

國立政治大學文學院哲學系碩士論文

Department of Philosophy

College of Liberal Arts

National Chengchi University

Master Thesis

重新理解柏拉圖之《泰鄂提得斯》篇

Reunderstanding *Theaetetus*

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中華民國一百零一年六月

June, 2012

# 國立政治大學哲學系

林加恩 所撰之碩士學位論文

## 重新理解柏拉圖之《泰鄂提得斯》 Reunderstanding *Theaetetus*

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## 謝辭

感謝我的父母、女友以及諸位好友這段時間的支持。撰寫、構思、討論、修改，這諸多的過程大多是孤獨的，跟過去的文本對話，跟當代的研究激盪。沒有充滿愛的環境，這樣的過程將會更難度過。

感謝指導老師彭老師的悉心指導。透過他的經驗跟學識，我得以看到自己的不足，也才開始對柏拉圖研究的概況有了基本的認識。他也不斷提醒我何謂哲學討論的主軸，又該如何避免不必要思緒的干擾。

也十分謝謝在大綱以及論文口試時，魏老師、何老師兩位師長所提供的寶貴意見跟鼓勵。希望自己能繼續在求學求道的道路上努力。



## 摘要

本文試圖藉由梳理前人對於《泰鄂提得斯》篇之研究觀點，重新理解此篇談論知識的對話錄之意義。此文不採取過去對話錄間系統性的比較取徑，而專注於從此文本本身發掘柏拉圖所欲呈現之知識觀點。

藉由帶出『助產術』、『普羅塔哥拉斯』、『偏題』等主題，配合重新閱讀原文『知識即感知』的知識定義的討論，呈現在對話錄中，對話者於追求知識過程中所經歷的種種心智轉變，進而描繪柏拉圖所刻畫之人與知識間的關係，凸顯此對話錄中『內化政治』的面向以及對話錄真正核心的關懷。

與其說此對話錄意圖定義知識是什麼，不如說柏拉圖試圖傳遞一種心智教育的指引，來引領我們轉換跟知識追求活動間的關係。

關鍵字：泰鄂提得斯、助產術、普羅塔哥拉斯、偏題、知識即感知。

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to portray what may be the real spirit of the dialogue *Theaetetus*.

While most of the researches focus on the systematic position of this dialogue, this dialogue seems to offer us less than it might do. While the midwifery and the digression are taken to be peripheral in other scholarly works, this thesis intends to bring out the connotation of these passages. Together with re-reading of the first part of the definition of knowledge, I tried to show the “inner-political” facet and the real concern of this dialogue.

I suggest that, in *Theaetetus*, what we really get is not the result of a certain definition of knowledge; instead, what Plato tries to transmit is a mental-pedagogical guideline, informing us how to transform our relations with the pursuit of knowledge.

Key Words: *Theaetetus*, midwifery, Protagoras, digression, knowledge is perception.

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## Reunderstanding *Theaetetus*

### Chapter I

#### Introduction: motivations of this work and some discussions of previous studies

It is still arguable what *Theaetetus* is really about. Apparently, *it is* a reference to a past dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus, accompanied by the occasional participation of Theodorus. The topic is raised by Socrates, on what knowledge is; and it ends in a seemingly aporetic manner: Socrates facing the indictment that Meletus had brought against him. Socrates promised to meet again with Theodorus the following day. This ending, along with the opening and the content of *Sophist*, led most of the scholars<sup>1</sup> confirm the correlation between these two dialogues, although they were quite distant from each other. About the chronology, there are various criteria adopted by the scholars: the survey by Erler<sup>2</sup> offers a clear overview of the methods used by far. We get relative orders concerning the internal, external, and stylistic variables. The academic history of the chronology of *Theaetetus* has prompted a rigorous debate, whether it is closer to the earlier groups or the later groups of the dialogue. And it is the latter which is much preferred till now. Despite the uncertainty, it seems clear that this dialogue situates its role in Plato's work at a turning point. Its ambiguity prompts researches in finding a coherent interpretation to settle its position once and for all. For my thesis, I try to avoid following such a coherent impulse to fit the dialogue into a systematic picture, though at the same time, taking into consideration the observations provided by the previous discussions. I am more interested in the questions raised in *Theaetetus* per se, and would like to limit the scope to what we can get from the dialogue itself.

There is this current tendency to give the dialogue a systematic understanding, which brings various new aspects. After Schleiermacher<sup>3</sup>, the system and unity of Plato's work guided the readers in reconstructing the meaning transmitted from each dialogue. His romantic but scholarly reading<sup>4</sup>, provides us with a good example to retrieve and imagine the past. However, besides these internal relations that this branch of works provides, it seems that only if we believe all dialogues provide a one-aimed system for Plato's philosophy, this approach would be valid without doubt. On the other hand, another way to discuss Plato is focused on whether the contents

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<sup>1</sup> Taken for example Klein, J. *Plato's Trilogy*.

<sup>2</sup> Erler, M. *Die Philosophie der Antike*, pp.22-26.

<sup>3</sup> See also the discussion of the chronology by D. Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, the first chapter.

<sup>4</sup> See Mariña, J. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, Chapter 5: *The art of interpreting Plato* by Lamm, Julia A.

reflect the thoughts of Plato or Socrates.<sup>5</sup> This approach shows the difficulties to fully reconstruct Plato's system, but attempt to explore what insight Plato's works may offer us. My approach sits somewhere in the middle. I would not deny the importance of Plato's philosophical world as a whole, but I do think that *Theaetetus*, as the sole dialogue which touches directly upon the question of knowledge, renders something different. Its overt claim may be the search of knowledge, but what it really achieves is to present a suitable path to knowledge. In Plato's presentation, all the psychological paths connect and redirect the people within and transform their relations with knowledge.

As an experimental work<sup>6</sup>, dated generally in his later stages of life, almost all interpreters try to fit *Theaetetus* into the framework of Plato's philosophy, or, to be more precise, his texts. Instead of focusing on the characteristics and the uncertainty of this short piece, most interpretations just try to make it more coherent compared with others and thus receive a more fixed status. But what if this work, because of its own nature, cannot be so? It has the form of the early dialogues, with the tendency falling back into an aporetic style. Does it suggest anything? If the base or the essence of knowledge itself is under scrutiny or reflection, why should we suppose any certain historical understanding of Plato to evaluate this content? Or historicity may be important in understanding the components within this dialogue, but not the very trend of thought itself? To be more precise, it may be the very thing that this reflection tries to escape of. Being a knowledge seeker, to search for an answer concerning an open-ended pursuit, what can Plato do to make his understanding of knowledge more enduring and still valuable for the future readers? Furthermore, do all these interpreters conceptualize the process of defining knowledge as acquiring a certain answer, rather than discovering and challenging the mind with an ongoing process? The point is, if the orientation of the interpreter himself is not to think of gaining some tangible, certain knowledge, such as the three major arguments revealed in the dialogue, the understanding may be totally altered. If we try to grasp the whole effort of Plato from a more structural point of view, then, the contrast, the shade, and the gradation of the whole dialogue will appear differently.<sup>7</sup>

But let us first examine the previous studies. Among all the major books, researches, and articles directly or indirectly referring to this dialogue, I suggest that

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Corlett, J. A. *Interpreting Plato's dialogue*, introduction, pp. 1-18.

<sup>6</sup> Here I mean the subtitle, *πειραστικός*, which causes the uncertainty of the basis of this dialogue. I will not go into the discussion of this word, rather, I will just treat this beginning as a psychological preparation for any reader, who wishes to have a fresh start on such a subject.

<sup>7</sup> Just as in the end of *Theaetetus*, 208e, Socrates' example of *σκιαγραφημα*.



there are basically three branches of perspectives. The first, which I will classify as a historical view, tries to locate and grasp the meaning of this discussion by its relative coordinate concerning other close-related dialogues. Jacob Klein's *Plato's Trilogy* is one such example. In his approach, he tries to find the definition of the sameness and the difference (the other) talked about in the dialogue, and he concludes that its main theme is not knowledge, but the possibility of error.<sup>8</sup> I found it hardly acceptable and yet, illuminating in a way. First, it cuts the tie between the knowledge seeker and knowledge itself. If the stress is upon the negativity of this activity, then it is bizarre for any person to desire to participate in such an activity. Even Theaetetus, the protagonist in the dialogue, needs the encouragement from Socrates from time to time. This can hardly be Plato's project in mind. If the road to knowledge highlights such a psychological perspective to the impossibility of such a pursuit, this is definitely a one-sided interpretation. Perhaps for Klein, it is the whole compendium of Plato's work which brings the positive psychological impulse, but I think the text of *Theaetetus* itself already provides us with this clue and motivation. Klein does make it right when he tries to read out of the arguments themselves, not confining the lessons we can learn from this dialogue only within the realm of arguments; but he still wants to combine this discovery to other dialogues but not solely from the text of *Theaetetus* itself. This historical approach is quite important in offering us the coordinate of the dialogue, such as dating, the vicissitude of a writer's mental struggle, etc. However, concerning the content of *Theaetetus*, it seems not so proper to push too far in that direction, since what Socrates suggests in the dialogue, is to probe into the very essence, the very beginning of the activity to make sense of what knowledge might be. It is also possible that the absence of the theory of idea or form as a testimony that Plato just wants a fresh start without theoretical burden in reader's mind. As we can clearly see, when Theaetetus named his own learning of mathematical knowledge, and some other professions of life as the possible candidates of knowledge, he was immediately stopped by Socrates. This event shows not only what Socrates inquires after is not any branch of specific knowledge, but also that he demands a whole new start without any presumption. Even perception is worth of a new examination. The first approach has the tendency to interpret the lack of discussion of Plato's form theory as a sign or revelation for their own interpretation, it can be meaningful but without certainty. It also leads to unbalanced interpretation of each paragraph. The proportion of the discussion of perception deserves our attention. As Mojsisch<sup>9</sup> has observed, the variety of perception is set side by side with the question of being. Socrates' refutation shows the weakness of

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<sup>8</sup> See Klein, op. cit., pp.144-145.

<sup>9</sup> See Kobusch, T. Und Mojsisch, B. ed. *Platon Seine Dialoge in der Sicht neuer Forschung*, p.172.

perception but the impression caused by the dialogue also leads us to wonder more about whether the perception has a critical role in our knowledge-forming process or not.

The second approach, I would call it the argument-oriented interpretation, which centers on the inner development and internal consistency of the arguments in question. This branch consists of scholars such as Bostock, Heidegger, and Cornford, etc. Heidegger for example, in his own framework, he contrasts *Politeia* with *Theaetetus*, treating these two dialogues as two poles of the history of the concept of truth and untruth; he thinks that these two together will offer the reader the presencing of truth. Heidegger's reading is more phenomenological in that he tries to bring out the development of consciousness in the dialogue. I am also sided with this observation, i.e. to read closely the impact aroused by the details in the dialogue. But does *Theaetetus* really just offer us this polarity and lie inevitably on the negative side of the spectrum of truth? Concerning Socrates' stress of his maieutic skill, this position seems to be fragile. The midwife first identifies the hopeful candidates then to provoke them to give birth to their own offsprings. In the end, although Theaetetus realized that the efforts brought up wind-eggs, but he also admitted that he has said far more than before. Although Heidegger's approach is rich in the phenomenological, ontological awareness, it seems still inevitable to try digging substantial claim of knowledge (though from the negative side) from the dialogue. Stern's new work<sup>10</sup> is also a one-sided try. He highlights the political aspect of this dialogue, but seems not to be concerned with the knowledge-seeking itself. The political atmosphere in that epoch is prevalent, and that is probably why Socrates (or Plato) inclined to refer to this aspect of life as an example to illustrate his point of view. While highlighting this, it definitely ignores what Socrates try to say in the so-called second digression, that the philosopher promotes another kind of lifestyle, which contrasts prominently with the men in politics. Curiously enough, Sedley's work, *The Midwife of Platonism*, which in a way continued Cornford's observation, also tries to depict the effort of this dialogue as a witness of the "art of midwifery". In other words, Stern and Sedley do not really think that this dialogue contains anything meant for itself, but for others (other dialogues). In Sedley's own words, the dialogue portrays a kind of rebirth of historical Socrates.<sup>11</sup> The objection to the second type of interpretation is that, it often reads too much into the arguments and images (or metaphors) posed by Socrates. They often try to create a solid theory of knowledge based on the content in *Theaetetus*. Under this

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<sup>10</sup> Stern, P. *Knowledge and Politics in Plato's Theaetetus*.

