KNOWLEDGE AND DEATH IN PLATO'S *THEAETETUS*

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The subject of Plato's *Theaetetus* is commonly thought to be "theory of knowledge." After all, Socrates explicitly raises the question, "What is knowledge?" and, together with the assistance of Theaetetus, proceeds to discuss three possible accounts of what knowing is. It should be observed that in the context of the dialogue not one of the hypotheses about the nature of knowledge is thought to be satisfactory. In this respect, the dialogue is more a testimony to what knowledge is *not* rather than what it is. I would, however, like to introduce a more radical claim. I should say that the *Theaetetus* is concerned with "theory of knowledge" but only if "theory of knowledge" concerns "death." Now, in order to make sense out of this claim, we must consider certain dramatic and substantive features of that dialogue in light of our own contemporary pre-occupation with this central problem of epistemology.

What is knowledge? What do you know if and when you know? In 1963, Gettier published his now seminal paper, "Is Knowledge a Justified True Belief?" Of great importance, for our concern, is that Gettier calls into question what has been generally understood as the classical view of knowledge. A person *S* knows a proposition *P* if and only if (1) *P* is true, (2) *S* believes *P* is true, and (3) *S* is "justified" in believing *P* is true. Overlooking some important problems with (1) and (2) concerning the nature of truth itself, much contemporary discussion has focussed upon condition (3). In what does "justification" consist? What has resulted is a proliferation of literature on the problem of justification, perhaps most interesting of which is Lehrer's contribution on defeasibility and the "undefeated" nature of certain propositions. But, amidst all this literature, the spirit of the problem bequeathed to us by Plato has been notably absent. To this spirit we shall now turn.

In a Platonic context, we might say that "*S* knows that *P*" suggests that there can be no proposition *R*, such that *R* could "defeat" *P* and so contrary to what we thought, *S* did *not* know *P*. Either one knows or one does not; if one knows then one cannot not know. In the *Meno,* the eristic argument rears its awful head: gaining knowledge must be impossible for either one knows and hence needs not seek knowledge, or one does not know and thereby would not recognize the thing sought after even if one encounters it. The objection to this powerful eristic argument comes in the form of the theory of recollection. We already know, but we have forgotten. We have a complete innate knowledge, but incarnated in this world, the soul incarnated in a body, the attention is dispersed through the senses, and

having lost sight of that which we once knew, we somehow have forgotten. Theory of knowledge, in a Platonic context, then, must have its roots in a study of forgetfulness, or stated differently, in what "not-knowing" is and how it is possible. The meaning of this "not-knowing," this forgetfulness, which is the business of theory of knowledge, is inextricably tied to problems in ontology, and most significantly in terms of human experience, with the problem of "death."

Let us consider, Platonically speaking, what it is that one knows if and when one knows. It seems clear that the object of knowledge cannot be a changing thing. If this were so, then knowledge *par excellence* would be impossible. For every proposition *P* which we might make about something *M* must be false even in the very moment that it is made since the thing to which the proposition refers is no longer the *same* thing, but always *other* or different as it continually undergoes change. So, if knowledge is possible, the object of knowledge cannot be a changing thing. But, then, what about the so-called material world, and that world experienced through the senses, the very character of which is "change"? What *is* it? What is the ontological status of that world? The problem of this so-called "material" world is the problem of "change," broadly speaking, the problem of "time" and "temporality." Put in a different parlance, change, time, and temporality are expressions used to speak of that human experience called "death," man's experience of finitude, that he does not have enough time. Death is man's experience of the "it was" of time, the passing of all that must pass. Death is another way of viewing the core of the problem of knowledge and value. To speak of the problem of knowing as, in part, a problem of temporality, is simply to speak of death as that which apparently robs the world of meaning, undermines the possibility of the enduring and non-changing standards by virtue of which knowledge and value are possible. Death, or the problem of temporality as such, must be the point of departure for a theory of knowledge. The problem of knowing cannot be disengaged from the problem of Being; epistemology cannot be isolated from ontology. I shall now proceed to consider how the *Theaetetus* is a dialogue about theory of knowledge, but only if the business of epistemology remains inseparable from ontology, that is, the being of temporality called into question by death itself. But to do this, I must first recall the three hypotheses about the nature of of knowledge.

