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EDITED BY
CHRISTOPHER ROWE
University of Durham



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Contents

	<i>page</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Chronology</i>	xxxiii
<i>Short summaries of <i>Theaetetus and Sophist</i></i>	xxxv
<i>Further reading</i>	xli
<i>Note on the text and translation</i>	xliv
<i>Theaetetus</i>	I
<i>Sophist</i>	99
<i>Further notes on the text</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	183

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Introduction

The *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* are two of the Platonic dialogues most widely read by philosophers, and they have been read in a variety of different ways, in antiquity as much as in the modern period, and during the centuries in between. Modern discussions of the two dialogues tend to concentrate on specific passages and problems, not always with sufficient attention to the contexts within which those passages and problems occur. The present introduction is constructed on the basis of the evident fact that the two dialogues are written as wholes, and also as a *single* whole, or part of one (see Section 1), and therefore deserve to be read as such. The purpose of the following pages is to help readers find their way through the arguments of the two dialogues from end to end, offering a preliminary way¹ past at least some of the many obstacles – whether problems isolated, or indeed constructed, by modern critics, or other problems of a more mundane sort – that may serve to obstruct an attempt at a continuous reading of two admittedly complex works.

1 A trilogy (or a quartet?)

The *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* form part of a single Platonic project. This is formally signalled by the fact that the end of the *Theaetetus* looks forward

¹ There exists a vast body of secondary literature on the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, and the interpretation of both dialogues is controversial. What follows tends to favour one particular interpretation (namely the translator's), for which in the short space available only the outlines of a justification can be given.

Introduction

to the beginning of the *Sophist*, and the latter correspondingly looks back to the former, the two dialogues supposedly being the record² of conversations taking place on successive days with two main characters, Socrates and Theodorus, present throughout. In fact, the project extends beyond these two to a third, *Statesman*, and *Sophist* can be taken as promising a fourth, *Philosopher*, although if Plato ever genuinely planned a quartet, he did not complete it.

What is this project about? *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* may each broadly be described as concerned with ‘giving an account’ of something (whatever an ‘account’ may turn out to be): of what knowledge is, of what a ‘sophist’ is, and of what it is to be a statesman. If *Philosopher* had been written, it would, presumably, have done the same for the philosopher. All of these four things, namely knowledge (*epistémē*, sometimes interchangeable with ‘wisdom’, *sophia*), the sophist, the statesman (or ‘political expert’, *politikos*), and the philosopher, are intimately bound up with each other. The philosopher, according to his very name (*philo-sophos*), is a seeker after the wisdom or knowledge that the ‘sophist’, by virtue of *his* name,³ appears as claiming already to possess; and the ‘statesman’ or political expert, for his part, will surely need the same thing – wisdom or knowledge, as Socrates in Plato’s *Republic* argues passionately and at great length.

So what exactly is it to be wise, to possess knowledge? Or is there even such a thing as knowledge in the first place? The first main part of the *Theaetetus*, occupying not far short of two-thirds of the whole, is largely devoted to the refutation of an account of knowledge that would make truth relative and leave no room for philosophy, reserving any available space exclusively for one sort of expert: one who happens to label himself a sophist (Protagoras, allegedly the author-in-chief of the account in question). On this account of knowledge, there will be no such thing as falsehood; and this is a topic to which *Sophist* then ultimately returns, as a condition of establishing its final conclusion, namely that sophistry as properly understood deals in just this – falsehood. But the protagonists of the *Sophist* have to work hard to reach that conclusion; as hard, indeed, as the protagonists of the *Theaetetus*

² *Theaetetus* is actually set up in its opening two pages as something recorded and written down as a book by the Socratic Euclides of Megara; nothing is said about the authorship of its sequel.

³ *Sophist*es: practitioner or purveyor of *sophia*, depending on one’s point of view.

Introduction

have to work for whatever results *they* achieve, and the issues that the actors in both dialogues have to deal with extend far beyond those of truth and falsehood: for example, to the question about what is to count as real, or as Plato puts it, what is to count among *ta onta*, ‘the things that are’.

In the process, they engage in conversation not only with each other, but with most of Socrates’ and Plato’s best-known philosophical predecessors, and probably also, more covertly, with some of Plato’s contemporaries. What has emerged by the end of the *Sophist* is, in effect, a reasoned defence of a particular way of looking at the world (the broadest features of which will be sketched in the following two paragraphs), which we may reasonably take to be that of Plato and his Socrates: a defence that treats their opponents entirely seriously, is sometimes prepared to reach compromises with them, and takes very little for granted. For example, if the *Sophist* treats ‘sophist’ as a disputed term, Socrates makes clear that ‘philosopher’ is so too (216d⁴), and, most remarkably, the dialogue goes on not only to suggest some similarities – however misleading these may be – between the sophist and Socrates himself, but to take issue with what looks like one extreme reading of Plato’s own position, attributed to the ‘friends’ or supporters ‘of the forms’ (see Section 2).

In the third part of the trilogy, *Statesman*, there is a rather more assertive tone, less openness to the views of others. The idea that statesmanship, properly understood, might be anything other than knowledge-based is given hardly any space at all. What dominates is the portrait of an impractical, perfect statesmanship, and the roughest of sketches of a slightly more practicable ideal constitution, by comparison with which all existing constitutions are openly declared ‘states of faction’ (*stasiōteiai*) rather than constitutions (*politeiai*), while all actual statesmen are called ‘the greatest imitators and magicians [and] the greatest sophists among sophists’ (*Statesman* 303c). In a way, then, it does no great harm to take the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* in isolation from the *Statesman*, as the present volume does, insofar as the latter is already putting to use results obtained in the former two, and is less

⁴ For this form of reference to Plato’s text, see Note on text and translation.

Introduction

fundamental than they are (unless, that is, for political theory, or for the philosophy of law).

