
JOHN M. COOPER, *PLATO'S THEAETHETUS*,
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This is the second edition of John M. Cooper's book on Plato's *Theaetetus*, and it appears to be unchanged from the first edition published in 1990. Cooper is a prominent ancient philosophy and Plato scholar, perhaps mostly known for the edition of Plato's *Complete Works*, together with D. S. Hutchinson back in 1997, as well as various philosophical studies such as *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (2012), *Reason and Emotion* (1999), *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (1975), etc. Holding his study of *The Theaetetus* means holding an important piece of the history of philosophy in your hands - it is not a book which one leaves on the shelves after reading, it needs to be reflected upon and absorbed through time. Its polemic structure simply begs for a deeper analysis of the topics discussed. So, what are the main interpretive problems in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and what solutions does Cooper offer?

Above all, one has to notice that Cooper does not consider *The Theaetetus* in isolation from the other dialogues. His analysis of Plato's influential epistemological treatise seems to be a part of a much greater endeavor: showing that there are inconsistencies and disagreements between the most important metaphysical and epistemological doctrines of the middle period dialogues, particularly *The Republic*,

and later dialogues, such as *The Theaetetus*, *The Philebus*, or *The Sophist*. Cooper claims there are two main groups of Platonic scholars - those who believe that the main philosophical conclusions of *The Republic* constitute the core of Plato's philosophy which is retained in *The Theaetetus* and other dialogues, and those who challenge this position by arguing that the conclusions of the late dialogues significantly differ from the middle period metaphysics (p. 3). In his book, Cooper allies with the second group of scholars, and identifies his main opponent in Paul Shorey, who follows F. M. Cornford, A. E. Taylor and other "orthodox", or "traditional" interpreters of Plato's philosophy. According to Cooper, Shorey strongly rejected *any* idea about revisions and developments in Plato's philosophy, he was against the theory that the dialectical dialogues criticize and reject some of the central philosophical conclusions of middle period Platonism, as well as that there is any alteration of Plato's position before or after *The Republic* (p. 4). One of the main concerns of Platonic scholars is, of course, the notion of Forms. In *The Republic*, Forms are fundamental to the explanation of knowledge, but in *The Theaetetus*, this is not the case. Plato seeks a different definition of knowledge. Even so, scholars such as Shorey, do not find this sufficient to argue that *The Theaetetus* represents a significant divergence

from the middle period epistemology. Shorey attacks any “genetic” interpretation of Plato’s philosophy, such as the one which developed in 19th century Germany. Cooper’s main task is, therefore, to show that thorough analysis of Plato’s argument in *The Theaetetus* reveals irreconcilable differences between the middle and the late period epistemology. In his opinion, this is sufficient to disapprove Shorey and the first group of scholars.

The book has a simple, well-thought structure which follows the structure of *The Theaetetus*. In the first chapter, Cooper deals with the “amalgamation” of the epistemological theories of Theaetetus, Protagoras, and Heraclitus (*The Theaetetus*, 151a-161a). The preliminary questions about the nature of knowledge are raised here, and Theaetetus proposes the first definition of knowledge as perception, only to be refuted by Socrates throughout the dialogue. In Plato’s view, Theaetetus’ understanding of knowledge as perception incorporates the most important aspects of the Protagorean and Heraclitean doctrines, the first being that “it is incorrect to say that something is true without saying to whom it is true” (152a), and the second that “all things are in flux” (152d). This way, Plato’s Socrates actually argues against Protagoras and Heraclitus whose views are put to the mouth of “naive” Theaetetus. Cooper takes a great deal of effort to explain how could Protagoras’ theory be reduced to the one of Heraclitus, as this is not immediately clear to Plato’s readers (pp. 14-26, ff.). Some of the relevant passages from *The Timaeus*, concerning the notions of *genesis* and *ousia*, are recalled here by the American author (28a-b, 37e-38a, 51b, etc.). But, as we shall see, for Cooper, the main comparison is the one between *The Theaetetus* and *The Republic*.

The second and third chapter of the book discuss Plato’s arguments against Protagoras and Heraclitus in detail. According to Socrates, Protagoras is bound to accept that some people’s opinions are false, as well as that some people are wiser (or, less ignorant) than others, on the ground that classes of judgments exist in

which error is possible (pp. 85-87). Protagoras relativistic conception of knowledge thus fails. On the other hand, Heraclitus’ position is refuted by pointing out that if everything is in flux, then the witness himself is constantly changing - he is no more real than colors and appearances he’s perceiving (pp. 91-92). Plato obviously thought that Heraclitean theory of flux is the underlying metaphysical basis for Protagorean relativism. Both theories introduce the aspect of instability into our notion of knowledge. It is also worth noting that authors such as Cooper, G. E. L. Owen, or H. F. Cherniss, pay much more attention to Plato’s critique of Heracliteanism in *The Theaetetus* than, for example, W. K. C. Guthrie, or A. E. Taylor do. However, this is not Cooper’s main concern. The main purpose of his argument is to show that Plato’s insistence on the stable character of knowledge and its disassociation from perceptual world doesn’t *automatically* amount to the middle period metaphysics and the Forms of *The Republic*. We have already seen that the Forms are not explicitly brought up as the objects of knowledge in *The Theaetetus*, but scholars such as Cherniss and Cornford, whom Cooper criticizes in the third chapter of his book (p. 7, 121), stick to the claim that Plato’s position in *The Theaetetus* is nothing but a continuation, or addendum to the epistemology of *The Republic*.

