ve heard *that* said of me?
- b1 THEAETETUS: I have.
 SOCRATES: So shall I tell you the cause?
 THEAETETUS: Yes, certainly.
 SOCRATES: It’ll help you understand what I’m getting at if you think
 b5 about the whole situation with midwives. I imagine you know that none of them acts as midwife to others while she is still conceiving and bearing children herself, only when she’s no longer capable of doing so.
 THEAETETUS: Yes, I do.
- b10 SOCRATES: Well, they say Artemis was the cause of this, having been allotted childbirth as her province when she was herself childless. Not
 c1 that she actually assigned midwifery to the barren, because human nature lacks the strength to acquire skill in things where it has no experience; rather she gave the function to women now too old to give birth, as recognition of their similarity to herself.
 THEAETETUS: That’s likely enough.
- c5 SOCRATES: And isn’t it also likely, indeed inevitable, that it should also be midwives more than anyone who can tell whether a woman is pregnant or not?
 THEAETETUS: It certainly is.
 SOCRATES: And what’s more, it’s the midwife who by applying homely
 d1 drugs and singing incantations is able to bring on birth-pains, and to make them gentler if she wishes; she will even bring about the birth when women are in difficulties, or else she will cause a miscarriage in the early stages,⁸ if it seems right.

⁷ The name can be read as/sounds like ‘revealer of excellence/virtue/goodness’ (*phainein* + *aretē*).

⁸ Two words in the text here (*neon on*) are marked as irredeemably corrupt by the editors of the OCT.*