<sup>11</sup> Sedley, D. *The Midwife of Platonism*, Chapter 1.

understanding, it is doomed to treat Plato's answer to what knowledge is as a failure, only illuminating in defeating some of the most intricate arguments at that time. In terms of arguments, the epistemological facet of this dialogue is not complete, if the interpreter tries to reconstruct the theory through arguments. But if we also take other clues provided in the dialogue into account and shift our focus to the whole process, things might turn out differently. And this concern brings about the next approach.

The third approach, the human existence approach, can be represented by Paul Friedländer. In his view, he treats all the arguments and the so-called digressions within as a presentation of the boundary situation of life. All epistemological, ethical or metaphysical connotations enriched this dialogue, making it not simply a search for a theory of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> I am basically in line with this interpretation, and think it is always hard to discuss or contemplate knowledge as a solitary, independent facet of life. But to my disappointment, it seems that even this branch of discussion often has its presupposition of what knowledge should be like. He thinks that this dialogue has the intention to move people to higher knowledge. From the introduction of his three-volume study of Plato, we can also see the reason why he takes this as basis, i.e. Plato takes a turn in his later years to focus on the question of being, and makes it as the ultimate goal. But does it naturally endorse *Theaetetus* as the case under this basic structure? This dialogue seems to suggest that, in fact, you cannot and should not suppose what knowledge is like, but you need to reflect upon possible solutions or paths repeatedly to reach a possible account or judgment. And the more preparation and well-tuned propensity you have, the better it may be. We may have the intention to value the knowledge at hand, but when we come back to rethink the basis of knowledge, the hierarchy of knowledge may be another matter which is not central to be discussed under the framework of this dialogue.<sup>13</sup>

I found the last approach most appealing. However, it is not complete, and thus, I believe it is worthwhile to reconsider the whole dialogue. I will focus my discussion on the first part of this dialogue, namely the paragraph from 143d to 187a. The reason for this choice is that it contains the most vibrant part of this dialogue, and the paragraph actually lays the reason and the cause of the ensuing two arguments. My approach will be psychological; while having in mind also the aspects of self-knowledge and politics of knowledge<sup>14</sup>, I will try to show the dynamics and the

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<sup>12</sup> See Friedländer, P. *Plato 3*, pp.188-189.

<sup>13</sup> And maybe it is why the mentioning of Parmenides theory is cut immediately after *Theaetetus* expressed his desire to hear more about it following the former discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Tschemplick, A. *Knowledge and Self-Knowledge in Plato's Theaetetus and Stern*, op. cit.

facts I observe from the dialogue. My basic problem towards this passage is: what does Socrates want to achieve through his midwifery? What does the conflict between the views of Socrates and Protagoras really reflect? Does this dialogue really aim to produce a kind of “knowledge”? Or, rather, it shows the transformation related in this very process?

In the work of *Divan* written by Jalal al-Din Rumi, a Persian philosopher and poet, he uses his rhetoric devices to express his understanding of the paradoxical nature of life.<sup>15</sup> For him, as what Fatemeh (1998) has mentioned, there may be a kind of knowledge or wisdom, which we may call “intelligent ignorance”. Human beings are forced to play different games to approach the unfathomable depth of knowledge the world presented. The contrast, oxymoron, impossibility, and silence are all rhetoric devices to show a certain facet of knowledge. For example, we can observe the contrast in the sorts and the essence of knowledge; the persuasiveness of perception and the contradiction brought by it when trying to judge competing experience of perception; and the aporetic ending. Back to *Theaetetus*, we see striking familiarity of all these experiences. If in regard to *Theaetetus*, the dating and the style are only valid in guiding us having a tentative picture of Plato but never a completely final word, then, once we strip of this theoretical presupposition, the dialogue opens more room for contemplation. In *Theaetetus*, we can observe a still uncertain mentality towards knowledge, and under such background, what may be a better solution to discuss such a fundamental question? I will try to explore this mental facet all along, and the ambiguity among wisdom and knowledge, in order to offer a new way to look at this monumental work by Plato.

But what constitutes the psychological, mental dimension which offers the dialogue the perpetual dynamics? In Sedley’s work, he treats the dialogue as a pivot of Plato’s middle to later works, which renders the continuity of Plato’s thought. I, too, find the dialogue earns its special status among other dialogues in showing the difficulty of defining knowledge through the framework of midwifery. The midwifery in my eye is less than an assertion of a claim of knowledge; rather, it captures the motivation behind this work, manifesting so bluntly as possible. Thus, I think that it will be proper to give an analysis of the midwifery, in that it will show how midwifery works in changing and enlarging the interlocutor’s thought and concern. Furthermore, the Protagorean theme is a crucial part in connecting the epistemological issue further to an ethical, political perspective of knowledge. Without this, the digression part may seem hard to be understood, when the issue

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<sup>15</sup> Keshavarz, F. *Reading Mystical Lyric*.

shifts from the perception to the life style taken by the knowledge seeker. What is to be taken as a vehicle to speak out the real content and intention of Plato is the real crucial frontline among all contesting interpretations. And I hope by discussing these mental-forming sides of the pursuit, we may perceive how the main concern of the dialogue may be understood properly; moreover, I wish to present the relation between my position and the third approach which I categorized above.



## Chapter II

### Invitation to the inquiry of knowledge

#### I. Midwifery

In the beginning of the dialogue, the scene between Eucleides and Terpison lays out the background of the following memory, a dialogue between a promising youth and the famous philosopher Socrates. We cannot help noticing the nature of Theaetetus in this framework: a youth who is willing to fight for his honor pertaining to the city-state where he lives and fulfills his duty. It is intriguing to read the lines between 142b-c,

*Eucleides: Only just now I was listening to some people singing his praises for the way he behaved in the battle.*

*Terpison: Well, there's nothing extraordinary about that. Much more to be wondered at if he hadn't distinguished himself.<sup>16</sup>*

The twist manifests the reliability of this “historical” account. It seems that Plato, as a writer, suggests that he too noticed the credibility in question and intended to use this dramatic setting to settle the tone of the dialogue. Going further into the content of the dialogue itself, I do not intend to follow its timeline. Rather, I think the theme of the art of midwifery can guide us in noticing the important traces in the dialogue. After being guided by Socrates in admitting the importance of discovering what knowledge is, Theaetetus shows his worry that he has never truly taken any possible measure to question this very question. Socrates expresses his sympathy towards this troubled state and further dives into an enumeration of his method. In 149 b- c,

*Socrates: You know, I suppose, that women never practice as midwives while they are still conceiving and bearing children themselves. It is only those who are past child-bearing who take this up. ... She didn't, it's true, entrust the duties of midwifery to barren women, because human nature is too weak to acquire skill where it has no experience. But she assigned the task to those who have become incapable of child-bearing through age---honouring their likeness to herself.*

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<sup>16</sup> Translation from Levett, M.J., revised by Burnyeat, M. *The Theaetetus of Plato*. The following quotes will be taken from this book, except for some certain parts, where other version provides better precision.

Socrates speaks of the initial condition of a midwife with two characteristics. First, midwives are themselves barren since they are past child-bearing; second, their function works where human nature is weak and fragile. Why does he say this? Does it change the mind-set of his interlocutor? Saying that his position possesses nothing, but in the meantime, he has an art to help; these are both encouraging and baffling. How can you ever trust such a person to lead you on the search for knowledge, if he does not possess any fixed knowledge? This knowledge-less claim crumbles the normal relation between a teacher and a student, where the possession of fixed knowledge determines the structural hierarchy. To complicate the situation even more, we do know from the context that Theaetetus acknowledges Socrates as a more experienced, wise old man. We can imagine that, in modern day, within a critical seminar, the structure of the teaching system seems to determine this unbalanced relationship even further and prior to the teaching scene. But what Socrates tries to offer at the same time is the possibility of the inter-subjective situation, where both the mentor and the student return to an equal point. This definitely is worth of our attention.

From 149d to 150a, Socrates speaks of the difference between a match-maker and a midwife. In this part, he stresses the selectivity of a midwife. Unlike the professed all-knowing match-maker who would take as many cases as possible, either lawful or unlawful; a midwife, on the contrary, is not proud to assert her ability and also cautious in accepting the offer. We can see that in the first place, that the role of a midwife is relatively passive, it results from the cautiousness concerning the important event of delivering.

The situation become even stranger when Socrates continues to say that it is the midwife who can tell better whether a woman is pregnant or not; furthermore, it is the midwife who is the brightest matchmaker and gives the lawful matchmaking instead of ways such as procuring. At 150b1, Socrates says that the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms (εἴδωλα) and sometimes of realities (ἀληθινά). It seems to suggest that as the owner of this art, he knows how to distinguish what is true or wrong, which reminds us of the discussion of judgment and logos in the second and third argument of the whole dialogue. However, Socrates actually failed to give such an account in the end, only refuting all possibilities he himself suggested. Reading through *Theaetetus*, we may find that Socrates reaches his judgment of midwifery by getting his interlocutor's answer. But even the consent of the interlocutor may not be a true, real baby of knowledge. In reality, *Theaetetus* like most of so-called early dialogues, has the peculiarity in not giving any positive results,

which would offer only “wind-eggs” according to this dialogue. But obviously, all scholars gain the profit of knowing more about Plato through all these wind-eggs. If it is not the result of the discussion being true or false which determines whether the learning is meaningful or not, then it will be absurd to stress upon the final negative result of a dialogue. Writing a dialogue specific on knowledge, Plato must have thought of this tricky situation; nonetheless, he still tries to assert and make explicit the methodology of midwifery.

The following may be seen as an explanation of this ambiguous method. Socrates suggests his three distinct differences against the traditional midwifery.

- (1) That he treats man instead of woman.
- (2) He watches over the process of souls instead of bodies.
- (3) He can apply all possible tests to the offspring to reveal true or false.

And the similarities are:

- (1) He is himself as barren as all midwives.
- (2) The pain he brings out in the process is an important sign.

Also in the long monologue from 150b to 151d, we can see some very interesting indicators of his technique. He always gets answers from others instead of his own since he has no knowledge. It is God’s work perpetrating through his hand. But this is also two-edged: some students gain progress through having contact with Socrates, and the fact that they get to know better results in the turning away of the students. Students left early as Socrates expected either because of self-satisfying with the results or the influence of others. Here, we see that it poses a puzzling state. Perhaps it is only from the end of a person’s life can we possibly (not necessary) judge his pursuit in life, and how can anyone know to what extent should they find another route? It explains very little by saying that others provide false or harmful guidance or teaching while the contesting view may seem equally persuasive. Socrates has named Aristeides as one such bad example, but this only partially reflects what Socrates really meant. The issue that I am posing here is that if we have the intention to pin down the final lesson Socrates offered, it will be close to impossible. But the certain thing is that he may remind the students about how to choose their directions.



At the end of this long monologue, we can see that Socrates has tried to set those people whose temperament or preparation are not what he demanded to those who are more proper to guide them; Socrates says that with all good will, he, because of suspicious of the pregnancy of Theaetetus, wants Theaetetus to go on this journey of exploring the definition of knowledge.