Separating *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* from *Statesman*, however, does have the unfortunate consequence of obscuring one of the central purposes of the whole project: namely to show us the way to living a better life. The *Statesman* offers the Platonic alternative to the Protagorean vision of human life and organization criticized in the *Theaetetus*. ‘Whatever sorts of things seem to each city to be just and fine,’ Protagoras says, as reconstructed by Socrates (*Theaetetus* 167c), ‘these I claim are so for that city, for so long as it thinks them so.’ He may also claim to be able to make cities, and individuals, think sounder or healthier thoughts (whatever ‘sounder’ and ‘healthier’ might be), but his basic position is that he will work in and with individuals and institutions as they are. There could scarcely be a starker contrast with the *Statesman*, which suggests nothing less than starting all over again from scratch, under the guidance of reason and philosophy.

2 *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Republic* (1): ‘forms’ and ‘kinds’

‘Forms’ – in Greek, *eidé* (*eidos* in the singular), or *ideai* – play a central role not only in *Republic*, but in other works that were apparently written prior to *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*: *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*. ‘Forms’ are entities such as ‘the equal itself’, ‘justice itself’, ‘beauty itself’, or ‘the good itself’, which are offered in these dialogues as the real referents of the terms ‘equal’, ‘just’, ‘beautiful’, or ‘good’, or whichever it may be. According to many modern interpreters, such entities are notably absent from the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, being introduced in the *Sophist* only in the context of a discussion of extreme views of how to understand reality, which include the view held by the ‘friends of the forms’ (246b–252a), and – such interpreters claim – not at all in the *Theaetetus*. If this were true, it would represent a significant volte-face. The ‘form [*eidos*] of the good’ plays a particularly prominent role in the *Republic*: Socrates there trumpets it as the most important of all the objects a philosopher seeks to know; it is ‘even beyond being, superior to it in dignity and in power’ (*Republic* vi, 509b), the very key to understanding how we should run our societies and our lives. If this latter topic is as important for *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* as Section 1 has suggested, then we might well expect to find this ‘form’, ‘the good itself’, playing the same role in them

Introduction

as in the *Republic*. But according to what is probably now the standard modern interpretation, at least in the Anglophone world, there is hardly a whisper of it in either work. How could this be? Has Plato perhaps undergone a change of mind, so that he no longer believes in the sorts of things he previously had his Socrates announce with such evident passion?

The answer is surely no. ‘Forms’ are central to *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. At any rate, both dialogues, and particularly the latter, are full of talk about things called *eidē* (or by whatever term may be used interchangeably with *eidē*),⁵ and we are given plenty of reason for supposing that the reference is to exactly the same sort of entities in *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* as it was in *Republic*, or *Phaedo*, or *Phaedrus*. There is, first, that single acknowledged reference to ‘forms’ in the *Sophist*, in the shape of a criticism of the ‘friends of the forms’ for proposing to say that their forms are the only things that are (246a–248a), and to treat everything else as perpetually in a process of coming-into-being, never being. These forms of theirs, like the forms Socrates talked about in the *Republic*, are intelligible and bodiless, and ‘remain forever exactly as they are’. But there is no indication that *eidē* as they appear in the *Sophist* outside this passage, or indeed in the *Theaetetus*, are to be treated any differently. Again, *Theaetetus* can describe its task as understanding ‘what the thing, knowledge, might be in itself’ (146e), and ‘the thing, knowledge, in itself’ sounds not unlike the sort of description usually attaching to ‘forms’; it would be an odd way of beginning a discussion that was designed to do away with them.

Those who suppose forms to be absent from the two dialogues tend to translate *eidos* and related terms (like *genos*) not as ‘form’, but (e.g.) as ‘kind’, and treat them as referring to something like classes and subclasses, or Aristotelian genera and species. There are what may look like strong grounds for such an interpretation, especially in the way the *Sophist* approaches its topic: that is, by repeatedly taking an overarching ‘kind’ (i.e., *genos*, or *eidos*), and dividing it up into sub-‘kinds’; or in the way the argument typically progresses by reference to things in the ordinary world, no matter, apparently, whether these are ‘kinds’ or individuals. But none of this by itself indicates an interest in an analysis into classes, or sets, or anything of the sort. Relationships between

⁵ See Note on text and translation.

Introduction

'kinds', and between 'kinds' and particulars, are typically represented as a matter of 'sharing in', which is the same metaphor that *Republic*, *Phaedo* and other dialogues use for the relationship between particulars and forms, and which Socrates in the *Phaedo* treats as interchangeable with either the 'presence' of the form in the particular, or the particular's 'associating with' the form (*Phaedo* 100d, with 101c). The *genē* and *eidē* being talked about in *Sophist* and *Theaetetus* are *somethings*, entities in themselves – 'forms', which can be shared in by or be present in other *genē* or *eidē*, and especially by and in individuals in space and time, but in themselves are still 'somehow graspable by the mind and without body', and 'remain forever exactly as they are' (i.e., neither do they change, nor do they perish with the particulars that 'share in' them: cf. *Phaedo* 103a).

Theaetetus and *Sophist* represent not a change of mind on Plato's part, but a change of emphasis. The stress in *Republic* and *Phaedo* is on the difference it makes to focus on things in themselves (forms), as the philosopher does, rather than on the ordinary world as it appears to perception, even while both these dialogues acknowledge that it is the ordinary perceptible world from which even the philosopher has to begin. How, after all, would we ever be motivated to think about anything in the first place *except* by the things around us? The 'theory of recollection', advanced in *Phaedo* and elsewhere, provides a mechanism whereby the process can start: we begin to see things as beautiful or ugly, equal or unequal, thanks to the awakening of knowledge acquired before birth. The two new dialogues, but especially *Sophist*, focus more on forms as 'shared in' by, or 'present' in, particulars, and on the 'associations', or 'mixing', between forms, both in themselves and in their involvement with particulars. The perspective of *Republic* and *Phaedo* still surfaces, as in the following passage from the *Theaetetus* (part of a purple 'digression' comparing the ideal philosopher – the 'leader of the philosophical chorus' – with the lawyer in court):

only [the philosopher's] body is truly located in the city and resides in it, because his mind, having concluded that all [the things that concern others] are worth little or nothing, rejects them and flies off in all directions . . . using every sinew to search out every nature among the things that are, taking each thing as a whole, not lowering itself to any of the things close by.

