Plato, *Theaetetus*

142a – 148c (beginning), and 196d – 210d (end).

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[142a]
Eucleides Just in from the country, Terpsion, or did you come some time ago?

Terpsion Quite a while ago; and I was looking for you in the market-place and wondering that I could not find you.

Eucleides Well, you see, I was not in the city.

Terpsion Where then?

Eucleides As I was going down to the harbor I met Theaetetus being carried to Athens from the camp at Corinth.

Terpsion Alive or dead? [142b]

Eucleides Just barely alive; for he is suffering severely from wounds, and, worse than that, he has been taken with the sickness that has broken out in the army.

Terpsion You mean the dysentery?

Eucleides Yes.

Terpsion What a man he is who you say is in danger!

Eucleides A noble man, Terpsion, and indeed just now I heard some people praising him highly for his conduct in the battle.

Terpsion That is not at all strange; it would have been much more remarkable if he had not so conducted himself. But why did he not [142c] stop here in Megara?

Eucleides He was in a hurry to get home; for I begged and advised him to stop, but he would not. So I went along with him, and as I was coming back I thought of Socrates and wondered at his prophetic gift, especially in what he said about him. For I think he met him a little before his own death, when Theaetetus was a mere boy, and as a result of acquaintance and conversation with him, he greatly admired his qualities. When I went to Athens he related to me the conversation [142d] he had with him, which was well worth hearing, and he said he would surely become a notable man if he lived.

Terpsion And he was right, apparently. But what was the talk? Could you relate it?

Eucleides No, by Zeus, at least not offhand.
[143a] But I made notes at the time as soon as I reached home, then afterwards at my leisure, as I recalled things, I wrote them down, and whenever I went to Athens I used to ask Socrates about what I could not remember, and then I came here and made corrections; so that I have pretty much the whole talk written down.

Terpsion That is true. I heard you say so before; and really I have been waiting about here all along intending to ask you to show it to me. What hinders us from reading it now? Certainly I need to rest, since I have come from the country. [143b]

Eucleides And I myself went with Theaetetus as far as Erineum,[1] so I also should not be sorry to take a rest. Come,

let us go, and while we are resting, the boy shall read to us.

Terpsion Very well.

Eucleides Here is the book, Terpsion. Now this is the way I wrote the conversation: I did not represent Socrates relating it to me, as he did, but conversing with those with whom he told me he conversed. And he told me they were the geometrician Theodorus and Theaetetus. Now in order that [143c] the explanatory words between the speeches might not be annoying in the written account, such as "and I said" or "and I remarked," whenever Socrates spoke, or "he agreed or he did not agree," in the case of the interlocutor, I omitted all that sort of thing and represented Socrates himself as talking with them.

Terpsion That is quite fitting, Eucleides.

Eucleides Come, boy, take the book and read. [143d]

Socrates If I cared more for Cyrene and its affairs, Theodorus, I should ask you about things there and about the people, whether any of the young men there are devoting themselves to geometry or any other form of philosophy; but as it is, since I care less for those people than for the people here, I am more eager to know which of our own young men are likely to gain reputation. These are the things I myself investigate, so far as I can, and about which I question those others with whom I see that the young men like to associate. Now a great many of them come to you, and rightly, [143e] for you deserve it on account of your geometry, not to speak of other reasons. So if you have met with any young man who is worth mentioning, I should like to hear about him.

Theodorus Truly, Socrates, it is well worth while for me to talk and for you to hear about a splendid young fellow, one of your fellow-citizens, whom I have met. Now if he were handsome, I should be very much afraid to speak, lest someone should think I was in love with him. But the fact is—now don't be angry with me—he is not handsome, but is like you in his snub nose and protruding eyes, only those features are less marked in him than in you.
[144a] You see I speak fearlessly. But I assure you that among all the young men I have ever met—and I have had to do with a great many—I never yet found one of such marvelously fine qualities. He is quick to learn, beyond almost anyone else, yet exceptionally gentle, and moreover brave beyond any other; I should not have supposed such a combination existed, and I do not see it elsewhere. On the contrary, those who, like him, have quick, sharp minds and good memories, have usually also quick tempers; they dart off and are swept away, [144b] like ships without ballast; they are excitable rather than courageous; those, on the other hand, who are steadier are somewhat dull when brought face to face with learning, and are very forgetful. But this boy advances toward learning and investigation smoothly and surely and successfully, with perfect gentleness, like a stream of oil that flows without a sound, so that one marvels how he accomplishes all this at his age.

Socrates That is good news; but which of our citizens is his father?

Theodorus I have heard the name, but do not remember it. [144c] However, it does not matter, for the youth is the middle one of those who are now coming toward us. He and those friends

of his were anointing themselves in the outer course,[1] and now they seem to have finished and to be coming here. See if you recognize him.

Socrates Yes, I do. He is the son of Euphronius of Sunium, who is a man of just the sort you describe, and of good repute in other respects; moreover he left a very large property. But the youth's name I do not know. [144d]

Theodorus Theaetetus is his name, Socrates; but I believe the property was squandered by trustees. Nevertheless, Socrates, he is remarkably liberal with his money, too.

Socrates It is a noble man that you describe. Now please tell him to come here and sit by us.

Theodorus I will. Theaetetus, come here to Socrates.

Socrates Yes, do so, Theaetetus, that I may look at myself and see what sort of a face I have; [144e] for Theodorus says it is like yours. Now if we each had a lyre, and he said we had tuned them to the same key, should we take his word for it without more ado, or should we inquire first whether he who said it was a musician?

Theaetetus We should inquire.