Where does the midwifery lead to? It seems to push the search of knowledge to an uncertain point. But is it really so? When reflecting further on this, all this information practically serves as psychological preparations for Theaetetus. Socrates' words have the effect in asking Theaetetus to decide for himself once again if he is willing to go on with Socrates; Theaetetus here underwent a choice, whether to go on this painful passage of pregnancy of the self-exploration. Disregard of Socrates' belief from that historical moment that women are not so much in the center of knowledge seeking, so he puts women outside of his midwifery; the stress he puts on is that because of his emptiness in knowledge, therefore he is in the best position to examine his target. And all the psychological struggles imposed through midwifery may very well be experienced by all knowledge seekers. From here, namely 151e, Theaetetus finally suggests his first thought, that knowledge is perception.

Sedley<sup>17</sup> and Stern<sup>18</sup> provided different ways to look at the contribution of the whole paragraph about midwifery. It will be illuminating to compare them and bring about some of my suggestions. For Sedley, this part presents an image with two-facets. He suggests that the claim of ignorance and the absence (or silence) of manifest theory is a dramatic maneuver. It is like a pretense of the attitude in order for the discussion of such a basic, simple concept to be able to go on. The other facet which Sedley tries to draw out is through the connection of this dialogue with *Meno*. These two dialogues share structural similarity. The aviary model in the later part of the dialogue insinuates the theory of recollection in Plato's work.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Sedley treats the following explanation as showing the tools and the effects of midwifery. In this light, the technique seems to be perfect and flawless, a powerful weapon to find a certain knowledge. Another topic raised by Sedley is the relation between Socrates' assertion of having no knowledge and the assertion that he knows the art of midwifery. The fact that he knows nothing but midwifery is further confirmed at 161b, where Socrates converses with Theodorus. As the ability endowed by God, Socrates seems to avoid further questioning of this expertise.

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<sup>17</sup> See Sedley, op. cit., pp. 30-37.

<sup>18</sup> See Stern, op. cit., pp. 66-81.

<sup>19</sup> This observation is also backed up by Cornford, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

When we go back to the reluctance of a midwife (150a), where it shows the difference between a midwife and a normal match-maker, Sedley might just follow the tendency to draw knowledge from the classical passage, i.e. that the midwifery presents a fixed, functional state. However, the difficult conditions encountered by a midwife just show how uncertain this process may be, and not how powerful or how correct a midwife can reach. What will happen if the one who possesses this art is not as good as Socrates? (Even Socrates may not be perfect.) The correlation between *Meno* and *Theaetetus* is also uncertain. I have two doubts. First, is it certain that Plato has *Meno* in mind and not trying something new? This argument requires the internal evidence to back up for it, Sedley takes the similar occurring point in these two dialogues (which Cornford already observed) and the words appearing in the aviary model as evidence. But I think Sedley's justification of this connection is weak. Sedley separates two layers of Socrates, one dramatically innocent of the theoretical burden, the other starts an embryonic state of the practices of extracting inner resources from the interlocutor.<sup>20</sup> I consider this scheme to be too artificial. It is hard to determine if Plato and Socrates are totally identified in this dialogue, any conjecture is hard to be confirmed by Plato himself. The hypothesis Sedley takes requires the accidental matchup of two historically uncertain minds. Second, the context of the aviary part does not suggest so strongly the importance of recollection, the validity of this passage to be an evidence is not secured. This aviary model still basically deals with the problem of retrieving the knowledge being processed by experience, not obviously recollection in a Platonic sense. All in all, I think that Sedley's approach hopes for a fruitful result, and he finds it. This epistemological tendency to read into all minute details inevitably leads to show the certain side of the whole process, while ignoring the uncertain factors in play.

Stern's approach provides a very interesting counterpoint. From the very beginning, he reads out the political atmosphere of the dialogue, corresponding with the tragic shade of the ending that Socrates was going to face the trial.<sup>21</sup> In his eye, this passage of midwife shows a political defiance and shakes the ground of the political community at that time. Socrates' "selflessness" and "the insistence of sterility of himself" pose a strong contrast with the ample knowledge of the sophists.<sup>22</sup> His self-portrait is a testimony of his observation on the impossibility of direct teaching; even if direct teaching exists, it will be valid only in a limited manner. He also points out that "the pain of Socratic midwifery occurs in the critical rather

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<sup>20</sup> See Sedley, op. cit., pp.29-30.

<sup>21</sup> See also Friedländer for his analysis, which I will pick up later in Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> See also the discussion of sophists at that time by Broadie, S. *The Sophists and Socrates*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, Sedley, D. ed.

than in the elicitive phase,"<sup>23</sup> when compared with usual circumstances of midwifery. He thinks that the Socratic way is to help us to be less attached to ourselves, to overcome the given order of the common sense of the world. What Stern reads out is not some substantial knowledge, but unsettling effects of midwifery upon the claim of knowledge.

But I also find this interpretation to be overly politicized, since Socrates in his later digression mentions his aloofness from the political matter. It seems that it is not the substantial matters in the political world which he tries to aim at. Stern's observation of the psychic dynamic is acute,<sup>24</sup> and I keep this part as further fuel for discussion. But to his so-called political facet, I think it is more in the metaphorical sense that Socrates tries to arouse. Like the analogy of his mental assistance to midwifery, this perspective also functions in an analogical manner. Stern's claim of the stress on the critical stage is also dubious. In the very beginning of the discussion of midwifery, Theaetetus is already at a perplexed state. I do not think such a separation of stage is necessary.

To make a third choice after this examination, I would say that this passage does show the perilous and uncertain facet of the art of midwifery, but it is all the way aiming at the dynamic of identifying possible knowledge, successful or not. But only if we believe the godly order which guides Socrates through his praxis is justified, can we give full validity to this method. While having the approval of the conversation with no other third party in the process to examine the validity, we can hardly say that the result of each midwifery is irrefutable. However, regarding the weakness of Plato's method, his stress upon the ignorance of the midwife is just the best response towards the situation he perceived. By this initial condition he sets for every discussion, he turns this fatal flaw into something acceptable, even necessary in every discussion if it is in a midwifery-like situation. This also provides new energy and hope for every future debate, since they have to always come to an equal, unbiased starting line. It is the politics of the inner conflict which Plato tries to present here. We see also that in the end, Socrates, when facing the wind-egg they produced, is not urgent in fulfilling his "midwifery"; instead, he reminds Theaetetus to take the position of midwifery in the future debate with anyone.

To paraphrase my thoughts, the real effect of the midwifery image given in *Theaetetus* seems to stress less on the fruit, i.e. the conclusion reached so far; rather,

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<sup>23</sup> Stern, op. cit., p.79.

<sup>24</sup> See Stern, op. cit., footnote 90, he also mentions that one of his obvious differences from the perspective of Sedley, is the recognition of "psychic complexity."

it is the idea of becoming a midwife himself, after realizing all the difficulties in the process of grasping the true essence of knowledge, which may be the real aim. Concerning the perception and future, the complex of being good and being true, the no-knowledge position may be the only way for a man to understand himself in the flux. Two pre-conceived concepts make various researchers to overlook this aspect. First, this dialogue has to be about the knowledge itself. Second, this dialogue does not represent the genuine thoughts about knowledge, but is just a passage towards the conclusion of other Plato's works. What if we just set aside this connection as not necessary, and go back to the spiritual arousal from this dialogue? The issue being touched upon can serve as a paradigm even for people in modern age. It reminds us of what cannot be left out in a discussion of knowledge, even without any theoretical frameworks to work with: i.e. the motivation, attitude, and the orientation of the knowledge seeker. Plato may not be trying to settle any adequate theory in this dialogue; however, he presents a vacuous position, i.e. Socrates, as the one who triggers the knowledge seeker's mind to build his own relation and understanding with knowledge. This may not be the knowledge itself, but it is definitely the most knowledge-generating settings we can ever think of.<sup>25</sup> The one who questions is empty and ignorant, but is sensitive in connecting the resources to vibrate again and again the psychological need to question the base of knowledge. He invents the "midwifery" as a psychological-pedagogy, to train and to guide the knowledge seeker.

Theaetetus may very well continue questioning Socrates' basis as possessing the key of midwifery, and that may also lead to another criterion check, which is also epistemologically relevant. However, Theaetetus is familiar with the form of a straight forward answer which made him start giving the following straight answer, i.e that knowledge is perception. Before delving into that part of discussion, let us see how Socrates conducts the matter in the way he wishes to be discussed. He deliberately brings into Protagoras' "perspective" and presents us with other facets of knowledge in this dialogue.

## II. Protagoras

Socrates accepts Theaetetus suggestion, that knowledge is perception and tries to make him reflect that, upon which tradition this type of discussion he refers to. But Socrates' guidance is also in a sense misleading. He immediately suggests this definition to be directly connected with the Protagorean way of examining

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<sup>25</sup> This thought is partly due to the reflection of Lacan on Psychoanalysis; but a detailed comparison would need another work to solve.

perception. It is quite clear that we do not really see the historical Protagoras here.<sup>26</sup> It is a Platonic Protagoras. But this intentional shift of direction is no doubt an important turning point of the discussion. From here, although we first observe that Socrates tries to define the crucial elements in the process of perceiving, such as what a percipient is, in reality we can see there are three major compositions in this first discussion of Theaetetus' proposal, i.e. two of Protagoras' points of view which attribute to Protagoras by Socrates, and one very long so-called digression. Instead of directly treating all kinds of ways of perception, he focuses basically on two facets of the possible outcomes if knowledge is perception in a "Protagorean" way. Thanks to the observation by Ugo Zilioli, in his book<sup>27</sup>, he points out that Socrates' Protagoras basically has the ontological and ethical concern in *Theaetetus*. Together with the digression, and the numerous assertions by Socrates himself, that he himself is barren of knowledge, it is thus meaningful to ask what Plato means exactly by bringing out all these arguments. I will now examine both of these two arguments.

The first approach is to redefine the definition "Knowledge is perception" by referring to Protagoras' so-called "Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not." He makes Theaetetus think if anything has its own property regardless of the observer, or rather things show differently when it is perceived by different observer. The example Socrates mentions is temperature. It is not a detailed discussion, since some very controversial cases are left out, such as colors, smells. Socrates further suggests this world as reflected by the famous literary writers, such as Homer: that the world is full of flux and motion itself. According to the observation of the nature, it seems that the processing of becoming is a renewal power of all creatures, and thus our learning process is similarly refreshed by motion.

Here we should make a stop. Why Socrates questions the absoluteness of perception but also praises the goodness the motions brought along at the same time? It may be a way to show his impartiality towards this position, that he sees both side of this phenomenon. However, in the following sections, he mentions several times the ambiguity of all these contesting states. In 157e, Socrates mentions the borderline cases, e.g. the dream, the insanity, the disease, the misperception. He says that it will be hard to distinguish the reality between a normally-functioned state and so-called deviation. In 158c9 to d6, he says that we make our assertions

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<sup>26</sup> See Schiappa, E. *Protagoras and Logos*, esp. pp. 117-130.

<sup>27</sup> See Zilioli, U. *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism*, esp. chap. 1&3.

with equal conviction in both cases, i.e. real life and the dream. Here, we may further infer the case of psycho-diseases. Modern psychoanalysis treats the patient seriously and never simply defines the patients' perception as false, instead, they accept their psycho-reality first, and that leads to a further totally different aspect of the troubling soul. Interestingly, in the following passage, he tries to persuade Theaetetus that if for the case of disease or madness, the criterion here which differs between the sleep and real life might be a matter of time, but not the very state itself. These chaotic shifting perspectives warn us the linear understanding of all these discussions. The ontological status of perception is still possible, before we can eliminate all these ambiguous settings.

In the second enumeration and reply of Protagoras, imagined by Socrates, Protagoras says that he doesn't agree with Socrates that there is only one type homogeneous memory, and also the matter of true and false should be changed to the question of good and bad. However, in 170a2-3, Socrates immediately points out that Protagoras' promising proposal is self-defeating. He thinks that it is obvious that in human society, we do believe in the distinction between wisdom and ignorance; that makes it hard to admit that everyone has his own truth.

