PHL2002: Plato's Theaetetus

Thursday, 6:00-9:00PM
Jackman Humanities Building, Room 418
170 St. George St.

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Office hours: at (1), Wed. 1:00-2:00; at (2), Tues. 12:00-1:00.

This seminar will be dedicated to a close reading of Plato's Theaetetus. The Theaetetus is unique in two ways. It is the only Platonic dialogue exclusively dedicated to problems in epistemology, and in particular to the nature of knowledge [epistêmê]; and it is the only post-Republic work which shares the aporetic form of the early Socratic dialogues, ending without a positive solution to the problem. The Theaetetus is also one of Plato's philosophically richest dialogues, featuring constructive argument on topics such as definition, relativism, perception and its objects, the nature and possibility of falsehood, and the relations of part and whole (and simple and complex) in knowledge and its objects. We will read the Theaetetus as slowly as possible, with full attention to Plato's literary and dialectical methods as well as to the detail of Socrates' arguments. Central and ongoing questions will include the relation of the parts of the Theaetetus to the whole: how are the three definitions of knowledge (and the refutations of each) related to each other and to the project of the whole? Do the negative, aporetic results of the dialogue implicitly gesture (a) towards a correct definition of knowledge in the vicinity, or (b) towards the conclusion that knowledge is indefinable, or (c) towards a different strategy for defining it?

Readings:

Everyone should have Plato, Complete Works, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), including the translation of the Theaetetus by M.J. Levett. This translation is also available from Hackett in two freestanding paperback editions, with introductions by Bernard Williams (short) and Myles Burnyeat (long). The translation by John McDowell is also usable; those by Cornford and Chappell are worth a look; others are to be avoided (see under Bibliography). Students without Greek should have two translations and check them against each other. Students with Greek should have the OCT edition to refer to (either the Duke ed. or Burnet ed edition). Those who are planning to take option (ii) below should plan to read the bulk of the dialogue in Greek (totalling approximately 50 pages, to be selected), using the OCT text.
Everyone should be sure to have read the whole of the *Theaetetus* in English before the start of the course. Other particularly relevant Platonic texts worth (re)reading are the *Meno*, *Republic* V-VII and *Sophist*. No particular background in ancient philosophy will be presupposed.

A range of scholarly papers will be available for photocopying in the course folder (in Room 415). Papers particularly likely to be discussed in any given session are listed (tentatively) below and will be flagged in the preceding session.

**Requirements and Evaluation:**

Students taking the course will be expected to (1) attend and participate on a regular basis, with the option of an in-class presentation (20 min. max., 10% of final grade); (2) submit a brief 'think-piece'/paper prospectus Nov. 26 (3-4 pages, no extensions, 10%); (3) for the rest of the evaluation, students must choose one of two options: (i) a long (18-20) page term paper, due on January 4; or (ii) a medium-length paper (10 pages), due December 15, and a translation-based final exam (40% each), to be held January 6. If there is a critical mass of interest, there will be a reading group meeting weekly (almost certainly on Wed. afternoons), to work through some of the text together in aid of those taking option (ii).
Tentative Schedule:

For each week, the 'Core Reading' is the part of the text expected to be under discussion; 'Further Readings' are either other relevant ancient texts or particularly helpful or important secondary works. Note that the 'Further Readings' represent a range of suggestions rather than required reading; for most weeks they represent more than any one person is likely to read, but only a small selection of the valuable secondary literature worth consulting (the Bibliography is a bit more extensive). NB for the most part, comprehensive works (e.g., McDowell, Burnyeat, Sedley) are not listed below; but it is a good idea to consult one or two of them on a regular basis. Overlap with the readings included in the course folder is imperfect.

Week 1 (Sept. 10): Course Introduction: Puzzles and Strategies
Retroactive reading: Plato on knowledge, doxa and their objects: *Meno* (nb esp. 70a-7b, 80d-87e, 96e-100b), *Republic* 475e-80a, *Parmenides* 129a-35e (nb esp. 134e-5c), *Timaeus* 27e-9c, 49b-52b, *Seventh Letter* 341a-5c

Week 2 (Sept. 17): Preliminaries and Definition:
Core Reading: *Theaetetus* 142a-151d
Further Reading: Plato *Meno*, Burnyeat, 'Mathematics' and 'Midwifery', Sedley, '145-147'

Week 3 (Sept. 24): Definition I: Knowledge as Perception: The Three Theses:
Core Reading: *Theaetetus* 151d-171d

Week 4 (Oct. 1): Definition I: Preliminary Arguments, Protagoras' Defence and the Peritropê:
Core Reading: *Theaetet*. 160e-171d
Further Reading: Emilsson, 'Self-Refutation', Burnyeat 'Introduction' pp. 19-31...