Socrates Then if we found that he was a musician, we should believe him, but if not, we should refuse to take his word?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates But now, if we are concerned about the likeness of our faces, [145a] we must consider whether he who speaks is a painter, or not.

Theaetetus I think we must.

Socrates Well, is Theodorus a painter?

Theaetetus Not so far as I know.

Socrates Nor a geometrician, either?

Theaetetus Oh yes, decidedly, Socrates.

Socrates And an astronomer, and an arithmetician, and a musician, and in general an educated man?

Theaetetus I think so.

Socrates Well then, if he says, either in praise or blame, that we have some physical resemblance, it is not especially worth while to pay attention to him.

Theaetetus Perhaps not. [145b]

Socrates But what if he should praise the soul of one of us for virtue and wisdom? Is it not worth while for the one who hears to examine eagerly the one who is praised, and for that one to exhibit his qualities with eagerness?

Theaetetus Certainly, Socrates.

Socrates Then, my dear Theaetetus, this is just the time for you to exhibit your qualities and for me to examine them; for I assure you that Theodorus, though he has praised many foreigners and citizens to me, never praised anyone as he praised you just now.

Theaetetus A good idea, Socrates; but make sure [145c] that he was not speaking in jest.

Socrates That is not Theodorus's way. But do not seek to draw back from your agreement on the pretext that he is jesting, or he will be forced to testify under oath; for certainly no one will accuse him of perjury. Come, be courageous and hold to the agreement.

Theaetetus I suppose I must, if you say so.

Socrates Now tell me; I suppose you learn some geometry from Theodorus?

Theaetetus Yes. [145d]

Socrates And astronomy and harmony and arithmetic?

Theaetetus I try hard to do so.

Socrates And so do I, my boy, from him and from any others who I think know anything about these things. But nevertheless, although in other respects I get on fairly well in them, yet I am in doubt about one little matter, which should be investigated with your help and that of these others. Tell me, is not learning growing wiser about that which one learns?

Theaetetus Of course.

Socrates And the wise, I suppose, are wise by wisdom.

Theaetetus Yes. [145e]

Socrates And does this differ at all from knowledge?

Theaetetus Does what differ?

Socrates Wisdom. Or are not people wise in that of which they have knowledge?

Theaetetus Of course.

Socrates Then knowledge and wisdom are the same thing?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Well, it is just this that I am in doubt about and cannot fully grasp by my own efforts—what knowledge really is.
[146a] Can we tell that? What do you say? Who of us will speak first? And he who fails, and whoever fails in turn, shall go and sit down and be donkey, as the children say when they play ball; and whoever gets through without failing shall be our king and shall order us to answer any questions he pleases. Why are you silent? I hope, Theodorus, I am not rude, through my love of discussion and my eagerness to make us converse and show ourselves friends and ready to talk to one another. [146b]

Theodorus That sort of thing would not be at all rude, Socrates; but tell one of the youths to answer your questions; for I am unused to such conversation and, moreover, I am not of an age to accustom myself to it. But that would be fitting for these young men, and they would improve much more than I; for the fact is, youth admits of improvement in every way. Come, question Theaetetus as you began to do, and do not let him off.

Socrates Well, Theaetetus, you hear what Theodorus says, [146c] and I think you will not wish to disobey him, nor is it right for a young person to disobey a wise man when he gives instructions about such matters. Come, speak up well and nobly. What do you think knowledge is?

Theaetetus Well, Socrates, I must, since you bid me. For, if I make a mistake, you are sure to set me right.

Socrates Certainly, if we can.

Theaetetus Well then, I think the things one might learn from Theodorus are knowledge—geometry and all the things you spoke of just now—and also cobblery and [146d] the other craftsmen's arts; each and all of these are nothing else but knowledge.

Socrates You are noble and generous, my friend, for when you are asked for one thing you give many, and a variety of things instead of a simple answer.

Theaetetus What do you mean by that, Socrates?

Socrates Nothing, perhaps; but I will tell you what I think I mean. When you say "cobblery" you speak of nothing else than the art of making shoes, do you?

Theaetetus Nothing else. [146e]

Socrates And when you say "carpentry"? Do you mean anything else than the art of making wooden furnishings?

Theaetetus Nothing else by that, either.

Socrates Then in both cases you define that to which each form of knowledge belongs?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates But the question, Theaetetus, was not to what knowledge belongs, nor how many the forms of knowledge are; for we did not wish to number them, but to find out what knowledge itself really is. Or is there nothing in what I say?

Theaetetus Nay, you are quite right.

[147a]
Socrates Take this example. If anyone should ask us about some common everyday thing, for instance, what clay is, and we should reply that it is the potters' clay and the oven makers' clay and the brickmakers' clay, should we not be ridiculous?

Theaetetus Perhaps.

Socrates Yes in the first place for assuming that the questioner can understand from our answer what clay is, when we say "clay," no matter whether we add "the image-makers'" [147b] or any other craftsmen's. Or does anyone, do you think, understand the name of anything when he does not know what the thing is?

Theaetetus By no means.

Socrates Then he does not understand knowledge of shoes if he does not know knowledge.

Theaetetus No.

Socrates Then he who is ignorant of knowledge does not understand cobblery or any other art.

Theaetetus That is true.

Socrates Then it is a ridiculous answer to the question "what is knowledge?" when we give the name of some art; [147c] for we give in our answer something that knowledge belongs to, when that was not what we were asked.

Theaetetus So it seems.

Socrates Secondly, when we might have given a short, everyday answer, we go an interminable distance round; for instance, in the question about clay, the everyday, simple thing would be to say "clay is earth mixed with moisture" without regard to whose clay it is.

