

PHILOSOPHY
An
Introduction
Through
Literature

LOWELL KLEIMAN & STEPHEN LEWIS

PLATO

Knowledge as Justified True Belief

SOCRATES: . . . what is one to say that knowledge is? For surely we are not going to give up yet.

THEAETETUS: Not unless you do so.

SOCRATES: Then tell me, what definition can we give with the least risk of contradicting ourselves?

THEAETETUS: The one we tried before, Socrates. I have nothing else to suggest.

SOCRATES: What was that?

THEAETETUS: That true belief is knowledge. Surely there can at least be no mistake in believing what is true and the consequences are always satisfactory.

SOCRATES: Try, and you will see, Theaetetus, as the man said when he was asked if the river was too deep to ford. So here, if we go forward on our search, we may stumble upon something that will reveal the thing we are looking for. We shall make nothing out, if we stay where we are.

THEAETETUS: True. Let us go forward and see.

SOCRATES: Well, we need not go far to see this

much. You will find a whole profession to prove that true belief is not knowledge.

THEAETETUS: How so? What profession?

SOCRATES: The profession of those paragons of intellect known as orators and lawyers. There you have men who use their skill to produce conviction, not by instruction, but by making people believe whatever they want them to believe. You can hardly imagine teachers so clever as to be able, in the short time allowed by the clock, to instruct their hearers thoroughly in the true facts of a case of robbery or other violence which those hearers had not witnessed.

THEAETETUS: No, I cannot imagine that, but they can convince them.

SOCRATES: And by convincing you mean making them believe something.

THEAETETUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: And when a jury is rightly convinced of facts which can be known only by an eyewitness, then, judging by hearsay and accepting a true belief, they are judging

Reprinted from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (1961) pgs. 907-917, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns by permission of Routledge and Methuen Publishers. Plato (ca. 428 to 348 B.C.), one of the giants of Western philosophy, is best known for his classical theory of ideal forms. He was a student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle.

without knowledge, although, if they find the right verdict, their conviction is correct?

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But if true belief and knowledge were the same thing, the best of jurymen could never have a correct belief without knowledge; it now appears that they must be different things.

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates. I have heard someone make the distinction. I had forgotten, but now it comes back to me. He said that true belief with the addition of an account (*lógos*) was knowledge, while belief without an account was outside its range. Where no account could be given of a thing, it was not 'knowable'—that was the word he used—where it could, it was knowable.

SOCRATES: A good suggestion. But tell me how he distinguished these knowable things from the unknowable. It may turn out that what you were told tallies with something I have heard said.

THEAETETUS: I am not sure if I can recall that, but I think I should recognize it if I heard it stated.

SOCRATES: If you have had a dream, let me tell you mine in return. I seem to have heard some people say that what might be called the first elements of which we and all other things consist are such that no account can be given of them. Each of them just by itself can only be named; we cannot attribute to it anything further or say that it exists or does not exist, for we should at once be attaching to it existence or nonexistence, whereas we ought to add nothing if we are to express just it alone. We ought not even to add 'just' or 'it' or 'each' or 'alone' or 'this', or any other of a host of such terms. These terms, running loose about the place, are attached to everything, and they are distinct from the things to which they are applied. If it were possible for an element to be expressed in any formula exclusively belonging to it, no other terms ought to enter into that expression. But in fact there is no formula in which any element can be expressed; it can only be named, for a name is all there is that belongs to it. But when we come to

things composed of these elements, then, just as these things are complex, so the names are combined to make a description (*lógos*), a description being precisely a combination of names. Accordingly, elements are inexplicable and unknowable, but they can be perceived, while complexes ('syllables') are knowable and explicable, and you can have a true notion of them. So when a man gets hold of the true notion of something without an account, his mind does think truly of it, but he does not know it, for if one cannot give and receive an account of a thing, one has no knowledge of that thing. But when he has also got hold of an account, all this becomes possible to him and he is fully equipped with knowledge.

Does that version represent the dream as you heard it, or not?

THEAETETUS: Perfectly.

SOCRATES: So this dream finds favor and you hold that a true notion with the addition of an account is knowledge?

THEAETETUS: Precisely.

SOCRATES: Can it be, Theaetetus, that, all in a moment, we have found out today what so many wise men have grown old in seeking and have not found?

THEAETETUS: I, at any rate, am satisfied with our present statement, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Yes, the statement just in itself may well be satisfactory, for how can there ever be knowledge without an account and right belief? But there is one point in the theory as stated that does not find favor with me.

THEAETETUS: What is that?

SOCRATES: What might be considered its most ingenious feature. It says that the elements are unknowable, but whatever is complex ('syllables') can be known.