Previously, I mentioned that some critics have pointed out the two facets of Protagoras' arguments: ontological and ethical. Here, we can observe during this transition, from "the man is the measure of all things" to "there are better judgment; one kind are better than the others, but in no way truer" (167b), what it meant. In a social situation, it does lead to comparison. But Protagoras always respects the legitimacy of everyone's direct perception, no matter from which aspect or circumstances it arises from. This "democratic" way of inviting all to the process of searching for knowledge is itself not about relativistic measurements, but of an ethical character. It shows the inevitable arena of contesting measurements. Socrates must have sensed this perspective, since he tries to falsify by claiming it to be self-defeating, but very soon in the "digression", he picks up this daunting enemy in his mind again, thus elaborating his own version of a good psychic state, that is not affected by the political world. He tries to express his ideal state to deal away this ethical quandary.

From here, I would like to first discuss the inappropriateness in some of the former discussions. When referring to the political character of *Theaetetus*, it is often targeted on the historical background of Plato and Protagoras. Cynthia Farrar's

book<sup>28</sup> brings out this nuance in detail, also quite unorthodoxly defends Protagoras' position as a relativist compared to the idealistic Plato. This historical concern is very enticing. However in this tentative work of Plato, I think his portrayal is less of a conflict of the outside world, the political atmosphere of the city state. Rather, he always focuses on the inner conflict of a knowledge-seeker. The evidence lies in the whole dialogue that discusses knowledge in an abstract, general way; even in the digression, Socrates remains firm in this attitude. On the other hand, the approach which suggests the negation of the thesis that "knowledge is perception" also misses the point. It only shows the incapability or the inexperienced state of Theaetetus, who is thoroughly quite passive all along this discussion. What it really brings out, is the worry of Plato itself, his uncertain assertion concerning his own position. Actually, on Socrates' own formulation of Protagoras' refutation and his own doubts, it already brings out latently the following two dimensions which Theaetetus suggested, that of being a right judgment and a clear account. To have a no answer result would be no surprise if we take a closer look into the first part, since Plato never really solves the puzzle which Protagoras engendered. Most of the interpretations suggest that from this ending which all arguments are refuted, it testifies the negative character of the dialogue, and only serves as a preliminary work of the trilogy, i.e. *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. However, I do not take this negative approach.<sup>29</sup> The dialogue offers us every time something new, both the psychological dynamics and other aspects of knowledge which cannot be ignored. And if there is room for the possibility that Plato is not trying to present firm knowledge claim in this dialogue, the guidance of orientation and motivation is still pedagogically meaningful.

The Protagorean content taken as a whole in this dialogue shows the inner-political dimension of the knowledge-seeking process. What I mean by "inner-political" refers to the psychic struggle to resettle the preponderance of each knowledge claim in mind. Stern's interpretation tempts to elevate the political dimension and the death of Socratic as a framework to a degree that it represents something as a paradigm for the people at that time. But I think what Plato tries to achieve is more modest though no less important: he tries to pin down some inevitable conflicts we will have to face in everyday life. Person such as Theaetetus, a young, promising man, equipped with the preparation training of mathematics, is still vulnerable under such preliminary examination. For Theaetetus, the boundary of mundane and sacred, perception and being, may be conceptually understandable,

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<sup>28</sup> Farrar, C. *The origins of democratic thinking*.

<sup>29</sup> This is partly inspired by Tuozzo, T. M. *Plato's Charmides*, especially the first chapter. There he also notices the psychic pedagogy of the early dialogue. In *Theaetetus*, this later dialogue, in a similar writing style, may offer such a lesson.

but in practice, in the very activity of giving definition and grasping the essence of knowledge, he is confronted by Socrates' way to interconnect all these different things in his mind. The phenomenon of nature is being correlated with the phenomenon of human world, and from now on, the conflict can no longer be purely theoretical, but it has to consider the social side of it. If anything really political here, I would say it is an inner-political fight, a fight to resettle the possible arena of definition of knowledge in a person's experience.

After examining the Protagorean content in the dialogue, I also realize the danger of taking this dialogue as a manifestation of some traces of skepticism. While Plato is trying hard from *Theaetetus* on, to put perception into his framework of knowledge, it seems difficult to reconcile that aspect easily with his own conception of knowledge. Not resorting to other works of Plato, I will try to discuss this problem within the range of this dialogue, to see if it has something meaningful to offer.

### III. Skepticism?

Lisa Raphals<sup>30</sup> in her essay, *Skeptical Strategies in the Zhuangzi and Theaetetus*<sup>31</sup>, tried to formulate the similarities between these two pieces of work. Apart from the differences of the argument style in two cultural zones, they shared strikingly similar skeptical methods. In her analysis of the narrative techniques, she noticed that the main dialogue is centered on the first definition of knowledge; however, most of the proofs and some digressions are indirect. She also points out that there are a variety of detailed similes to represent theories of knowledge, especially in Socrates two vivid models on how we get and retrieve knowledge. But, all these suggestions of definition are refuted, and in most of the Plato researches, it will just be deemed as the attempt showing the failure of this definition; or for some, it shows the transition stage of Plato's later theory. Raphal's observation shows that the questions raised in these two texts manifest the intention that there are hierarchies concerning the matter of knowledge, but they all avoid defining it in the end.

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<sup>30</sup> Her understanding of *Zhuangzi* may not be correct, since the difference of the epistemology behind these two authors may be both fundamental and cultural. But I do think that her comparison brings out some unstressed part of *Theaetetus*.

<sup>31</sup> See Kjellberg, P. & Ivanhoe, P. J. ed. *Essays on skepticism, relativism, and ethics in Zhuangzi*, chap. 2, pp. 26-49.



In the interpretations of Cornford<sup>32</sup>, the theory of form always becomes the refuge for the deadlock of the arguments within the dialogue. This dialogue thus presents no real bafflement, but just has its fixed positions among other Plato's dialogues. He writes:

*The Theaetetus will formulate and examine the claim of the senses to yield knowledge. The discussion moves in the world of appearance and proves that, if we try to leave out the world of true being, we cannot extract knowledge from sensible experience.*<sup>33</sup>

Cornford's position is firm in accepting the negative result of this dialogue. Bostock, however, has expressed a not so ordered reading experience in his book<sup>34</sup>. In chapter seven of his book, his understanding is that the first half of the book is about knowing that, and its second part about knowing things.<sup>35</sup> Bostock senses the subject-shift by observing the verbs used by Plato; he also thinks that this reflects that Plato himself also offering something which seems to be a problem rather than a solution. The muddling state of the pursuit of knowledge seems to show the uncertain state of Plato, shifting his focus between truth and things, trying hard to explain something which Plato himself also finds it difficult to give a lucid account.

Returning to the dialogue with the aforementioned discussions in mind, the introductory setting is not promising in the first place. Socrates invites a young man to discuss something he does not really know, and the midwifery serves as a way to bring out and check the result. In this process, the very mediating medium, i.e. the midwifery, does not go through the self-reflexive examining, such as the perception, the judgment and a description of the logos behind it. If it cannot guarantee its truth, what does it really help in an epistemological journey? It will be hard to say that the tone of this dialogue is skeptical, since its overt aim is to find a definition of knowledge. But, clearly, we face the situation of no answer.

Then, what we may gain from this discussion, is the psychological turn which anyone who is interested in the pursuit of knowledge, should bear in mind. The result that Socrates arduously refutes in the validity of perception as knowledge and stopped the discussion at an aporetic point seems to reveal the bafflement of Plato. If perception is far from his real objective, why does he donate such a proportion to it

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<sup>32</sup> Cornford, F.M. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*.

<sup>33</sup> Cornford, F.M. op. cit., p.7.

<sup>34</sup> Bostock, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Bostock, op. cit., pp.268-279.

in the dialogue? The following chapter will try to bring out and examine the discussions around this, and explain why the focus of mine is different. I believe that, in this dialogue, Plato is trying to capture the tension of mind in knowledge seeking, while putting the most important issues in question.



## Chapter III

### Knowledge as Perception

#### I.Theaetetus' Choice

Before giving his first suggestion, Theaetetus approaches Socrates' mind through various ways. Not everyone will take this as necessary, but he does. Perhaps it is due to Socrates' famous meticulous search for the precise definition.

In passage 145b1-b4, Socrates suggests that when referring to the praise given to Theaetetus, he questions if there will be a kind of urgency to examine the person being praised; reciprocally, the person being praised might also have the desire to show himself off. The invitation softens the resistance of his interlocutor, and moreover, it sets up the self-examining scene. It turns out to be an examination of a person's educational makeup. Socrates wants him to remember what he has been through during his lifetime. The geometry, astronomy, music, and arithmetic are all subjects which he learned from Theodorus. Socrates says that he has gone through the same kind of education before, showing his empathy, but he is confused about what he has learned. He asks if "to learn is to become wiser about the thing one is learning". And next, he leads Theaetetus to respond to his question, whether "it is through wisdom, that wise men are wise men."<sup>36</sup> After the affirmation from Theaetetus, Socrates then tries to make a very quick identification, between wisdom and knowledge.

What Socrates tries to do here will seem to be very rough. In many cultures, it is difficult to pin down the real difference between wisdom and knowledge. Take African for example, in Kresse's Book,<sup>37</sup> he uses an anthropological way to examine some crucial vocabularies in the Swahili culture zone, and tries to reveal the different facets of knowledge and wisdom. It becomes one of the crucial contesting focuses in an epistemological pursuit, to enumerate the complex relation between wisdom and knowledge. But here, Socrates just uses some simple phrases to run through this grey area.

Could Socrates have possibly ignored this roughness? Actually, this is where the tension comes from, his confusion of what makes wisdom and knowledge homogeneous, if it is possible. In his monologue, Socrates notices this silence (146a),

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<sup>36</sup> Here I took the translation from the French edition by Diès, A. *Platon* and modified into English, instead of Burnyeat' translation, since Diès' translation is closer to the original ancient Greek.

<sup>37</sup> Kresse, K. *Philosophising in Mombasa*.

and it actually confirms the ambiguity and uncertainty which Socrates himself brings in. Socrates already did this “blocking” before, when he reminds Theaetetus about his education. He mentions the subjects, but actually doesn’t want to start from all these in detail. There is a strangeness when something is being treated as unimportant or irrelevant while others value it. (cf. 145d, Theaetetus expresses his ardour in his learning).

We see that this psychological stress looms out as soon as possible. When Theaetetus is being further questioned on what knowledge is, he mentions immediately the teachings of Theodorus. Also in the sequence, he asserts that crafts such as cobbling must be knowledge. But it is refuted by Socrates, saying that this is not what he actually concerns. He says that, “I am asking for one thing, but you give me many.” He elucidates his point by saying that what he questions is not what knowledge is of, or the varieties there are; instead, he wants to know what it is.

Having knowledge of Plato’s philosophy, and the passage 185-186 in *Theaetetus*, it is always tempting to say that he is suggesting his own philosophical point of view, that here is the trace of the fight between one and many. But following the whole sequence, it seems more to be a self-caused problem with the rough treatment between wisdom and knowledge, if we conceive that these two interlocutors both have the simple hearts to put away the existing framework of thought and restart plainly.

So here we see a new arena to compare the approach of both and try to find a consistent one. Theaetetus responds to this demand of Socrates by narrating a story between him and Socrates the Younger. It is a discussion upon the incommensurable numbers. The whole discussion is raised under a geometric understanding of number, which shows the still practical side of mathematics at that time. The gist from this example is not clear, but what is certain is that in his solution, he has divided his objects into two groups: one which can be provided by equal numbers and the other which cannot be. Maybe we immediately think of this example being applied to the demarcation of knowledge and wisdom, one is self generating and the other not (or vice versa), but Theaetetus eliminates this connection. He thinks this example shows the ambiguity of Socrates concern, but do not know how to apply to it.

What can we learn from this example? What does it show? Does Theaetetus want to express his inherent doubt about Socrates approach, suggesting that he is departing on the grey zone of definition? As a prominent mathematician, it will be

bizarre for him to show his weakness in mathematics during such a conversation. Moreover, it can be an implicit resistance to Socrates' urge; it shows that Theaetetus still tries to understand the problem in a mathematical way, but feels perplexed in how to apply it to the question at hand.