Theaetetus It seems easy just now, Socrates, as you put it; but you are probably asking the kind of thing that came up among us lately when [147d] your namesake, Socrates here, and I were talking together.

Socrates What kind of thing was that, Theaetetus?

Theaetetus Theodorus here was drawing some figures for us in illustration of roots, showing that squares containing three square feet and five square feet are not commensurable in length with the unit of the foot, and so, selecting each one in its turn up to the square containing seventeen square feet and at that he stopped. Now it occurred to us, since the number of roots appeared to be infinite, to try to collect them under one

name, [147e] by which we could henceforth call all the roots.[1]

Socrates And did you find such a name?

Theaetetus I think we did. But see if you agree.

Socrates Speak on.

Theaetetus We divided all number into two classes. The one, the numbers which can be formed by multiplying equal factors, we represented by the shape of the square and called square or equilateral numbers.

Socrates Well done!

Theaetetus The numbers between these, such as three
[148a] and five and all numbers which cannot be formed by multiplying equal factors, but only by multiplying a greater by a less or a less by a greater, and are therefore always contained in unequal sides, we represented by the shape of the oblong rectangle and called oblong numbers.

Socrates Very good; and what next?

Theaetetus All the lines which form the four sides of the equilateral or square numbers we called lengths, and those which form the oblong numbers we called surds, because they are not commensurable with the others [148b] in length, but only in the areas of the planes which they have the power to form. And similarly in the case of solids.[1]

Socrates Most excellent, my boys! I think Theodorus will not be found liable to an action for false witness.

Theaetetus But really, Socrates, I cannot answer that question of yours about knowledge, as we answered the question about length and square roots. And yet you seem to me to want something of that kind. So Theodorus appears to be a false witness after all. [148c]

Socrates Nonsense! If he were praising your running and said he had never met any young man who was so good a runner, and then you were beaten in a race by a full grown man who held the record, do you think his praise would be any less truthful?

Theaetetus Why, no.

Socrates And do you think that the discovery of knowledge, as I was just now saying, is a small matter and not a task for the very ablest men?

Theaetetus By Zeus, I think it is a task for the very ablest.

Socrates Then you must have confidence in yourself, and believe that Theodorus is right,[…]

[196d]
Socrates And yet the argument is not likely to admit both. But still, since we must not shrink from any risk, what if we should try to do a shameless deed?

Theaetetus What is it?

Socrates To undertake to tell what it really is to know.

Theaetetus And why is that shameless?

Socrates You seem not to remember that our whole talk from the beginning has been a search for knowledge, because we did not know what it is.

Theaetetus Oh yes, I remember.

Socrates Then is it not shameless to proclaim what it is to know, when we are ignorant of knowledge? [196e] But really, Theaetetus, our talk has been badly tainted with unclearness all along; for we have said over and over again

“we know” and “we do not know” and “we have knowledge” and “we have no knowledge,” as if we could understand each other, while we were still ignorant of knowledge; and at this very moment, if you please, we have again used the terms “be ignorant” and “understand,” as though we had any right to use them if we are deprived of knowledge.

Theaetetus But how will you converse, Socrates, if you refrain from these words?

[197a]
Socrates Not at all, being the man I am; but I might if I were a real reasoner; if such a man were present at this moment he would tell us to refrain from these terms, and would criticize my talk scathingly. But since we are poor creatures, shall I venture to say what the nature of knowing is? For it seems to me that would be of some advantage.

Theaetetus Venture it then, by Zeus. You shall have full pardon for not refraining from those terms.

Socrates Have you heard what they say nowadays that knowing is?

Theaetetus Perhaps; however, I don't remember just at this moment. [197b]

Socrates They say it is having knowledge.

Theaetetus True.

Socrates Let us make a slight change and say possessing knowledge.

Theaetetus Why, how will you claim that the one differs from the other?

Socrates Perhaps it doesn't; but first hear how it seems to me to differ, and then help me to test my view.

Theaetetus I will if I can.

Socrates Well, then, having does not seem to me the same as possessing. For instance, if a man bought a cloak and had it under his control, but did not wear it, we should certainly say, not that he had it, but that he possessed it.

Theaetetus And rightly. [197c]

Socrates Now see whether it is possible in the same way for one who possesses knowledge not to have it, as, for instance, if a man should catch wild birds—pigeons or the like—and should arrange an aviary at home and keep them in it, we might in a way assert that he always has them because he possesses them, might we not?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates And yet in another way that he has none of them, but that he has acquired power over them, since he has brought them under his control in his own enclosure, [197d] to take them and hold them whenever he likes, by catching whichever bird he pleases, and to let them go again; and he can do this as often as be sees fit.

Theaetetus That is true.

Socrates Once more, then, just as a while ago we contrived some sort of a waxen figment in the soul, so now let us make in each soul an aviary stocked with all sorts of birds, some in flocks apart from the rest, others in small groups, and some solitary, flying hither and thither among them all. [197e]

Theaetetus Consider it done. What next?

Socrates We must assume that while we are children this receptacle is empty, and we must understand that the birds represent the varieties of knowledge. And whatsoever kind of knowledge a

person acquires and shuts up in the enclosure, we must say that he has learned or discovered the thing of which this is the knowledge, and that just this is knowing.

Theaetetus So be it.

[198a]
Socrates Consider then what expressions are needed for the process of recapturing and taking and holding and letting go again whichever he please of the kinds of knowledge, whether they are the same expressions as those needed for the original acquisition, or others. But you will understand better by an illustration. You admit that there is an art of arithmetic?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Now suppose this to be a hunt after the kinds of knowledge, or sciences, of all odd and even numbers.