THEAETETUS: Is not that right?

SOCRATES: We must find out. We hold as a sort of hostage for the theory the illustration in terms of which it was stated.

THEAETETUS: Namely?

SOCRATES: Letters—the elements of writing—and syllables. That and nothing else was the prototype the author of this theory had in mind, don't you think?

THEAETETUS: Yes, it was.

SOCRATES: Let us take up that illustration, then, and put it to the question, or rather put the question to ourselves. Did we learn our letters on that principle or not? To begin with, is it true that an account can be given of syllables, but not of letters?

THEAETETUS: It may be so.

SOCRATES: I agree, decidedly. Suppose you are asked about the first syllable of 'Socrates'. Explain, Theaetetus, what is *SO*? How will you answer?

THEAETETUS: *S* and *O*.

SOCRATES: And you have there an account of the syllable?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Go on, then, give me a similar account of *S*.

THEAETETUS: But how can one state the elements of an element? The fact is, of course, Socrates, that *S* is one of the consonants, nothing but a noise, like a hissing of the tongue, while *B* not only has no articulate sound but is not even a noise, and the same is true of most of the letters. So they may well be said to be inexplicable, when the clearest of them, the seven vowels themselves, have only a sound, and no sort of account can be given of them.

SOCRATES: So far, then, we have reached a right conclusion about knowledge.

THEAETETUS: Apparently.

SOCRATES: But now, have we been right in declaring that the letter cannot be known, though the syllable can?

THEAETETUS: That seems all right.

SOCRATES: Take the syllable then. Do we mean by that both the two letters or, if there are more than two, all the letters? Or do we mean a single entity that comes into existence from the moment when they are put together?

THEAETETUS: I should say we mean all the letters.

SOCRATES: Then take the case of the two letters *S* and *O*. The two together are the first syllable of my name. Anyone who knows that syllable knows both the letters, doesn't he?

THEAETETUS: Naturally.

SOCRATES: So he knows the *S* and the *O*.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But has he, then, no knowledge of each letter, so that he knows both without knowing either?

THEAETETUS: That is a monstrous absurdity, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And yet, if it is necessary to know each of two things before one can know both, he simply must know the letters first, if he is ever to know the syllable, and so our fine theory will vanish and leave us in the lurch.

THEAETETUS: With a startling suddenness.

SOCRATES: Yes, because we are not keeping a good watch upon it. Perhaps we ought to have assumed that the syllable was not the letters but a single entity that arises out of them with a unitary character of its own and different from the letters.

THEAETETUS: By all means. Indeed, it may well be so rather than the other way.

SOCRATES: Let us consider that. We ought not to abandon an imposing theory in this poor-spirited manner.

THEAETETUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Suppose, then, it is as we say now. The syllable arises as a single entity from any set of letters which can be combined and that holds of every complex, not only in the case of letters.

THEAETETUS: By all means.

SOCRATES: In that case, it must have no parts.

THEAETETUS: Why?

SOCRATES: Because, if a thing has parts, the whole thing must be the same as all the parts. Or do you say that a whole likewise is a single entity that arises out of the parts and is different from the aggregate of the parts?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: Then do you regard the sum (*tró zōon*) as the same thing as the whole, or are they different?

THEAETETUS: I am not at all clear, but you tell me to answer boldly, so I will take the risk of saying they are different.

SOCRATES: Your boldness, Theaetetus, is right; whether your answer is so, we shall have to consider.

THEAETETUS: Yes, certainly.
 SOCRATES: Well, then, the whole will be different from the sum, according to our present view.
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: Well but now, is there any difference between the sum and all the things it includes? For instance, when we say, 'one, two, three, four, five, six,' or 'twice three' or 'three times two' or 'four and two' or 'three and two and one,' are we in all these cases expressing the same thing or different things?
 THEAETETUS: The same.
 SOCRATES: Just six, and nothing else?
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: In fact, in each form of expression we have expressed all the six.
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: But when we express them all, is there no sum that we express?
 THEAETETUS: There must be.
 SOCRATES: And is that sum anything else than six?
 THEAETETUS: No.
 SOCRATES: Then, at any rate in the case of things that consist of a number, the words 'sum' and 'all the things' denote the same thing.
 THEAETETUS: So it seems.
 SOCRATES: Let us put our argument, then, in this way. The number of [square feet in] an acre, and the acre are the same thing, aren't they?
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: And so too with the number of [feet in] a mile?
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: And again with the number of [soldiers in] an army and the army, and so on, in all cases. The total number is the same as the total thing in each case.
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: But the number of [units in] any collection of things cannot be anything but parts of that collection?
 THEAETETUS: No.