Confronted by Socrates's question, "What is knowledge?" Theaetetus first advances the thesis that: (1) knowledge is sense-perception (*aisthesis*), (2) knowledge is true opinion (*orthe doxa*), and finally, (3) knowledge is true opinion plus an account (*logos*). The first response amounts to the claim that for *S*, knowledge is the contents of *S*'s own perception. Perhaps we might say that for *S*, *S*'s own perceptions are thought to be incorrigible and that incorrigibility is thought to be knowledge. The second thesis claims that

if *S* believes some proposition *P* and that proposition is true, then *S* knows (that) *P*. And thirdly, *S*'s belief that *P* is true, when *P* is true, does not constitute a sufficient condition for knowing *P*, but together with some sort of "account" or justification, the conditions are sufficient to claim that *S* knows (that) *P*. All of these hypotheses are rejected—not one of them comes to life; all succumb and meet with death.

In the context of the dialogue, each one of the three hypotheses confuses a relation between Being and Becoming—life and death. And it is important to notice that one way to see this confusion is to recognize that the *Sophist*, the continuation of this discussion which takes place on the following day, provides a certain structure which illuminates the errors in thinking made here. In particular, the three hypotheses in the *Theaetetus* all confuse a clear understanding of the relation between two great kinds, *Sameness* and *Otherness*.

Thesis 1, that "knowledge is sense-perception," is rejected in the context of the critique of Protagoras. The rejection consists of two parts, the problem of value and valuation, and the ontological problem that the world is continually changing. The contents of sensation are determined by the objects which are sensed. If the objects sensed are always changing then knowledge is impossible. But note, in the parlance of the great kinds, knowledge must be of that which is always the *Same*. To identify knowledge with sense perception, the contents of which are always becoming other and other, is to identify the *Same* with the *Other*. In a similar light, Socrates and Theaetetus reach the conclusion that "comparing" is inherent in thinking; comparing allows us to distinguish what is the Same and what is Other. But, without a standard which remains the Same, comparison or evaluation cannot avoid error, the error which results in the self-contradiction of identifying the Same and the Other.

Thesis 2, that "knowledge is true opinion," presents us with a fascinating paradox. The thesis that "knowledge is true opinion" turns out to be, in fact, a *false* opinion. It should come as no surprise, then, that almost the entire discussion of this second thesis focuses upon the possibility of "false" opinion, not true opinion. The "false" of course, is what is *not*, and the problem of what is not—death—appears to us once more. Within this second thesis, however, true opinion is not the Same as knowledge, it is Other than knowledge. What is Other than knowledge is mis-taken for the Same.

Thesis 3, that "knowledge is true opinion plus an account," is also rejected. It is not clear that this hypothesis is without merit—perhaps some different explanation of "accounting" could make this thesis acceptable. In any case, in the context of the dialogue, no adequate sense of accounting is provided. In the context of Same and Other, this third thesis could only succeed if the account adds something Other to the second thesis that

knowledge is true opinion. But each sense of "account" considered here adds nothing Other to the true opinion. Hence, each "account" adds nothing but the Same, although purports to supply something Other. In this last case, the Same is mistaken for the Other. In trying to articulate what is Other than true opinion, we say the Same—and that is a false opinion, again. We are familiar with this phenomenon—it is called a tautology.

In summary, then, three errors are committed by Theaetetus. The first is identifying the Same and the Other—self-contradiction. The second is mistaking the Other for the Same. And the third takes the Same for the Other—tautology.

These three theses leave Theaetetus and the listener-reader-participant in that dialogue with a deserved feeling of hopelessness. How is it possible to know what "knowing" is if you do not already know? Or, in the talk of "accounting" for knowledge, how is it possible to account for what accounting is if every account of accounting is already an account? In order to know one must already know; there is an apparently perverse ring to this conclusion.

