

KEY IDEAS OF PLATO' *THEAETETUS* [PENGUIN EDN]

<u>Item</u>	<u>Idea</u>	<u>Para</u>
1.	What is knowledge, and is it the same as wisdom?	145e
2.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : geometry and cobbling are examples of knowledge.	146d
3.	Those are objects of knowledge, but not the nature of knowledge itself.	146e
4.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : the answer will be as inconclusive as theories of irrational numbers.	148b
5.	Your struggles to explain irrational roots are just the approach we want.	148d
6.	I offer no wisdom, but I will lead you to truth like a midwife.	151c
7.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : I think knowledge is the same as perception (<i>aisthesis</i>).	151e
8.	So knowledge is relative to the observer? ('Man is the measure of all things')	152a
9.	This means the wind is cold for some people, but not for others.	152b
10.	Perception might indeed be knowledge, because it is infallible for each observer .	152c
11.	This includes the view that everything changes, and knowledge with it .	152e
12.	Movement, change and activity are vital for life, for learning and for climate.	153b
13.	Colours result from the meeting of observer and object (and animals see different colours from us).	153e
14.	Each individual perceives differently, and our own perceptions vary with time.	154a
15.	But objects don't change with observers, and observers don't change when objects do .	154b
16.	Whether a number is 'big' or 'small' is a relative matter.	154c
17.	And yet something must happen to the number for it to change magnitude.	155a
18.	Continual change involves both a perception and a thing perceived.	156a
19.	We experience the perceptions, and the qualities perceived match the senses used.	156b
20.	The perception and the perceived change slowly, and are linked together.	156c
21.	When white is perceived, the change in the eye and in the object precisely coincide.	156d
22.	Similarly with hardness or warmth, the senses and their objects depend on each other.	157a
23.	If this is right, words implying stability and identity (like "is") should be abandoned.	157b
24.	However, misperceptions through dreams or madness suggest ordinary perception is accurate .	157e
25.	It is hard to find an argument to prove that we aren't dreaming right now .	158b
26.	We spend as much time believing dreams as believing waking experience.	158d
27.	If two things are different, then they necessarily possess different powers.	158e
28.	If Socrates is healthy or ill or asleep, he must have different powers in each case.	159b
29.	Since perceptions are born of meetings, Socrates must perceive wine differently in each condition .	159d
30.	Our whole changing existence consists of these conjunctions with perceived qualities.	160b
31.	Therefore my knowledge must consist entirely of what I perceive.	160d
32.	If 'man is the measure of all things' (Protagoras), then so are pigs, baboons and tadpoles?	161c
33.	Such relativism also makes argument pointless , as we are all as clever as Protagoras.	161e
34.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : since this relativism makes us equal even with the gods, I am beginning to doubt it.	162c
35.	Protagoras would say the denial of relativism is popular, but lacks solid proof.	162e
36.	If perception is knowledge we would know strange languages as we heard them .	163b
37.	We know things as we remember them, which doesn't involve any perception.	164a
38.	With one eye covered we perceive and don't perceive, so we do and don't know .	165c
39.	Not only does the perceiver continually change, but we don't exist as fixed individuals .	166c
40.	Protagoras claims that there is no truth, but some people have better perceptions than others.	166d
41.	Healthy taste is not right taste, but it is better than sick taste .	166e
42.	Education aims for better beliefs, but the old beliefs must have appeared to be true.	167a
43.	We are wiser than frogs, as each area of activity has its own particular expertise.	167b
44.	In normal life we judge people to be right or wrong, which relativism says we can't do.	170c
45.	According to relativism, we should just agree with every opinion that is expressed.	170d
46.	Protagoras thought relativism to be true (though it is a minority view).	170e
47.	If everyone is right, Protagoras must consider those who disagree with him are right!	171a
48.	Protagoras is right that perceptions depend on observers, and that experts exist.	171e
49.	We might accept that the values of communities are all equally good, but not their decisions .	172a
50.	(Philosophers are above worldly affairs, because they view things so broadly).	174e
51.	In predicting the future, clearly experts have more authority than other people.	178e
52.	Communities make rules to achieve a better future, but most of us don't have this expertise.	179b
53.	Individual perception has undeniable authority (though relativists are hopeless at discussing it!).	179e
54.	We must decide between the Heracliteans ('all is flux') and the Parmenideans ('nothing ever changes').	181a
55.	There are two ways of changing - in position, and in qualities.	181d
56.	If 'everything is changing', Protagoreans must say things always change in <u>both</u> ways.	181e
57.	Descriptions of things become impossible if every aspect of them is always changing .	182e
58.	We said 'knowledge is perception' (which always changes), but now perception is impossible!	183a