(173e–174a)

Introduction

But the whole context of the passage strongly suggests that this Socrates of Plato's, who is giving this description, does not regard himself as such a 'leader of philosophy'. He may be involved in 'searching out every nature'⁶ among the things that are, taking each as a whole', rather than concerning himself with particulars, 'things close by'. But if he is the same old familiar, Platonic Socrates, he is firmly located in the city, both body *and* soul. Indeed, according to his defence in the *Apology*, his philosophical questioning is chiefly for the city's sake; and in the *Theaetetus* itself he begins by announcing his fondness for his fellow-citizens (143d). Perhaps the visitor from Elea – who takes over the role of main speaker in *Sophist* and *Statesman* – is different (away from his city, and not even given a name). But if so, he has come down from the clouds for the occasion, since he quite evidently shares Socrates' interest in the practical outcomes of his discussions.

3 *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Republic* (2): knowledge and its objects

Real knowledge, for Plato, is only of 'forms'. What this amounts to is the claim, first, that we only know a thing when we know what it is, in and by itself, and second, that there *is* such a thing (whatever it may be: goodness, justice, fire ...) in itself, apart from anything that shares in it. The first of these two claims is made by Plato's Socrates in the course of a long argument (with the 'lovers of sights and sounds', a.k.a. ordinary people) in *Republic* v, 474b–480a; forms as such are probably only introduced later in the dialogue. The second claim is made by Timaeus, presumably on Plato's behalf, in *Timaeus* 51d (to paraphrase: 'I cast my vote for saying that if intellect [= knowledge], and true belief are two separate kinds of things, then there are things, forms, that are imperceptible to the senses and graspable only by intellect').

But this only tells us what knowledge is of, not what knowledge is – that is, it does not tell us what it actually is to *know* something as opposed to having some other sort of cognitive relationship to it. Socrates' discussion with Theaetetus in the *Theaetetus* actually begins with Socrates rebuking his younger interlocutor for suggesting that he can say what knowledge is by giving a list of its objects. It would, then, be strange if it

⁶ For this use of 'nature', see Note on text and translation.

Introduction

turned out that giving an account of real knowledge, which is what they are trying to understand, amounted, after all, to no more than specifying its objects. In any case, if the only things we can (really) know are things that are beyond the reach of the senses, only accessible to the mind, it becomes more, not less, urgent for Plato to say how such access is to be gained. Answering that question ought, surely, to be the absolute and first priority for someone so evidently committed, as is his Socrates, to the importance of discovering the truth about things.

Some of the dialogues may suggest that knowing forms involves a sort of direct contact, a mental variety of seeing or touching. But if forms themselves are outside time and space, that appears to make real knowledge less rather than more accessible: something to be hoped for in an after-life, or dreamed of as some kind of out-of-body experience in this life (as perhaps in the passage cited from the *Theaetetus* in Section 2), but in fact out of our reach while we are alive and apparently most in need of it. Given the practical nature of much of Plato's concern, as illustrated by dialogues like *Republic* and *Statesman*, it would seem extraordinary if he had left matters there. The trilogy *Theaetetus-Sophist-Statesman* may be seen as part of his attempt to fill that crucial gap, and say how it may be possible to acquire knowledge of the most important subjects.

True, *Theaetetus* appears to end in impasse. The argument has shown that knowledge cannot be perception, and neither can it be true belief; and then the third candidate, true belief with an account, is also found wanting. But as Section 1 has indicated, the discussion does not end with the *Theaetetus*. If the *Theaetetus* is taken on its own, then no conclusion about knowledge is reached. But *Sophist* does reach conclusions, not only about the sophist, but about how to understand false belief, and the *Statesman*, too, successfully concludes its treatment of the statesman. Nor are these conclusions subject to any sort of explicit qualification. We are thus left with a situation in which the attempt to say directly what knowledge is apparently runs into the sand, but two attempts to say directly what other things are – that is, in *Sophist* and *Statesman* respectively – appear to succeed splendidly.

This contrast between the apparent failure of *Theaetetus* and the success of *Sophist* and *Statesman* may be explained in different ways. Perhaps it is just that knowledge is a more difficult subject to take on. That is certainly true, at least to go by the continuing inability of philosophers over twenty-four centuries to agree on what it is. (The last

Introduction

account proposed and seemingly rejected in *Theaetetus*, true belief plus ‘an account’, looks strikingly like a strong modern candidate, justified true belief; but we should not be too quick to assume that Plato would have thought of ‘justification’, or of truth, or of belief, in the sorts of ways that we do.) Perhaps the switch of main speakers, from Socrates in *Theaetetus* to the anonymous Eleatic in *Sophist* and *Statesman*, has something to do with the matter. But the fact remains that both the two latter dialogues reach results that at least appear to claim to add something to our understanding – our knowledge – of the way things are. Neither dialogue tells us what the thing, knowledge, actually is; but quite evidently the failure to answer that question has no tendency to suggest to anyone involved that they should stop inquiring into anything else until that first question is answered.

What *Sophist* offers us, like *Statesman* after it, is a demonstration of how we can progress towards knowledge. And what makes that progress possible is, as it must inevitably be, the gradual construction of an *account* of the thing being investigated – not an account belonging to any of the three varieties of ‘account’ considered and rejected in the *Theaetetus*, but one of an altogether more interesting and sophisticated sort (on which, see Section 7 below). In which case, it seems, that last account of knowledge from the *Theaetetus* lives on. Socrates may behave at the end of the dialogue as if he and Theaetetus have managed to kill it off. But that, it turns out, is not the case. To go by the evidence of the *Sophist* and its sequel, knowing what a thing is will after all include giving an account – a very particular sort of account – of that thing.