Theaetetus I do so.

Socrates Now it is by this art, I imagine, that a man has [198b] the sciences of numbers under his own control and also that any man who transmits them to another does this.

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates And we say that when anyone transmits them he teaches, and when anyone receives them he learns, and when anyone, by having acquired them, has them in that aviary of ours, he knows them.

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates Now pay attention to what follows from this. Does not the perfect arithmetician understand all numbers; for he has the sciences of all numbers in his mind?

Theaetetus To be sure. [198c]

Socrates Then would such a man ever count anything—either any abstract numbers in his head, or any such external objects as possess number?

Theaetetus Of course,

Socrates But we shall affirm that counting is the same thing as considering how great any number in question is.

Theaetetus We shall.

Socrates Then he who by our previous admission knows all number is found to be considering that which he knows as if he did not know it. You have doubtless heard of such ambiguities.

Theaetetus Yes, I have.

Socrates Continuing, then, our comparison with the acquisition [198d] and hunting of the pigeons, we shall say that the hunting is of two kinds, one before the acquisition for the sake of possessing, the other carried on by the possessor for the sake of taking and holding in his hands what he had acquired long before. And just so when a man long since by learning came to possess knowledge of certain things, and knew them, he may have these very things afresh by taking up again the knowledge of each of them separately and holding it—the knowledge which he had acquired long before, but had not at hand in his mind?

Theaetetus That is true. [198e]

Socrates This, then, was my question just now: How should we express ourselves in speaking about them when an arithmetician undertakes to count or a man of letters to read something? In such a case shall we say that although he knows he sets himself to learn again from himself that which he knows?

Theaetetus But that is extraordinary, Socrates.

Socrates But shall we say that he is going to read or count that which he does not know, when we have granted that he knows all letters and all numbers?

[199a]
Theaetetus But that too is absurd.

Socrates Shall we then say that words are nothing to us, if it amuses anyone to drag the expressions "know" and "learn" one way and another, but since we set up the distinction that it is one thing to possess knowledge and another thing to have it, we affirm that it is impossible not to possess what one possesses, so that it never happens that a man does not know that which he knows, but that it is possible to conceive a false opinion about it? [199b] For it is possible to have not the knowledge of this thing, but some other knowledge instead, when in hunting for some one kind of knowledge, as the various kinds fly about, he makes a mistake and catches one instead of another; so in one example he thought eleven was twelve, because he caught the knowledge of twelve, which was within him, instead of that of eleven, caught a ringdove, as it were, instead of a pigeon.

Theaetetus Yes, that is reasonable.

Socrates But when he catches the knowledge he intends to catch, he is not deceived and has true opinion, and so true and false opinion exist and none of the things [199c] which formerly annoyed us interferes? Perhaps you will agree to this; or what will you do?

Theaetetus I will agree.

Socrates Yes, for we have got rid of our difficulty about men not knowing that which they know; for we no longer find ourselves not possessing that which we possess, whether we are deceived about anything or not. However, another more dreadful disaster seems to be coming in sight.

Theaetetus What disaster?

Socrates If the interchange of kinds of knowledge should ever turn out to be false opinion.

Theaetetus How so? [199d]

Socrates Is it not the height of absurdity, in the first place for one who has knowledge of something to be ignorant of this very thing, not through ignorance but through his knowledge; secondly, for him to be of opinion that this thing is something else and something else is this thing—for the soul, when knowledge has come to it, to know nothing and be ignorant of all things? For by this argument there is nothing to prevent ignorance from coming to us and making us know something and blindness from making us see, if knowledge is ever to make us ignorant. [199e]

Theaetetus Perhaps, Socrates, we were not right in making the birds represent kinds of knowledge only, but we ought to have imagined kinds of ignorance also flying about in the soul with the others; then the hunter would catch sometimes knowledge and sometimes ignorance of the same thing, and through the ignorance he would have false, but through the knowledge true opinion.

Socrates It is not easy, Theaetetus, to refrain from praising you. However, examine your suggestion once more. Let it be as you say:
[200a] the man who catches the ignorance will, you say, have false opinion. Is that it?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates But surely he will not also think that he has false opinion.

Theaetetus Certainly not.

Socrates No, but true opinion, and will have the attitude of knowing that about which he is deceived.

Theaetetus Of course.

Socrates Hence he will fancy that he has caught, and has, knowledge, not ignorance.

Theaetetus Evidently.

Socrates Then, after our long wanderings, we have come round again to our first difficulty. For the real reasoner [200b] will laugh and say, "Most excellent Sirs, does a man who knows both knowledge and ignorance think that one of them, which he knows, is another thing which he knows; or, knowing neither of them, is he of opinion that one, which he does not know, is another thing which he does not know; or, knowing one and not the other, does he think that the one he does not know is the one he knows; or that the one he knows is the one he does not know? Or will you go on and tell me that there are kinds of knowledge of the kinds of knowledge and of ignorance, and that he who possesses these kinds of knowledge and has enclosed them in some sort of other ridiculous aviaries [200c] or waxen figments, knows them, so long as he possesses them, even if he has them not at hand in his soul? And in this fashion are you going to be compelled to trot about endlessly in the same circle without making any progress?" What shall we reply to this, Theaetetus?

Theaetetus By Zeus, Socrates, I don't know what to say.

Socrates Then, my boy, is the argument right in rebuking us and in pointing out that we were wrong to abandon knowledge and seek first for false opinion? [200d] It is impossible to know the latter until we have adequately comprehended the nature of knowledge.