Week 5 (Oct. 8): Definition I: The Digression & the Argument from Prediction
Core Reading: *Theaetet*. 171d-179c
Further Reading: Plato *Gorgias* 481b-513c, Sedley *Midwife* pp. 62-86, Mann ms, Rue, 'Flight', Burnyeat 'Introduction' pp. 31-42

Week 6 (Oct. 15): Definition I: The Refutations of Heraclitus and Theaetetus:
Core Reading: *Theaetet*. 179c-186e
Further Reading: Barney ms, Lorenz, *Brute* pp. 76-94, Cooper, 'Sense Perception', Holland, 'Argument'

Week 7 (Oct. 22): Definition I retrospect:
Core Reading: *Theaetet*. 151d-171d
Further Reading: TBA
Weeks 8-9 (Oct. 29, Nov. 5): Definition II: Knowledge as True Judgement: The Problem of False Judgement

Core Reading: Theaet. 186e-201c
Further Reading: Euthydemus 285d-8a, Cratylus 429a-35d, Sophist 236e-64b, nb esp. 236e-41d, 254b-64b; Denyer, Language Chapter 7, Chappell, pp. 150-96, Ackrill 'False Belief', Woolf, 'Tablet', Burnyeat, 'Jury'

Week 10 (Nov. 19): Definition III: True Judgement with a Logos: Socrates' Dream

Core Reading: Theaet. 201c-6c

Week 11 (Nov. 26): Definition III: The Three Senses of Logos

Core Reading: Theaet. 206c-10a
Further Reading: Morrow, 'Mathematicians', Thomas, 'Contents'

Week 12 (Dec. 3): Conclusion and Upshot

Core Reading: Theaet. 208c-210a
Further Reading: Phaedrus '265c-6c, 270a-1b, Philebus 15a-19a, Seventh Letter 341a-5c, Fine, 'Knowledge', Nehamas, 'Episteme', Sedley, Midwife pp. 174-81

Bibliography (for Part I):

The Oxford Classical Text (Platonis Opera vol. 1, ed. E. Duke et al., Oxford 1995) is the standard Greek edition of the Theaetetus; the older Burnet OCT is still perfectly usable. We will use the Hackett translation in class. Note that the McDowell, Chappell, and Cornford volumes all also include (decent) translations, the latter two fragmented by running commentary. Campbell is a very impressive Victorian edition with comments. Under 'comprehensive works', the most useful are starred.

The secondary literature on the Theaetetus is both high in philosophical quality and (in English alone) unbearable in quantity.

I. Comprehensive works on the Theaetetus:

Bostock, D., (Plato’s Theaetetus (Oxford, 1988));
*Burnyeat, M.F., (Plato, Theaetetus, trans. M. J. Levett (Hackett, 1990)
*Campbell, L., The Theaetetus of Plato (2nd ed., Oxford, 1883)
*Chappell, Timothy, Reading Plato’s Theaetetus (Indianapolis, 2005)
*Cornford, F.M., Plato’s Theory of Knowledge (London, 1934)
Stern, P. *Knowledge and Politics in Plato’s Theaetetus* (Cambridge, 2008)

Some relevant general works on Plato:

Crombie, I., *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines* (London, 1963)
White, N., *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, (Indianapolis, 1976)
Papers:

II. (Week 2) Preliminaries and Part I:


III. (Week 3): Definition 1: Knowledge as Perception: The Three Theses


IV. (Week 4): Definition 1: Preliminary Arguments, Defence and Peritropê

Burnyeat, M. F. ‘Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy’, Phil. Review 85 (1976), 44-69

----- ‘Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s Theaetetus’, Phil. Review 85 (1976), pp. 172-95
Castagnoli, L., 'Protagoras Refuted: How Clever is Socrates' Most Clever Argument at *Theaetetus* 171a-c?', *Topoi* 23 (2004), 3-32