Before the passage leading to the description of Socrates' midwifery, Socrates wants to re-confirm that Theaetetus is following him that what they are pursuing is nothing trivial. It is a reaction directly towards Theaetetus' response. Theaetetus shows his uncertainty, but Socrates seems to ignore it. He just wants to have Theaetetus willing to dig on the issue of what knowledge is. Theaetetus shows his fragile and incapable mentality confronting this matter, and Socrates uses his story of midwifery to justify this mental discomfort, it is pain out of fullness but not emptiness. Besides the psychological discomfort, here is a landmark of the beginning of a search for knowledge. The midwifery metaphor stresses the pain and the help from outside. Those interpretations which suggest the self-knowledge facet of this dialogue has to face this obvious contradiction. Not without the intervention of a mental midwife, knowledge never shows its meaning itself. And the position of this midwife is crucial to the pursuit of knowledge, if there is any. The pain is also not a common sense and usual practice for every procuring of knowledge. The ongoing pain forces all knowledge seekers to return again and again to the starting point. But through this metaphor, Socrates makes it as an inherent property in a relation of collaboration. This point seems to be ignored greatly in most of the philosophical discussions, as if it is only a random coincidence or not the crucial point in understanding the dialogue. However, when we reflect about the process of education and every beginning towards a certain goal of knowledge, our mental state is so important. The modern separation of philosophy and psychology often treats this as unnecessary accompaniment, but here we see again the interconnected importance of it in a pedagogical, structural setting. Before turning into the philosophical argument itself, Socrates decides to linger and spends much time in guiding Theaetetus to the preferable mode which he thinks fitter for the investigation of knowledge. Here, we may also talk about the boundary between the sophists and Socrates again. For sophists, the rhetoric is worthwhile in that it brings the persuasiveness when manipulating the psychological state of its object. In contrast, Socrates' attitude in treating the psychological perspective lies in the arousal of the awareness of the troubling state of mind before embarking on a journey of pursuit. He relies not on the persuasiveness but the orienting effect of the psychological turn; in fact, the uncertainty accompanies all along. While the skill for the sophist lies in

the expertise of persuasion, Socrates keeps the interlocutor aware of their deficiency throughout the process.

This preparation stage of entering into the argument concerning perception often is treated as not so necessarily expressing any obvious aspect about knowledge; at most, it can be taken as a framework of showing the usual attitude expressed also in other early dialogues. However, if we take the alternating of perspective into the crucial component of reflecting knowledge, this preparation may appear to be as important as the issue in question. One must decide how to situate his endowment and previous “knowledge” first; and what we see here, is exactly its process. Socrates is trying to make Theaetetus realize that no matter how erudite he was before, he has to give away all the preconceptions in order to gain new insight of knowledge.

Now, let us dive into the passage of knowledge as perception.

## II. Knowledge as perception

Interestingly, after Theaetetus’ proposal, Socrates immediately connects this proposal with the tradition from Protagoras. He says even that such a “wise man” will not talk in nonsense. Reading carefully this seeming jokingly praise to the ancestor, we see again the dubious identity between wisdom and knowledge. Socrates selectively took the figures he is interested in as the start point of discussion, and the tone he uses and the way he presents certainly will influence our perception of the objects or people in the discussion.

Further on, Socrates starts to narrate what Protagoras might do to analyze the perception. First, it is the relativity of feeling: how it appears to each of us or how we perceive it may be different one from another. In 152d-e, we see that Socrates leads it to an observation, that nothing has its intrinsic status if we grasp things through perception; they are constantly under the influence of move and change, in other words, the process of coming to be. To further his thought, he brings forth even more traditions in their cultural zone, namely other philosophers and writers at that time. Among the writers, he mentions both comedy and tragedy. He believes that they portrayed everything as connected with flux and motion. What he meant here is really quite obscure, since we do not really know what stance he took exactly towards these dramas at this moment. The image and content from the literature may either brings us to the physical world or let us wander in the mental realm. What we can be certain of is that, he thinks all this branch of philosophizing or

literary works reflect the moving side of the world. He even mentions his understanding of fire and heat to backup his point. The next step he makes is an analogy, between the outside world and the soul. He compares the state of rest with not to study and to forget, the state of motion as to learn and to study by the soul. This again shows the ambivalent state when calling forth the tradition of literature. Concerning his former description of his “mental midwifery”, it seems quite legitimate to have this analogical move. But if we question further, we may say here it is a leap which has to be solved. More interestingly, Socrates, from this standpoint, immediately gives his valuation of these two kinds of activity, i.e. one that is beneficial and the other not. We are familiar with these logics of oppositions in Plato’s thought, but this really does not guarantee this argument.

We may further point out the faults of his argument by his subsequent analysis. In 153c-d, he uses Homer’s understanding of the natural world to backup his conceived argument. This connection is also weak in that we do not really see how the motion inside a soul and that in the outside world coincide as an epistemological approach. To understand the correlation here, it has to be a psychological effect, which makes the interlocutor rethink his own connection with the world, and thus opens the possibility for this very analogy. As a reader, we have to question if we think it is so easy to sympathize with Theaetetus at this moment, and as the epistemological reasoning is not so strong, it still has the experience with the world and the psychological affinity with the phenomenon to make us be willing to go along.

In 154a-d, Socrates offers a suggestion on the alteration of the self. If self is also changeable, it does not have to be during the encountering that the relativity comes into. This gives the relativity a more essentialistic nature. Adding an illustrating example of dices, Socrates gives till now the most brain-teasing narration of the discussion. He brings out three principles not to be violated while making judgments. They are:

- (1) Things are equal to themselves, in bulk and in number.
- (2) If there is no disturbance of increasing or decreasing, things will remain equal.
- (3) Without becoming, nothing will become what it is not.

After these, actually, Socrates mentions another factor which seems to bypass the aforementioned criterion, namely aging.

With all these bewilderments, Theaetetus expresses his wonder, or to be more precise, his bafflement. Here, Socrates opens up a totally new dimension, the alteration caused by time. We see that how related Socrates is, when he feels Theaetetus' bafflement, which shows his interlocutor's sensibility of all these underlying factors. Socrates' metaphor of the myth of Iris and his statement in 155d testifies this very moment. The broad use of such kind of metaphor from the literature shows a quite different attitude of Plato towards literature. This expresses Socrates' need to grasp the feelings of Theaetetus through such a literary device. Then, Socrates points out directly that there are people who just refuse to admit the existence of unseen factors. This leads to the following, more subtle argument for the advocate of the moving principle.

From 156a to 157c on, Socrates talks about two forms of motion, one being active, the other being passive, and each has an infinite multitude. These two factors are correlated, and will not come into reality until one meets the other. He has numerated examples such as sight, the relation between eyes and something which comes into its vicinity. Through the coordination of motions in the intervening space, the eye, which is slower in motion, is filled with sight; and something which in its vicinity which is faster is filled with whiteness. Consequently, we get a seeing eye and the perception of a white object. Socrates uses this explanation of the physical mechanism to illustrate the relation of the passiveness and activeness in play. It will always come in a pair in a process of perception; more generally, it is observed in any motion. And, what is passive in a situation may turn active in another, or vice versa. Socrates concludes his words by saying that the verb "to be" must be abolished under such a theory, since it does not describe the facts properly. After all this, Theaetetus clearly expresses his confusion in mind, because he does not think this discussion lead to any places. He questions if Socrates is stating his own opinion or trying him out. And here, Socrates restates his position again as not-knowing, but just pieces together some useful information. What is noticeable here has been pointed out by Böhme<sup>38</sup>. In the pair given by Socrates, there are also pleasures and pains, desires and fears. (Lust und Unlust, Begierde und Abscheu) Under the framework of the dialogue, it seems not coincidental or surprising. Because the mental dimension is something which Socrates repeatedly brings out and wishes Theaetetus to take notice of. It is in the later passage that Socrates uses the faculty of mind to close this part of discussion; Theaetetus is guided to say that it is through the self-function of soul that we perceive common features. But where can we categorize these affective factors? They seem to be neither process by general organs of human nor counting

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<sup>38</sup> See Böhme, G. *Platons theoretische Philosophie*, pp. 203-209.



as something common to the soul. This uncertainty hovers here and may actually be ignored by Theaetetus.

From 157e, Socrates again turns to something new. He turns to the borderline situations, where man's control is not entirely. These include dream, insanity and other diseases. He seems to use these cases to offer the possibility of error in perception. Theaetetus himself thinks that man in madness can hardly provide true perception. Socrates relays on this thought and puts forward the ambiguous case of dreaming and awakening. It may turn out that both these cases have their own claim of reality. Then, he picks up the case of illness. He is not trying to describe any specific disease but only tries to use this to strengthen the opposition which he creates here. After having Theaetetus admitting his formulation, that a thing related with other things can either be like or unlike, he infers that when Socrates, embodying a normal person, meets with things in different state, ill or healthy, will make this encountering different. Same thing may lead to different results. Then, he says that since these perceptions are possessions of each individual, this results leads to the absolute correctness of perception. Here, it seems that this conclusion push a little bit too far, maybe even a little bit ironical. It only explains that in different situations, we may find the underlying details influencing our feeling or perception. However, while portraying these possibilities, Socrates seems to evoke both doubts and resources yet to be examined out of Theaetetus. These special states of human being as a perceiver bring out much to be reflected. If we do not rule out the possibility of reality of all these cases, it will always be hard to close the possibility of absolute correctness of perception. Even though after guiding Theaetetus for a while, Socrates shifts immediately to his counter arguments and not coming back to the detailed examination of these states anymore. Only till the part of the third definition, Socrates has uses his example from a dream to hint us again this ignored issue for the last time in the dialogue. Theaetetus follows Socrates guidance with difficulty and also never raises any questions concerning this part anymore.

Observing the whole framework, we can easily find Theaetetus being very passive in the dialogue, who only lets Socrates bring out some tentative results which will proof to be wind eggs in the following discussion. The lessons here is not how ingenuous the arguments are, but it shows that without an active mind state to pursue knowledge, you may always find a wind egg in the end; because you are just following other people's concern or desire to solve the problem, instead of engaging in the questioning himself. If any negative lesson which has to be drawn from the dialogue, I will say that it is the contrast of Theaetetus' good nature and his failure in

being passive in the pursuit himself. In a sense, Theaetetus may be already active enough when facing such an experienced tutor in life; however, when we see the twist and the conversing process, we may see that Theaetetus always situates himself as merely reflecting the inquiring desire of Socrates, seldom showing his own orientation towards the question. Under the framework of midwifery, we may say it is normal. But I take it more than that: Plato is conscious here to remind us the importance of developing a more active mind when situating in such a setting. Being only a passive respondent will never give out any fruitful result: one of the probabilities is the result can just be refuted by the very person who raises it as this dialogue presents. While Socrates knows the weakness of his own arguments, we can say that the whole scenario is almost destined to end up like this if Theaetetus is not giving anything out of his own situation and relation with knowledge, to support his own association or experience. Of course, people notice the prima-facie structure that Socrates earns the definition from his interlocutor; but more importantly, I think it is crucial to observe the form of debate afterwards. In the discussion following the definition, we see no example where Theaetetus gives strong basis for his definition first, and I will consider this to be the important hint for my observation.

But to see more traces of my point, let us see the following part which predominates by Socrates and Theodorus.

### III.Theodorus' participation and the digression

It is so peculiar that right after Socrates guides Theaetetus to a tentative conclusion, his questioning words soon entice Theodorus into the scene, who in the very beginning has no will to participate. This scene, for me, also vividly portrays the passivity of Theaetetus, who instead of thinking for himself the real pros and cons around his first definition and questioning the validity of the argument, just leaving the discussion further to the elders.