Theaetetus As the case now stands, Socrates, we cannot help thinking as you say.

Socrates To begin, then, at the beginning once more, what shall we say knowledge is? For surely we are not going to give it up yet, are we?

Theaetetus Not by any means, unless, that is, you give it up.

Socrates Tell us, then, what definition will make us contradict ourselves least. [200e]

Theaetetus The one we tried before, Socrates; at any rate, I have nothing else to offer.

Socrates What one?

Theaetetus That knowledge is true opinion; for true opinion is surely free from error and all its results are fine and good.

Socrates The man who was leading the way through the river,[1] Theaetetus, said: "The result itself will show;" and so in this matter, if we go on with our search, perhaps the thing will turn up in our path and of itself reveal the object of our search;
[201a] but if we stay still, we shall discover nothing.

Theaetetus You are right; let us go on with our investigation.

Socrates Well, then, this at least calls for slight investigation; for you have a whole profession which declares that true opinion is not knowledge.

Theaetetus How so? What profession is it?

Socrates The profession of those who are greatest in wisdom, who are called orators and lawyers; for they persuade men by the art which they possess, not teaching them, but making them have whatever opinion they like. Or do you think there are any teachers so clever as to be able, in the short time allowed by the water-clock,[1] [201b] satisfactorily to teach the judges the truth about what happened to people who have been robbed of their money or have suffered other acts of violence, when there were no eyewitnesses?

Theaetetus I certainly do not think so; but I think they can persuade them.

Socrates And persuading them is making them have an opinion, is it not?

Theaetetus Of course.

Socrates Then when judges are justly persuaded about matters which one can know only by having seen them and in no other way, in such a case, judging of them from hearsay, having acquired a true opinion of them, [201c] they have judged without knowledge, though they are rightly persuaded, if the judgement they have passed is correct, have they not?

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates But, my friend, if true opinion and knowledge were the same thing in law courts, the best of judges could never have true opinion without knowledge; in fact, however, it appears that the two are different.

Theaetetus Oh yes, I remember now, Socrates, having heard someone make the distinction, but I had forgotten it. He said that knowledge was true opinion accompanied by reason, [201d] but that unreasoning true opinion was outside of the sphere of knowledge; and matters of which there is not a rational explanation are unknowable—yes, that is what he called them—and those of which there is are knowable.

Socrates I am glad you mentioned that. But tell us how he distinguished between the knowable and the unknowable, that we may see whether the accounts that you and I have heard agree.

Theaetetus But I do not know whether I can think it out; but if someone else were to make the statement of it, I think I could follow.

Socrates Listen then, while I relate it to you—"a dream for a dream." I in turn [201e] used to imagine that I heard certain persons say that the primary elements of which we and all else are composed admit of no rational explanation; for each alone by itself can only be named, and no qualification can be added, neither that it is nor that it is not,
[202a] for that would at once be adding to it existence or non-existence, whereas we must add nothing to it, if we are to speak of that itself alone. Indeed, not even "itself" or "that" or "each" or "alone" or "this" or anything else of the sort, of which there are many, must be added; for these are prevalent terms which are added to all things indiscriminately and are different from the things to which they are added; but if it were possible to explain an element, and it admitted of a rational explanation of its own, it would have to be explained apart from everything else. But in fact

none of the primal elements can be expressed by reason; [202b] they can only be named, for they have only a name; but the things composed of these are themselves complex, and so their names are complex and form a rational explanation; for the combination of names is the essence of reasoning. Thus the elements are not objects of reason or of knowledge, but only of perception, whereas the combinations of them are objects of knowledge and expression and true opinion. When therefore a man acquires without reasoning the true opinion about anything, [202c] his mind has the truth about it, but has no knowledge; for he who cannot give and receive a rational explanation of a thing is without knowledge of it; but when he has acquired also a rational explanation he may possibly have become all that I have said and may now be perfect in knowledge. Is that the version of the dream you have heard, or is it different?

Theaetetus That was it exactly.

Socrates Are you satisfied, then, and do you state it in this way, that true opinion accompanied by reason is knowledge?

Theaetetus Precisely. [202d]

Socrates Can it be, Theaetetus, that we now, in this casual manner, have found out on this day what many wise men have long been seeking and have grown grey in the search?

Theaetetus I, at any rate, Socrates, think our present statement is good.

Socrates Probably this particular statement is so; for what knowledge could there still be apart from reason and right opinion? One point, however, in what has been said is unsatisfactory to me.

Theaetetus What point?

Socrates Just that which seems to be the cleverest; the assertion that the elements are unknowable and the class of combinations [202e] is knowable.

Theaetetus Is that not right?

Socrates We are sure to find out, for we have as hostages the examples which he who said all this used in his argument.

Theaetetus What examples?

Socrates The elements in writing, the letters of the alphabet, and their combinations, the syllables[1]; or do you think the author of the statements we are discussing had something else in view?

Theaetetus No; those are what he had in view.

[203a]
Socrates Let us, then, take them up and examine them, or rather, let us examine ourselves and see whether it was in accordance with this theory, or not, that we learned letters. First then, the syllables have a rational explanation, but the letters have not?

Theaetetus I suppose so.

Socrates I think so, too, decidedly. Now if anyone should ask about the first syllable of Socrates; “Theaetetus, tell me, what is SO?” What would you reply?

Theaetetus I should say “S and O.”

Socrates This, then, is your explanation of the syllable?

Theaetetus Yes. [203b]

Socrates Come now, in the same manner give me the explanation of the S.