4 *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Republic* (3): knowledge and belief

But what of the other elements of that last account, ‘true’ and ‘belief’? Truth, presumably, must be included along with the account; knowledge could hardly involve any old account, however sophisticated, regardless of its truth. ‘Belief’, however, may be more problematic (as it may be to know how it can be true). Knowledge, in Plato, is frequently treated as a state of mind that *contrasts* with belief. From this perspective, belief may precede knowledge, but will be a cognitive state distinct from knowledge; it becomes, turns into, knowledge – as the *Meno* puts it, by being ‘bound down by the working out of the reason’ (*Meno* 98a).

Introduction

It has often been held, and is still held by many, that Plato thought belief, like knowledge, had its own special objects. (The term here is *doxa*, often also translated as ‘opinion’, sometimes as ‘judgement’: see Note on text and translation.) More specifically, Plato is held to have thought that knowledge is exclusively of forms, belief exclusively of particulars, so that just as there is no knowledge, or real knowledge, of particulars, so there are no beliefs about forms. The chief justification for this interpretation is purportedly discovered in those passages from the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* referred to at the beginning of Section 3 above (*Republic* v, 474b–480a; *Timaeus* 51d), particularly in the first, which includes the plain statement – agreed to by both Socrates and his interlocutor – that, subject to certain conditions, it is impossible to know and believe the same things (478a–b).

This looks, on the face of it, like an open-and-shut case. Or, more strictly, it would look like that if it were not for (a) the fact that Socrates will go on in Book vi of the *Republic* to describe his own beliefs (*doxai*) about the form of the good, (b) the fact that in Plato generally belief can be about anything (as the *Theaetetus* confirms), and (c) the conditions attached to the statement in question,⁷ one or more of which will hold, if at all, only in the particular context in which the statement at issue is being made – that is, one in which Socrates is trying to persuade non-philosophers that their grasp of beauty is a matter of belief (merely), not of knowledge. In short, the passage does not show what it is supposed to show, and neither does its counterpart in the *Timaeus*. The real upshot of the *Republic* passage is not that knowledge and belief have distinct sets of objects, ‘forms’, and particulars respectively, but rather that knowledge of anything is not to be got from particulars, only from recognizing and investigating things in themselves; and that particulars can give us no more than beliefs about those things. The *Timaeus* passage, for its part, confirms what is implied but not shown by the *Republic* argument, namely that ‘forms’ are what make knowledge possible, while adding the new information that particulars can give us *true* belief; not only that, *Timaeus* tells us, but everyone has a share in it. (Thus everyone,

⁷ ‘It’s impossible,’ [Glaucon] said, ‘given what we’ve agreed; if it’s true (1) that different capacities are naturally for different things, (2) that both of the two things in question, belief and knowledge, are capacities, and (3) that they’re different capacities, it follows that there’s no room for what’s known to be the same as what’s believed.’

Introduction

it seems, will have access of some sort to truth: presumably in virtue of their access to particulars, and because these latter ‘share in’ what things are ‘in themselves’; even ordinary, non-philosophical people must have some basic ability to generalize across particular cases. None of this is incompatible with the *Republic* passage, though to have made it explicit there would have got seriously in the way of the argument being made in that particular context, namely that the ‘lovers of sights and sounds’ – who turn out to be people in general – have *mere belief*, not knowledge.)

Given this reading of *Republic* and *Timaeus*,⁸ they constitute no reason for excluding belief from figuring in Plato’s account of knowledge, in *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, or anywhere else. This is a matter of some importance. If we had reasons, independently of these latter two dialogues, for excluding belief from the account of knowledge, then the second and third accounts proposed in *Theaetetus* – true belief, then true belief plus an account – would have to be regarded as doomed from the start, like the first (knowledge = perception): no-hoppers, not more or less plausible candidates that come to be rejected in the face of the specific arguments Socrates and Theaetetus raise against them. If, on the other hand, there is no such external reason preventing us from supposing that belief and knowledge can coexist, as it were, then both the second and the third of the proposed accounts may be taken at face value – that is, as serious answers to the problem of knowledge – even if one or both turn out to be judged unsatisfactory, and one of them almost immediately (most of the discussion of true belief actually being taken up with the problem of *false belief*). With the first of these two alternatives, the whole ‘inquiry’ into knowledge was always a set-up, its intentions ultimately negative (as is surely the case with knowledge = perception); with the second, it is more like a genuine inquiry, undertaken with positive intent, albeit an inquiry whose eventual outcomes will presumably be known in advance to the author, if not to the participants.

Which of the two alternatives is correct cannot finally be settled here. It should be noticed, however, that belief, *doxa*, is introduced into the argument of the *Theaetetus* well before the second and third accounts of

⁸ Which will be particularly controversial. Many interpreters have had, and still have, a great deal invested in the idea that Plato posits distinct and exclusive sets of objects for knowledge and belief. But there is a clear case for abandoning the idea; and *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* themselves strengthen that case.

Introduction

knowledge, and in a way that makes it a central and apparently even indispensable aspect of knowing. The relevant part of the argument, completing the refutation of the first account of knowledge (knowledge = perception), is summed up in the following exchange:

SOCRATES:... our aim in starting this conversation wasn't at all to find out what knowledge was not; it was to find out what it is. Still, at least we have advanced far enough to know not to look for it in perception at all, but rather under whatever name we're to use to describe the soul when it's occupied with the things that are, itself by itself.

THEAETETUS: Yes, and the name we give it, I think, Socrates, is forming and having beliefs.

SOCRATES: Yes, my friend, you think correctly.