In 161, Socrates drags Theodorus into the discussion. Socrates expresses his worry about Protagoras, that his measurement of the efficacy of a judgment may cause a disastrous result, when everyone is his own master and has the final words. In this passage, we first see the conflict of different goals in knowledge. The diversion being that Socrates take truth as the final goal for a good explanation for knowledge, however not Protagoras. Here "judgment" also looms out as a main motive. Before discussing the proposal "true judgment as knowledge" in the later part, Socrates here has two approaches to let us think about the importance of judgment. One

being the comparison among people and the other lies in the passage from 184 to 186, where Socrates separates the judgment from perception due to the failure to reach a correspondence between the things being perceived and the faculty which perceives.

In 163 to 165, Socrates offers a seemingly strange concern: that a person may see and not see at the same time, if perception is identified with knowledge. Here, the question of memory runs into it. But is this a true question? Disregarding the time factor, the argument seems to be very insensitive and artificial. Without mentioning the mechanism of the retrieving failure, this argument seems to be anachronistic. The processing of incoming perceptual information in this argument becomes timeless. It seems that Socrates wants to juxtapose two situations together to create the confusion of Theaetetus. The perception not in action becomes a danger for memory, in that both claim the direct affinity with knowledge.

However so at this moment insensitive towards time, in the following imaginative solo of Protagoras, the time factor comes out again, and become a manifested one. From 166a, Socrates starts his apology for Protagoras. There are basically the following points:

- (1) The memory which has been forgotten is not any more the same memory the one had.
- (2) There are countless differences between men.
- (3) There are still wise people, and there are better judgments. One kind are better than the others, but in no way truer.
- (4) For different walks of life, even for a city, the criterion would be that “to make the situation better would be true perception.”

Here are two points we should especially take notice of. First, Protagoras understands and accepts that there are different stages of life, and this makes the proposition that “man is true each time and there are better judgments” coexistent without leading to contradiction. We see how Socrates himself use this nuance to persuade Theodorus into being his interlocutor in the following “digression”. Second, the knowledge claim has to be feasible when admitting the reality of the differences among people.

In the following refutation, Socrates tries to come back to daily experience, back to a person’s encountering with different matters, where he will not always find

himself smart or wise, but sometimes even foolish. Together with this concern, we may also find it common when we observe others: by juxtaposing two opinions at the same time, when one takes to be right, the other to be wrong, Socrates thinks that he successfully gives a self-defeating reply to the apology. Interestingly, this discussion appears here between Socrates and Theodorus; at first sight, it fulfills Protagoras condition that they are in the same stage of life, i.e. the old age. However, the stage of life does not have to be synchronic for everyone. Some people have the chance and the endowment to be more advanced; some have more good positions to expose to a variety of information. If we put all these details in concern, we can see that Protagoras can easily use his theory to encompass all these minor differences first, then to pick out a better judgment which does not contradict his own principle.

But here comes a more nuanced reflection. Socrates turns to the political matter. In a political environment, the Protagorean theory may serve to justify the convention and matters in each city. But when we conceive a larger community where common goods are at stake, we have to face once again a competitive state according to this theory. Even to this extent the theory may go smoothly, but the twists appear in those issues such as religion and justice, where the common wisdom suggests a common nature for everyone.

Since the issue becomes even more complicated while bringing into the conflicting view, Theodorus' reply leads to the discussion of time. It is not at all a coincidence to discuss "σχολή" here. If we follow all the discussions above, we find it necessary for Socrates' conception of life to be specified, because he has to face the common wisdom he just mentioned. It is crucial to know what kind of person can have a better outlook to lead a philosophical life. This ethical concern is a direct response to Protagoras model and also his self-imposed question; and if he cannot deal away very successfully through argument, then at least it has to offer an alternative. He describes is:

***Because the one man always has what you mentioned just now---plenty of time. When he talks, he talks in peace and quiet, and his time is his own. It is so with us now: here we are beginning on our third new discussion. (172d)***

The third discussion, according to Burnyeat's conjecture, is to refer to a third encountering with the problems connected with Protagoras.<sup>39</sup> I agree with this, but I

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<sup>39</sup> See Burnyeat, op. cit., footnote at p. 300.

think there are more reasons to it than just a logical guess. It is the inherent need to explain this unresolved concern which forces Plato to answer it in a form of digression. From the above excerpt, it illustrates us a figure with his own subjective time, where he has to forge his own truth claim in his own dimension. Contrastingly, it is the images of a judge, who has to speak one eye on the clock, and facing people with no good will, has to follow all kinds of bureaucratic procedure. See the passage below:

***He has to speak one eye on the clock. Besides, he can't make his speeches on any subjects he likes. He has his adversary standing over him, armed with compulsory powers and with the sworn statement, which is read out point by point as he proceeds, and must be kept to by the speaker. ...And the struggle is never a matter of indifference; it always directly concerns the speaker, and sometimes life itself is at stake. (172e)***

And all these practices change the mind-set of a will-be judge, cultivating a small and warped soul. On the contrary, a philosopher does not confine himself to the social rules or games; the political area is not his places, he keeps himself aloof from it. He deems those things as petty and concentrates his mind on the nature of important aspects of life, such as the universe and what man is. Socrates picks up the instance of Thales, who was unaffected by the public matter, and devoted wholeheartedly to his own pursuit.

The account from 174c to 176a, Socrates vividly describes his image of the philosopher. Most of the second-hand literatures will put this part as simply showing the consistent image of Socrates.<sup>40</sup> However, I think this actually is misleading. As the whole midwifery progresses, can we say that this is just an accidental pause? Or, rather, if we put ourselves into Theaetetus' shoes, without the modern knowledge of all the background of Socrates, will gain maybe the most through this renewal of perspective. In other words, all the actions which define a philosopher's life are all kinds of perception, through which we can reset our inclination and concern for the knowledge.

Let's examine closer. The philosopher is inexperienced towards daily scenes. What does it mean? Does that mean the ignorance of perception or being bad in the ability to observe? He would not mess into others' scandal, also would not fluctuate

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<sup>40</sup> Take von Kutschera, *F. Platons Philosophie II* for example, this part of discussion only appears at the chapter *Sokrates und die Philosophie*, an extra out of the whole dialog.

his mind about the high and low of any moment. In modern days, he would be someone detached from the media. He worries about the quality of the rulers, who do not have time to self-cultivate. He disregards the possessions of lands and the inheritance of nobility. He thinks that the focus on these things is deviation from the whole picture of life. Here, the contempt for those who traces back their ancestry to acquire their own benefit is so similar to what we can read also in Rabelais' *Gargantua*.<sup>41</sup> The vanity of vanity disgusts him. Turning to the question of justice and injustice, happiness and misery in general, then it is what pulls all concentration of a philosopher. The lawyers, instead, would seem clumsy and powerless facing these questions of the essence of nature. The philosopher may be bad at practical crafts, but he does not feel shameful appearing simple and good-for-nothing.

Due to Theodorus doubt, in the next passage 176a to 177b, Socrates shows his understanding that how hard it is for the people in the world to choose the way he suggests. The good and the bad have to be opposed to each other in the world. And this situation, not pessimistic, even becomes the urge for people to long for heaven, to become just and pure, namely God-like. His final long discussion lies in portraying what real happiness and divinity are, compared with the worldly enjoyment. This part is very important that it shows the quality of which a knowledge seeker should always puts in mind. The connection between heaven and earth and the struggle between the earthliness and the divinity are always crucial. If a discussion of knowledge lacks all these facets, it is just a worldly play and nothing substantial.

This digression rekindles every reader's heart. It shows the importance of life and the psychological preparation before all serious searching. The three definitions in the dialogue, which being refuted one after another, may not become something as guidance in knowledge seeking, but this digression might really change Theaetetus into a new man, who no longer cares only the mathematical world. As a midwife, Socrates actually passes down his own important message.

Later, Socrates tries to pick up again the critics of Protagoras' point of view which he attributed to. His argument bases on the uncertainty of future. Here, he thinks that the judgment about future is strictly connected with the probabilities or likeliness brought about by factors such as expertise. But here, this critic seems also weak. Take the case of medicine for example, Socrates says that it will be absurd to take patient's own judgment as true rather than a doctor's. The case can be complicated if referred to the subjective side of decision, the patient clearly has two

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<sup>41</sup> See Rabelais, F. *Les cinq livres, Gargantua*, chapter I. De la genealogie & antiquité de Gargantua.

choices to make, to believe the diagnosis or not. If he does, he passes over the judgment to the one who is superior in his world and then would not defy Protagoras criterion. If he does not, it may be the case which Socrates tries to describe, but not totally certain.

From 180e to 183c, Socrates restarts his acute questioning concerning the nature of motion, since it is the contesting point of the two traditions. While one group asserts “Unmoved is the Universe”, the Protagorean branch asserts the opposite. Socrates wants to know if there is only one type of motion in question. According to Socrates’ classification, there are basically two motions: spatial motion, and the alteration in the same space. He further suggests that everything will undergo these two types of motion, because it will be strange to say that one thing is both moving and standing still. Then, he brings out again the model of passive and active factors; this model shows the difficulty to grasp exactly what a perception is when everything moves. This model further implicates the difficulty of using the natural language to express properly this phenomenon of motion in question.

It seems that Socrates has used this discussion to foreclose further possibility for the point that “everything is in motion”, and after the agreement of Theodorus, Theaetetus demands a further discussion of the other party, which asserts that unmoving is the principle. It is actually an opportunity for Socrates to give the Protagorean view a heavier blow, and to clarify the dynamics between these two opposites. However, Socrates chooses to put the discussion of Parmenides’ view aside, and goes on the examination of perception.

This passage is worthy of our attention. At first sight, this entr’acte shows the reverence of Socrates to Parmenides. But then, Socrates’ going back to perception, seems to suggest that he also feels that the above discussion just show the difficulty to defend its position when taking the dynamic view; it does not close the importance and the meaning of perception in regard to knowledge.

#### IV. Passage 184-187

In the last passage of the discussion on the first definition, Socrates restarts his delivery. He first makes Theaetetus to reflect on in what sense that we describe that we perceive perception by the corresponding organ or mechanism. Through this refinement of wording, he tries to make Theaetetus notice how we can associate our body with the perception we acquire. As for the model that we perceive “with” the

organs, Socrates uses a very interesting metaphor, “a number of senses sitting inside us as if we were Wooden Horses.” (184d) What this really meant is obscure, maybe it refers to the Trojan Horse in Homer’s Iliad, which refers to the tricky, untruthful nature of this model. The model is to imagine the function of the organ as instrument. As Theaetetus also agrees that this is more likely, Socrates points out that it is through the tracing of the converging site of all these sensations, which makes us to have the tendency to attribute all to the body.

Further, Socrates wants Theaetetus to recognize the peculiar nature of each sensation, that they are independent of each other and same to themselves. This leads to the perplexed question: What can be common then among all these independently acquired sensations? Socrates’ suggestion is to reflect on the application of the words “is” and “is not”. Theaetetus soon shows his understanding in comparing with the example of numbers, the difference and the identity embodied by odd and even; he even expresses that he thinks the proposal is to identify “through what bodily instruments we perceive all these with the soul.” On further discussion, he proposes that soul functions through itself, and lies in the position of comparison and the sense of time. Soul seems to make a calculation within itself of past and present in relation to future. This faculty of comparison distinguishes itself from the bodily perception in that, it needs development and education while perception is naturally given.

What is noticeable is the turn at 185e, where Socrates makes Theaetetus decide for himself which position he is more inclined with. He guides Theaetetus to think that it is the soul which attempts to reach a decision. But this choice is not guaranteed. In the following guidance, curiously, before reaching the conclusion that perception is different from the process of reasoning about them, Theaetetus still stresses again that this experience is “the one who reach the soul through body.” Thus, here, we can only speculate that the separation of the function of bodily organs and the soul, simply by an analogical thinking that soul seems to be different from other organs, but what goes on between “the perception which reach the soul through body” and “the decision which made by the soul through itself” remains unclarified. While the relation between perception and judgment may just be explained through this clarification, we see that Plato here chooses to bypass this difficulty but just use this rhetorical division to close the possibility of perception as knowledge. But while the “through” is not explained further, we can almost say that the credulous state of judgment is also foreseeable.