Theaetetus How can one give any elements of an element? For really, Socrates, the S is a voiceless letter,[1] a mere noise, as of the tongue hissing; B

again has neither voice nor noise, nor have most of the other letters; and so it is quite right to say that they have no explanation, seeing that the most distinct of them, the seven vowels, have only voice, but no explanation whatsoever.

Socrates In this point, then, my friend, it would seem that we have reached a right conclusion about knowledge.

Theaetetus I think we have. [203c]

Socrates But have we been right in laying down the principle that whereas the letter is unknowable, yet the syllable is knowable?

Theaetetus Probably.

Socrates Well then, shall we say that the syllable is the two letters, or, if there be more than two, all of them, or is it a single concept that has arisen from their combination?

Theaetetus I think we mean all the letters it contains.

Socrates Now take the case of two, S and O. The two together are the first syllable of my name. He who knows it knows the two letters, does he not? [203d]

Theaetetus Of course.

Socrates He knows, that is, the S and the O.

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates How is that? He is ignorant of each, and knowing neither of them he knows them both?

Theaetetus That is monstrous and absurd, Socrates.

Socrates And yet if a knowledge of each letter is necessary before one can know both, he who is ever to know a syllable must certainly know the letters first, and so our fine theory will have run away and vanished! [203e]

Theaetetus And very suddenly, too.

Socrates Yes, for we are not watching it carefully. Perhaps we ought to have said that the syllable is not the letters, but a single concept that has arisen from them, having a single form of its own, different from the letters.

Theaetetus Certainly; and perhaps that will be better than the other way.

Socrates Let us look into that; we must not give up in such unmanly fashion a great and impressive theory.

Theaetetus No, we must not.

[204a]
Socrates Let it be, then, as we say now, that the syllable or combination is a single form arising out of the several conjoined elements, and that it is the same in words and in all other things.

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates Therefore there must be no parts of it.

Theaetetus How so?

Socrates Because if there are parts of anything, the whole must inevitably be all the parts; or do you assert also that the whole that has arisen out of the parts is a single concept different from all the parts?

Theaetetus Yes, I do.

Socrates Do you then say that all and the whole are the same, [204b] or that each of the two is different from the other?

Theaetetus I am not sure; but you tell me to answer boldly, so I take the risk and say that they are different.

Socrates Your boldness, Theaetetus, is right; but whether your answer is so remains to be seen.

Theaetetus Yes, certainly, we must see about that.

Socrates The whole, then, according to our present view, would differ from all?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates How about this? Is there any difference between all in the plural and all in the singular? For instance, if we say one, two, three, [204c] 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 forms speaking of the same or of different numbers?

Theaetetus Of the same.

Socrates That is, of six?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Then in each form of speech we have spoken of all the six?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates And again do we not speak of one thing when we speak of them all?

Theaetetus Assuredly.

Socrates That is, of six?

Theaetetus Yes. [204d]

Socrates Then in all things that are made up of number, we apply the same term to all in the plural and all in the singular?

Theaetetus Apparently.

Socrates Here is another way of approaching the matter. The number of the fathom and the fathom are the same, are they not?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates And of the furlong likewise.

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates And the number of the army is the same as the army, and all such cases are alike? In each of them all the number is all the thing.

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates And is the number of each anything but [204e] the parts of each?

Theaetetus No.

Socrates Everything that has parts, accordingly, consists of parts, does it not?

Theaetetus Evidently.

Socrates But we are agreed that the all must be all the parts if all the number is to be the all.[1]

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Then the whole does not consist of parts, for if it consisted of all the parts it would be the all.

Theaetetus That seems to be true.

Socrates But is a part a part of anything in the world but the whole?

Theaetetus Yes, of the all.

[205a]
Socrates You are putting up a brave fight, Theaetetus. But is not the all precisely that of which nothing is wanting?

Theaetetus Necessarily.

Socrates And is not just this same thing, from which nothing whatsoever is lacking, a whole? For that from which anything is lacking is neither a whole nor all, which have become identical simultaneously and for the same reason.

Theaetetus I think now that there is no difference between all and whole.

Socrates We were saying, were we not, that if there are parts of anything, the whole and all of it will be all the parts?

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates Once more, then, as I was trying to say just now, if the syllable is not the letters, does it not follow necessarily [205b] that it contains the letters, not as parts of it, or else that being the same as the letters, it is equally knowable with them?

Theaetetus It does.

Socrates And it was in order to avoid this that we assumed that it was different from them?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Well then, if the letters are not parts of the syllable, can you mention any other things which are parts of it, but are not the letters[1] of it?

Theaetetus Certainly not. For if I grant that there are parts of the syllable, it would be ridiculous to give up the letters and look for other things as parts. [205c]

Socrates Without question, then, Theaetetus, the syllable would be, according to our present view, some indivisible concept.

Theaetetus I agree.

Socrates Do you remember, then, my friend, that we admitted a little while ago, on what we considered good grounds, that there can be no rational explanation of the primary elements of which other things are composed, because each of them, when taken by itself, is not composite, and we could not properly apply to such an element even the expression “be” or “this,” because these terms are different and alien, and for this reason it is irrational and unknowable?

Theaetetus I remember. [205d]

Socrates And is not this the sole reason why it is single in form and indivisible? I can see no other.

Theaetetus There is no other to be seen.

Socrates Then the syllable falls into the same class with the letter, if it has no parts and is a single form?

Theaetetus Yes, unquestionably.

