**Theaetetus, Part II: A Dialogical Review**

By

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Traditionally, when an author's work has exceeded a certain age say, over two thousand years - it is no longer considered eligible for "review. " But what if the thrust of that older work is closely paralleled in a much more modem piece? This is the case, I have concluded, in the relation between Plato's *Theaetetus* and Richard Rorty's acclaimed and more recent volume, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It appears to this author that to fully understand and appreciate Rorty's contribution to the subjects he raises, one must study his book in conjunction with Plato's Theaetetus—a piece where just these issues have been discussed before.

Both Rorty's volume and Plato's concern a central question for philosophy: "What is knowledge?" The *Theaetetus* is a dialogue in which Plato portrays his teacher, Socrates, as working out this problem with two interlocutors, the old mathematician Theodorus and his young pupil Theaetetus. (In form, the dialogue is actually presented as a transcript of that original discourse passed from a certain Euclides to his friend Terpsion.) In the course of that dialogue, the conversants never do succeed in finding a satisfactory definition for knowledge. Yet they are successful in discarding their own earlier, mistaken views on the matter so that, by the end of the discussion, they at least know that they are ignorant of what knowledge is. For both the historical Socrates and Plato, just such knowledge is itself to be valued as an alternative to thinking that one knows about a subject when, in fact, one is lacking in such knowledge.

The role of "foil" for the piece is given to the viewpoint of Protagoras, the sophist. While the conversants find flaws in their own proposed definitions, Protagoras is presented as one who thinks he knows precisely what knowledge is: namely, whatever one can persuade the "present company" to believe as true can be taken, in effect, as being the "truth" and "knowledge" for that group. "Knowledge" is relative. Needless to say, many politicians of that time found this skeptical view quite appealing, and sought out such sophists as Protagoras for lessons in argument and rhetoric –the better to convince their various publics of their "knowledge" on the issues of the day. But Socrates, who ultimately proved willing to die for his own belief in a more firm standard of truth, could not lightly accept this sophist position.

As Plato was aware, the historical Protagoras lived too early to be plausibly included in a conversation with the other three participants of the *Theaetetus* dialogue. But Plato managed nonetheless to bring him into the discussion. At first, Socrates merely introduces some points that were typically raised by Protagoras, and then asks the others to answer questions and objections that might be made against them. Later, after these views have been dismissed too lightly, perhaps, by this method, Socrates sets off on a monologue in which, as best he can, he speaks as if he were Protagoras speaking "on his own behalf. "

Unfortunately, as I indicated earlier, Socrates and his friends never manage to substitute for the skepticism of Protagoras any more definite understanding of knowledge of their own. True, the dialogue itself does illustrate a *method* for examining various "candidates" for knowledge (i.e., hypotheses—in this case regarding what is knowledge), and, if necessary, for rejecting these. The possibility for there being such a process would seem to imply—*contra* Protagoras—that *not* all positions are equally good candidates for knowledge, after all—even if large groups of unquestioning people should happen to accept such stands as true. But how is this method or process possible? It seems that the knowledge-seeking method (or "dialectic") cannot establish, by itself, its *own* legitimacy—or even determine the nature of the "knowledge" it uncovers.

At this point, enter the twentieth century, and Richard Rorty. This whole inquiry by philosophy into the nature of knowledge, says he, has been fruitless just because there is nothing in particular to find. If there seem to be some standard techniques for seeking knowledge (such as the "scientific method" of today) and some stock pieces of generally "accepted" knowledge (such as that 2 + 2 = 4), all this indicates only a fairly widespread agreement of what is to count as knowledge. This agreement can dissolve or change. "Knowledge" is relative. In other words, re-enter Protagoras.

The purpose of the dialogue that follows, therefore, is not by any means to "solve" these difficulties, which have clearly not changed much in nature, or even in expression, in over two thousand years. To the contrary, by juxtaposing Rorty's and Plato's arguments, and by showing how Rorty's view plays much the same role in my dialogue "Theaetetus, Part II" that Protagoras's plays in the original *Theaetetus*, I wish to suggest that solution-by-argument may simply *never* be successful in these matters. I believe this to explain, at least in part, why Plato speaks metaphorically in his dialogues of "recollecting the forms," and often writes in myth or allegory, and uses other such devices. To speak in contemporary terms: It may be that to make sense of our continual search for a knowledge that is stable (i.e., not changeable and relative) requires that we make a "leap of faith"—not to a faith in dogmas (for these are yet other fallible beliefs), but a more embracing faith that in the process of sincerely *searching* for knowledge, we might indeed come to gain a knowledge that is real.