The fourth chapter of Cooper’s analysis of *The Theaetetus* is probably the most significant (“The Refutation of the Sense-Perception Theory of Knowledge”, pp. 118–140), as the reader is acquainted with the key premises of his argument against Shorey, Cornford, Cherniss, and other traditionalist interpreters of Plato’s philosophy. There is no doubt that, for Plato, perception cannot be equated with knowledge, “with or without the aid of Heraclitean metaphysics” (p. 118). *The Theaetetus* 184b-186e ensures us that Plato’s explanation of knowledge rests on certain entities which are not objects of immediate perception, but somehow constitute perception and enable the experience of knowledge. The nature of these non-perceptual

entities is questionable for the scholars, and the interpretations differ in great extent. Instead of *eidōs* (usually translated as Form), Plato employs the term *koina* in order to denote such entities (185c), and *koina* are “common terms”, such as existence and non-existence, similarity and dissimilarity, sameness and difference, etc. This is actually in line with the other late dialogues, such as *The Sophist*, or *The Timaeus*. In somewhat vague manner, *koina* are associated with *ousia*, which denotes permanent, pure, real existence, and without *ousia*, knowledge is impossible (152c, 186c). According to Cooper, traditional, or “conservative” Platonic scholars interpret these passages in *The Theaetetus* as consistent with the two-worlds argument found in *The Republic* (the passage 523b-524b is emphasized by the author of the book). As we know, in *The Republic*, knowledge is restricted to the unchanging world of Forms, and there cannot be knowledge of perceptual objects, only belief (*doxa*). But if Plato claimed this in such an elaborate, extensive manner in *The Republic*, how come Forms do not play any role in the explanation of knowledge in *The Theaetetus*? Did he change his mind, or did he want the Forms to be implicitly present in *The Theaetetus*? The “easier” approach to this interpretive problem is taken by Shorey and traditional scholars, for whom the argument in *The Theaetetus* represents some kind of weaker version of the argument in *The Republic*. On the other hand, Cooper is right to point out that such interpretations are not supported by Plato’s writing. Even if *koina* are Forms, nowhere in *The Theaetetus* is knowledge restricted to *koina*, or intelligible entities (p. 121), which means that the dialogue is not a mere repetition of the theory of knowledge found in *The Republic*. Cooper’s analysis appears to be in line with the aforementioned “genetic” school of interpretation, as well as, for example, S. Rosen’s interpretation of *The Sophist* according to which Plato abandoned the concept of Forms in his late dialogues.

The rest of the book examines the last two definitions of knowledge proposed

by Theaetetus: knowledge as true belief (187b-201c), and knowledge as true belief plus *logos* (201c-210b). Both are refuted by Socrates, and the dialogue reaches no definite solution to the problem of knowledge. Nevertheless, the definition of knowledge as *true belief plus logos* has become the cornerstone of traditional epistemology, being challenged in the last couple of decades only by, for example, contextualist theories. The impact of *The Theaetetus* on philosophical epistemology is therefore tremendous. In the final chapter, Cooper discusses Plato’s conception of *logos* in *The Theaetetus* (pp. 234-279), which is supposed to be the explanation of true belief (*alethes doxa*) necessary for real knowledge. Four “senses” of *logos* are elaborated by Plato, and all four are found to be inadequate (some scholars, such as Guthrie, perceive three senses of *logos*, see: *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 5, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, pp. 117-120). Cooper considers the so-called “dream theory” a separate version of the first sense of *logos* (p. 237, ff.). According to this sense, the sufficient conditions for knowledge consist in the expression of thought in words. The next sense is enumeration of all parts, or elements of a thing, and the last one, the expression of a specific property by which something is differentiated from all other things. Being that all of these senses of *logos* are refuted by the end of the dialogue, we are back to the beginning of our inquiry.

Let us get back to Cooper’s main argument. How successful is it in disapproving Shorey and the traditionalists? There is no doubt that *The Theaetetus*, *The Philebus*, or *The Sophist*, propose some kind of revision of middle period metaphysics. The dualistic position of *The Republic*, by which the world was split into the intelligible and physical realm is now softened and possibly abandoned. Plato’s conception of knowledge does not revolve around transcendence anymore, but *objectivity* (p. 139). Even *The Timaeus* strives in this direction. While in *The Republic* knowledge was restricted to intelligible entities, in *The Theaetetus*, or *The Philebus* (61d-e), Plato

explicitly claims that knowledge of sensory, changing objects *is* possible. But, the fact that Plato's conception of knowledge remains grounded in certain intelligible, imperceptible principles, no matter if those are Forms, or *koina*, or something third, keeps the traditionalists in life. Although Cooper rightly claims that we cannot assimilate metaphysics and epistemology of the late period into the two-worlds ontology of *The Republic*, it is also true that

Plato doesn't deny this solution explicitly by stating that his epistemological considerations in *The Theaetetus* are entirely separate from those of *The Republic*, as well as that Forms, from now on, do not play *any* role in the experience of knowledge. This topic is an ongoing discussion, and therefore, *Plato's Theaetetus* by John M. Cooper represents a highly valuable contribution to Platonic and ancient philosophy studies.