Socrates If, then, the syllable is a plurality of letters and is a whole of which the letters are parts, the syllables and the letters are equally knowable and expressible, if all the parts were found to be the same as the whole. [205e]

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates But if one and indivisible, then syllable and likewise letter are equally irrational and unknowable; for the same cause will make them so.

Theaetetus I cannot dispute it.

Socrates Then we must not accept the statement of any one who says that the syllable is knowable and expressible, but the letter is not.

Theaetetus No, not if we are convinced by our argument.

[206a]
Socrates But would you not rather accept the opposite belief, judging by your own experience when you were learning to read?

Theaetetus What experience?

Socrates In learning, you were merely constantly trying to distinguish between the letters both by sight and by hearing,

keeping each of them distinct from the rest, that you might not be disturbed by their sequence when they were spoken or written.

Theaetetus That is very true.

Socrates And in the music school was not perfect attainment [206b] the ability to follow each note and tell which string produced it; and everyone would agree that the notes are the elements of music?

Theaetetus Yes, that is all true.

Socrates Then if we are to argue from the elements and combinations in which we ourselves have experience to other things in general, we shall say that the elements as a class admit of a much clearer knowledge than the compounds and of a knowledge that is much more important for the complete attainment of each branch of learning, and if anyone says that the compound is by its nature knowable and the element unknowable, we shall consider that he is, intentionally or unintentionally, joking.

Theaetetus Certainly. [206c]

Socrates Still other proofs of this might be brought out, I think; but let us not on that account lose sight of the question before us, which is: What is meant by the doctrine that the most perfect knowledge arises from the addition of rational explanation to true opinion?

Theaetetus No, we must not.

Socrates Now what are we intended to understand by "rational explanation"? I think it means one of three things.

Theaetetus What are they? [206d]

Socrates The first would be making one's own thought clear through speech by means of verbs and nouns, imaging the opinion in the stream that flows through the lips, as in a mirror or water. Do you not think the rational explanation is something of that sort?

Theaetetus Yes, I do. At any rate, we say that he who does that speaks or explains.

Socrates Well, that is a thing that anyone can do sooner or later; he can show what he thinks about anything, unless he is deaf or dumb from the first; and so [206e] all who have any right opinion will be found to have it with the addition of rational explanation, and there will henceforth be no possibility of right opinion apart from knowledge.

Theaetetus True.

Socrates Let us not, therefore, carelessly accuse him of talking nonsense who gave the definition of knowledge which we are now considering; for perhaps that is not what he meant. He may have meant that each person if asked about anything must be able in reply [207a] to give his questioner an account of it in terms of its elements.

Theaetetus As for example, Socrates?

Socrates As, for example, Hesiod, speaking of a wagon, says, "a hundred pieces of wood in a wagon."[1] Now I could not name the pieces, nor, I fancy, could you; but if we were asked what a wagon is, we should be satisfied if we could say "wheels, axle, body, rims, yoke."

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates But he, perhaps, would think we were ridiculous, just as he would if, on being asked about your name, we should reply by telling the syllables, [207b] holding a right opinion and expressing correctly what we have to say, but should think we were

grammarians and as such both possessed and were expressing as grammarians would the rational explanation of the name Theaetetus. He would say that it is impossible for anyone to give a rational explanation of anything with knowledge, until he gives a complete enumeration of the elements, combined with true opinion. That, I believe, is what was said before.

Theaetetus Yes, it was.

Socrates So, too, he would say that we have right opinion about a wagon, but that he who can give an account of its essential nature [207c] in terms of those one hundred parts has by this addition added rational explanation to true opinion and has acquired technical knowledge of the essential nature of a wagon, in place of mere opinion, by describing the whole in terms of its elements.

Theaetetus Do you agree to that, Socrates?

Socrates If you, my friend, agree to it and accept the view that orderly description in terms of its elements is a rational account of anything, but that description in terms of syllables or still larger units is irrational, [207d] tell me so, that we may examine the question.

Theaetetus Certainly I accept it.

Socrates Do you accept it in the belief that anyone has knowledge of anything when he thinks that the same element is a part sometimes of one thing and sometimes of another or when he is of opinion that the same thing has as a part of it sometimes one thing and sometimes another?

Theaetetus Not at all, by Zeus.

Socrates Then do you forget that when you began to learn to read you and the others did just that?

Theaetetus Do you mean when we thought that sometimes one letter [207e] and sometimes another belonged to the same syllable, and when we put the same letter sometimes into the proper syllable and sometimes into another?

Socrates That is what I mean.

Theaetetus By Zeus, I do not forget, nor do I think that those have knowledge who are in that condition.

Socrates Take an example: When at such a stage in his progress a person in writing "Theaetetus" thinks he ought to write,
[208a] and actually does write, TH and E, and again in trying to write "Theodorus" thinks he ought to write, and does write, T and E, shall we say that he knows the first syllable of your names?

Theaetetus No, we just now agreed that a person in such a condition has not yet gained knowledge.

Socrates Then there is nothing to prevent the same person from being in that condition with respect to the second and third and fourth syllables?

Theaetetus No, nothing.

Socrates Then, in that case, he has in mind the orderly description in terms of letters, and will write "Theaetetus" with right opinion, when he writes the letters in order?

Theaetetus Evidently. [208b]

Socrates But he is still, as we say, without knowledge, though he has right opinion?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Yes, but with his opinion he has rational explanation; for he wrote with the method in terms of letters in his mind, and we agreed that that was rational explanation.

Theaetetus True.

Socrates There is, then, my friend, a combination of right opinion with rational explanation, which cannot as yet properly be called knowledge?

Theaetetus There is not much doubt about it.

