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Being, Benefit, and the Power of *Dialegesthai* in Plato's *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*

The science of dialectic (*dialektikē*) is crucial to Plato's conception of philosophy. Indeed, it may be argued that philosophers, according to Plato, are characterized especially by their mastery of dialectic. It is, nevertheless, a matter of controversy how Plato conceives of this science. In fact, many critics, following in the footsteps of Julius Stenzel and Richard Robinson,[1] have claimed that Plato advocated a number of different conceptions of dialectic and, in particular, that his supposed later dialogues are characterized by radical changes in the way the procedures of and the objects proper to dialectic are understood.

Central to the controversies concerning these alleged changes in Plato's understanding of dialectic are the *Parmenides* and the *Theaetetus*. While these dialogues are not considered to belong among the later dialogues, many regard them as transitory, being the first that allegedly expound a number of doctrinal changes characteristic of the later Plato that supposedly affect his conceptions of forms and of dialectic. Critics have thus argued that the *Parmenides* is essentially a critique of the assumption of transcendent forms characteristic of the so-called middle period dialogues and that the inquiry into knowledge found in the *Theaetetus*, in contrast to related inquiries found in for instance the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, is characterized by its lack of reference to transcendent forms and a more explicit interest in the world revealed to us through perception; some also argue that it foreshadows a new conception of dialectical definitions introduced in full only in the *Sophist*.[2]

A passage that seems particularly important for coming to grips with Plato's supposed later conception of dialectic, or indeed with his conception of dialectic more generally, is the *Parmenides* 135b5-c5. Here Parmenides explains that, should one not allow, given the many problems he has taken up in the previous part of the dialogue, that there are forms for each of

[1] See Stenzel 1917; Robinson 1941; and Robinson 1953.

[2] See especially Stenzel 1917 that argues that the *Parmenides* heralds a radical change in Plato's way of conceptualizing forms while the *Sophist* contains solutions to the *aporiai* set out in the *Parmenides*, partly by introducing a new conception of *logos ousia* that is already foreshadowed in the *Theaetetus*; this line of interpretation is in many respects followed by Mary Louise Gill (2012) and Charles H. Kahn (2013); Gregory Vlastos, in contrast, argued (1954) that the *Parmenides* is a dialogue documenting Plato's honest perplexity; on the *Theaetetus*, see also Robinson 1950.

the things that are, one would not have anything toward which one might turn one's mind (*dianoia*) and one would thereby utterly destroy *tēn tou dialegesthai dynamin*. While it is a matter of some controversy what the expression *tēn tou dialegesthai dynamin* means in this context,[3] it is safe to say that *dialegesthai* is used in a semi-technical sense and means something like discourse engaged in for the purpose of achieving knowledge, and not casual conversation, as the expression's close connection with *dianoia* demonstrates. The upshot is, then, that if one denies that there are forms in some sense at least, one destroys the power of knowledge-directed discourse because one abolishes the entities toward which we must direct our mind in order to unfold this power. And, since dialectic for Plato depends on such discourse, being, it may be argued, the highest realization of the power it possess, the implication is that dialectic too requires forms, a fact also underlined by Parmenides' suggestion that, should the power of *dialegesthai* be destroyed, philosophy will become impossible as well (see 135c5).

While few will deny the importance of this passage for Plato's conception of dialectic, its significance is notoriously controversial. Is Parmenides recommending that we posit transcendent forms? Is he only recommending that we posit forms in some other sense?[4] What reasons are there for claiming that the power of *dialegesthai* will be destroyed if there are no forms? And what is the power of *dialegesthai*? The *Parmenides* itself seems to offer few clues as to how we should answer the first two questions and even fewer as to the last two.

At the beginning of the dialogue, it is true, Socrates suggests that we need to posit forms for certain things, at least, such as likeness, one and many, the just, the beautiful, and the good (see 130b3-10) if we are to avoid Zeno's so-called paradoxes, and it may be argued that the assumption that there are forms is meant to be a metaphysical solution to a problem raised by a metaphysical doctrine, that of Parmenides and Zeno, namely the problem that rational speech about the things available to us through sense-perception becomes impossible.[5] If this suggestion is along the right lines, it may perhaps also provide an explanation of the fact that Parmenides twice commends Socrates for his zeal toward speech (*hē hormē epi tous logous*; 130b1, 135d3): positing forms somehow secures a foundation for the basic human activity of speaking. Nevertheless, the dialogue itself does not provide any further explanation why forms are called for if the power of *dialegesthai* is to be possible or

[3] For a recent discussion, see Gill 2012, p. 18n1.
[4] Allen 1997, p. 111 defends the former view, while Gill 2012, pp. 9-10 and 34-39, defends the latter.
[5] See Allen 1997, p. 85.

what this power is. Rather than explaining to Socrates why the denial that there are forms should lead to the destruction of this power, Parmenides simply states that Socrates is "only too aware of that sort of consequence" (135c2-3). The dialogue thus seems to suggest that this point should be obvious to the reader, either because it is self-evident, or because it is explained elsewhere. Since it is hardly self-evident that forms are called for if we are to account for the possibility of speech, it seems more reasonable to assume that Plato means to indicate that reasons for Parmenides' claim can be found elsewhere.

In this chapter I argue that the discussion of the thesis that knowledge is perception from the *Theaetetus*, in particular the conclusion to this discussion found in the passage 184b3-186e12, provides a partial explanation of Parmenides' claim that the power of *dialegesthai* depends on forms and that the *Theaetetus* for that reason is important for understanding Plato's conception of dialectic. I turn to the *Theaetetus* rather than to other dialogues that may also seem to provide explanations why the power of *dialegesthai* depends on forms,[6] for two reasons. First, Plato clearly connects the arguments of the *Theaetetus* with those of the *Parmenides*, both at a dramatic and at an argumentative level, in such a way that we have reason to believe that he wanted his readers to regard the arguments of the two dialogues as closely connected. Second, critics who believe that Plato's conceptions of forms and of dialectic change significantly in the course of his work will be reluctant to accept explanations for Parmenides' claim that rely on dialogues now commonly believed to precede the *Parmenides*. But they generally regard the *Theaetetus* as being closely related to the *Parmenides* both in time of composition and in doctrinal content and if an explanation of Parmenides' claim can be elicited from the *Theaetetus*, it will be more difficult for critics accepting a developmental approach to Plato to dismiss it outright as irrelevant for understanding the claim concerning the power of *dialegesthai* found in the *Parmenides*.