V. (Week 5): The Digression and the Argument from Prediction

Bradshaw, D., 'The Argument of the Digression in the *Theaetetus*', *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998), pp. 61-68
Hemmenway, S., 'Philosophical Apology in the *Theaetetus*, *Interpretation* 17 (1990), pp. 323-46
Rue, R., 'The Philosopher in Flight: The Digression (172c-177c) in Plato's *Theaetetus*, *OŠAP* 11 (1993), pp. 71-100

VI. (Week 6): The Refutations of Heraclitus and Theaetetus

----- 1990, ‘Plato on Perception and “Commons”:’ *Classical Quarterly*, 40, pp. 148–75

VII. (Weeks 8 and 9): Definition II

Woolf, R., 'A Shaggy Soul Story: How Not to Read the Wax Tablet Model in Plato's *Theaetetus*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004), pp. 573-60

VIII. (Weeks 10-12): Definition III:
Hicken, W., "The Character and Provenance of Socrates 'Dream' in the Theaetetus", *Phronesis* 3 (1958), pp. 126-45
----- ‘Logical Atomism in Plato’s Theaetetus’, *Phronesis* 35 (1990), pp. 21-46

*Theaetetus: Preliminary Questions (Part I):*

Week 2: Preliminaries and Definition 0:

2.1 Why is the *Theaetetus* told in 'flashback' form, with a framing dialogue? Is it significant that the story is reported as told by Socrates himself?

2.2 What is the philosophical significance of the *dramatis personae*? Why do we need Theodorus as well as Theaetetus as an interlocutor? What are we to make of the resemblances between Theaetetus and Socrates? Or of the fact that both Theaetetus and Theodorus are mathematicians?

2.3 What *exactly* is wrong with Theaetetus’ initial definition of knowledge (146c-d) through an enumeration of its species? (How closely does it resemble misguided first answers given in the early dialogues?) Is it uninformative, or circular, or what? Is it necessarily wrong to define a genus by its species, or a relation by its relata, or a psychological state by its objects? (And which is the most perspicuous way of looking at this case?) (cf. *Republic* 505b-c)

2.4 Does Socrates' refutation really show that Theaetetus doesn’t even grasp [suniēsin] what *shoemaking* is? (147b) Doesn’t this show that we need to distinguish between levels of knowledge, or a strong and a weak sense of 'know'?

2.5 What is the point of Theaetetus' mathematical excursus? 'Powers' (or capacities, or faculties) [dunameis] have a huge role in Platonic metaphysics (Charmides 168b-9c, *Republic* 477b-8e, *Sophist* 247eff.) as well as a mathematical sense -- is that relevant here?

2.6 Is Socrates' long speech on 'midwifery' an explanation of his approach in the early aporetic dialogues, or is it something new?
Week 3: The Three Theses

3.1 Does Theaetetus (a mathematician!) really mean to identify knowledge with sense-perception? If not, what does he have in mind with his definition? (cf. Frede) What assumptions about knowledge would make his definition plausible?

3.2 At 152c Socrates gives a fleeting glimpse of the pretheoretical constraints an account of knowledge should meet: knowledge is "always of what is, and unerring [apseudes]". How much of a role do these constraints play, if any, elsewhere in the dialogue? (cf. Gerson) Do we glimpse other constraints en passant? Why does Socrates not put them more in the foreground?

3.3 What does the Protagorean Measure Thesis (‘Man is the measure of all things’) as presented here mean? Is ‘relativism’ the right word for it?

3.4 What does Plato present as the grounding for the Measure Thesis and the 'Secret Doctrine'?

3.5 What is the relation of the Measure Thesis to the thesis that knowledge is perception? What does Socrates mean by saying that they ‘coincide’ (160d)? Do they ‘coincide’? Does either entail the other? Does either support the other in some way which falls short of entailment? (cf. Sayre)

3.6 Likewise for the relation of the ‘Secret Doctrine’ (152c-7c) to the other two theses. How could any theory of perception, or natural science generally, ground an absolutely comprehensive relativism, or even be compatible with it? What kind of theory is the 'Secret Doctrine' anyway? (cf. Lee)

3.7 Does Plato himself accept the Heraclitean theory of flux so far as sensible particulars are concerned? Does the Theaet. show him being "a better Heraclitean than Heraclitus himself"? (Jackson)

Week 4: Preliminary Refutations, Protagoras’ Defence, and the Peritropê:

4.1 How exactly does the theory get developed in the passage 157e-60d?

4.2 What’s wrong with the objections to Protagoras raised at 161c-4c? Aren’t they actually pretty powerful?

4.3 Protagoras’ Defence at 165e-8c evidently attempts to provide him with an account of wisdom which grounds his own professional activity as teacher and civic advisor, without compromising his relativism. Does it succeed?