SOCRATES: Now, anything that has parts consists of parts.
 THEAETETUS: Evidently.
 SOCRATES: But all the parts, we have agreed, are the same as the sum. If the total number is to be the same as the total thing.
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: The whole, then, does not consist of parts, for if it were all the parts it would be a sum.
 THEAETETUS: Apparently not.
 SOCRATES: But can a part be a part of anything but its whole?
 THEAETETUS: Yes, of the sum.
 SOCRATES: You make a gallant fight of it, Theaetetus. But does not 'the sum' mean precisely something from which nothing is missing?
 THEAETETUS: Necessarily.
 SOCRATES: And is not a whole exactly the same thing—that from which nothing whatever is missing? Whereas, when something is removed, the thing becomes neither a whole nor a sum: it changes at the same moment from being both to being neither.
 THEAETETUS: I think now that there is no difference between a sum and a whole.
 SOCRATES: Well, we were saying, were we not, that when a thing has parts, the whole or sum will be the same thing as all the parts?
 THEAETETUS: Certainly.
 SOCRATES: To go back, then, to the point I was trying to make just now, if the syllable is not the same thing as the letters, does it not follow that it cannot have the letters as parts of itself, otherwise, being the same thing as the letters, it would be neither more nor less knowable than they are?
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: And it was to avoid that consequence that we supposed the syllable to be different from the letters.
 THEAETETUS: Yes.
 SOCRATES: Well, if the letters are not parts of the syllable, can you name any things, other than its letters, that are parts of a syllable?
 THEAETETUS: Certainly not, Socrates. If I ad-

mitted that it had any parts, it would surely be absurd to set aside the letters and look for parts of any other kind.
 SOCRATES: Then, on the present showing, a syllable will be a thing that is absolutely one and cannot be divided into parts of any sort?
 THEAETETUS: Apparently.
 SOCRATES: Do you remember then, my dear Theaetetus, our accepting a short while ago a statement that we thought satisfactory—that no account could be given of the primary things of which other things are composed, because each of them, taken just by itself, was incomposite, and that it was not correct to attribute even 'existence' to it, or to call it 'this,' on the ground that these words expressed different things that were extraneous to it, and this was the ground for making the primary thing inexpressible and unknowable?
 THEAETETUS: I remember.
 SOCRATES: Then is not exactly this, and nothing else, the ground of its being simple in nature and indivisible into parts? I can see no other.
 THEAETETUS: Evidently there is no other.
 SOCRATES: Then has not the syllable now turned out to be a thing of the same sort, if it has not parts and is a unitary thing?
 THEAETETUS: Certainly.
 SOCRATES: To conclude, then, if, on the one hand, the syllable is the same thing as a number of letters and is a whole with the letters as its parts, then the letters must be neither more nor less knowable and explainable than syllables, since we made out that all the parts are the same thing as the whole.
 THEAETETUS: True.
 SOCRATES: But if, on the other hand, the syllable is a unity without parts, syllable and letter likewise are equally incapable of explanation and unknowable. The same reason will make them so.
 THEAETETUS: I see no way out of that.
 SOCRATES: If so, we must not accept this statement—that the syllable can be known and explained, the letter cannot.
 THEAETETUS: No, not if we hold by our argument.

SOCRATES: And again, would not your own experience in learning your letters rather incline you to accept the opposite view?
 THEAETETUS: What view do you mean?
 SOCRATES: This—that all the time you were learning you were doing nothing else but trying to distinguish by sight or hearing each letter by itself, so as not to be confused by any arrangement of them in spoken or written words.
 THEAETETUS: That is quite true.
 SOCRATES: And in the music school the height of accomplishment lay precisely in being able to follow each several note and tell which string it belonged to, and notes, as everyone would agree, are the elements of music.
 THEAETETUS: Precisely.
 SOCRATES: Then, if we are to argue from our own experience of elements and complexes to other cases, we shall conclude that elements in general yield knowledge that is much clearer than knowledge of the complex and more effective for a complete grasp of anything we seek to know. If anyone tells us that the complex is by its nature knowable, while the element is unknowable, we shall suppose that, whether he intends it or not, he is playing with us.
 THEAETETUS: Certainly.
 SOCRATES: Indeed we might, I think, find other arguments to prove that point. But we must not allow them to distract our attention from the question before us, namely, what can really be meant by saying that an account added to true belief yields knowledge in its most perfect form.
 THEAETETUS: Yes, we must see what that means.
 SOCRATES: Well then, what is this term 'account' intended to convey to us? I think it must mean one of three things.
 THEAETETUS: What are they?
 SOCRATES: The first will be giving overt expression to one's thought by means of vocal sound with names and verbs, casting an image of one's notion on the stream that flows through the lips, like a reflection in a mirror

or in water. Do you agree that expression of that sort is an 'account'?

