

Plato's Later Metaphysics & Epistemology (PHIL 107B/207B) – Guided Reading Questions

9/29 The *Theaetetus*: Prologue | Definition “o”

start–151d

- Much of today's reading is the “prologue” to the dialogue – a dramatic introduction to the philosophical discussion to come. Plato is well known for including in his prologues thematic allusions to the dialogue's main concerns. What allusions to the *Theaetetus*'s main theme of knowledge can you find in its prologue, and what might this tell us about the dialogue to come?
- At 146c–d, Theaetetus attempts to define what knowledge is by offering a list of specific examples and kinds of knowledge. (This is the dialogue's so-called Definition “o”.) Socrates obviously doesn't like this definition. But what's so bad about defining something in this way? Is Socrates right to reject this sort of definition? And what does his rejection tell us about the sort of definition he *is* looking for?

10/4 Definition I: ‘Knowledge is perception’

151d–160e

- Theaetetus' first (proper) proposed definition is that knowledge is perception (151e). This proposal is a bit surprising, given that his first attempt at an answer made reference to theoretical sciences like geometry and practical arts like cobbling – areas of expertise which require much more than mere perception to master. So why *is* Theaetetus' first definition at all plausible? What considerations might have led him (or would lead anyone else) to suppose that knowledge is perception? Are these considerations reasonable ones?
- Socrates goes on to relate Theaetetus' thesis that knowledge is perception to two other ideas: Protagoras' “Measure Doctrine” (the claim that “man is the measure of all things”), and Protagoras' “Secret Doctrine” (the claim that “all things are in motion”, also associated with Heraclitus et al.). Socrates treats both these claims as equivalent to Theaetetus' thesis (see, e.g., 160e). Are they? Is someone who is committed to one of them committed to the other two? In what ways are they related? In what ways are they different?

10/6 Definition I: Initial objections | Refutation of Protagoras

160e–171d

- Socrates begins his refutation of Definition I by presenting a number of cheap objections to Protagoras' Measure Doctrine (161c–165e) – objections which, as he himself admits (e.g., at 164c), seem based on superficial verbal contradictions, rather than deep problems in Protagoras' position. Why, then, does Socrates bother including these objections in his argument? And why does Plato bother including these objections in the dialogue? Are they really as superficial as Socrates claims they are?
- At 170a–171c (and especially at 171a–c), Socrates presents his famous “self-refutation” argument against Protagoras' Measure Doctrine – an argument which purports to show that, if Protagoras admits that the Measure Doctrine is true, then he also admits that the Measure Doctrine is false. Read this argument slowly and carefully. Does the argument seem valid to you? Are there any moves which seem suspicious? And even if this argument doesn't work exactly as it's supposed, does it still succeed in refuting the Measure Doctrine in any other way?

10/11 The digression | Refutation of Protagoras, cont'd

171d–179c

- At 172c–177c, Socrates breaks off into a digression, explaining the difference between two basic types of people: the philosophical person and the person of the law-courts. What jumps out at about this digression? Do any of Socrates' comments surprise you? Why do think the digression appears at this point in the text, at this point in the argument? In what ways might it relate to the dialogue's main theme of knowledge?

- At 177c–179b, Socrates presents a second argument against Protagoras’ Measure Doctrine – an argument which purports to show that the Measure Doctrine is false at least in cases involving judgments about the *future*. Compare this argument to the sophisticated formulation of Protagoras’ position at 166a–168c. Does it seem to you that Protagoras would accept Socrates’ argument here as a compelling refutation of his position? In what ways might he try to resist Socrates’ argument?

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10/13 Definition I: Refutation of Heraclitus

179c–184b

- At 181c–183c, Socrates present an argument against Protagoras’ Secret Doctrine, the Heraclitean “Flux Theory” that all things are in motion. His stated conclusion seems to be that, if this theory is true, then no statement would be any truer than its opposite, including the statement that ‘knowledge is perception’; therefore the theory refutes itself. Why is this an effective refutation of the Flux Theory? (Or isn’t it?) Does this refutation work only on the extreme version of the Flux Theory which Socrates puts forward (according to which all things are always in motion in every way)? What justifies Socrates’ assumption that proponents of this Flux Theory are committed to this extreme version?