What I want to present in this part, is that I try to show the “hard” trouble which Plato reveals but chooses to bypass, it may offer us the sign to think that Plato does not really want to give an answer in this work. He does make efforts to use more definition and models to show what may be his tentative try, but it is quite certain that till the end of the first discussion, he already hints us the aporetic ending. What does it mean by saying that the soul reaches out after itself? I do not understand it from the dialogue.

After this textual reading, I think now it will be proper to go into some of the previous interpretations which I deemed to be valuable to discuss along with.



## Chapter IV

### Excurs contra Friedländer and Tschemplik

#### I. Paul Friedländer's interpretation

I have mentioned in the introduction that I am more oriented towards Friedländer's interpretation. However, in many turning points, I do not really have the same judgment as he does; or, in some cases, I think along similar strain of thought, that there are rooms for new understanding. Thus, after Chapter III's reading, it will be meaningful to examining once again in detail, of what creates the difference.

In the beginning, Friedländer points out the four-fold significance of the introductory conversation. These four points are<sup>42</sup>:

- (1) It fixed the historicity and the preciseness of the report. This is reflected from the narration that Eucleides checked frequently the version with Socrates.
- (2) Like in *Symposium* and in *Parmenides*, it reinforced the importance of the main conversation, since the introductory scene happened just a full generation after the death of Socrates.
- (3) It brings another profit of perspective (Dimensionsgewinn), which is a more integrated portrait of Theaetetus. The scene embodied his gentleness of soul and his courage vividly in his life, besides his pursuit in mathematics.
- (4) It makes the passage 172c-177c understandable.

Friedländer basically offers us two valuable points. The first, that it is important to take the historical setting of the dialogue in mind, when we try to extract possible answers from the dialogue. Secondly, the digression offers us the clue to take this dialogue as expressing much more than just a pursuit after knowledge. As to the first point, it is actually one of the major frontlines in interpreting this dialogue, when the dating of it will change our perception of the content. Friedländer observes the effect of the introductory scene as an emphasis of the propinquity of the event with the death of Socrates. This move seems to be more concerned with the political meaning than its historical reality. And this goes undoubtedly with the second point by Friedländer. He has asked, "Still, has this dialogue perhaps quite another significance besides its being the basic text of Plato's theory of knowledge?"<sup>43</sup> His questioning

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<sup>42</sup> See Friedländer, op. cit., pp. 145-146, compared also with the German version (1975:131-132).

<sup>43</sup> Friedländer, op. cit., p.147.

corresponds with his judgment that the digression shows the precarious existence of the philosopher. I agree with this observation in that it points out the narrowness of the argument-oriented approach which I have categorized before. They often just try to gather all clear arguments within this dialogue to say it is all what Socrates tries to tell. But the opening introductory and the digression clearly tell us that there are much more to which Plato cares when reflecting upon knowledge. I disagree with Friedländer in that I think the connection he suggests is too strong. I agree with his direction, but I think in the dialogue the discussion functions more only in an inner-political level, i.e. the inner conflict of a knowledge seeker as what I tried to described in the former chapters. While Friedländer describes and concludes the message of the digression as revealing the sphere of divine, and the knowledge and life, all together may be called as existence<sup>44</sup>, I considered all these elements as to show the inevitable ontological and ethical side of pursuit of knowledge. If the pursuit is reduced to only epistemological, it will not be meaningful for Socrates. While Friedländer enlarges the scope of the dialogue by saying the aim of the dialogue is existence, I would say it is still knowledge itself, but the knowledge which gains its importance by reflecting its psychological grounding and orientation, at the same time not ignoring its ethical value.

Friedländer is really sensitive when he tries to reveal the detailed description of Theaetetus' profile. He notices the transition of the inquiry, being connected with the "beauty" of Theaetetus. This shift of the external to inner is just a parallel with the physical to the spiritual, which broadens the personal dimension of Theaetetus. Continuing this observation, Friedländer noticed that Socrates uses the standard of certain profession such as draftsman to back up the judgment of beauty. It seems that for Socrates there are real concrete forms of knowledge. However, soon after these forms of knowledge mentioned by Theaetetus, Socrates demands a deeper understanding behind all these, which has the power to pull everyone including the readers into the ontological and ethical dimension of knowledge. Thus, Friedländer has suggested that this dialogue concerns not only the theory of knowledge but also with ethics, and even existence.

Friedländer puts much value in the personality of Theaetetus. However, we can see in this dialogue that this temperament does not make Theaetetus active towards knowledge. What I mean here is that after giving up the concrete way to define knowledge, his role in the discussion is minor all through, and the fact that he constantly needs new encouragement to go on reflects also this passivity.

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<sup>44</sup> Friedländer, op. cit., p.172.

Furthermore, he seldom questions the ungrounded claim of Socrates. So as to the real force behind the search for knowledge, I would say it is more from the technique of midwifery itself and the outlook from the digression. These two parts manifest the mental motivation and orientation for a knowledge seeker. If knowledge is static and confined in the realm of any owner with certain expertise, it would not become anything intrinsically epistemological. That is the lesson we can learn from the part where Theaetetus' proposition has first been rejected. The digression actually offers us the chance to consider the possibility of questioning the boundary of the knowledge; and through this, we may get rid of the boundary and start a new journey of midwifery just like what happens here in this dramatic setting. As Socrates observes about the facts that static things perish, and moving things renew, it is not hard to imagine that in Socrates' mind, even though he is fervent in defining the knowledge of being, he may have noticed the possibility of the moving nature of a theory. People take the dating of Plato's work as a way to justify their claim of understanding of Plato's works. But will Plato insist all these coherent views while still having doubt in his mind? It is hard to say. I am not saying that the dating doesn't help us to understand Plato, but in trying to give Plato's theory a consistent and continuous picture, I think that we left out the possibility that Plato may want to present something not so certain, since he himself underwent a transition in his life. We may be quite certain what may be his final decision in his later years, but in this most outward version of inquiry into knowledge, Plato is honest in presenting the long-standing doubt which may arise in all careful knowledge seekers. We should always keep in mind that Socrates puts this to extreme as saying that he has no knowledge and here in the most manifest description of his art of midwifery, he stresses once again the barren, empty position.

Let us go back to Friedländer's understanding. Friedländer asserts<sup>45</sup> that the assimilation of knowledge and wisdom from 145e to 147c indicates that his pursuit is not any specific branch of knowledge, but the highest kind. And he thinks that Theaetetus has ignored this sign and thus gives an improper answer. This interpretation seems flawed in that as Socrates situated himself in the dialogue in the same ignorant status, how can he attribute first the ranking to any kinds of knowledge? From the development of the argument, we may perceive that in the very beginning, the knowledge for Theaetetus is not clearly differentiated. It can be anything, the only problem being that he does not know how to extract deeper from the variety. Among the possibilities, he brings out perception as the first candidates, and I take this as showing that also in Plato's mind, it is an essential object to be

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<sup>45</sup> Friedländer, op. cit., p.151.

discussed for every beginner approaching this kind of discussion. We cannot say here Socrates already takes perception as a lower status of knowledge, since the judgment and perception may play different roles in life, and what is crucial is that whether we can extract something essential about “being” from our target. Even in the later part, the separation of judgment from perception, Socrates does not give a hierarchical judgment but only points out the differences. But the tendency for Friedländer to treat this passage in this way is no surprise under a pre-judgment of this dialogue in Plato’s “system”.

Friedländer’s understanding of the discussion around the first perception is something I would generally agree with. He described it as different stages of guidance, which gradually open up the interlocutor’s capacity to accept the more extreme cases to be considered. In his so-called third stage, Socrates mentions those abnormal cases as dreams, madness and illusion. Friedländer thinks that till this stage this clarification ends by dissolving man into a system of relations<sup>46</sup>. This seems to be a suggestion that the cases here are being treated negatively. However, if we remember the dream part in the discussion of the third definition, it is possible that Plato does not treat dreams as essentially meaningless. So the juxtaposition here is more likely to cause the stress of Socrates’ interlocutor rather than expounding his own judgment; even more so, if we consider his role as a midwife.

There are various understandings about the digression. The nuances which reflected by this passage also seems to reflect the reader’s heart. Sandra Peterson’s interpretation is daring.<sup>47</sup> She treats this whole digression as persiflage. Her argument lies in two observations. One is that the image depicted in this digression has many counterexamples from other dialogues. Because of the politically active images in other dialogues of a philosopher such as Socrates, the passage here seems to offer a farce and incoherent image of Socrates. The second is that Socrates is so consistent in his strategy by letting other people agree with the proposal he makes; and thus the attribution of every dialectical result, which means the one who should be responsible for the argument at stake, will turn back to his interlocutors. And because of the reluctance of Theodorus to speak, Socrates uses this ironic comparison of two images to win Theodorus’ consent, and actually makes all these descriptions closer to what Theodorus might have in mind for a philosophical figure. Evidence she draws is the “God-like” part. She believes that this part is unclear and is more likely to be a joke to Theodorus, satirizing Theodorus’ self-image. Shorey’s

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<sup>46</sup> Friedländer, op. cit., p.160.

<sup>47</sup> Peterson, S. *Socrates and Philosophy in the Dialogues of Plato*, esp. chapter 3; see also Allen, Danielle S. *Why Plato wrote*, for a similar perspective.

observation is also worth mentioning.<sup>48</sup> He treats here more like a wise talk. He thinks the image being mentioned in the very beginning of the digression develops naturally. “The philosophic choir”, in Shorey’s words, exemplifies a different life style from those non-philosophers. Under this interpretation, Theodorus thus is struck by the description and starts to wonder if everyone would adopt this and lead to a less evil world. For Friedländer, instead, this digression gives us a glimpse of “the philosopher, wisdom and the realm of true being.”<sup>49</sup> He also noticed the possibility of caricature of the philosopher’s image, through the eyes of his counterparts, the judge or the politician for example. But Friedländer judges the contribution of the sudden come and go of the digression as opening a new area, the existence. This together with the facts given by the dialogue has surpassed the threatening of the Protagorean thesis. In short, the digression has enlarged the scope of the search for knowledge, and even the latter parts continue to dig into the question of perception and so on, the whole scope of knowledge always looms out and reminds the importance of the whole picture.<sup>50</sup>

What can we judge or read out from these contesting views? My strategy is to go back to what happens exactly during the time of the dialogue. It is clear that all these interpretations share one obvious danger, that they are evaluating the afterward-effect to the readers in the future time, together with all their knowledge of Plato’s complete works. But what we can see here, are just two mathematicians conversing with a person who is more agile in this kind of philosophical discussion. The malicious mental attributions of the modern interpretation would actually contradict the initial atmosphere of friendship and goodwill. Having this in mind, a more proper interpretation should cover this initial condition all along and follow this dynamics. We see that after this digression, there are changes of the attitude and mental states of the interlocutors. Furthermore, I think this digression reminds us that we should always not forget to cover this psychic bringing up during any serious epistemological pursuit, since it will have a long-term effect for a young knowledge seeker. Does the digression serve so much as what Friedländer asserts, as to bring up the issue of existence? I am also not so convinced. His interpretation may reflect the color of the academic atmosphere in his time. However, I do think this digression opens up a contrasting point, and makes the investigation into the essence of

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<sup>48</sup> Shorey, P. *What Plato said*, p.275.

<sup>49</sup> Friedländer, op. cit., p.174.

<sup>50</sup> It should be noted also, that in the notes 47 by Friedländer, op. cit., pp.493-494, he reminds us of the debate of the position of this digression between Schleiermacher and Diès, while the former judges this part as in the beginning, thus serves as a guidance in the labyrinth of the dialogue; the latter judges this part as in the middle, and refutes this observation.

knowledge never falling into just a mental game, but always very close to a living life itself.