Section I: The question concerning dialectic in the *Theaetetus*

Before I turn to the concluding discussion of the thesis that knowledge is perception from the *Theaetetus*, found in the passage 184b3-186e12, a few remarks about some dramatic and argumentative features of the dialogue important to my overall argument are necessary. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates at one point recalls his encounter with Parmenides in his youth that the

[6] Vasilis Politis argues (2021) that *Republic* VII, 523-525 provides an explanation of Parmenides' claim at *Parmenides* 135b5-c3. My argument in this chapter is not that *Theaetetus* 184b3-186e12 provides the *only* explanation of Parmenides' claim, but that it provides *an* explanation. In fact, I believe that *Theaetetus* 184b3-186e12 in many respects parallels the argument from *Republic* 523-525, but it lies beyond the scope of the present chapter to explore this connection further.

eponymous dialogue supposedly dramatizes (*Tht.* 183e7-184a2). Direct references between dialogues are exceedingly rare in Plato,[7] and for that reason we are entitled to infer that Plato meant his readers to see the argument of the *Theaetetus* as being in some way connected to that of the *Parmenides*. This dramatic link between the dialogues is further accentuated by the fact that the *Parmenides* contains Plato's earliest depiction of Socrates, dramatically speaking, while the *Theaetetus* contains one of the latest, the dialogue taking place a few weeks before Socrates dies. The two dialogues depict the beginning and the end of Socrates' philosophical career, as it were, and indicate that this career is somehow bound up with Parmenides.

The suggestion that the two dialogues are closely connected is corroborated at the argumentative level. The inquiry into knowledge central to the *Theaetetus* sets out from the denial that anything is one thing, itself by itself (*auto kath' hauto*; 152d2-3), whereas the inquiry of the *Parmenides* sets out from the assumption made by the young Socrates that we must posit forms, for certain things at least, themselves by themselves (*auto kath' hauto*; 128e6-7). The first part of the *Parmenides*, it may be argued, explores what problems follow from assuming that there are forms while the first part of the *Theaetetus* explores what problems follow if one denies it.[8] Together, they may therefore be said to exemplify the hypothetical mode of investigation recommended to the young Socrates by Parmenides in the *Parmenides* as an exercise in dialectic (see 135e8-136a2). In the light of this connection between the dialogues, the *Theaetetus* seems highly relevant for coming to grips with Plato's conception of dialectic.

Nevertheless, the *Theaetetus* is first and foremost an inquiry into the nature of knowledge, and it could be objected that this inquiry is directed at knowledge *simpliciter* and has little to say about dialectic. For, in this dialogue Socrates asks what characterizes any kind of knowledge in so far as it is knowledge and, in contrast to for instance the *Republic*, he appears to disregard the questions what kinds of knowledge there may be, and what the objects of knowledge are (see in particular 146e7-8 and contrast with e.g. *R.* 509d1-511e5).

The dramatic setting of the dialogue, however, suggests that Plato's attitude while writing the *Theaetetus* toward the question whether there may be different kinds of knowledge may be more complex than it at first appears. The inquiry into knowledge is

[7] The *Sophist* contains a similar reference to the *Parmenides* (see 217c5-7). In addition, the *Timaeus* seems to presuppose the argument of the *Republic* while the *Phaedo* may seem to contain a reference to the *Meno* (at 73a7-b2), but in both cases the references are less clear than those in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*.

[8] Cornford?? Or Johansen?

carried out in a conversation between Socrates, a philosopher who describes himself as a lover of *logos* (146a6) and connects his own activity as an intellectual midwife with the "whole business of conversation" (*hē tou dialegesthai pragmateia*; 161e6-7), presumably thereby meaning the business of knowledge-directed conversation central also to dialectic, and two mathematicians with rather different attitudes toward conversation-based inquiry. Theodorus, the older mathematician, is reluctant to enter into philosophical conversation (see 162a4-b5); he states from the beginning of the dialogue that he is unaccustomed the "dialect" of Socrates, that is, the type of discussions Socrates usually engages in (146b3), and he later explains that he rather quickly turned away from "bare" or "abstract arguments" (*psiloi logoi*; 165a1-3).[9] Theaetetus, on the other hand, admits from the beginning of the dialogue to have an interest in the type of questions Socrates poses (148e1-3), he proves easy to engage in the inquiry, he never grows tired of, or angry at, Socrates' questions, and he is praised by Socrates on several occasions for the good qualities of his soul (155d1-7, 185e3-5), a praise that is also reflected in the short introduction to the dialogue where Eucleides and Terpsion praise Theaetetus for being a real gentleman (142b7-c1). At the same time, both mathematicians are depicted as being somehow attracted to Protagoras: Theodorus admits to being a friend of the sophist (161b9-10, 162a4-5, 183b), and Socrates at one point even describes Protagoras as Theodorus' teacher (179a10), while Theaetetus admits to having read Protagoras' book "Truth" several times (152a5) and finds Protagoras' teaching impressive, at least at the beginning of the inquiry (153a4, 157d10-12).