Socrates So it seems that the perfectly true definition of knowledge, which we thought we had, was but a golden dream. Or shall we wait a bit before we condemn it? Perhaps the definition to be adopted is not this, [208c] but the remaining one of the three possibilities one of which we said must be affirmed by anyone who asserts that knowledge is right opinion combined with rational explanation.

Theaetetus I am glad you called that to mind. For there is still one left. The first was a kind of vocal image of the thought, the second the orderly approach to the whole through the elements, which we have just been discussing, and what is the third?

Socrates It is just the definition which most people would give, that knowledge is the ability to tell some characteristic by which the object in question differs from all others.

Theaetetus As an example of the method, what explanation can you give me, and of what thing? [208d]

Socrates As an example, if you like, take the sun: I think it is enough for you to be told that it is the brightest of the heavenly bodies that revolve about the earth.

Theaetetus Certainly.

Socrates Understand why I say this. It is because, as we were just saying, if you get hold of the distinguishing characteristic by which a given thing differs from the rest, you will, as some say, get hold of the definition or explanation of it; but so long as you cling to some common quality, your explanation will pertain to all those objects to which the common quality belongs. [208e]

Theaetetus I understand; and it seems to me that it is quite right to call that kind a rational explanation or definition.

Socrates Then he who possesses right opinion about anything and adds thereto a comprehension of the difference which distinguishes it from other things will have acquired knowledge of that thing of which he previously had only opinion.

Theaetetus That is what we affirm.

Socrates Theaetetus, now that I have come closer to our statement, I do not understand it at all. It is like coming close to a scene-painting.[1] While I stood off at a distance, I thought there was something in it.

Theaetetus What do you mean?

[209a]
Socrates I will tell you if I can. Assume that I have right opinion about you; if I add the explanation or definition of you, then I have knowledge of you, otherwise I have merely opinion.

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates But explanation was, we agreed, the interpretation of your difference.

Theaetetus It was.

Socrates Then so long as I had merely opinion, I did not grasp in my thought any of the points in which you differ from others?

Theaetetus Apparently not.

Socrates Therefore I was thinking of some one of the common traits which you possess no more than other men. [209b]

Theaetetus You must have been.

Socrates For heaven's sake! How in the world could I in that case have any opinion about you more than about anyone else? Suppose that I thought "That is Theaetetus which is a man and has nose and eyes and mouth" and so forth, mentioning all the parts. Can this thought make me think of Theaetetus any more than of Theodorus or of the meanest of the Mysians,[1] as the saying is?

Theaetetus Of course not.

Socrates But if I think not only of a man with nose and eyes, [209c] but of one with snub nose and protruding eyes, shall I then have an opinion of you any more than of myself and all others like me?

Theaetetus Not at all.

Socrates No; I fancy Theaetetus will not be the object of opinion in me until this snubnosedness of yours has stamped and deposited in my mind a memorial different from those of the other examples of snubnosedness that I have seen, and the other traits that make up your personality have done the like. Then that memorial, if I meet you again tomorrow, will awaken my memory and make me have right opinion about you.

Theaetetus Very true. [209d]

Socrates Then right opinion also would have to do with differences in any given instance?

Theaetetus At any rate, it seems so.

Socrates Then what becomes of the addition of reason or explanation to right opinion? For if it is defined as the addition of an opinion of the way in which a given thing differs from the rest, it is an utterly absurd injunction.

Theaetetus How so?

Socrates When we have a right opinion of the way in which certain things differ from other things, we are told to acquire a right opinion of the way in which those same things differ from other things! On this plan the twirling of a scytale[2] or a pestle or anything of the sort would be as nothing [209e] compared with this injunction. It might more justly be called a blind man's giving directions; for to command us to acquire that which we already have, in order to learn that of which we already have opinion, is very like a man whose sight is mightily darkened.

Theaetetus Tell me now, what did you intend to say when you asked the question a while ago?

Socrates If, my boy, the command to add reason or explanation means learning to know and not merely getting an opinion about the difference, our splendid definition of knowledge would be a fine affair! For learning to know is acquiring knowledge,
[210a] is it not?

Theaetetus Yes.

Socrates Then, it seems, if asked, "What is knowledge?" our leader will reply that it is right opinion with the addition of a

knowledge of difference; for that would, according to him, be the addition of reason or explanation.

Theaetetus So it seems.

Socrates And it is utterly silly, when we are looking for a definition of knowledge, to say that it is right opinion with knowledge, whether of difference or of anything else whatsoever. So neither perception, Theaetetus, nor true opinion, nor reason or explanation [210b] combined with true opinion could be knowledge.

Theaetetus Apparently not.

Socrates Are we then, my friend, still pregnant and in travail with knowledge, or have we brought forth everything?

Theaetetus Yes, we have, and, by Zeus, Socrates, with your help I have already said more than there was in me.

Socrates Then does our art of midwifery declare to us that all the offspring that have been born are mere wind-eggs and not worth rearing?

Theaetetus It does, decidedly.

Socrates If after this you ever undertake to conceive other thoughts, Theaetetus, and do conceive, [210c] you will be pregnant with better thoughts than these by reason of the present search, and if you remain barren, you will be less harsh and gentler to your associates, for you will have the wisdom not to think you know that which you do not know. So much and no more my art can accomplish; nor do I know aught of the things that are known by others, the great and wonderful men who are today and have been in the past. This art, however, both my mother and I received from God, she for women and I for young and noble men and for all who are fair. [210d] And now I must go to the Porch of the King, to answer to the suit which Meletus[1] has brought against me. But in the morning, Theodorus, let us meet here again.