(*Theaetetus* 187a)

'Forming and having beliefs' translates the single Greek word *doxazein*, the verb corresponding to *doxa*. Thus Socrates appears perfectly content, here in the *Theaetetus*, to put thinking in general under the heading of *doxa*; and not only that, the kind of thinking – by the soul on its own – that has just been treated as a requirement of attaining being, truth, and knowledge. Perception, it has been established, cannot aspire to this, reduced as it has been to bare, unthinking sensation. Perception grasps white now, or hot now, but not whiteness or heat, and certainly not the being of either (that they are, or what they are); neither, then, can it grasp the truth of anything, or *know* anything at all. By contrast, *doxa* – whether we render this as 'belief', 'opinion', or 'judgement', or just 'thinking', or 'calculation'⁹ – can do all of these things. And having failed with perception, *Theaetetus* will now duly offer 'true belief' as his next candidate (as he says, knowledge cannot be any and every belief, given that there can be false beliefs). Plainly, far from there being a contrast between belief and knowledge in this context, believing is, here in the *Theaetetus* at least, a part of knowing. And this is significant, because there is nothing *here* that would be affected by the failure of either the next candidate for the title of knowledge, true belief, nor the last, true belief plus an account; whatever knowledge may be, we cannot access it without thought, or calculation, or 'belief'.

⁹ 'Forming and having beliefs', above, as a translation of *doxazein*, is an attempt at a compromise between these alternatives, while maintaining 'belief' as the standard rendering of *doxa*. See Note on text and translation.

Introduction

But then the question can be raised again: is it so certain that this last candidate fails? If we consider *Theaetetus* in isolation, perhaps it does fail, though with the proviso that the failure may only be for want of a serviceable model of ‘account’ (not because of its reference to belief), and another model might have saved it. On the other hand, if we consider *Theaetetus* along with *Sophist*, as the evidence suggests that we should, then Plato will be admitting that the list of ways of ‘giving an account’ that Socrates and Theaetetus considered actually *was* incomplete, and he will be opening the way for us to suppose that the search for knowledge has made real progress – enough progress, indeed, for the discussion to move on from a theoretical discussion of knowledge to a practical demonstration, in the shape of the treatment of the sophist, of what it might be like to add to our store of it.

5 ‘Dialectic’

Theaetetus and *Sophist* are both written illustrations of ‘dialectic’,¹⁰ philosophical conversation. Dialectic proceeds mainly by way of question and answer, founded – at least ideally – on collaboration between the interlocutors; and written ‘dialectic’, written ‘dialogues’, reproduce the same collaborative process. Or, more strictly, they *pretend* to reproduce it (pretend quite literally, in the case of the *Theaetetus*, through the fiction of Euclides’ authorship). Any actual conversation, even involving philosophers, is clearly capable of being unpredictable, uneven, shapeless, and unproductive – features that are of more interest to novelists than to a philosophical author, or at any rate one like Plato. Plato’s dialogues may take unexpected turns; they may vary enormously in style and tone; and they may even appear to be unproductive. But shapeless they are not. They are, rather, products of the most careful design.

An important part of that design is that the author, Plato, should be as little visible as possible. Strictly speaking, he is not there at all. He never appears, and is referred to only twice (once, in the *Phaedo*, as absent). Maybe, then, we should leave him out of the equation, and just let the dialogues speak for themselves. This is how some literary interpreters of Plato in fact do operate, as in a way do those philosophical interpreters

¹⁰ In Greek, *dialektiké* (*sc. technē*): ‘the art of conversation’.

Introduction

who content themselves with analysing and commenting on the arguments without too much reference to their context within a particular dialogue or within the corpus as a whole. But Plato's dialogues are not just imagined, isolated snatches of conversation between Socrates (or whoever it may be) and various interlocutors, like Xenophon's *Memoirs of Socrates* – vignettes of the great man bundled together with a minimum of organization. Each of Plato's dialogues belongs to a larger whole, whether this is constituted by a particular cluster or sequence of dialogues, as with *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, or by Plato's works in general, or by both. The first type of case, which is relatively rare, will have been illustrated well enough by preceding sections of this Introduction. As for the second, here, too, the interconnections between the various and supposedly self-standing parts of the whole are so obvious that no interpretation of any individual part – that is, of any individual dialogue in the corpus – can usefully ignore them; although the fact that neither the connections themselves nor their implications are usually spelled out explicitly makes understanding them difficult and controversial, and is indeed the chief reason why there has always been, and no doubt always will be, so little agreement among even the most informed readers of Plato as to what exactly he stands for.

At the macroscopic level, then, there is shape to Plato, but dimly or at any rate differently discerned. At the microscopic level of the individual dialogue (or group of dialogues), on the other hand, the shape is more readily visible. Every dialogue has a more or less well-defined *structure* – and in this it begins to show its real differences from any actual conversation. Even teachers planning a discussion with students cannot arrange that their interlocutors will offer a particular intervention at a particular time, in order for the conversation to go in this direction rather than that, as Plato can; they may well try to influence the outcomes by making their own interventions, but this is an entirely different matter. In Plato's dialogues, the interlocutors are as much under his control as are the main speakers. He not only dictates the destination, but the route to that destination. This is not of course to suggest that the written dialogue has nothing in common with what it claims to imitate. A fictional conversation, however rigged, still has the capacity to draw the reader in, as a real conversation may draw in the bystander, and that is no doubt one of the chief motivations for Plato's use of the dialogue form. He wants to avoid 'talking like a book', as his Socrates accuses Protagoras of doing in the

Introduction

Protagoras (328d–329a), instead allowing his readers to march in step with the actual partners in the dialogue as they move the conversation forward. But this underlines how *unlike* a live conversation the written Platonic dialogue actually is; if anything, it is the virtual ‘conversation’ between Plato and his reader that approximates more nearly to the real thing, insofar as the reader has the freedom of response that real conversations presuppose and that the interlocutors in the dialogues universally and necessarily lack.