**The Dialogue**

SOCRATES: If truth can be, then this is surely true:

To read you, Rorty, is to speak with you;

To choose a course that's to our mood quite suited,

And start anew whene'er we've near concluded....

THEAETETUS: Socrates? Is that really you?

SOCRATES: Theaetetus! I was afraid I had seen you for the last time!

THEAETETUS: Then what you used to say is true.

SOCRATES: What was that, Theaetetus?

THEAETETUS: That at death, we might be able to meet and converse with our loved ones, and our heroes.

SOCRATES: When I said those things, dear Theaetetus, I must have been mad.

THEAETETUS: How can you say that, Socrates? If we are really here right now, then your remarks were clearly accurate

SOCRATES: I had true belief, perhaps. But, surely I spoke without knowledge.

THEAETETUS: I remember now, Socrates! We were discussing just these ideas about beliefs and knowledge, a long time ago. It was about the time of your trial.

SOCRATES: Yes, Theaetetus. In fact, my beloved pupil. Plato recorded our dialogue in his writings. It was a good thing, too. For it appears that, after all this time, the matter is still pretty much where we left it that day.

THEAETETUS: But we failed to conclude anything!

SOCRATES: Precisely my point. Take for instance this fellow Rorty, down there. He recently wrote a book on the subject of knowledge. Yet....

THEAETETUS: Forgive me for interrupting, Socrates, but I simply must ask you: Why were you reciting a poem, of all things, about this Rorty, when I ran into you just now? Isn't that sort of thing out of your line?

SOCRATES: Didn't you hear? I began the project of versifying some of Aesop's fables when I was in prison, awaiting execution. Since Rorty feels that poetry can be as good as philosophy for describing our human condition, I thought it was only fitting to brush up on this art, to see if it might help me in my understanding.

THEAETETUS: Does it? Has it helped you to understand him? The reason I ask you, Socrates, is that I may have read the same book that you are referring to: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Not that I've been following much of earthly philosophy up until now; but a fellow here named Terpsion recommended strongly that I read it. He must be someone who heard of our ancient conversations about knowledge.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you are right.

THEAETETUS: So, tell me: *does* poetry in fact help you to understand this Rorty?

SOCRATES: I cannot say I know, Theaetetus. But I will say this much: I simply cannot get him to stand still long enough to construct a serious and prosaic summary of his arguments. To the contrary, they squirm and shift about so, that any such attempt is like trying to tie down a statue of Daedalus for inspection. In light of all this, there may just be no choice but to try some new approach to understanding him.

THEAETETUS: When all is said and done, though, Socrates, I gather you do not really think that he has accomplished anything.

SOCRATES: Why do you say that?

THEAETETUS: Because, before I interrupted you earlier (and please forgive me for disturbing your train of thought), you were saying that, even including this modern book, no one has really advanced on the subject of knowledge since our time. Doesn't it follow, as they now say, that all Rorty's talk is just "hot air"?

SOCRATES: Really, Theaetetus, you surprise me! Are we not now—even more than when we first agreed to it, in your teacher's presence—free men, with "time at (our) disposal to converse in peace at (our) leisure"? Shall we not remain free to move "from argument to argument," as strikes our fancy, and "not care how long or short the discussion may be, if only it attains the truth"? There is thus no reason to apologize, if we agree to shift course; and again, there is no objection to raise against Mr. Rorty, if he has tried his own hand at this very important question about knowledge.

THEAETETUS: I stand corrected, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Better than this, Theaetetus, stand watchful. Let us see whether, after all, there may yet be some life in the ideas brought forth in Rorty's book. Or, in the end, are they indeed just wind eggs?

THEAETETUS: At any rate, he does seem to accept your idea about free men and their discourse.

SOCRATES: How so?

