

PLATO'S *THEAETETUS*

This book was written in about 368 BCE, and is a dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus about the nature of knowledge. It is the oldest surviving book on the subject, and it explores **perception, relativism, error and justification**, seen as the key problem areas of knowledge.

A. Perception [151e-186e]

1. If knowledge is the same as perception, then it is relative to the observer (Protagoras: *Man is the measure of all things*)
2. Perception is infallible for each observer, so it is a candidate for knowledge.
3. The world constantly changes (Heraclitus: *All is flux*), so knowledge will change with it.
4. But it is absurd to think that objects change when observers do, or vice versa.
5. Observations and objects seem to coincide, even during change, as in colour or temperature.
6. Errors in perception (dreams or madness) suggest that normal perception is reliable.
7. Socrates will perceive wine differently if he is in a different condition (e.g. ill).
8. All our lives consist of perceptions, so knowledge *has* to be made out perception.
9. If man is the measure of all things, then presumably so are pigs, baboons and tadpoles!
10. If relativism is right then we are all equally clever (even fools and gods), and argument is pointless.
11. *But* we can't know a strange language just by perception.
12. When we know things from memory we aren't perceiving.
13. With one eye shut we perceive and don't perceive, so we know and don't know!
14. We could deny truth, but still admit that some perceptions (e.g. healthy) are better than others (sick).
15. If Protagoras is right, he must consider that those who disagree with him are also right!
16. Perhaps values are relative, but decisions can be right or wrong.
17. We all acknowledge experts, which shouldn't be possible if relativism is true.
18. If things changed (fluctuated) in *every* way, it would be impossible to describe them.
19. We seemed trapped between Parmenides ('nothing changes') and Heraclitus.
20. Each sense is different, but there is also some common ground between them.
21. We can know similarity, identity, numbers and existence through the mind.
22. *Conclusion:* perception and knowledge are quite different things.

B. False Belief [187b-201b]

1. Knowledge is a type of thought; it is different from belief, so perhaps it is true belief.
2. False belief can't be belief applied to untrue things, because such things don't exist.
3. Perhaps false belief is applied to the wrong facts.
4. But we only believe things if we think them true, so we are incapable of knowingly believing wrong facts.
5. Maybe knowledge is correctly linking beliefs to memories (as if to impressions in a block of wax).
6. Then clever people have receptive wax and are good at making the links.
7. But arithmetic errors involve no perceptions, and are just confusions within the wax.
8. This means you could have knowledge (good links) and ignorance (confusions) of the same thing.
9. Forget wax; think of memory as birds in an aviary, which don't sit still, and so have to be caught (which is a skill).
10. False belief would then be when you catch the wrong birds.
11. The trouble is, you have to *know* which birds to catch, which means knowledge is required to attain knowledge.
12. And limited knowledge catches the wrong birds, so error comes from knowledge (and error could catch the right bird!).
13. How do we know which original beliefs are false (without an infinite regress of knowing that we know that we know)?
14. It seems we must decide what knowledge is *before* we can analyse false belief.
15. *Conclusion:* knowledge isn't true belief (especially since orators can create true beliefs which aren't knowledge).

C. Justification [201d-210b]

1. Maybe knowledge is true belief with a 'rational account' (*logos*).
2. A rational account must build on primary elements which just are.
3. The rational account will be about the combination of the elements.
4. For example, language is built out of syllables, which are in turn built out of letters.
5. But knowing a syllable is more than just knowing the letters it is composed of.
6. So either a syllable has not parts to analyse, or it is no more than the sum of its parts.
7. If syllables are basic elements as well as letters, a basic account may be impossible.
8. But experience suggests that elements are more knowable than complexes.
9. Perhaps an account just needs to catalogue the elements (like the hundred timbers that make up a wagon).
10. But knowing elements doesn't prevent error in their order (as in bad spelling).
11. Maybe an account is knowing what is distinctive or unique in a thing (e.g. the sun).
12. But knowing what is unique in a thing is needed *before* an analysis can be made.
13. *Conclusion:* it seems that knowledge is required before you can get knowledge, so we are stuck.