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# Plato

# Theaetetus



Translated with Introduction and Notes

Joe Sachs

# PLATO'S THEAETETUS

Translated, with  
Introduction and Notes

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FOCUS PUBLISHING  
R. PULLINS Co.  
NEWBURYPORT, MA

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ISBN 1-58510-101-X

Cover image: Wendy Braithwaite

**Book Team:**

Publisher: Ron Pullins

Production Manager: Linda Robertson

Editorial Manager: Cynthia Zawalich

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	12
THE <i>THEAETETUS</i> .....	13

# Introduction

Plato's *Theaetetus* is the first in a series of three dialogues depicting one long interrupted conversation spread out over two days. The dialogues from the second day are the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, in which the discussion is launched by a question posed by Socrates, asking whether there are one, two, or three kinds of people corresponding to the names sophist, statesman, and philosopher. There is no dialogue called the *Philosopher*, nor any that formally asks what a philosopher is. This trilogy, therefore, seems to have one member too few and one too many. Some scholars have conjectured that a symmetrical pattern may have been intended to culminate in a fourth dialogue, producing a tetralogy along the lines of a Virginia Reel, changing conversational partners from Socrates and Theaetetus, to Theaetetus and the Eleatic Stranger, to the Eleatic Stranger and Young Socrates, to the notional pairing of Young Socrates and Socrates.<sup>1</sup> Other and more astute readers have noticed that a dialogue between partners with the same name might be no dialogue at all, but the silent thinking within one soul, especially since thinking and dialogue are contrasted in just that way by both Socrates (*Theaetetus*, 189E) and the Eleatic Stranger (*Sophist*, 263E). Hence, the *Philosopher* would not be an absent dialogue but the image of the silent presence of Socrates himself, thinking his own thoughts.

There is no doubt that this conclusion is true to the way Plato writes, always playful, always pointing to something on display that is never quite grasped by anyone with whom Socrates speaks. What Socrates is and does reveal more about the philosopher than could any attempt to define one. And there is another and deeper reason for the absence of a dialogue on the philosopher, given by Jacob

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1 See F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, (Library of Liberal Arts edition, 1957), p. 168.

Klein in the book *Plato's Trilogy*.<sup>2</sup> The central thread of that study traces an analysis of motion, rest, and being that emerges from the center of the *Sophist*, but is never summed up by any of the speakers in the dialogues.<sup>3</sup> The evidence gathered by Klein points to a structure in which being is not a genus of which motion and rest are species, nor an aggregate of which the two of them are independent parts, but a whole in which each constituent is what it is only by its togetherness with the other. If the knowledge a sophist would need to distinguish true from false images were inseparable from the knowledge a statesman would need to rule over human lives, the twofold inquiry about the sophist and statesman might be the discovery of the philosopher from two aspects, and the philosopher might be discoverable in no other way.

Again, there is no doubt that this interpretation uncovers a genuine intention of Plato's, one that in no way excludes the previous reading. The philosopher's activity may ultimately be silent, yet still be inextricably entwined with image-making and with communities of other human beings. But there is still a third reason why no dialogue on the philosopher follows the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*: one has already taken place on the preceding day. The richest, most direct, and most extensive presentation of the philosophic activity in Plato's writings is the *Theaetetus*. The question that guides that dialogue is about knowledge, but the question that Socrates asks first is about young men who care about philosophy (143D). It is in the *Theaetetus* that Socrates makes the famous claim that philosophy begins in wonder (155C), and forms of the word wonder occur in the dialogue more than twenty times. Theaetetus is shown to be a young man already accomplished in mathematics, but Socrates appeals constantly not to what he may know but to his eagerness to know more. A dozen times, Theaetetus reveals both his eagerness and his susceptibility to wonder in the oath "by Zeus." A parable about the legendary first philosopher is recounted in this dialogue (174A), and it is the only dialogue in which the word philosophy is ever used in the plural (172C). The old man Theodorus, who had turned away from philosophy to mathematics early in life (165A), is enticed into giving his opinions throughout a long description of the philosopher's life (172C-177B), and he gets excited enough to become quite long-winded himself about the battles between certain

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2 University of Chicago Press, 1977.