4.4 What are the ethical and political implications of the Defence? How can it apply both to individual human beings and (in the 'Defence') to political communities?
4.5 By exactly what steps does the peritropê (‘Self-Refutation’) argument against Protagoras at 170a-1c proceed? Where, if anywhere, should Protagoras attempt to escape? (Burnyeat, Waterlow, Emilsson) If Protagoras accepts the argument, what options does it leave him with?

**Week 5: The Digression and the Argument from Prediction:**

5.1 What are the ethical and political implications of the ‘New Formulation’ (171d-2b)? Why might some ‘fellow-travelers’ not ‘go all the way with’ Protagoras? (172b)

5.2 Why should the Digression come between the ‘New Formulation’ (171d-2b) and the Argument from Prediction (177c-9b) rather than anywhere else?

5.3 Does the Digression itself argue anything? How? To whom is it addressed? On what assumptions does it rely? How is it connected to the refutations of Protagoreanism which surround it?

5.4 Is there some irony, humour or self-subversion in Socrates’ portrayal of the Philosopher? If so, does that undermine its moralistic tone?

5.5 Who (or what thesis exactly) exactly is targeted in the Argument from Prediction at 177c-79c? Is it a refutation of the Defence? Or of the Measure Thesis itself? The order of arguments suggests that it should target the ‘New Formulation’: does it really do so? How might Protagoras (or a fellow-traveler) respond to it?

**Week 6: The Refutations of Heraclitus and Theaetetus:**

6.1 How many different arguments are involved in the refutation of Heraclitus at 179c-83b? Does it improve on Cratylus 439-40? Does it refute only an ‘extreme’ Heracliteanism? What’s the difference between the extreme and moderate flavours here?

6.2 What does the final refutation of Theaetetus’ definition of knowledge as perception (183c-6e) assume about what perception is (and what knowledge is)? Is it dependent on the earlier discussions of perception (eg, by applying only to a Heraclitean conception of perception), or does it start from scratch?

6.3 How strong is Socrates’ argument from common properties to the claim that truth (and thus knowledge) must transcend sense-perception? Does his refutation of Theaetetus’ definition tell us anything positive about what perception and knowledge must be?

6.4 If they ‘coincide’, why are all three Part One theses refuted separately? Are the refutations in any way interdependent or connected?

**Questions: Part II: Weeks 8-9: False Judgement**
1. Could anyone ever have maintained that knowledge was nothing more than true judgement? (Could this have been an actual sophistic or proto-sceptical view -- or a distortion of one?) If this definition isn't a serious candidate, why is it introduced at all?

2. Why does Socrates engage in such a lengthy vindication of the possibility of false judgement? Does the problem of how false judgement is possible somehow arise from, or depend on, the definition of knowledge as true judgement? Or is it a genuine digression? (Might the problem be 'unfinished business' left over from the refutation of Protagoras, who claimed that one cannot think what is not (167a) -- i.e., the position now to be refuted? (But hasn't Protagoras been comprehensively rejected by now?))

3. Does the problem of false judgement at 188a-c depend on a mistaken absolute dichotomy between knowing and not knowing? Is it the same dishotomy as at *Meno* 71b? Is the solution the same in the two dialogues? Is the second version of the puzzle, at 188d-9b, susceptible of the same analysis?

4. What's the function of the discussion of 'other-judging' at 190e-1b? Does it actually resolve anything? (And is there a relation, or at least an analogy, between (i) 'other-judging' [*allo, heteron doxazein*], offered here as the solution to the problem of judging what is not [=the second puzzle], and (ii) the form of 'the different' [*thateron = to heteron*] in the *Sophist*, offered there as the solution to the problem of saying what is not?)

5. What assumptions about perception, judgement, memory and knowledge are in play in the discussion? Might Socrates' primary purpose here be to illuminate these topics in 'philosophy of mind', rather than really to 'solve the puzzle' of false statement?