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10/18 Definition I: Final refutation

184b–186e

- The argument in this section relies on a general principle which Socrates puts forth at 185a: “what is perceived through one power (=capacity=ability) cannot be perceived through another power.” Why should we accept this principle? Can you think of any apparent counterexamples to it? What is its most charitable interpretation? And even if it is not universally true, does this affect the validity of the overall argument?
- Socrates’ argument here aims to show that perception does not get at or grasp “being”, and therefore cannot be the same thing as knowledge. What sense of ‘being’ do you think Socrates is talking about here? “Essential” being – what an object itself *is*, as opposed to what it is *like*? “Veridical” being – how an object *truly* is, as opposed to how it merely *appears*? The “Form” of Being – what *being itself* is, as opposed to what *ordinary objects* are? Or something else? Read through the text here carefully, paying attention to the ways in which Socrates describes this concept of ‘being’, and the ways in which he uses it in his argument.

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10/20 Definition II: ‘Knowledge is true judgment’ | False judgment

187a–191a, 200d–201c

- At 187b, Theaetetus presents his second proposed definition: that knowledge is true judgment. As it turns out, Socrates is able to quickly refute this definition by means of a simple counterexample, at 201a–c. Yet instead of proceeding right to this refutation, Socrates first embarks on a long digression about the possibility of false judgment. Why do you think Plato includes this digression, especially given the falsity of Theaetetus’ definition? What, if anything, does this digression add to Theaetetus’ definition?
- At 187e–190e, Socrates presents a series of arguments against what would seem an incontrovertible claim: that false judgment is possible (or, essentially, that it is possible for us to be wrong). (In fact, such arguments were common in Plato’s time, and it is generally held that the earliest explanation of how false judgment is possible appeared in Plato’s *Sophist* (which was almost surely composed *after* the *Theaetetus*.) What errors can you spot in the arguments? Are certain possibilities overlooked? And more interesting, is there any truth in these arguments? Is there a certain sense of judgment to which these arguments validly apply?

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10/25 Definition II: The wax block & the aviary

191a–200d

- Socrates’ simile of the wax block at 191c–196c presents a vivid image of how false judgment can occur, namely, by the misapplication of thought to perception. Yet after much elaboration of this simile, Socrates curtly dismisses it, at 195e–196c, because it fails to explain how false judgment can occur in cases where perception is not involved. But why think this is a problem for the simile of the wax block? Doesn’t this simile still show that false judgment (of some sort) is indeed possible? And why would Socrates spend so much time developing the simile only in the end to quickly tear it down?

- Socrates' simile of the aviary at 197b–200b present a second image of how false judgment can occur, intended to improve on the shortcomings of the wax block simile. How exactly does the simile of the aviary improve upon the simile of the wax block? Why does it still fail as an explanation of the possibility of false judgment? Why does Theaetetus' attempt to improve upon the simile further at 199e, by introducing pieces of ignorance into the aviary, also fail? What do all of these failed attempts tell us about the nature of false judgment?

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10/27 Definition III: 'Knowledge is true judgment plus an account'

201c–206b

- At 201d, Theaetetus presents his third and last proposed definition: that knowledge is true judgment with an "account". Following this, Socrates recalls a dream he once had, which is meant to elaborate Theaetetus' definition. However, Socrates then shows that the picture presented in his dream runs into contradiction; he ultimately describes it as "tomfoolery" (206b); and after dismissing the dream Socrates goes on to present a number of independent refutations of Theaetetus' definition. Why, then, does Socrates bother recounting the dream in the first place?
- What is the picture presented in the dream, exactly? Why can the elements only be named? Why can nothing else be said of them? Why are they perceivable? And why does all this amount to their being unknowable? In what way are the elements "woven together" to create complexes? How is this the same as the way in which their names may be woven together to create an account? What makes this ontological picture of things at all plausible or attractive? Is it actually susceptible to the objections which Socrates raises against it?