THEAETETUS: Where he says that philosophy should be treated as but part of the continuing "conversation of mankind." I am not sure I can go along with his notion that knowledge is only the "right, by current standards, to believe." But where he states a view that the aim of the wise philosopher must be to "keep a conversation going" and to see that the participants continue to generate "new descriptions," rather than remain stagnant with their older viewpoints, this part does seem to go along with what you just said, Socrates, about the proper spirit of discussion.

SOCRATES: So it does, Theaetetus. And I suppose that you have also noticed this?

THEAETETUS: To what are you referring?

SOCRATES: To the fact that, according to this view of his that you describe, Rorty has indeed been faithful to his goals, and even admirably effective. (Of course, strictly speaking, we should not be saying of Rorty that he has a "view" on anything—even on the subject of his book! For I clearly recall his remark, somewhere, that he only just says things, and does not hold to views.)

THEAETETUS: Is it your intention to confuse me further, Socrates, and not reveal to me your vision? Must I too resort to poetry for insight on the man?

What words are these, that Rorty can us tell

And yet not hold; but still fulfill so well?

SOCRATES: So, this is why I took to you so readily! While old Theodorus, your teacher, was convinced that you were merely fixed to your studies—commensurate, like a square number to its side, it now comes out that you were cavorting with a Muse—and probably quite mad besides! But as I once told Phaedrus, I generally prefer the lover; and the lover is always possessed.

THEAETETUS: Please, Socrates. Let us return to our discussion.

SOCRATES: Yes, but only if you permit me this—

THEAETETUS: What is it?

SOCRATES: To tell you first the dream I just had, while speaking of the Muse.

THEAETETUS: Granted. But you must promise to return to my question.

SOCRATES: Agreed. What I see is a bird, flying high. He is combing the vast landscape in search of worms to bring back to his nest for his young. Many of these young are merely phantoms; and numbers of the worms lie uneaten at the bottom of the nest. At length the bird, wishing itself to be a youth again, joins its own children with the uneaten worms in the nest; and waits.

THEAETETUS: What an odd vision, Socrates! What does it mean?

SOCRATES: I think it provides the answer you have been waiting for, by showing the sense in which Rorty has been faithful to his own goals. In his single-minded pursuit of continuing the conversation that is philosophy, he has been like the bird—unearthing conversants from across the whole field of Western philosophy with which to nourish his discourse in a nest of controversy. The phantom children are those ideas resulting from his inquiries that prove to lack in "life and truth." The uneaten worms are the potentially nourishing insights, brought back from the field by the bird, that have for some reason been overlooked.

THEAETETUS: But why does the old bird pretend he is a youth, in the later part of your image?

SOCRATES: Because, Theaetetus, how else can he sustain hope? For all his noteworthy effort to draw from the widest possible source of nourishment, all his children are either phantoms, or else, for some reason or other, never seem to grow up. But if he himself can join them in the nest, then he might strive to regain that joy and hope which is the lot of youth.

THEAETETUS: I'm afraid, Socrates, that I still don't understand.

SOCRATES: My dear friend. How many years has it been since we held our wonderful discussion about knowledge?

THEAETETUS: I have not kept totally informed about earth-time. However, I know it has been over two thousand years.

SOCRATES: And do you suppose all discussion about this question was stopped, after we were finished?

THEAETETUS: Not at all. In fact, Rorty himself quotes all kinds of subsequent thinkers on this subject.

SOCRATES: Yes. That is my image of the bird's picking worms.

THEAETETUS: That is hardly a flattering image, Socrates, of the people he quotes! Don't forget that Plato, your own pupil, was mentioned more than once in Rorty's book; and even you—

SOCRATES: –even I am among his "worms," Theaetetus? Is that what bothers you? What do you think was left of my body—which was already nothing beautiful—within a year after my death? The worms. And the same with all those quotes from previous philosophers: What are these but the "worms" or dead remains of the real knowledge they possibly had, and were trying (when alive) to express? Or have you not noticed how, in the hands of an insincere or inexperienced reader, a perfectly wonderful quote can be totally misrepresented, to himself and to others?

THEAETETUS: Yes. I have noticed.

SOCRATES: But as a tool in the process of dialectic, to help afford "close companionship" with a fruitful idea, the written word can still have value?