Thus, even if the inquiry aims at articulating a unified conception of knowledge, the drama of the dialogue points to three rather different conceptions of knowledge and its importance for human life: the expert knowledge possessed by Theodorus and Theaetetus, the self-proclaimed wisdom of Protagoras that seeks to associate itself with this kind of expert knowledge, and the type of expertise and wisdom Socrates claims for himself and describes as intellectual midwifery (149a4-151d6, 161e4-5, 210c4-d2) and connects with knowledge of one's own knowledge and ignorance (210b11-c4, see also 187a1-6 and 154d8-e5). As I shall argue below, part of the drama of the *Theaetetus* consists in the fact that Socrates, through the dialogue, seeks to turn Theaetetus from sophistry and "mere" mathematics toward philosophy and dialectic. This drama revolves, in part, around Theaetetus' conception of being and

[9] In both the *Phaedrus* 262c8 and the *Symposium* 215c7, this expression is used to refer to the kind of speeches Socrates typically engages in.

benefit, two things central also to the young Socrates' first steps into the realm of dialectic depicted in the *Parmenides*.

Section II: The passage 184b3-186e12 and its connection to the previous part of the dialogue

The first, main part of the *Theaetetus*, running from 151d7 to 186e12, contains one of the most celebrated and influential arguments against the thesis that knowledge (*epistēmē*)[10] is, or at least must be grounded in, perception. At the end of this long and complex discussion, in a passage that seems to contain an separate and independent refutation of the thesis, namely 184b3-186e12, Socrates asks Theaetetus whether certain properties common to the things we perceive, such as their being and non-being, their similarity and dissimilarity, can be perceived through the senses (185a4-d5).[11] Theaetetus states that they cannot and suggests that it is the soul, rather, itself by itself (*autē di' hautēs*), that examines (*episkopein*) these properties (185d6-e2). On the basis of some further discussion of the activity of the soul when it examines such properties, and the concession that it is impossible to obtain truth without grasping being, and to obtain knowledge without truth, Theaetetus finally concedes that knowledge cannot be perception (186e4-8). Many critics will agree that the passage 184b3-186e12 where this conclusion is established is a high point in the dialogue and possibly also in the history of philosophy.[12] At the same time the passage appears to raise as many questions as it purports to answer.

One major question is what purpose the passage serves within the larger argument that runs from 151d7 to 186e12. For Socrates has already reached the conclusion, at 182d8-e6, that, if everything is always changing in every way, we are not entitled to call a particular instance of perception "seeing more than we call it not seeing, or any other sort of

[10] *Epistēmē* is usually translated as "knowledge". In other dialogues, however, including the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, *technē* and *epistēmē* are used interchangeably and the examples of *epistēmai* Theaetetus presents as his first candidate answer in the *Theaetetus* at 146c7-d3 includes *skytotomikē te kai hai tōn allōn dēmiourgōn technai*. Theaetetus' initial answer in fact demonstrates that, when Socrates raises the question what knowledge is, Theaetetus is thinking first and foremost about knowledge in the sense of "expert knowledge," that is, the knowledge a practitioner of a specific profession or craft possesses in contrast to the layman, the "grasp" of a subject that you may learn from a skilled practitioner. As I will argue below, this aspect of *epistēmē* comes to the fore in a number of arguments in the later discussion, including the passage 184b3-186e12, and it is part of the reason the notion that knowledge is perception is dismissed. This aspect of *epistēmē* is important to bear in mind.

[11] The Greek text used is that of the *Platonis Opera, Tomus I*, edited by E. A. Duke et al.

[12] The reader may compare the somewhat backhanded praise of Plato's "achievement" towards the end of Myles Burnyeat's essay "Plato on the Grammar of Perception" (1976, p. 50) with Martin Heidegger's more generous, if also very critical, remarks on the importance of the passage from his 1934 lecture on the *Theaetetus* (1997, p. 175-6, 181-2).

perception,"[13] since we would thereby impose an unwarranted stability upon it. This conclusion may seem to render Theaetetus' proposal that knowledge is perception empty or meaningless and therefore refuted, since that definition, at least as it is interpreted by Socrates, depends on the ontological assumption mentioned above, that nothing is one thing, itself by itself. What Socrates has established immediately prior to the passage 184b3-186e12 is, then, that the assumption about being supporting Theaetetus' proposed definition, that Socrates associates loosely with Heraclitus, renders that very definition meaningless.[14] But if it is already clear that Theaetetus' answer is untenable, why is the refutation comntained in the 184b3-186e12 passage needed?

A further, closely related question is what ontological status, if any,[15] Socrates accords the common properties (*ta koina*) he brings up for discussion in this passage, properties such as being and benefit that the refutation contained in the passage revolves around. Particularly controversial issues are what being, that is, *ousia*, means and what reasons the interlocutors have for claiming that truth, and therefore knowledge, depends on grasping *ousia*. Is the argument simply meant to establish that "to know is to judge, or is a species of judging"[16] and that, since "a true judgement" will involve "the verb 'to be',"[17] knowledge will depend, only in this limited sense, on grasping being?[18] This is by now the majority view, and it may seem to be corroborated by the way being is first introduced in the passage 184b3-186e12, a point to which I shall return below.

However that may be, if one looks at the greater context within which this passage is found, that is, the long discussion of Theaetetus' thesis that knowledge is perception and its connection to Protagoras and Heraclitus, a case can be made for the claim that the conception of being is clarified only gradually within the passage 184b3-186e12 and that the full significance of the term can only be understood if interpreted in the light of the final section

[13] All translations of the *Theaetetus* are from Rowe 2015; at times I have made minor adjustments to the translation in order to bring out a particular point I wish to make.
[14] Here I follow Burnyeat's so-called B-reading, according to which the extreme implications of this ontology spelled out at 182d8-e6 is already implied in the initial formulation of that theory (1990, p. 46). Catherine Rowett argues that the passage 183b7-c3 is where Theaetetus' first proposal "is declared non-viable, and left to die" (2018, p. 173), and that the passage 184b3-186e12, rather than constituting a conclusion to the first section of the dialogue, "forms a transition between Theaetetus' first proposed definition... and his second" (p. 197).
[15] John Cooper claims that "it nowhere matters to his argument what their [that is, the common properties] metaphysical status is" (1970, p. 138n19).
[16] Ryle 1939, p. 317
[17] Burnyeat 1976, p. 49
[18] Cooper 1970, p. 131n12 objects to this general line of interpretation, correctly pointing out that "the principle of selection for the κοινά is not their implication in all judgements, but their applicability to objects of different senses. So the supposed special position of at least some of them as regards the power of judgement," including being, "is not Plato's reason for illustrating the independent activity of the mind by judgements involving them."

of this passage.[19] It is the process through which Theaetetus, with Socrates' help, arrives at a better understanding of being and its connection to benefit within the passage that I wish to highlight, since it is central to my claim that the passage *Theaetetus* is important for understanding Plato's conception of dialectic. I therefore begin by discussing the connection between the 184b3-186e12 passage and the greater context in which it is located before I turn to the question how we should understand the concept of *ousia* in section III below.