59.	Language would be reduced to continually saying what everything <u>isn't!</u>	183b
60.	We see with our eyes and ears, or (strictly) our minds perceive 'by means' of them.	184c
61.	Each sense has distinctive and separate experiences, but there is also 'common ground'.	185c
62.	Features such as similarity, identity, numbers and existence are perceived by mind, not senses.	185d
63.	Being and truth (fundamental to knowledge) are not, then, reached through perception.	186d
64.	Since knowledge comes through the mind, perception and knowledge are quite separate.	186e
65.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : knowledge is a type of thinking. It can't be just belief, but perhaps it is true belief.	187b
66.	Dividing things into the 'known' and the 'not known' doesn't explain how false belief is possible.	188c
67.	Perhaps false belief is simply belief applied to things which are not true.	188d
68.	But untrue things don't exist, so beliefs can't be applied to them.	189a
69.	Perhaps false belief is the application of a belief to the wrong fact.	189c
70.	Belief is a statement made to itself by the mind at the end of an inner conversation.	190a
71.	Of course, no one can believe anything unless they feel it to be true.	190c
72.	False belief can't be application to wrong facts, as we can't knowingly do that.	190d
73.	An account of false belief is essential , or relativism and all-is-flux will triumph.	190e
74.	Maybe false belief is (after all) mistaking the unknown for the known (think a stranger is Socrates).	191b
75.	Imagine that memory is like making marks on a mental block of wax .	191d
76.	Usually two things can't be confused when they are remembered or perceived.	192a
77.	Confusions occur when perceptions of things known are connected to the wrong memories.	193c
78.	Clever people have highly receptive and suitable 'wax', but ignorant people don't.	194c
79.	But is it really true that knowledge is the correct linking of perception to thought?	195c
80.	Errors in arithmetic are confusions of 'wax impressions', with no perception involved.	196b
81.	This seems to mean that we can have both knowledge and ignorance of the same thing.	196b
82.	It is frustrating that we cannot analyse knowledge without use of the word 'know'.	196e
83.	Think of knowledge as birds in an aviary , which we 'possess', but don't immediately 'have'.	197c
84.	In arithmetic the discovery of knowledge is like catching the birds for the aviary.	198b
85.	The owner then investigates his own knowledge, like tracking down his own pigeons.	198d
86.	False beliefs occur when we catch the 'wrong birds' from the knowledge we possess.	199b
87.	In this sense, we can not know a thing even when we know it.	199c
88.	This means that error is a result of knowledge, and knowledge could result from error!	199d
89.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : perhaps we catch ignorance in the aviary as well as knowledge?	199e
90.	But that's the original problem! How would you know which beliefs were false?	200b
91.	If you presume further knowledge about the knowledge , it is an infinite regress.	200b
92.	You must first know what knowledge is, and <u>then</u> analyse false beliefs.	200d
93.	Knowledge isn't just true belief, as orators can create true beliefs that aren't knowledge.	201b
94.	<i>Theaetetus</i> : maybe knowledge is true belief combined with a "rational account" (logos)?	201d
95.	It is not possible to give an account of the primary elements of existence, which just are.	201e
96.	Everything else is combinations of elements , and there knowledge <u>is</u> true belief with an account.	202b
97.	The theory is based on language - can we give an 'account' of syllables but not of letters?	203a
98.	We can indeed analyse 'so-' into components, but the letter s just <u>is</u> .	203b
99.	A syllable is either just letters, or an identity created when letters combine.	203c
100.	It can't be just letters, because knowing a syllable is more than knowing the letters .	203d
101.	So a syllable can't have parts, because a 'whole' is normally just the sum of its parts.	204a
102.	In the case of numbers, a 'whole' and a 'totality' are the same, just a set of units.	204c
103.	Dilemma: either a syllable has no parts, or it can be known just by knowing the letters.	205b
104.	In order to be knowable, a syllable must be a single indivisible entity .	205c
105.	If a syllable has a single identity, it may be an 'element', of which no 'account' can be given.	205e
106.	Experience (of literacy and music) suggests that elements are more knowable than complexes.	206b
107.	A ' rational account ' (<i>logos</i>) must be more than just speech, which anyone can do.	206d
108.	Perhaps an account lists all the elements of a thing (e.g. the one hundred timbers of a wagon).	207a
109.	It certainly seems inadequate to list a few larger components of a thing.	207b
110.	But getting the elements (letters) right in a spelling doesn't prevent errors in similar words.	208a
111.	Such spelling is true belief with an account of elements, but too unreliable for knowledge.	208b
112.	Perhaps an account is knowing what is distinctive in a thing (e.g. that the sun is brightest).	208c
113.	Shared features would involve discussing many things, but unique features might do it.	208d
114.	But you must uniquely identify a thing before you analyse its features.	209b
115.	Therefore uniqueness is required for true belief, before we begin our 'account'.	209d
116.	Of course, if we had to <u>know</u> what is unique, our definition of knowledge would be circular.	210a
117.	So knowledge is not perception, <u>or</u> true belief, <u>or</u> true belief with a rational account.	210b