THEAETETUS: Yes. And now I see why Rorty's extensive use of quotes might be compared with the collection of worms for birds. For if they are used properly, for nourishment, they can certainly be of value. But in themselves they are worth nothing; or, worse, they can decompose into a stench of misinterpretation.

SOCRATES: Quite so. Now tell me this.

THEAETETUS: What is it, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Even if, as we say, people have been thinking about knowledge for well over two thousand years, it is no shame if they have remained in a state of perplexity regarding it. We ourselves ended our conversation about "What is knowledge?" in a state of uncertainty, so we can hardly fault our heirs if they do the same. Yet, after all these centuries, is it not at least a little odd for someone to take up a position that was already fashionable in our age; and, from this hardly novel station, to challenge all comers, as if to a fresh debate?

THEAETETUS: This would indeed be odd, Socrates. And, of course, I see in this your image of the elder bird who takes that unbecoming place alongside chicks. But how does this relate to Rorty?

SOCRATES: My excellent companion. Isn't it clear that Rorty is trying, in effect, to relive the role of Protagoras in our own previous dialogue?

THEAETETUS: In the sense of encouraging debate and conversation?

SOCRATES: In that sense, too. But I am talking in particular about his stated beliefs.

THEAETETUS: Which ones?

SOCRATES: Well, tell me: in that older discourse with Protagoras when, historically, his ideas were still rather new and young, which of his ideas particularly caught our attention?

THEAETETUS: His famous "Truth," Socrates, that "man is the measure of all things—alike of the being of things that are and of the not-being of things that are not"; and that any given thing "is to me such as it appears to me, and it is to you such as it appears to you"?

SOCRATES: Good. That is the view I was referring to. Does Rorty mean for us to take up a debate on the very quotes you gave (only in slightly altered words)—as if we had not been through it all before—just for the sake of his continued conversation?

THEAETETUS: Is that a fair question, Socrates? It seems to me that Rorty never even mentions Protagoras or these quotes in his book. Besides this, he offers innumerable arguments on a plethora of other topics, such as normal/abnormal discourse and what he calls "glassy essences"; yet we have not even touched on these issues. In light of this, how can you propose to dismiss his whole book as a repetition of old arguments, without further study?

SOCRATES: Your sense of fair play is admirable, Theaetetus; and I do not wish to disappoint you. Do you think that Rorty has actually understood the nature of knowledge, after all, and that I have misread him?

THEAETETUS: That's what I wish to discover since, if he has understood something, I do not want us to be left out!

SOCRATES: Excellent. But may I tell you first why I spoke as I did?

THEAETETUS: Please. Go ahead.

SOCRATES: It was because, as you observed, Rorty does appear to share our notion of the "free man." At least, when he wrote his book, he took every liberty to explore quite interesting digressions. Some of these discussions are quite informative, as I sense you agree. But I took it that, on the whole, he would like himself to be judged by his own conclusions; that is, by what he tried, in his own view, to prove. It is here that I drew the parallel with Protagoras. But perhaps you are right. Would you like us to question some of those other issues you mention, before we conclude this discussion?

THEAETETUS: Yes. That would be my preference.

SOCRATES: And a good one, indeed. Where should we begin?

THEAETETUS: I should think, Socrates, that the theme he mentions most often—this idea of the "glassy essence," as he calls it—is a likely place to start. Even the title of his book refers to it.

SOCRATES: Help me along, then. What does he mean by this phrase?

THEAETETUS: He borrows it from a certain English poet and playwright whom he quotes. Actually, the quoted passage does not even say a word about knowledge. Instead, its author is lamenting the state of man, who, in his pompous, vain, and foolish manner, hides from himself his own possession of a "glassy essence"—kin to the divine.

SOCRATES: Yes, I now remember seeing that quote in Rorty's book. There seems to be some sense in its author's lament. Do you not agree?

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates, I do. But if you are focusing on its suggestion that man may have a divine potential that he is not living up to, this is not at all the type of thing that Rorty wants to talk about.

SOCRATES: Then why else would he use this reference, if not to seek and explore its intended meaning?

THEAETETUS: To home in on the presumed nature of the mentioned "glass," and to criticize all such notions of an inner mirror as being out of date and unhelpful for epistemology. Rorty says the concept implies a theory of knowledge—or, rather, it has forced its stamp on all subsequent theories. What is more, he suggests that you and Plato actually originated this notion, which, to the detriment of possible progress, has lingered on since then.