The structures of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* themselves will be sketched below (see ‘Short summaries of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*’), but in the meantime it may be useful to list some general features of the organization of the Platonic dialogue. There is, first, the choice of characters – typically, Socrates plus one other, but sometimes, in the later dialogues, Socrates will cede his place as questioner, and sometimes there will be more than one respondent. Insofar as dialectic, in its Platonic form, evidently derives from the practice of the original Socrates, the presence of Socrates or a substitute will in a way be a basic requirement; the choice of respondent or respondents will often be determined by the subject matter, but failing that it will typically be someone younger than the main speaker, a feature that simultaneously reflects the implicit hierarchical relationship between questioner and respondent, and the archetypal image of Socrates in conversation with the youth of Athens with which that relationship begins. Second, the argument will, broadly speaking, be linear. It may veer off course, or digress, or loop back on itself: still, it will always maintain a forward momentum. A third typical feature of the Platonic dialogue, and for present purposes the most important, is a corollary of the second: the forward momentum of the argument tends to be maintained by having each successive stage build on what has gone before – having it not merely take off from the preceding stage, but actually use its results, positive as well as negative, as the basis on which to construct the next part of the argument.

A concrete example, from the *Theaetetus* (one that will already be partly familiar): perception – as reduced to immediate sensations – fails as an answer to the question about what knowledge is because it has no access to being or truth; for such access, we need *doxa*, (roughly translated as) ‘belief’. So what about *doxa* as a candidate? Obviously not *doxa* on its own, because *doxa* may be false as well as true; true *doxa*, then. But now true *doxa* too proves inadequate. What about adding

Introduction

‘together with an account’? But the line of argument may also be seen as extending both further back and further forward: further back, given that *doxa* will need to be combined with perception, and further forward, given what was proposed in Sections 1–4 above about the relationship between *Sophist* (and *Statesman*) and *Theaetetus*, and that *Sophist* may actually build on the supposedly failed final account of the *Theaetetus*.

This third feature might be summed up by saying that Platonic dialogues tend to work cumulatively. Or if this is too large a generalization to make without rehearsing the evidence, the proposal is that in any case *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* can be seen to work in this way: that is, by a sort of accumulation, so that by the end of the process, despite setbacks along the way, not only is there an account of knowledge on the table, but an account (as we can see, reading back) of some depth.

6 The *dramatis personae* of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*

Such an interpretation, as applied to the *Theaetetus*, is virtually the converse of one of the oldest and best known of interpretations of the dialogue (advanced by the so-called ‘New Academy’ in the centuries after Plato’s death), which takes it as evidence that Plato is sceptical about any possibility of knowledge. This latter interpretation is hard to square with many aspects of the *Theaetetus*, and particularly with many of the things that are said in the context of the refutation of Protagorean relativism in the first part. It does gain some traction from Socrates’ description of himself, in *Theaetetus* 149a–151d, as a midwife who can assist with the birth of others’ ideas, and nurture them or kill them off as appropriate, but is barren of ideas himself. But this need be no more than a variant of his normal stance, as announced in Plato’s *Apology* and exhibited in a number of short dialogues like *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, or *Lysis*: as someone who knows nothing of substance, except for one thing, namely that he knows nothing. Not only does he know nothing, but he claims (this, too, is in the *Apology*) to discover only ignorance in others too,¹¹ and his conversations as Plato ‘records’ them not infrequently end in impasse, as they do in the last three dialogues named, and as *Theaetetus* does. At the same time, even in such cases, Plato’s Socrates

¹¹ He refers at *Theaetetus* 149a to his reputed ability to reduce people to perplexity.

Introduction

plainly shows himself a person of strong convictions, and in other dialogues, like *Phaedo* and, especially, *Republic*, he appears perfectly ready to put forward positive proposals of his own, even while steadfastly avoiding any suggestion that he possesses anything beyond beliefs; these he will typically represent as the outcomes of arguments, and as conclusions to be held on to for so long as those arguments stay unrefuted.

Here, in *Theaetetus*, the subject is that very thing that he says matters more than anything, for any human being, and yet claims not to possess: knowledge. It thus seems particularly appropriate that *this* conversation should end in at least apparent impasse, and that all three proposals about what knowledge is should come from *Theaetetus*, not from him. What would Socrates know about knowledge, of all things? All he can do is what he always does, act as midwife, and see to *Theaetetus'* offspring. If it happens that any of these shows promise, then that is none of Socrates' doing; the idea was conceived by someone else, not by him. But such a strategy on Plato's part is not only dramatically appropriate. He does not deploy it merely in order to preserve Socrates' role as a know-nothing (*Theaetetus* 179b). Nor, surely, is it intended as ironic. We might be tempted, especially if we have read the *Republic*, to take Socrates' comparison of himself as midwife as at worst a sham, at best disingenuous, but this would be a mistake. Granted, it may be more than a little overdone. Socrates is, in general, very much in charge, as he always is; for example, it is certainly not *Theaetetus* who creates the complex picture of Protagoreanism as the kernel of his proposal that knowledge is perception. But there is a point of substantial importance behind the midwife image, namely that whether or not some particular thesis – whether *Theaetetus'*, about knowledge, or anybody else's about anything – is able to survive or proves not to be viable has nothing to do with any special insight or knowledge Socrates has into the subject. If it survives and flourishes, that is because it deserves to do so. Socrates is the divinely appointed midwife-critic, or, to put it more prosaically, the representative of an impersonal reason ('is what is before us true, or is it not?').