How we are to conceive of the connection between the passage 184b3-186e12 and the previous part of the dialogue is a matter of controversy. Myles Burnyeat, voicing the perspective of his so-called B-reading, famously argued that what we find at the end of the previous part (at 183b7-c3) is the conclusion to a prolonged indirect refutation of Theaetetus' thesis that knowledge is perception, where "the thesis under consideration supplies the materials for its own refutation."[20] More precisely he argued that the Protagorean measure doctrine and the Heraclitean ontology supporting it, the main subjects of the inquiry that ends at 183b7-c3, "provide sufficient conditions for Theaetetus' definition to come out correct" and that the argument Socrates presents "down to 160e" seeks to establish "that they are the only sufficient conditions which could reasonably be devised," wherefore they are therefore also necessary.[21] If it is correct, Theaetetus' thesis is self-defeating since the Heraclitean ontology supporting it, at least as it is interpreted by Socrates, renders the thesis itself meaningless. The passage 184b3-186e12, in contrast, according to Burnyeat, contains a direct refutation, that is, a refutation that "proceeds, for the first time in the dialogue, from premises which Plato himself accepts as true."[22] This suggestion does provide an explanation of the differences between what appear to be two distinct refutations of the same thesis. The question remains, however, why Plato chose to provide them in the first place. Would one not suffice? If the thesis is indeed self-defeating, what more needs to be said? And why should Socrates wish to provide a refutation building on premises Plato accepts in any case?

David Sedley, on the other hand, has argued that the refutation culminating at 183b7-c3 refutes Theaetetus' first answer "only in the Heraclitean form in which he [that is, Socrates] has developed and criticized it," that is, only in the form where perception is understood in accordance with the ontological view that there are no things that are what they

[19] On this point, see the interpretation of the passage by David Sedley (2004, pp. 109-110), an interpretation to which this chapter is indebted. Cooper, in contrast, explicitly denies that οὐσία can mean nature (1970, p. 137n18), as does Burnyeat (1976, p. 45).
[20] Burnyeat 1990, p. 53.
[21] Burnyeat 1990, p. 10.
[22] Burnyeat 1990, p. 53. See also Heidegger 1997, p. 150.

are, themselves by themselves. He further suggests that it "remains a theoretical possibility that Theaetetus' definition ... could be defended on some other basis." What the passage 184b3-186e12 then provides is a refutation that demonstrates that "Theaetetus' definition is inherently faulty, regardless of any perceptual theory one might adopt".[23] This interpretation may seem to square better than Burnyeat's with a caveat made by Socrates at 183c3, namely, that Theaetetus' thesis that knowledge is perception can now be dismissed "unless Theaetetus here has something else to say."[24] Nevertheless, it seems to face a similar problem also. For if the passage at 184b3-186e12 provides a refutation of the thesis that knowledge is perception, irrespective of what theory you may have about perception, we are left to wonder why Plato bothered to write the long discussion running from to 152a1 to 183c3.

The problem facing both accounts is, then, that the dialogue's argumentative structure becomes questionable if we cannot point to any deeper connections between the final refutation of Theaetetus' thesis contained in the 184b3-186e12 passage and the previous criticism of Protagoras' measure doctrine and the Heraclitean ontology Socrates associates with it. If a link can be established between the two refutations that will enable us to read the whole passage 152a1-186e12 as a continuous refutation of the thesis that knowledge is perception, it will thus provide us with a reading of the dialogue more generous to Plato that is preferable also because Socrates, at the end of this passage (at 186e11-12), clearly indicates that this is how he understands his prolonged inquiry into Theaetetus' first proposed answer. Moreover, Theaetetus' definition, as interpreted by Socrates, that he appears to refute at 183b7-c3 rests on an assumption about being that explicitly denies what Socrates himself argues is a necessary assumption as a young man in the *Parmenides*—that there are some things that are what they are, themselves by themselves. It therefore seems fair to assume that the older Socrates, when linking Theaetetus' definition with Protagoras' measure doctrine and the quasi-Heraclitean ontology and criticizing both, is also attempting to teach Theaetetus an important lesson about being and the necessity of positing forms if dialectic and philosophy is to be possible. If this suggestion is correct, it likewise speaks in favor of finding a link between discussion running from 152a1 to 183 and the 184b3-186e12 passage that will allow us to see this lesson reflected also in the 184b3-186e12 passage.

In an influential paper from 1970 John Cooper suggested, while discussing what the expression "to grasp being" can mean in the passage 184b3-186e12, that the "refutation of

[23] Sedley 2004, p. 105.
[24] On this passage, see also Rowett 2018, pp. 173-4.