SOCRATES: Well, I for one never had the capacity to "originate" anything! You remember how I always said I was only a midwife.

THEAETETUS: That may be; but Rorty doesn't see it that way. He feels that you helped to bring about the idea of the "eye of the mind," which (like a "glassy essence") separates man from the beasts. This visual imagery, he continues, suggests a firm distinction between what is "objectively out there" and our own internalized image of that external world. This leads in turn, according to him, to the fruitless search for marks of "knowledge" or "certainty" that the images that are inside really "correspond" to what is outside. However, he says, this search is pointless, since any attempt to describe what is "out there" is colored by our own attitude and belief system, and so can hardly be objective. Rorty's alternative is to take as true that position which "you can defend against all comers." That is, since the beliefs are held, in the first place, within a framework of commonly held beliefs, they must be defended, if at all sensibly, from within that context. As I quoted before, knowledge is, for him, the "right, by current standards, to believe."

SOCRATES: An apt summary, my friend. Do you think that you can defend these views for him?

THEAETETUS: I will try, if you wish. But remember what Protagoras said to us, through your lips, when we last conversed: If someone else plays my part (in this case, Rorty's), then "I am refuted only if his answers are such as I should have given; if they are different, then it is he (my stand-in) who is refuted, not I."

SOCRATES: I remember, Theaetetus; and I shall try to keep this in view. But since, happily, you are mindful of Protagoras, just now, you will perhaps recall as well how he was refuted by our old arguments, when he put forth views very much like Rorty's. Does he not say that "whatever practices seem right and laudable to any particular state are so, for that state, for so long as it holds them" and say other things along these same lines?

THEAETETUS: It is your job to remember, Socrates. For, if you are suggesting that Rorty will fall with Protagoras, then it is hardly fitting for me, his appointed defender, to lift the first earth.

SOCRATES: Well put, my friend. And I will be brief; because, as I say, we have covered this ground already. But tell me. Rorty says that "truth" is nothing, beyond what is accepted as true?

THEAETETUS: Yes, that is the gist of his claim.

SOCRATES: So if I and you and all else besides will only stand firm in our nonacceptance of his "truth" (or of his right to believe his truth, if you prefer), then all he says will be, by his own accounting, "more false than true by just so much as the unbelievers outnumber the believers," since the truth lies in the common acceptance.

THEAETETUS: I think you are right; yet it is difficult to follow your words.

SOCRATES: Then I will start again. Do most people agree with Rorty, concerning truth; or do they believe, instead, in the possibility of objective truth?

THEAETETUS: They believe, or at least I think they do, that truth can be objective.

SOCRATES: But if this is their common belief, then is this not also for them the very truth, according to Rorty?

THEAETETUS: Yes, I think that follows.

SOCRATES: So, for them it is true that objective truth exists?

THEAETETUS: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Thus my point: It is their very confirmation that objective truth can exist that refutes Rorty; for he denies this possibility. Yet it was his own position that transformed theirs to knowledge. It was he, after all, who claimed that mutual believing makes mutually true the shared belief.

THEAETETUS: That appears to be the case.

SOCRATES: ... But, hold! ...

THEAETETUS: What is it, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I think that Rorty must be sleeping, and dreaming.... Although it is not normally permitted for us to speak with him while he is still on earth, I can sense his spirit passing by here, briefly, to refute us.

THEAETETUS: What is it saying?

SOCRATES: I cannot make it out, exactly. But I think I can reconstruct his arguments.

THEAETETUS: Then please do so without delay. And then reply to him.

SOCRATES: This is how I make it out:

RORTY: So, you say, old Socrates, that I wish to go back in time! It is rather you, and your ideas, that I say are obsolete and no longer of service. Do you think you can refute me as if I were Protagoras, when I speak with much more subtlety? Besides, you and he are from a different time from myself; our language is scarcely commensurable. Indeed, I am surprised we can even communicate!

SOCRATES: Please, do not rebuke me and then leave me in ignorance. Where have I misunderstood?

RORTY: Did you not read the sections in my book on "normal" and "abnormal" discourse?