It is this critical role of Socrates' that characterizes the *Theaetetus* as a whole, and in a way explains its ending: what could fit better than to have Socrates still worrying away at whatever the argument (or *Theaetetus*) may have thrown up, however promising it might appear to be? (Isn't that just what Socrates is supposed to do?) The *Sophist* includes a large

Introduction

critical component, but overall it is more openly and directly constructive, not only ending with a positive conclusion, but reaching it via a series of moves all instigated and systematically carried through by the main speaker. This is plainly not a role for the midwife of the *Theaetetus*. Instead Plato gives it to a nameless visitor, who is identified only as originating from Elea in southern Italy – the birthplace of the philosopher Parmenides, who, by the dramatic date of the *Sophist* (shortly before Socrates' trial and execution), was long since dead, but who is nevertheless an important presence in the dialogue, as he is in the *Theaetetus*. The visitor is introduced merely as a philosopher and ‘a friend of the followers of Parmenides and Zeno’, and presumably, since neither we nor those present learn much more about him than that, either in *Sophist* or in *Statesman* (in which he again leads the discussion), that is enough to explain Plato’s choice of him to lead this next stage of the conversation. The fulsome way in which Socrates treats him when he is introduced may suggest that we are supposed to think of him as further on, philosophically, than Socrates is; certainly he is well placed, through his Eleatic connections, to mount the major amplification, or revision, of Parmenides’ position¹² that turns out to be key to the final account of the sophist. He certainly assumes a degree of authority, regarding question-and-answer as easier than monologue, ‘provided one’s partner causes no trouble and is easily led’ (*Sophist* 217d). The sentiment immediately differentiates him from the Socrates of *Theaetetus*; but it is entirely in keeping with the greater directness of the *Sophist* as a whole.

The Visitor, in fact, chooses as his interlocutor the boy Theaetetus, who showed few signs of being ‘easily led’ when paired with Socrates in *Theaetetus*; he actually made a fair bit of the running. But the Visitor in *Sophist* gives him little opportunity to do so, and Theaetetus is happy to go along. Nor is there any reason for him not to go along, insofar as the *Sophist* as a whole, like the *Statesman* after it, reads like something of a tour de force: a demonstration of philosophical expertise that turns even apparent missteps into lessons in method. In the *Statesman*, Theaetetus will be replaced by a friend of the same age (see *Sophist* 218b) who happens to share Socrates’ name, just as Theaetetus shares Socrates’

¹² The Visitor wants it to be clear that he is no ‘parricide’: see 241d.

Introduction

looks; is it being suggested that the older Socrates, too, is one of those being led by the Eleatic Visitor?

Theaetetus is an outstanding pupil of the mathematician Theodorus, a native of Cyrene currently staying in Athens. Theodorus is Socrates' friend and the original partner in the main conversation in *Theaetetus*, before *Theaetetus* arrives on the scene; he is the one who arranges to meet Socrates the next day, when the sophist is discussed, and the one who introduces the Eleatic Visitor. He is, then, a major player, and indeed for a considerable part of the *Theaetetus* it is he and not *Theaetetus* who responds to Socrates' questions: the part, that is, which is mainly concerned with the discussion and refutation of the relativist Protagoras' views. Socrates refers to him as Protagoras' friend several times, and Theodorus accepts the description; but Socrates also once refers to Protagoras as Theodorus' teacher (179a), and to Theodorus as the guardian of Protagoras' legacy (164e–165a). Theodorus thus appears as something of a contradiction. His expertise as a mathematician is emphasized, and provides an immediate, and apparently secure, example of knowledge. Indeed that might in itself be a good enough reason for his inclusion in the cast list. Yet there he is, defending the views of someone who systematically rejects the very possibility of any expertise except in one small area (which apparently does not include mathematics).

No one in the dialogue points to the contradiction, and maybe Theodorus is simply ensuring that an old friend gets a decent hearing. But there may be more to it. Cyrene was the birthplace of the Socratic Aristippus, who was known for his extreme views on pleasure, but who also became the founding figure of a group, later labelled as 'the Cyrenaics', who reportedly developed an epistemology that looks closely related both to Protagorean relativism and to the kind of theory to which Socrates reduces this in the *Theaetetus*. 'The Cyrenaics' are reported as holding that our immediate affections or sensations are knowable, but what causes those affections is not: we can know, for example, that we are becoming hot, but we can say nothing for certain about what is making us hot (except that it, whatever it is, is making us hot). It is by no means certain that such ideas were already current in Cyrene at the time of writing of *Theaetetus*. But it is at any rate worth noting that (a) a version of them is worked out in *Theaetetus*; (b) Cyrene is the only place we know of (apart from *Theaetetus*) where such ideas were developed;

Introduction

(c) the main conversation in the dialogue starts with a reference to Cyrene, and with Socrates saying that he would have asked ‘whether there were any young people in Cyrene interested in geometry or philosophy of some kind’ had he not been more interested in the state of the intellectual health of young Athenians (143d); and (d) the link between Cyrenaic and Protagorean ideas was acknowledged even in antiquity. It may even be that we should label Cyrenaic epistemology as the new Protagoreanism. According to this story, Theodorus will be defending Protagoras not merely out of friendship, but out of loyalty to the intellectual tradition of his native city and its new take on his friend’s ideas.

This is, of course, all highly speculative, and the *Theaetetus* can for the most part be read quite satisfactorily without it. It may nonetheless serve as a useful reminder that reading any part of Plato in context is not just a matter of linking one part of his oeuvre to others, but also of understanding the wider intellectual and philosophical environment within which he was writing, during the years following Socrates’ death. For dramatic reasons, the philosophical rivals with whom Socrates explicitly engages must all belong to the past: Parmenides and Zeno, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Protagoras. But philosophy did not stop with these great figures, or with unnamed others (the atomists, for example, whom Plato refuses ever to name, though they are in all probability often on his mind: for example, at *Sophist* 246a–b); nor is it plausible to suppose that Plato, of all people, wrote without attention to what had gone on, philosophically, in the time between him and them, or to what was going on as he wrote. And as it happens, in both *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, the focus is ultimately not so much on individual philosophical figures as on the types of theory and the ways of thinking that they represent. If it is difficult for us to identify specific contemporary references, it is as well to be aware of their likely presence in both dialogues, not least since Plato repeatedly signals as much, whether by representing the *Theaetetus* as written by Euclides, who reputedly had his own ‘school’ of philosophy at Megara; whether by making *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* a sort of memorial to Theaetetus (who is dying as Euclides introduces ‘his’ book);¹³ or by

¹³ Theaetetus’ death is datable either to 369 BCE or, more probably, to 391 BCE. This, incidentally, will fix the dramatic date of Euclides’ authorship (or give it a *terminus post quem*: see 146a), but not the date of Plato’s own.