6. Is the second version of the puzzle (188d-9b), in terms of what is not, essentially identical to the 'Parmenidean' or sophistic claim that saying what is not is impossible, discussed in the *Euthydemus, Cratylus* and *Sophist*? (NB Socrates' assumption that a judgement is an unspoken statement: compare 189e-90c and *Sophist* 263e-4b.)

7. What claims about the mind are presented metaphorically by the Wax Tablet and the Aviary models? Are the two models compatible? How does the Aviary improve on the Tablet?

8. Does Socrates' discussion in fact show that false judgement is possible? Does it show how it is possible? (Or does it only show how certain kinds of false judgement are possible?) Is the Wax Tablet an adequate account of (perception-based) identity mistakes, or does it fail to explain error at all? Is the Aviary model a more generalized or otherwise improved solution, or a dead end? (Why is it a dead end?)

9. Is Socrates' solution to the puzzle(s) here compatible with those offered in the *Cratylus* and *Sophist*? Are there perhaps multiple problems of false judgement/statement, each with its own solution?
10. Why is the refutation of definition 2 (via the Jury example) so perfunctory?

11. Does the Jury example imply that Plato now (in contrast to Republic VI, etc.) allows that sensible particulars (and indeed actions and events involving them) can be objects of knowledge? How does it compare to the Meno's use of 'the way to Larissa' as a paradigm object of both knowledge and true opinion?

12. What on earth does Socrates mean by saying that he was wrong to leave the question about knowledge and proceed to inquire into false judgement first, on the grounds that 'it's impossible to know this until we have an adequate grasp of what knowledge is' (200d). Why would he suppose that the failure of the discussion so far calls for that diagnosis?

Questions: Part III: Weeks 10-12: Socrates’ Dream, Definition Number III, and the Upshot of the Whole

1. What is the significance of ‘Socrates’ Dream’ at 201c ff.? Is the Dream theory a version of the ‘theory of Forms’? Or should we attribute it to some philosophical rival of Plato’s? Or is the argument here perhaps meant to be totally general in import, applicable to any theory with a certain kind of ‘foundationalist’ structure?

2. What is the role of ‘perception’ in the Dream? Does it show any connection to the discussion of perception in Part I?

3. Where exactly does the Dream go fatally wrong? How might it be revised to evade Socrates’ refutation? (And is the upshot of that refutation that we should reject the metaphysics of the Dream or just that we should reject its account of knowledge?)

4. What is the relation of the Dream (and its refutation) to the three versions of Definition III later distinguished (and their refutations)? Is the Dream perhaps an elaboration of version (2), logos as an enumeration of parts; or is the relation of elements to wholes here different? If the Dream does = version 2, why does Plato discuss both?

5. What is the significance of Definition 3.2, i.e. the thesis that the logos which turns true belief into knowledge is a kind of analysis into parts? Does this represent a live philosophical theory? Is it meant to recall Definition 0, with its attempt to define the genus by articulating its species? (Would species-genus relations be included in the part-whole relations considered here? How many different kinds of ‘part’ might be in view here?)

6. What is the significance of Definition 3.3, according to which the logos which turns true belief into knowledge is a logos of a distinguishing feature? How exactly does the refutation work? Is it fair to say that the problem with 3.3 is that it is circular (‘knowledge = x+knowledge...’)? Is this the same as the problem with Definition 0? If so, what is the import of that circularity?
7. Why does the *Theaetetus* not consider the *Meno*’s claim that judgement becomes knowledge as through the addition of an *aitias logismos*, a 'reckoning of the reason why' (98a)? Or does one of the senses of *logos* here somehow amount to this?

8. Does Part Three add up to a complete refutation of the definition of knowledge as true belief with a *logos*? Or does it leave open -- even suggest -- some other way of taking this definition, one in which it is correct? (cf. Fine, Nehmas)

9. Does the *Theaetetus* point to *any* positive moral regarding how knowledge should be defined? Or does it show that knowledge *cannot* be defined?

10. Does the *Theaetetus* suggest that we must specify the *objects* of knowledge to explain what knowledge is? If so, must those objects be Forms? (Cornford)

11. Parts I and II of the *Theaetetus* suggest that an adequate account of knowledge would have to allow for, perhaps even incorporate an adequate explanation of *error*? If so, why does this theme seem to disappear in Part III?

12. What besides the figure of Protagoras links the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*? (Does the *Theaetetus* as a whole ‘ratchet up’ the conditions on the possession of knowledge, as the *Protagoras* arguably does for virtue?)