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11/1 Definition III: The meaning of 'account'

206c–end

- At 206c–210a, Socrates distinguishes between three possible meanings of 'account', and refutes Theaetetus' definition on all of them. All three meanings raise their own questions. Could anyone seriously think that the first meaning is the one intended? Why does Socrates even bother to mention it? How is the second meaning different from the meaning of 'account' in Socrates' dream? If it isn't, why is this meaning refuted again (and why is the refutation different this time)? What is exactly is wrong with the third meaning? Socrates ultimately suggests that it is circular, but is that all that's wrong with it?
- Are Socrates' refutations of the three different meanings of 'account' supposed to amount to a complete refutation of Theaetetus' third definition? If so, what do they suggest is at root wrong about the definition? If not, do they hint at any ways in which the definition could be saved?

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11/3 The *Theaetetus* in retrospect

review

- What, in the end, does the *Theaetetus* tell us about knowledge? Does it offer any positive lessons about how it should be defined? Is it meant to show us that it cannot be defined? Or is it simply aporetic, intended to disabuse us of a handful of tempting but ultimately unsatisfactory definitions?
- Why do Forms never make an explicit appearance in the dialogue? In many of Plato's other works, Forms are explicitly described (if not introduced) as objects of knowledge – indeed, as what knowledge's objects *must* be, if knowledge is to be stable and unerring. Is the Forms' absence in the *Theaetetus* supposed to be a conspicuous omission, which no echt Platonist would miss? Should it be taken as a rejection of his earlier views? Or does it simply signal that Plato is here starting from scratch, attempting to define knowledge without bringing in any prior assumptions?

- At 130b–c, Socrates confidently affirms that there are Forms of likeness, one, many, just, beautiful, and good; admits to being unsure whether there are Forms of human being, fire, and water; and confidently denies that there are Forms of hair, mud, and dirt. Why does Socrates have these different reactions? What distinguishes these three groups of things? What does this tell us about Socrates’ reasons for believing in Forms in the first place?
- What, exactly, is Parmenides’ first argument against Forms, the “Whole–Part Dilemma” at 130e–131e, meant to show? That partaking in Forms is nonsensical? That partaking in Forms cannot be explained either as getting a share of the whole Form or as getting a share of a part of it? Or merely that Socrates hasn’t worked through all the details of his belief in Forms? (And if the last option, what exactly hasn’t Socrates worked through sufficiently yet?)

- What are the steps of Parmenides’ second argument against Forms, the “Bigness Regress” at 132a–b? What is it meant to show, and why is this a problem? Is the argument valid? Should Socrates accept all the argument’s premises? How are Socrates’ two responses to Parmenides’ argument (viz., that “Forms are thoughts” at 132b, and that “Forms are like patterns set in nature” at 132d) meant to block the Bigness Regress?
- How is Parmenides’ third argument against Forms, the “Likeness Regress” at 132d–133a, different from the Bigness Regress? Does it derive the same conclusion in a different way, or does it derive a different conclusion altogether? And how do these two arguments relate to Parmenides’ first argument against Forms, concerning the nature of participation?

- Why is Parmenides’ fourth argument against Forms at 133b–134e presented as the “greatest difficulty” for the theory of Forms? What should this tell us about the theory of Forms itself, and what it’s supposed to do as a theory?
- Parmenides’ fourth argument presents a number of shocking conclusions about Forms and knowledge. Are they all equally important, or is one of these conclusions supposed to be the argument’s main one? Are they independently arrived at, or do some of the conclusions stand behind and ground the others? What premises does Parmenides’ argument rely on to arrive at its conclusions? Is this argument valid? Is it sound?

- Why does Parmenides, after presenting all of the preceding objections, suggest that we must still allow that there are Forms, lest we have nowhere to turn out thought (135b–c)? What should this tell us about the purpose of the preceding arguments? What should this tell us about Plato’s commitment to the theory of Forms?
- What is the method which Parmenides outlines at 135e–136c – by what steps does it proceed? what does it attempt to show? what is its purpose? What should this methodological excursus lead us to expect from the deductions which are soon to follow?