Introduction

wheeling in an anonymous Eleatic, ‘friend of the followers of Parmenides and Zeno’, to give a new perspective on Parmenides. (Or are we, perhaps, to take the visitor’s anonymity as a sign that the new perspective owes more to Plato than to anyone now in Elea?)

There is probably one further identifiable reference to contemporary philosophical developments in the last part of *Theaetetus*. *Theaetetus* attributes his third and final proposal about knowledge (knowledge is true belief plus an account) to someone else, whom he has heard proposing to treat knowable things as things of which a reasoned account can be given, unknowables as unaccountable (201c–d). He cannot spell this out, but Socrates can: he proposes to ‘swap with you, a dream for a dream. . . . I thought I was hearing certain people saying’ that the primary elements of things could only be named, and nothing else could be said about them, so that they were ‘unaccountable’; of things composed out of these, by contrast, an account could be given – by weaving together the names of their component elements. Now it happens that Aristotle¹⁴ attributes a theory rather like the one just inadequately summarized to another, older Socratic for whom Plato evidently had little more love than he did for Aristippus: Antisthenes.¹⁵ Socrates’ reference to ‘swapping . . . a dream for a dream’ could be understood as a covert acknowledgement by Plato that actually neither *Theaetetus* nor Socrates could have heard of the theory, which is still in the future. This is important for the interpretation of this final part of the dialogue, for the three interpretations of ‘account’ that Socrates considers and rejects are introduced as the ones the author of the theory in question ‘intended “account” to signify for us’ (206c), and indeed the second is precisely the one we would expect to go with the theory (a listing of components). We cannot be certain, of course, that Plato is alluding to Antisthenes, or indeed that he is not inventing the whole theory for himself; but the fact is that, as he presents it, what is refuted is strictly not the proposal itself, that knowledge is true belief plus an account, so much as someone else’s version of that proposal.

¹⁴ *Metaphysics* 1024b26–1025a1.

¹⁵ Another possible reference to Antisthenes is in *Sophist* 251b–c. For the source material on Antisthenes and other Socratics, in English translation, see George Boys-Stones and Christopher Rowe (eds), *The Circle of Socrates: Readings in the First Generation Socratics* (Hackett, 2013).

Introduction

7 Questions of method: ‘collection’ and ‘division’

Now I am myself, Phaedrus [says Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*], a lover of these divisions and collections, so that I may be able both to speak and to think; and if I find anyone else that I think has the natural capacity to look to one and to many, I pursue him ‘in his footsteps, behind him, as if he were a god’. And the name I give those who can do this – whether it’s the right one or not, god knows, but at any rate up till now I have called them ‘experts in dialectic’.¹⁶

‘Collecting’ and ‘dividing’ seems to be what the ‘godlike’ Eleatic Visitor in the *Sophist* does. For the purpose of his account of the sophist, he generally starts by taking a larger kind or form that seems to include the one he is looking for, and then he splits this up until he gets to the right one (the final account being, roughly speaking, the sum of all the parts that have not been discarded in the process). This seems to suggest two things: (1) that arriving at the larger kind is ‘collecting’, the splitting up ‘dividing’; and (2) that ‘collection’ has to precede ‘division’. Neither (1) nor (2), however, is a necessary part of the method; and both limit rather than add to our understanding of what is going on in the *Sophist* (see 224c, 251d, and 267b, where ‘collecting’ is explicitly referred to). Whatever the *Phaedrus* intends by its (‘these’) ‘divisions and collections’, the ability to ‘divide’ and ‘collect’ in the *Sophist* surely refers to something much richer: namely the general ability to trace the relationships among kinds or forms, and therefore also the relationships among the particular, individual things that share in them, insofar as they do. The aim is a better understanding of all the similarities and differences between ‘the things that are’, whether forms or spatio-temporal particulars. Thus the discussion of the sophist claims to tell us both about how sophistry itself relates to – is like, and is different from – other things, taken in themselves, and what actual, flesh-and-blood sophists are. This is more than just giving a distinguishing mark¹⁷ of sophistry, and sophists; it amounts to being able to locate them in relation to everything else, seeing them both together with all the things they relate to, and

¹⁶ *Phaedrus* 266b–c; compare *Sophist* 253d–254a.

¹⁷ I.e., the third of the interpretations of ‘giving an account’ discussed in *Theaetetus*.

Introduction

as distinct from them and from other things.¹⁸ The discussion of the ‘greatest kinds’ that lies at the heart of the *Sophist* is itself, as the Visitor makes clear (253b–e), an illustration of this process – and a much more fundamental illustration than the discussion of the sophist it helps bring to a successful conclusion.

¹⁸ Or in the language of the *Phaedrus*: ‘perceiving [things] together … [and] being able to cut [them] up again, kind by kind, according to the natural joints, and not … like an inexpert butcher’ (*Phaedrus* 265d).

Chronology

BCE

c. 515	Parmenides born
c. 490	Protagoras born
469	Socrates born
424/3	Plato born
c. 415	Theaetetus born
c. 420	Protagoras dies
c. 409?	Plato meets Socrates
399	Trial and execution of Socrates
390s-380s	Plato probably writes the first and largest group of his dialogues (as measured, primarily, by style), including some of those usually described as ‘middle’: <i>Cratylus</i> , <i>Phaedo</i> , <i>Symposium</i>)
391 (or 369?)	Theaetetus dies
c. 380s	Plato founds the Academy at Athens
380s-370s	Plato probably writes the second group of dialogues: <i>Parmenides</i> , <i>Phaedrus</i> , <i>Republic</i> , <i>Theaetetus</i>
360s-340s	Plato probably writes the third group of dialogues: <i>Sophist</i> , <i>Statesman</i> , <i>Philebus</i> , <i>Timaeus-Critias</i> , <i>Laws</i> (known to be his last work)
348/7	Plato dies