SOCRATES: Certainly, I did.

RORTY: Well, perhaps you should listen "in person" to its content: Normal discourse is an inquiry "which is conducted within an agreed upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside."

SOCRATES: Yes, I recall now. And knowledge, you say, resides in those statements that all participants in a given "normal discourse" would count as true.

RORTY: Correct. But hear what I really mean by this, and not just what you think I mean.

SOCRATES: Of course. You are saying that I should accept your own viewpoint as our "normal" reference; so that, from that predefined location to which I will have already agreed to confine myself, I might accept your further conclusions as true—

RORTY: Yes, and…

SOCRATES: But, naturally, I might bolt at any time from your ranks, and utter forth a piece of "abnormal discourse," which whether it be "nonsense (or) intellectual revolution" (this cannot be certain)—is, at any rate, likely to the effect that none of what you say is true, nor does anything follow from it—

RORTY: Socrates! It is now you who flit about like a statue of Daedalus! Will you not sit still and listen?

SOCRATES: Forget my impetuousness, dear Rorty. Please do continue.

RORTY: I am trying to show you that your arguments with Protagoras are simply not applicable to me. I notice that you at least had the good sense to avoid repeating those other arguments that come up in the Platonic record of your old discussion—namely, about whether Heraclitus was right in saying that all is in flux, and about what this might or might not mean for my position. It was good, I say, that you at least avoided that old line; for I need simply answer: All these matters about the state of this or that are recorded in any of a great number of "normal discourses," whether science, poetry, or art. Therefore, "who speaks 'truly' on these matters" must be judged by the norms within which these candidates for "truth" are generated; there is no other way. So do not try to bedazzle me, Socrates, with your talk that I must be "wrong," if it is once established that other people think I am wrong. It is still possible that, though I may be "wrong" according to their normal reference point, I might yet be "right" according to some other such standard. Or, even more significantly, I might choose to ignore the whole lot of these conventions, and fulfill, instead, my ambitions as an "edifying" philosopher. That is, perhaps it is not the truth, after all, that I am seeking; but rather to avert the "danger ... that some given vocabulary, some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse." Perhaps I am always "striving for truth," but loathing to reach it; so that the very idea of…

THEAETETUS: Socrates? Why do you stop?

SOCRATES: Perhaps Rorty is awakening, Theaetetus. At any rate, his image—already faint—is now lost to me.

THEAETETUS: Well, what did you make of his arguments?

SOCRATES: I think I may have misjudged the man. Could he be my own heir? The "stinging fly" of the modem world, as I was of ancient Athens?

THEAETETUS: What are you talking about, man? Speak more plainly.

SOCRATES: You recall we already mentioned one similarity between Rorty and me: We are, neither of us, in a hurry, but prefer instead to draw in conversants from all quarters. Now, in addition, we hear him saying, as you so often heard from me, that he is loath to see people resting content in their habitual beliefs, that he prefers, instead, to inject an unsettling new viewpoint that gets things moving again.

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates, that is rather like you. Every time someone thinks that he or she knows something, you are always on the scene to point out that, in reality, they know nothing at all.

SOCRATES: There is even more than this; because I remember the conclusion of that sentence which Rorty's spirit, perhaps out of deference to me, failed to finish. For it was in his book, just after his other quotes.

THEAETETUS: What sentence was that?

SOCRATES: It ends: "...the Platonic notion of Truth is absurd."

THEAETETUS: You are not saying, Socrates, that you agree even on this with Rorty?

SOCRATES: In a sense I do, Theaetetus; for, to my knowledge, at any rate, the Plato whom he thinks he means had no such notion as Rorty ascribes to him.

THEAETETUS: Please explain.

SOCRATES: Plato says it everywhere, in his letters and in the Dialogues: As concerns the matters of greatest truth and import, "I certainly have composed no work in regard to (these), nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies." Then how might one hope to "learn"? "Acquaintance with (these matters) must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction on the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining."

THEAETETUS: I do not understand, Socrates, how this relates to our topic.

SOCRATES: Is not Rorty's chief objection to the so-called notion of Truth in Plato that it represents, in his mind, the epitome of static and "normal" discourse? Perhaps if you have looked in on some first-year philosophy classes, nowadays, you might have seen where he gets this idea—what with all this talk about fixed "ideas of chairs" and tables, and that sort of thing.