Protagoras earlier in the dialogue [at 177c6-179b9] seems to offer a clue".[25] While I do not accept Cooper's ultimate conclusions about Plato's conception of knowledge and being in the *Theaetetus*, I think he is right in suggesting that the previous arguments against Protagoras that culminate in 177c6-179b9 offer clues for deciding what the expression "to grasp being" means when used in the passage 184b3-186e12[26]—and indeed for understanding the full implication of the latter passage more generally. In what follows I argue that we are not facing two distinct refutations in the passage 152a1—186e12 but two complementary steps in one prolonged refutation, where the second step builds upon and elaborates on arguments articulated in the first, in particular arguments directed against Protagoras. To demonstrate how these two steps are connected it is helpful to begin by looking at a short section of the 184b3-186e12 passage, namely 186a2-186b1, and to consider how it is related to the previous refutation of Protagoras. In the argument leading up to this section, running from 184b3 to 186a1, Socrates and Theaetetus establish that certain properties common to the things we perceive cannot themselves be objects of perception but are rather things that the soul examines or inspects (*episkopein*), itself by itself (*autē di' hautēs*). The section itself runs as follows:

> [T1] Socrates: So to which of the two sets of things do you assign being (*tēn ousian*)? This is what is most constantly present in all cases.
> Theaetetus: I myself count it among the things that the soul reaches out to, itself by itself.
> Socrates: The like, too, and the unlike, the same and the different?
> Theaetetus: Yes.
> Socrates: What about beautiful and ugly, good and bad?
> Theaetetus: These too, it seems to me, are more than anything things whose being (*ousian*) the soul examines (*skopeisthai*) in relation to one another (*pros allēla*), reckoning up in itself (*analogizomenē en heautē*) past and present in comparison with future. (186a2-b1)

The fact that Theaetetus here, when considering where to place "beautiful and ugly, good and bad," brings up the activity of "reckoning up" past and present in relation to the future indicates that he has the argument directed against Protagoras in the previous part of the dialogue, an

[25] Cooper 1970, p. 141.
[26] Scholars who point to the connection between Theaetetus' claim at 186a10-b1 and the argument directed against Protagoras at 177c6-179b9 include Campbell 1881, p. 143, note to line 4; Cornford 1935, p. 107n1; McDowell 1973, pp. 190-1; and Sedley 2004, p. 109. As far as I know, only Cooper and Sedley make something of the fact that what is at stake in the earlier argument is the question of expertise.

argument that culminates at 177c6-179b9, in mind. For this argument was centered precisely on the notions of the good and the beneficial in relation to the future.

To see the full importance of that argument for the drama of the *Theaetetus*, however, it is important to note that the term "good" (as well as "beautiful") was introduced already at an earlier stage in the *Theaetetus* and has been an implicit theme prior to the refutation found at 177c6-179b9. When Theaetetus initially suggests that knowledge is perception, Socrates associates this suggestion with Protagoras and the doctrine that all the things we are accustomed to say *are* in fact *become* through the interaction of two types of movement (see 152c8-d6); on this basis he then asks Theaetetus, at 157d7-9, if he likes "the proposal that neither good, nor beautiful, nor any of the other things that were on our list just now *is* at all, but is rather always in a process of *coming to be*." As F. M. Cornford observed, at this point in the dialogue Theaetetus "apparently feels no qualms when Socrates slips in the words 'good' and 'beautiful', as if these qualities were on the same footing with 'hot' or 'white' or 'large'," [27] qualities that each of us, according to the Protagorean measure doctrine, is a measure of.

Now, one reason why it may be thought problematic to assimilate the good, in particular, to perceptible qualities, and the beneficial that goes together with the good (for what is beneficial for something is beneficial because it helps realize the good of that thing),[28] at least on the assumption that each of us is an adequate measure of such qualities, is that this dissolves an important basis for distinguishing the expert from the layman, a distinction Theaetetus and Theodorus should be interested in maintaining, given that they themselves are practitioners of a recognized expertise. This consequence gradually becomes clear through the ensuing discussion (see e.g. 161d2-e3) and it finally evolves into an explicit theme in a defense Socrates delivers on behalf of Protagoras (see 166d4-7). What seems to motivate this defense is, precisely, the problem that the notion of being an expert or wise about something appears meaningless if all things, including what is good and beneficial, are to each of us the way they appear to us. For what sets the expert or the wise person apart from the layman more than anything else, it may be argued, is the expert's ability to predict what *will be* good or beneficial to someone, an ability the layman lacks, even if the layman may still be the best judge of what appears good or beneficial to him or her at any given moment. This is the basic point of the refutation of Protagoras found at 177c6-179b9.

[27] Cornford 1935, p. 51.
[28] I here leave the beautiful out of the discussion; it may be noted that a case could be made for connection the beautiful or fine with the notion of benefit as well, in so far as a beautiful or fine practice, for instance, is something that will help something realize its proper virtue, thereby making it good.

My aim here is not to discuss in any detail Socrates' defense on behalf of Protagoras or the various steps in the refutation of Protagoras' doctrine that follows.[29] Important for my purpose here is only that the argument against Protagoras found at 177c6-179b9 sets out from the question concerning the expert's knowledge of the good and beneficial. Socrates here suggests that, while some people may be willing to follow Protagoras in claiming that, for instance, justice has no more than a kind of borne along being (*tēn pheromenēn ousian*; 177c6) and that whatever a city posits as just is just for that city as long as it so posits it, they will not be willing to make the same claim concerning the things that are good and "insist that whatever a city lays down as beneficial for herself, because it thinks it is so, is actually beneficial for as long as she so lays it down" (177c6-d5).

At this point, Socrates thus explicitly seeks to exclude the good and the beneficial from the realm of perpetual change to which the notion "good" was apparently condemned at 157c7-9. In fact, he proceeds to suggest, a city is aiming (*stochazesthai*) at this very thing, that is, what is good or beneficial, whatever it might call it, while making its laws, attempting to make them as beneficial as possible for itself, even while many a city misses (*diamartanein*) this target (177e4-178a3). That Socrates here describes legislation as an activity where one aims at, or looks toward (*blepein*; 177e7), what is good, but risks missing the target, further underlines the idea that the good or beneficial is something stable, a thing that is not perpetually changing and relative to how each of us perceives it.