## II. Knowledge and self-knowledge

Tschemplik in his book digs up the facet of knowledge and self-knowledge in *Theaetetus*. This connection basically comes from his observation of the relation of the theme between *Charmenides* and *Theaetetus*. He takes basically two approaches. First, he tries to compare the content in the *Apology* and *Republic*, to bring out the meaning of the digression in *Theaetetus*. For this, I do not agree entirely, since I do not treat the portrait given in the digression as a caricature, but I do think like in *Republic*, the digression shows the danger of corruption of a political life. Second, he takes the hypothesis that “the purpose of the dialogue is to explore the mathematician’s understanding of knowledge and to consider whether it is a possible paradigm for philosophical knowledge.”<sup>51</sup>

His approach is illuminating and had actually pushed me to try the mathematical way to understand the background of the dialogue, such as to read the reconstruction of the mathematics at that time, also some passages related to mathematics in other Plato’s dialogues. However, when we come back to *Theaetetus*, what we really see in the content does not concern so much about the essence of mathematics itself. Taken as a figure who practices some studying instead of philosophy, Theaetetus in the dialogue is never an active representation of anything deep in mathematics. He has the good endowment but when related to the basic question, he is as helpless as anyone. From this, it will not be a surprise to find out the first guess he made is not at all complex; without Socrates association, it seems actually naïve. Tschemplik stressed much on role of mathematics as the framework of this dialogue. For him, the opening frame, in which Theaetetus having the role as a citizen compared with the role as a mathematician, hints much of the contrast of being a human being than a mathematician. For Tschemplik, the mathematics in the dialogue functions symbolically on many levels, which I think is an exaggerated explanation. Throughout the whole dialogue, we can hardly see mathematics plays a crucial role in deciding any argument. And the contrast he pointed out elicited from the association with mathematics, I think is redundant when we observe closely the discussion of the first definition and the digression. Basically, this dialogue treats mathematics as something practically equal to other concrete form of knowledge

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<sup>51</sup> Tschemplik, A. *Knowledge and Self-knowledge in Plato’s Theaetetus*, p.141.

when referring to the question of the essence of knowledge. Theaetetus gains no obvious privilege by having this education.

In addition, Tschemplik's hypothesis shows a common error. He thinks that the failure to give an answer in the end shows that philosophy is not reducible to mathematics. In his last chapter, he further explains it by saying that "mathematics does not need self-knowledge in order for it to be a successful endeavor, whereas philosophy does."<sup>52</sup> This judgment is only valid if we believe that Socrates would backup the stereotyping process by contrasting two different subjects. Actually, while we see that in the dialogue, Socrates shifts the discussion to the definition of knowledge, the question already becomes a common ground which any branch of knowledge shall share. And while mathematics and philosophy are different in the concrete form of knowledge, it does not mean that they cannot cultivate the same mentality. This fallacy shows again the weakness of Tshemplik's argument in putting the interpretation of the dialogue under the contrasting poles of mathematics and philosophy. It will also be hard to argue that all mathematical pursuits require no self-knowledge. Socrates' midwifery is just such a demonstration that anyone who is willing to suffer can learn something from this process. Another inherent prejudice related is that the dialogue has to reach something fixed or knowledge closed to truth, so that if it does not make it, it means otherwise. This mentality is represented very well by Tschemplik. He demands the lesson of "self-knowledge" from the dialogue. But do we really see such a lesson? I think it is not so obvious. Learning is not a logical game. It is not something as a Syllogism in the later time as Aristotle describes.<sup>53</sup> And this dialogue has no intention in giving us something fixed. In the whole structure, we see the dynamic detour of the discussion. Socrates wants to motivate this young person, tries to make him understand a proper way to discover the knowledge, he shows Theaetetus where the difficulties are, but still want him to find his own answer for it. Thus, while Theaetetus is basically passive in this journey of discovery, it is natural to have a no answer ending. The more encouragement we see in the dialogue, the more we feel the still quite static heart of Theaetetus. Contrary to Tschemplik's connection of the ending with the refutation of the educational efficacy of mathematics, the picture in the dialogue simply shows that the mind in perplexed needs renewal all the time, where the efficacy of mathematics is not strongly relevant. The quest for knowledge or truth is not once for all undertaking. If we remember again the rush transfer from wisdom to knowledge in

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<sup>52</sup> Tschemplik, op. cit., p.169.

<sup>53</sup> Here see the discussion of syllogism in Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*( 2002), pp. 160-162. Also worth comparing is the discussion of syllogism in philosophical tradition by Jacques Lacan, in his seminar book XII, VI.



the very beginning of the dialogue, we have to confess that there are still much to be discovered, even for the questionable status of perception. Tschemplik is right in pointing out that the arrangement of the dialogue has showed also the contributions of perception in a person's road to knowledge. It is so true, because every new experience which results a new perception will have to run again through all these examinations.



## Chapter V

### Conclusion

To reflect my discussion of this dialogue, it seems to me that all the former interpretations have the tendency to stress upon the factual side of knowledge, whether Plato shows his true conception of knowledge in this dialogue or not. This becomes my biggest surprise when I read the first part of *Theaetetus*. It is clear that he makes us aware of the psychological state of Socrates and his interlocutors. The homogeneous touch of the aporetic ending indeed makes us have the tendency to compare this dialogue with those of the former period, but if we try to grasp the whole context which Plato tries to encompass, which is the pedagogical and the ethical side of the position as a knowledge seeker, we can actually find out that this dialogue is a record of this psychic path, which has the power to let us go back again and again to question the starting point of each knowledge searching process. I tried to show that for Plato, in this transitional and sole dialogue concerning the nature of knowledge, he is trying to give a dynamic understanding of knowledge. The knowledge comprises of the motivation of the mind or soul, the ethical and ultimate concern of human life, and the working effect of midwifery. In Chinese philosophy, especially the Song-Ming period, in the branch of new Confucianism, there are lots of discussions about how to guide a person in entering the gate of knowledge and cultivate the mentality for studying. In comparison, Plato makes a similar move in presenting us the details of the process he observed, and hints us that it will be wrong to treat the psychological maneuvering as something outside of the epistemological pursuit. Different from the sophists' taking the psychological turn as a tool in gaining money or prestige, Plato ingeniously shows us that this maneuvering can be beneficial if it is oriented to the right thing. The case of *Theaetetus* is just the proof of this try. In *Theaetetus*, we see how closely the midwifery weaves the interaction between the mental turn and the pursuit of knowledge together, that it makes us reflect whether the boundary of the motivation and the goal should not be made so clear. I see the mental struggle in the dialogue as something "inner-political", in that it shows the struggle and the ethical facet of knowledge, also together with the aloofness of a philosopher from the real arena of politics which Plato describes. The political setting of the introductory and the ending shows us that we are always in a social condition, whether a citizen or a soldier, while pursuing knowledge at the same time. The digression reminds us of not falling into the "pure trap of epistemological pursuit", but we must keep in mind the full picture of life in sight, caring about the essence of human being and the truth of right and wrong.

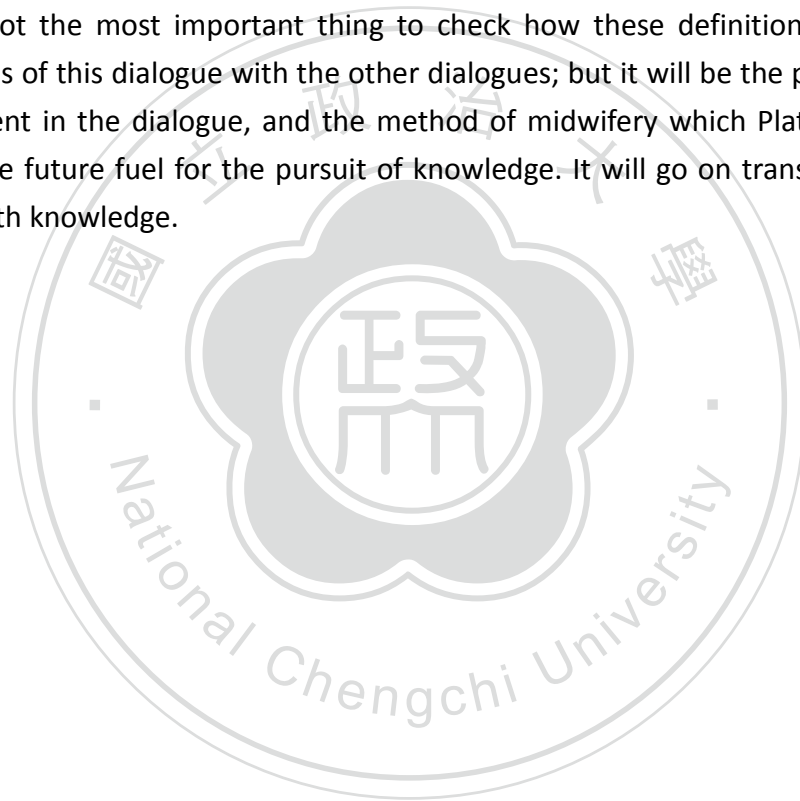
I noticed the major weakness in this investigation, in that I do not and cannot offer a detailed inter-dialogue comparison, either of the early dialogues and the trilogy. This definitely weakens my appreciation towards the systematical understanding of the dialogue. While almost all researches try to decipher this dialogue from the outlook of other dialogues, I limit it to the scope of this transitional dialogue, wishing that the clues within can already shed some light for us. I think that it will be hard to treat this dialogue independently, while the systematical approach has the advantage of giving a more coherent view. But, I would like to restate that my attempt in this thesis is simply to challenge this very coherence demanded by most of the scholars.

Another thing which is not treated in detail is the question of dating. When developing my thoughts, I started to feel that it is in treating the historical position of this dialogue, that many scholars show their understandings of the dialogue. The philological and philosophical way of gathering their evidence all show their sensitivity by setting up different criterions. For the former, the historical imagination may be predominant; for the latter, the logical development of the philosophical theory is the main concern. I hope that I have clearly expressed my approach to be unrestricted by the necessity of the logical structure which builds up by the comparison among dialogues, and I am not convinced by conclusion drawn from either dramatic or historical setting of the dialogue. I respect both branches to be valuable and often in contrast will show the weakness of my argument; however, I also take *Theaetetus* to be a special dialogue, which might not be confined by the conditions settled by these previous discussions.

While I sided with Friedländer most of his approach, I tried to show the distance between us. Friedländer has achieved his interpretation due to many of the conditions of his time and his academic training. In his time, it seems understandable that he chooses a more politically-oriented interpretation. Out of a different atmosphere and background, I am also directed by the dialogue to a similar position in the end, and it may seem that my insistence upon the “inner-political” struggle is somehow synonymous with what Friedländer characterized as “existence”. However, I think there are still sharp differences, in that Friedländer will consider the impetus provided by the dialogue to help the knowledge seeker to achieve a fulfilled life, while my observation suggests that the whole efforts of Plato is to include all these related faces of life into the serious discussion of knowledge. To be more precise, what Plato achieves is that he offers us the possibility to reconsider the weight of the

psychological, epistemological and ethical perspective of knowledge when reflecting on the question “what is knowledge”. And the different weight and priority we take for each perspective will surely alter our understanding of knowledge. While Friedländer still thinks that this dialogue has give us the message of the hierarchy of knowledge, I would not and cannot insist so strongly that there is no hint of this, but I think that what Plato teaches us more about is to shaken the pre-existed order of knowledge in our mind, and reconsiders all different possibilities.

And I still believe that, this is not a coincidence that this dialogue developed through a knowledge-seeking path without really finding it. This very fact will continue to attract the future reader to come back to this dialogue and ask why. For me, it is not the most important thing to check how these definitions reveal the connections of this dialogue with the other dialogues; but it will be the psychological drive present in the dialogue, and the method of midwifery which Plato suggested become the future fuel for the pursuit of knowledge. It will go on transforming our relation with knowledge.



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