THEAETETUS: I do. We certainly call that expressing ourselves in speech (ἀκτύειν).

SOCRATES: On the other hand, that is a thing that anyone can do more or less readily. If a man is not born deaf or dumb, he can signify what he thinks on any subject. So in this sense anyone whatever who has a correct notion evidently will have it 'with an account,' and there will be no place left anywhere for a correct notion apart from knowledge.

THEAETETUS: True.

SOCRATES: Then we must not be too ready to charge the author of the definition of knowledge now before us with talking nonsense. Perhaps that is not what he meant. He may have meant being able to reply to the question, what any given thing is, by enumerating its elements.

THEAETETUS: For example, Socrates?

SOCRATES: For example, Hecidol says about a wagon, 'In a wagon are a hundred pieces of wood.' I could not name them all; no more, I imagine, could you. If we were asked what a wagon is, we should be content if we could mention wheels, axle, body, rails, yoke.

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But I dare say he would think us just as ridiculous as if we replied to the question about your own name by telling the syllables. We might think and express ourselves correctly, but we should be absurd if we fancied ourselves to be grammarians and able to give such an account of the name Theaetetus as a grammarian would offer. He would say it is impossible to give a scientific account of anything, short of adding to your true notion a complete catalogue of the elements, as, I think, was said earlier.

THEAETETUS: Yes, it was.

SOCRATES: In the same way, he would say, we may have a correct notion of the wagon, but the man who can give a complete statement of its nature by going through those hundred parts has thereby added an account to his correct notion and, in place of mere belief,

has arrived at a technical knowledge of the wagon's nature, by going through all the elements in the whole.

THEAETETUS: Don't you approve, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Tell me if you approve, my friend, and whether you accept the view that the complete enumeration of elements is an account of any given thing, whereas description in terms of syllables or of any larger unit still leaves it unaccounted for. Then we can look into the matter further.

THEAETETUS: Well, I do accept that.

SOCRATES: Do you think, then, that anyone has knowledge of whatever it may be, when he thinks that one and the same thing is a part sometimes of one thing, sometimes of a different thing, or again when he believes now one and now another thing to be part of one and the same thing?

THEAETETUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Have you forgotten, then, that when you first began learning to read and write, that was what you and your school-fellows did?

THEAETETUS: Do you mean, when we thought that now one letter and now another was part of the same syllable, and when we put the same letter sometimes into the proper syllable, sometimes into another?

SOCRATES: That is what I mean.

THEAETETUS: Then I have certainly not forgotten, and I do not think that one has reached knowledge so long as one is in that condition.

SOCRATES: Well, then, if at that stage you are writing 'Theaetetus' and you think you ought to write T and H and E and do so, and again when you are trying to write 'Theodorus,' you think you ought to write T and E and do so, can we say that you know the first syllable of your two names?

THEAETETUS: No, we have just agreed that one has not knowledge so long as one is in that condition.

SOCRATES: And there is no reason why a person should not be in the same condition with respect to the second, third, and fourth syllables as well?

THEAETETUS: None whatever.

SOCRATES: Can we, then, say that whenever in writing 'Theaetetus' he puts down all the letters in order, then he is in possession of the complete catalogue of elements together with correct belief?

THEAETETUS: Obviously.

SOCRATES: Being still, as we agree, without knowledge, though his beliefs are correct?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Although he possesses the 'account' in addition to right belief. For when he wrote he was in possession of the catalogue of the elements, which we agreed was the 'account.'

THEAETETUS: True.

SOCRATES: So, my friend, there is such a thing as right belief together with an account, which is not yet entitled to be called knowledge.

THEAETETUS: I am afraid so.

SOCRATES: Then, apparently, our idea that we had found the perfectly true definition of knowledge was no better than a golden dream. Or shall we not condemn the theory yet? Perhaps the meaning to be given to 'account' is not this, but the remaining one of the three, one of which we said must be intended by anyone who defines knowledge as correct belief together with an account.

THEAETETUS: A good reminder. There is still one meaning left. The first was what might be called the image of thought in spoken sound, and the one we have just discussed was going all through the elements to arrive at the whole. What is the third?

SOCRATES: The meaning most people would give—being able to name some mark by which the thing one is asked about differs from everything else.

THEAETETUS: Could you give me an example of such an account of a thing?