The dramatic context is not incidental to the content of the discussion. The dialogue opens with a mention that Theaetetus is en route to Athens and his death from wounds incurred in battle. The point of departure of our dialogue is "death." The dialogue ends with Socrates en route to the porch of the King Archon, to the *anakrasis*, to hear the formal charges against him, and subsequently to his own execution. The point of conclusion of our dialogue is "death." Socrates and Theaetetus are not the Same; they are Other, but they bear many resemblances which suggest the relation of Sameness. Both are physically unattractive, both are shown to us with a remarkable character, and both are close to death. But Sameness and Otherness permeate the dialogue. From the distance, Socrates compares two approaching figures, Theaetetus and Theodorus, but cannot distinguish the two—they are Other but appear the Same. The initial "*θε*" of their names suggests Sameness only to be transformed into Otherness. But it is of crucial importance to observe that the discussion of knowledge is sandwiched between two confrontations with the immediacy of death. Just as Socrates and Theaetetus seem to be the Same with respect to appearance, qua human beings, so is it also with the confrontation of death. And yet "death," temporality as such, is the greatest confrontation to Sameness itself; the ultimate passing of all that must pass which renders everything Other than itself is death.

Sandwiched between the opening and closing of the dialogue, with the apparent hopelessness of death all around, is the so-called "philosophical digression" on time. If one thinks that the business first and foremost of the *Theaetetus* is "theory of knowledge," then one cannot help but feel stultified to find this philosophical digression on time, which then must seem to

come out of nowhere. Actually, the problem of time, the atemporal and its relevance to the temporal is the central concern of the dialogue. There, Socrates discusses the difference between the philosopher and the lawyer. The philosopher, he says, has all the time in the world so long as he hits upon what *is*; the lawyer, on the other hand, has to watch time closely to plead his case. The truth of the matter is precisely Other, not the Same. Socrates will not go off to meet his accusers; he has no time—death will interfere with the philosopher's way. But, the matter of death does not seem to get in the way of his accusers.

The *Theaetetus* searches for a standard of value, a standard which transcends the temporal but which can be shown to be relevant to the temporal. Knowledge and value presuppose a nonchanging entity by virtue of which we can compare, not merely one thing with another but, as the Statesman (284b) points out, temporal phenomena to a normative standard. But, the affirmation of an existent norm is not enough. How that atemporal entity relates to the temporal is the problem which remains, which I have discussed elsewhere as the problem of "schematizing" the Forms. If death is to be "overcome," which is another way of saying that knowledge is possible, this is the task which remains before us. The *Theaetetus* does not provide us with a constructive reply; other so-called later dialogues do that for us. And this suggests that the dialogues cannot be dealt with in an isolated fashion. Rather, they must be taken up and considered together.

The *Theaetetus*, whose dialogue takes place in the gymnasium, ends with the promise to continue the discussion tomorrow. That discussion is Plato's *Sophist*. But before that next discussion, Socrates must go to hear the indictment against him. We must observe that the dialogue should have continued were it not for this legal call. The dialogue, however, ends with an apparent hopelessness, as does the departure of Socrates to meet the charges.

As Harrison, Bonner, and others have pointed out, Greek legal procedure, following the ousting of the thirty tyrants, and thereby applicable in 399B.C., demanded a due process whereby the jury which would hear a trial of the sort required for Socrates would also preside at the pretrial hearing in case the defendant wished to enter evidence against the indictment. In accordance with this procedure, it is now believed that, granting the very large jury which sat on the case, the trial in front of the *dikasterion* followed immediately upon the completion of the *anakrasis* or pretrial hearing. Otherwise, it would doubtlessly have been impossible to regather all the same jurors and thereby insure, as jurisprudence demanded, due process for Socrates.

Now, let's see what happens when we plug this historical consideration into the dramatic presentation of the dialogues. This means that when the

Sophist opens, with the pursuants to yesterday's discussion present as agreed, no mention is made of the location. But if we plug in this historical data to see if it might be dramatically illuminating, we are led to the consequence that it is more than mere coincidence that the location goes unnamed, as does the stranger from Elea who presides over the discussion, alluded to as some god who might distinguish justice from injustice. The *Sophist* may well be taking place in the prison where Socrates awaits execution. This dramatic context, entirely overlooked by almost every commentator, underscores the continuation of the same discussion in which the search for the Sophist, the professor of wisdom, the maker of semblances, is drawn into sharp contrast with the possibility of true knowing. The discussion of epistemology continues inextricably tied to ontology. As the search for knowledge continues, Socrates now sits and listens, allowing the stranger from Elea to conduct the discussion. Quietly he sits and listens, perhaps in his prison cell, or in any event, in the presence of the ever-looming specter of death.