That Socrates at first focuses on the act of legislation and the question what is good for cities is possibly a result of the fact that he, in his previous defense of Protagoras, emphasized the role of the expert in legislation. In order to consolidate the conclusion that the good and beneficial are objective matters that one may misunderstand, however, he proceeds to widen the perspective considerably. It will be easier for everyone to agree to this conclusion, he suggests, if one asks about the entire class (*eidos*) in which the beneficial happens to belong (178a5-7), the class of things that is concerned with the future (178a7-8).

To explain more clearly what class of things he has in mind, Socrates then mentions a number of arts or types of expertise, asking whether it will be the expert or the layman who will be able to judge correctly what will prove good or beneficial in the future: is it, for instance, the doctor or the patient that is the better judge of whether or not the patient will catch a fever and feel sick in the future (178c2-7), or the gymnastic trainer or the musical expert that is the better judge of whether or not something will appear to be in tune at a later point (178d4-6)?

[29] For further discussion of this matter, see Burnyeat 1990, pp. 22-28.

The general point Socrates wishes to establish concerning the good and beneficial is, then, that, at least when it comes to the question what *will* be good and beneficial in the future, it is the expert, and not the layman, who is the better judge. Relativism, or the notion that each of us is a measure of how things are, seems very difficult to reconcile with our trust in experts.

What the argument does not establish, however, is what would have to be true about reality for such expert knowledge to be possible, since the Heraclitean ontology supporting Theaetetus' definition, or at least the Protagorean interpretation Socrates has presented of it, is still in play. Once this ontology is dismissed, however, as it will be at 182d8-e6, further progression is possible on the way toward an answer to the question what knowledge is and how we must conceive of the reality toward which knowledge is directed. These are the questions that the claim advanced by Theaetetus at 186a10-b1 picks up on.

Section III: The implication of Theaetetus' concession concerning the good

So far I have argued that Theaetetus, when claiming in T1 that the good and the bad and the beautiful and the ugly belong to the "things whose being (*tēn ousian*) the soul examines (*skopeisthai*) in relation to one another (*pros allēla*), reckoning up in itself (*analogizomenē en heautē[i]*) past and present in comparison with future" (186a10-b1), is recalling Socrates' earlier argument against Protagoras. I have also indicated that this claim demonstrates an important change in Theaetetus' understanding of the good (as well as of the beautiful): he no longer accepts the suggestion that it has no being, itself by itself, as he was inclined to do at the beginning of the inquiry. For to claim that things such as the good and the beautiful have a being that the soul may examine is, it may be argued, to accept what was suggested as an objection to Protagoras, that they have something like a nature on their own that one may understand to a lesser or greater degree.

Assuming that the view that the good and the bad and the beautiful and the ugly have a being of their own that we may inquire into is central to Socratic inquiry,[30] it may also seem reasonable to assume that Socrates is pleased with Theaetetus' answer. Indeed, as noted above, Plato depicts a young Socrates in the *Parmenides* as setting out from a closely related view (at 130b7-9), according to which both unity, the just, the beautiful, and the good are things that are, themselves by themselves, and a Parmenides who conceeds (at 135b5-c3) that we need to posit forms in some sense at least for the things Socrates wishes to posit forms for

[30] Readers skeptical of the suggestion that Plato's Socrates would accept that the bad and the ugly have a being or nature of their own may consult *Republic* 476a1-8.

if truth-seeking discourse and philosophy is to be possible. If these assumptions are to the point, it may be argued that Theaetetus is here conceding a premise central to the young Socrates', as well as to Parmenides', conception of discourse aimed at truth and of dialectic. If mathematicians differ from dialecticians by the fact that they only dream about being, as Socrates suggests in the *Republic*, in contrast to dialecticians or philosophers who can be said to be awake given their knowledge about the nature of things such as the good, the beautiful, and the just (see 533b5-c3 with 476c1-d2), it may seem that Socrates is helping Theaetetus wake up.

Some critics, however, would deny that this is the implication of Theaetetus' concessions in T1. John McDowell, for instance, has suggested that Theaetetus, by bringing up the argument directed at Protagoras, may be "in danger of missing the point of the present section,"[31] and that Socrates' response to Theaetetus' concession—that is, "hold it there" (186b2)—is meant to highlight this problem. For, McDowell argues, by bringing up the earlier argument about future benefit Theaetetus risks "taking the present passage [that is, T1 and context] as merely adding some further questions, e.g. those about being" to those about the future, thereby missing Socrates' general point in the passage we are considering. That point, according to McDowell, is that not even when it comes to our present perceptions can we say that perception is knowledge. Even for a trivial judgement such as "this wind is cold" we rely on being, a "concept" that is not available to us in perception. McDowell is not alone in making this suggestion; in fact, on this score, his view is in agreement with interpretations of the passage advanced by Gilbert Ryle,[32] Myles Burnyeat,[33] and many later critics.

Two things seem to speak in favor of these critics. First, when Socrates initially brings up being for discussion prior to T1, namely at 185a9 and 185c5-6, he seems to have something rather trivial in mind, namely the mere fact that, concerning two things, we may say that they both are. And when the notion of *ousia* is used at 185c9 and then repeated in T1 at 186a2, it seems to be with the same meaning. From this point of view, it is not difficult to see why many critics reject the idea that *ousia* could mean something like the "nature" of something that an expert, in contrast to the layman, understands anywhere in the passage 184b3-186e12, insisting rather, in the words of Cooper, that it "throughout the passage ... seems to mean (something like) the existence of this or that".[34] Second, as a conclusion to the

[31] McDowell 1973, p. 190, note to 186b2-10, my emphasis; see also Cornford 1935, p. 107n1.
[32] See Ryle 1939.
[33] Burnyeat 1976; 1990
[34] Cooper 1970, p. 137n18. Burnyeat objects to the suggestion that the passage is concerned with "the 'is' of existence, since its negation 'is not' is later singled out as something that is also true of both the colour and the

argument advanced in the passage 184b3-186e12 as a whole, Socrates suggests that they should seek knowledge, or an answer to what it is, not in perception but in whatever it is the soul does when it is occupied with, or takes trouble with (*pragmateuesthai*), the things that are, itself by itself (187a3-6). And this, Theaetetus suggests, is the activity of opining (*doxazein*) or forming judgements. This suggestion seems to sit well with Burnyeat's claim that in the passage 184b3-186e12 Socrates' primary aim is to distinguish "perception and judgement in a way that effectively denies to the senses the judgemental function they had in the *Republic*,"[35] a function on which knowledge, according to Theaetetus' suggestion at 187a7-8, depends.