3 See especially pages 47, 48, 53, 56-57, 60-64, 177, and 200.

# PLATO'S THEAETETUS

Eucleides, Terpsion

**Eu:** Right now<sup>1</sup> in from the country, Terpsion, or a while ago? 142A

**Terp:** A fairly good while ago. In fact I was looking for you at the marketplace, and wondering that I couldn't find you.

**Eu:** It's because I wasn't in town.

**Terp:** But where?

**Eu:** Going down to the harbor I happened on Theaetetus, being carried to Athens from Corinth, from the army camp.

**Terp:** Living or dead?

**Eu:** Living, but just barely. He's in a bad way from some wounds, but even worse, the sickness that's come on the army has taken him. B

**Terp:** Not the dysentery?

**Eu:** Yes.

**Terp:** What a man you say is in danger!

**Eu:** A fine and good gentleman, Terpsion, seeing as how even now I heard some people praising him highly in connection with the battle.

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1 The first word of a Platonic dialogue is often a playful reference to its central concern. Of the two main contenders for the title of knowledge, perception has a "right-now" aspect that opinion lacks.

**C**      **Terp:** And there's nothing out of place about that. It would have been much more to be wondered at if he hadn't been that way. But how is it that he didn't break his journey here in Megara<sup>2</sup>?

**Eu:** He was hurrying home, for I kept begging and advising it, but he didn't want to. So I escorted him, and as I came back again I recollected Socrates and wondered at how prophetically he spoke, both about other things and particularly about this man. For it seems to me he happened upon him a little before his own death, when Theaetetus was a young man, and when he had been with him and conversed with him he greatly admired his nature. And when I went to Athens he recounted to me in detail the words spoken in his conversation with him—and well worth hearing they were—and he said it was utterly necessary that this man would come to be talked about if he should reach the prime of life.

**Terp:** He spoke the truth about that at least, it seems. But what were their words? Could you recount them?

**143A**      **Eu:** No, by Zeus; at least they're not on the tip of my tongue that way. But I did write down notes at the time as soon as I got home, and later, as I recollected at leisure, I kept on writing, and as often as I got to Athens, asking Socrates again and again about what I didn't remember, I made corrections when I came back here, so that something pretty much like the whole talk is written down for me.

**Terp:** True. I heard about it from you before, and in fact I've been killing all this time here intending to tell you to show it. But what prevents us from going through it now? At any rate I also need to rest, since I came from the country.

**B**      **Eu:** But I myself also escorted Theaetetus as far as Erineum, so that I wouldn't be displeased at resting. Let's do so then, and the boy will read to us at the same time that we rest.

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2 Aristotle, in Bk. IX, Chap. 3 of the *Metaphysics*, reports that Megara was identified with the philosophic claim that there are no potentialities before things happen.

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"Sachs's outstanding new translation of Plato's *Theaetetus* is lucid, readable, and faithful to the original. More than that, it is a translation for the thoughtful reader. Through his striking translations of key terms, Sachs compels the reader to think more deeply about Plato's intent. He shows that Plato's return within the dialogue to the same word or to its cognates is no accident but signals a philosophical trope in Plato's thought. The work's introduction avoids presenting a stock summary of the topics covered or a rehearsal of the failed arguments. Instead, it makes the case for regarding the *Theaetetus* as Plato's 'missing' work on *The Philosopher*. Through the 'variety of attempts, errors, new beginnings, and false turns that the dialogue presents,' Sachs argues, Socrates provokes his interlocutors and Plato's readers to strive to cross the boundary between mere opinion and the kind of thinking that is philosophy."

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ISBN 1-58510-101-X



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