SOCRATES: Take the sun as an example. I dare say you will be satisfied with the account of it as the brightest of the heavenly bodies that go round the earth.

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Let me explain the point of this example. It is to illustrate what we were just

saying—that if you get hold of the difference distinguishing any given thing from all others, then, so some people say, you will have an 'account' of it, whereas, so long as you fix upon something common to other things, your account will embrace all the things that share it.

THEAETETUS: I understand. I agree that what you describe may fairly be called an 'account.'

SOCRATES: And if, besides a right notion about a thing, whatever it may be, you also grasp its difference from all other things, you will have arrived at knowledge of what, till then, you had only a notion of.

THEAETETUS: We do say that, certainly.

SOCRATES: Really, Theaetetus, now I come to look at this statement at close quarters, it is like a scene painting. I cannot make it out at all, though, so long as I kept at a distance, there seemed to be some sense in it.

THEAETETUS: What do you mean? Why so?

SOCRATES: I will explain, if I can. Suppose I have a correct notion about you; if I add to that the account of you, then, we are understood. I know you. Otherwise I have only a notion.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And 'account' means putting your difference into words.

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So, at the time when I had only a notion, my mind did not grasp any of the points in which you differ from others?

THEAETETUS: Apparently not.

SOCRATES: Then I must have had before my mind one of those common things which belong to another person as much as to you.

THEAETETUS: That follows.

SOCRATES: But look here! If that was so, how could I possibly be having a notion of you rather than of anyone else? Suppose I was thinking, 'Theaetetus is one who is a man and has a nose and eyes and a mouth and so forth, enumerating every part of the body. Will thinking in that way result in my thinking of Theaetetus rather than of Theodorus or, as they say, of the man in the street?

THEAETETUS: How should it?

SOCRATES: Well, now suppose I think not merely of a man with a nose and eyes, but of one with a snub nose and prominent eyes. Once more shall I be having a notion of you any more than of myself or anyone else of that description?

THEAETETUS: No.

SOCRATES: In fact, there will be no notion of Theaetetus in my mind. I suppose, until this particular snubness has stamped and registered within me a record distinct from all the other cases of snubness that I have seen, and so with every other part of you. Then, if I meet you tomorrow, that trait will revive my memory and give me a correct notion about you.

THEAETETUS: Quite true.

SOCRATES: If that is so, the correct notion of anything must itself include the differentness of that thing.

THEAETETUS: Evidently.

SOCRATES: Then what meaning is left for getting hold of an 'account' in addition to the correct notion? If, on the one hand, it means adding the notion of how a thing differs from other things, such an injunction is simply absurd.

THEAETETUS: How so?

SOCRATES: When we have a correct notion of the way in which certain things differ from other things, it tells us to add a correct notion of the way in which they differ from other things. On this showing, the most vicious of circles would be nothing to this injunction. It might better deserve to be called the sort of direction a blind man might give. To tell us to get hold of something we already have, in order to get to know something we are already thinking of, suggests a state of the most absolute darkness.

THEAETETUS: Whereas, if . . . ? The supposition you made just now implied that you would state some alternative. What was it?

SOCRATES: If the direction to add an 'account' means that we are to get to know the differentness, as opposed to merely having a notion of it, this most admirable of all definitions of knowledge will be a pretty

business, because 'getting to know' means acquiring knowledge, doesn't it?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So, apparently, to the question, 'What is knowledge?' our definition will reply, 'Correct belief together with knowledge of a differentness,' for, according to it, 'adding an account' will come to that.

THEAETETUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Yes, and when we are inquiring after the nature of knowledge, nothing could be sillier than to say that it is correct belief together with a *knowledge* of differentness or of anything whatever.

So, Theaetetus, neither perception, nor true belief, nor the addition of an 'account' to true belief can be knowledge.

THEAETETUS: Apparently not.

SOCRATES: Are we in labor, then, with any further child, my friend, or have we brought to birth all we have to say about knowledge?

THEAETETUS: Indeed we have, and for my part I have already, thanks to you, given utterance to more than I had in me.

SOCRATES: All of which our midwife's skill pronounces to be mere wind eggs and not worth the rearing?

THEAETETUS: Undoubtedly.

SOCRATES: Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh, Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today's scrutiny; and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know. For that, and no more, is all that my art can effect; nor have I any of that knowledge possessed by all the great and admirable men of our own day or of the past. But this midwife's art is a gift from heaven; my mother had it for women, and I for young men of a generous spirit and for all in whom beauty dwells.

Now I must go to the portico of the King-Archon to meet the indictment which Meletus has drawn up against me. But to-morrow morning, Theaetetus, let us meet here again.