There are, nevertheless, reasons to reject McDowell's suggested reading of Socrates' remark at 186b2—that is, "hold it there"—as well as the widespread view that *ousia* cannot mean something like nature or essence later in the passage, 186a11, 186b6-7 and 186c3. Let us look first at Socrates' remark at 186b2 and the exchange between him and Theaetetus that follows. It runs as follows:

> [T2] Socrates: Hold it there. It's through touch that we will perceive the hardness of the hard, and similarly the softness of the soft – right?
> Theaetetus: Yes.
> Socrates: Whereas what our soul tries to judge by itself, going close up to them and comparing them with each other, is their being, and that they are,[36] their oppositeness to one another, and again the being of their oppositeness?
> Theaetetus: Certainly, yes. (186b2-10)

While it is true that Socrates in T2 focuses primarily on being, and leaves the good and the other properties mentioned in T1out of the discussion for the moment, the expression "hold it there" (*eche dē*; 186b2), taken on its own, could well be regarded as a way of emphasizing the importance of what Theaetetus has just conceded in T1—that the good and the bad and the beautiful and the ugly belong in the category of properties that the soul examines on its own—rather than as a warning against bringing them up in the present part of the inquiry. For

sound" (1976, p. 44) and suggests that what is contrasted here is the simple perception of a color and the thought that it is something.

[35] Burnyeat 1976, p. 36.

[36] Rowe translates *tēn de ge ousian kai hoti eston* at 186b6 as "their being, namely that they are," and the *kai* may indeed be read exegetically. But since Theaetetus has just stated that the soul examines the being of the good and the bad in relation to each other, I find it more natural to suppose that Socrates here follows up on Theaetetus' suggestion and makes a distinction between the being of hardness and softness and the fact they are.

this is certainly an important concession, given Theaetetus' earlier quasi-Protagorean attitude. The importance of this becomes all the more clear if we remember that Protagoras is described throughout the preceding parts of the dialogue as a friend, and even as a teacher, of Theodorus (161b9–10, 162a4–5, 164e4–7, 171c8–9, 179a10), that is, of Theaetetus' teacher, and that it is indicated that Theaetetus is somewhat attracted to the position of Protagoras. Part of the drama of the argument in the *Theaetetus* is surely that two mathematicians, who undoubtedly possess genuine, expert knowledge, find the teachings of Protagoras attractive, teachings that render the very notion of expert knowledge they rely on, as well as their field of study, it may be argued, devoid of meaning.[37] As I have argued, it is precisely the concepts of the good and beneficial that Socrates highlights in order to make Theodorus realize that Protagoras' position is incompatible with the notion that the expert and the layman differ as regards their ability to judge the future correctly.

To fully appreciate this aspect of the drama of the dialogue, one also needs to recognize that the previous refutation of Protagoras that culminates at 183b7-c3 is carried out exclusively in conversation with Theodorus. At 169a6-b4 a reluctant Theodorus is finally forced into participating in the dialectical exchange, "up until the point when" the interlocutors are in a position to decide whether Theodorus should, "after all ... be the measure when it comes to geometrical figures" (169a1-3), that is, whether it is an expert such as Theodorus, or rather the layman, who is the better judge of questions pertaining to geometry. And he remains Socrates' sole interlocutor up till 183c3, where Protagoras is finally dismissed, to Theodorus' relief who—even though he by that time has become rather engaged in the whole inquiry (see 177c3-5 and 182b6-8)—remarks that he now "too" has to "be released from the role of respondent, according to our agreement, which was that I should continue until the matter of Protagoras' thesis was settled" (183c4-7).

It is in order to highlight the dramatic importance of the fact that Theaetetus now, on his own, recognizes the significance of what was established concerning expert knowledge in the exchange between Socrates and his teacher Theodorus, I suggest, that Plato presents us with what may look like two independent refutations of the same thesis. In one sense, I thus

[37] On this point, see especially Gadamer 1982, pp. 295-9; see also Howland 1998, pp. 56-7 and Larsen 2019, pp. 7-12. In my view, the fact that both mathematicians seem unaware of the ontological and epistemological implications of the possibility of expert knowledge does not speak against the claim that Socrates uses the fact that some people possess expert knowledge as an argument against the suggestion that knowledge is perception; as Gadamer points out, in order to possess expert knowledge one need not necessarily be able to answer the question what knowledge is, just as one does not need to possess expert knowledge in a particular field in order to be able to answer the question what knowledge is. I thank Catherine Rowett for pointing out this potential objection.

agree with Catherine Rowett when she states that, at 183b7-c3, Theaetetus' thesis is "declared non-viable, and left to die."[38] At the same time, however, I argue that the full implications of this refutation for the way being and benefit should be understood has not yet been made clear, and that this is precisely what the ensuing conversation with Theaetetus, beginning at 184b3 after Theodorus withdraws from the conversation, is meant to do.