GUIDE TO PLATO'S *THEAETETUS* (TEXT 2)

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Background:

Heraclitus: "You cannot step into the same river twice", so everything is 'flux', and there is no stable reality to be known
Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things", so reality depends on a particular observer at a particular time (relativism)
Parmenides: The world of change is an illusion (supported by Zeno's 'Achilles' argument), and reality is fixed and eternal
Logos: 'Word', 'reason', 'a (rational) account'. A much-debated concept, between truth/reason and rhetoric/persuasion

Proposed Theories of Knowledge:

Direct Perception (10): it may be that knowledge is exactly the same as perception (*but see* 9,15)
Correspondence (20): maybe knowledge is when perceptions and objects precisely match (*but see* 32,39,57,62,64)
True belief (65): maybe knowledge is true belief (*but see* 66,71,92,93)
True memory (86): maybe knowledge is when we remember our true beliefs (*but see* 89,90,92)
Indefinable (92,105,114): maybe we intuitively recognise knowledge but can't analyse it (*but see* 10,51,65,78,108)
Elements (106,108): perhaps the 'account' involves listing all the fundamental components of things (*but see* 110,111)
Distinctive (112): maybe we should identify what is distinctive in the 'account' (*but see* 114,116)
[Meno (97e-98a): in this earlier dialogue, Plato says that true belief with a rational account *is* good enough for knowledge]

Key Examples:

Socrates (28): since Socrates constantly changes (e.g. illness, sleep), his perception of wine can never stay the same
tadpoles (32,43): if only perception or correspondence are required for knowledge, then tadpoles could achieve it
wax (75): memory is like impressions in wax, so knowledge would be successfully matching perceptions with impressions
aviary (83): knowledge is in the mind like birds flying in an aviary, but the owner still has to catch them for proper knowledge
syllables (97): syllables are built up from basic letters, but is that reductionist account enough, or do they gain a holistic identity?
wagon (108): there seems to be no more to knowing a wagon than knowing its hundred components (but what about the *order*?)

Later discussion:

Epicurus: a few years after Plato, he accepted the proposal that perception just *is* infallibly true, and so it is knowledge
Descartes: he doesn't pursue Plato's line of thought, because he is gripped by scepticism, from which only God can rescue him
Pragmatism: these Americans followed up the connection between knowledge and accurate prediction (see 51,52); truth *works*
Russell: expands Plato, with new terminology (*acquaintance/description, correspondence, appearance/reality, complex*)
Gettier problem: the account or justification may *accidentally* support true belief, so it wouldn't count as knowledge
'justification': it is widely agreed that knowledge is true belief, but the *logos*/account/justification is difficult and controversial:

- perhaps the justification should be non-accidental, because the fact somehow *causes* the person's belief
- perhaps there should not exist anything which could contradict the knowledge (so it is '**indefeasible**')
- perhaps a fourth condition is needed, e.g. that there is consistency with or support from other supposed 'knowledge'