THEAETETUS: Yes, I have heard such talk.

SOCRATES: Well, Theaetetus, I for one know nothing of these matters. But when it comes to the attainment of Truth, and of the other great virtues, this is of the utmost interest to me. And does that last quote from Plato have something to say on this?

THEAETETUS: Yes; and now I see your point in giving it. For it makes explicit that whatever Plato may have written down—for Rorty's eventual perusal—it was certainly not his "'notion of Truth. "

SOCRATES: Correct. And it further shows that there is nothing at all "normal," in Rorty's sense, about the process of attaining Truth, for Plato. Indeed, the quote belies any narrow attempt to pin down a firm belief, whether of this or of that, in Plato's work. And who more than Rorty should appreciate the use of words and examples for edification, rather than as dogma?

THEAETETUS: No one, Socrates. He should be your greatest enthusiast.

SOCRATES: There is more: Does Plato not admit of his own cosmology that, taken literally, it presents but a "likelihood" of truth? By describing learning as recollection, is he not, at the very least, admitting that no "normal discourse" can ground its "breakthroughs”. The same can be said of his repeated indications that the true philosopher is nothing less than "possessed by a deity." No, Theaetetus, Rorty is referring to the wrong man, if he thinks that Plato is his enemy. That "abnormal" step which takes us beyond our preconceptions is dear to both their hearts.

THEAETETUS: So, what happens now, Socrates, to your old criticisms of Rorty? Do you retract them? I mean, it now seems that you are in essential agreement with him.

SOCRATES: If, perchance, I was a little harsh with him, I will offer my hand in friendship, and retreat in this regard. But I fear, my friend, that nothing of this can untangle the man from the web of our arguments. For there is one thing lacking in all he says; and the contradictions and paradoxes mentioned before will all stand firm, so long as this one thing is absent.

THEAETETUS: What one thing is this?

SOCRATES: If I really *knew*, Theaetetus, then, at long last, I would be healed of my ignorance. But, failing this, I can do no more than Plato did when he employed such images as the "divided line," the "forms," and "madness." These are only hints, however, and if you try to treat them as still more theories among the many that already compete, then nothing will be gained. But if you seek instead for what these images are trying to express—much as the circled orbs of planets are, as it were, the attempt of created heaven to express in movement the inexpressible, unmoving eternity—then maybe yet the child of understanding will come to birth, and my skill as a midwife will be confirmed.

THEAETETUS: I do not follow, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then, soon, you must strike your own course; for I sense that my time for converse will be finished, and I will be summoned to the light of Truth. What shall become of "Socrates" in that place, I cannot say.

THEAETETUS: Please do not leave me, friend, before you speak.

SOCRATES: Rorty says he strives for truth, does he not?

THEAETETUS: Yes. As we mentioned earlier, he says he strives, but yet wishes neither to reach nor else to possess his goal.

SOCRATES: Not only that, Theaetetus, but he does not even have a vision, or an ideal, of what his goal is for which he strives. Indeed, he rejects the very attempt to seek such an image. It is like a scene of men running helter-skelter across the earth—each of them striving, but none of them with a goal for his striving. And if a man should chance to run too long in a single direction, perhaps because (whether alone or with some companions) he decided to run toward Mecca or Jerusalem, Rorty would do everything in his power to deflect him from his course and to persuade him to change directions. But why? Because there is some better place to run to? Or because, though the man believes he is running toward Mecca, say, he has his directions wrong? Or is it, perhaps, because the man is mistaken to think that the Mecca or Jerusalem of his desire is a place, and not a state of mind? No, Theaetetus. It is not for any of these sorts of reasons that Rorty would divert him (though I would think these meaningful questions to raise). Instead, for Rorty, the change he urges is only for the sake of change. So, everyone runs everywhere, to no purpose. But enough, Theaetetus. The goddess of Truth and Wisdom now beckons me; and my words seem to come not from me, but from under her spell. Yet I leave you with this firm hope: that if you strive always toward knowledge and wisdom and virtue, then there will always be an ideal before you; and you will not falter. So long, my friend. My time has come.

THEAETETUS: Goodbye.