This suggestion, that it is in order to highlight the importance of what Theaetetus concedes that Socrates tells him to "hold it there," not in order to warn him against missing a general point concerning being, is further corroborated by the general conclusion Socrates draws, just after T2:

> [T3] Socrates: There will be some things, then, that human beings and animals alike are naturally able to perceive as soon as they are born, namely those things the experience of which extends through the body to the soul; whereas calculations about these, *both as regards their being and as regards their benefit* (*ta de peri toutōn analogismata pros te ousian kai ōpheleian*), come, to the people to whom they do come, only with difficulty, late on, and after much trouble and education. (186b11-c5; my emphasis)

Here, Socrates is very far from suggesting that Theaetetus should forget about benefit and the good in order to concentrate solely on being, the supposedly most important concept for understanding our capacity to make judgements. He is rather encouraging him to see benefit, or the good, as on a par with being.

The question remains how *ousia* should be understood in our passage as a whole, that is 184b3-186e12. It can hardly be denied that the expression, when first introduced at 185c9, seems metaphysically innocent. As already mentioned, it seems to refer to the fact that something we perceive can be said to be, perhaps in the simple sense that it is *something or other*, rather than in the sense that it exists or has a specific nature, since *ousia* is here paired with *to mē einai* which, in this context, seems to mean that something that exists may, in another sense, be said not to be, presumable some specific thing, a point emphasized by Burnyeat.[39] But does this give us reason to conclude that the passage 184b3-186e12, taken as a whole, offers no "defence ... of the idea that knowledge, let alone truth, presupposes a grasp

[38] Rowett 2018, p. 173
[39] Burnyeat 1976, p. 44. But see Rowett 2018, p. 215, who objects to Burnyeat's line of reading.

of being in the specific sense of existence, reality, or essence" and that, "if any such narrow notion of being were intended, the argument would be left to limp on an unargued assumption of the first magnitude"?[40] Not necessarily. For an argument for such an idea, or at the very least the outline of an argument, is presented precisely in Theaetetus' claim in T1 and the short discussion that follows it in T2 and T3.

To make plausible that this is so, a few additional remarks about the structure of argument leading up to T1, presented in the passage 184b4-186a1, are called for. Here I take for granted a point made by Cooper, namely that Socrates' primary aim in that passage is to draw a simple, if important distinction between two types of activities the soul may be engaged in, a "perceptual use of the mind, in which it operates through the medium of the bodily senses" and "a further and higher use, in which the mind works independently of the body and the senses."[41] The latter is the activity the soul is engaged in when it aims to examine or inspect the common properties. As I see it, the argument presented from 184b4 up to 186a1 is intended to make one point, and one point only, namely that, when it comes to the properties that are common to several things we perceive that cannot themselves be perceived, the soul is able to engage in an activity, first described as a kind of thinking (*dianoein*) at 185a4 and later, at 185e2, as an examination or inspection (*episkopein*), that differs significantly from the activity it is engaged in when it perceives through the bodily organs. What Socrates then ensures in the first half of T1 (186a2-8) is that Theaetetus agrees that being, likeness and unlikeness, and identity and otherness, belong among such common properties, that is, properties that the soul, as Theaetetus puts it at 186a4-5, reaches out to (*eporegesthai*), itself by itself.[42]

Important as the first stage of the argument of running from 184b3-186e12 may be, that is, the passage 184b3-186a1, it does not attempt to answer the question what the activity of the soul when reaching out for the common properties consists in or how we are to conceive of the properties themselves. This, I urge, is precisely what the passage 186a2-e12

[40] Burnyeat 1976, p. 45.
[41] Cooper 1970, p. 127.
[42] At 187a7-8 Theaetetus suggests that the activity the soul engages in when it occupies itself with the things that are should be called "to form an opinion" (*doxazein*), and, at 187b5-6, that knowledge may happen to be true opinion (*alēthēs doxa*). That thinking and the act of forming an opinion amount, more or less, to the same thing is later suggested by Socrates himself (at 189e6-190a7), and this is also suggested by the Eleatic visitor in the *Sophist* (at 264a8-b4), a point I return to below. From that perspective, it seems unproblematic to use the term *doxazein* to describe the activity of thinking about, or preoccupying oneself with, the things that are. By suggesting that knowledge may be identical with a true opinion, however, Theaetetus shifts the focus from the *activity* of thinking, or of forming a belief, to the *product* of this activity. This, I believe, is part of the reason why the inquiry of the *Theaetetus* ultimately fails.

is meant to help clarify and it is, for that reason, the most important part of the entire passage 184b3-186e12. As already mentioned, it is addressed to Theaetetus, not to Theodorus; and indeed, Theaetetus stands sorely in need of such clarification if he is to realize his full potential for philosophy hinted at throughout the dialogue. For, being rather young and also a mathematician, he still has little understanding of being and the activity in which it is cognized,[43] a fact reflected also in his earlier enthusiasm for the flux doctrine and the idea that knowledge might be perception. Early in the dialogue, Theodorus states that certain guardians (*epitropoi tines*) appear to have destroyed Theaetetus' property (144d1-3) after his father died, a remark that may be seen as an expression of Platonic irony; for the word used for property is also the word for being, *ousia*, and the guardians who have taken responsibility for Theaetetus' education are, presumably, first and foremost Theodorus and, through him, Protagoras, two teachers who have not helped Theaetetus reach a better understanding of being at all.[44]

Let us now take a closer look at Theaetetus' answer in T1 to Socrates' question, what he thinks about beautiful and ugly, good and bad. What does his answer and the ensuing discussion in T2 and T3 tell us about being, benefit, and other common properties and the activity of the soul that is directed toward them? Theaetetus' answer is that, as regards the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad, the soul examines (*skopeisthai*) their being (*ousia*) in relation to one another, while calculating (*analogizesthai*), in itself, past and present in comparison with the future. He thus suggests that the soul in fact performs two distinct, if also closely related, activities when it comes to these matter. It *examines* their being in relation to each other and, while doing so, it *calculates* "past and present in comparison with future".

The activity of calculating, David Sedley argues, to my mind persuasively, "suggests a reference to the work of the expert," namely the work that was up for discussion in the 177c6-179b9 passage, which in turn suggests that Theaetetus now "seems to have bestowed on [being] a richer profile" in comparison to that found in the discussion running up to 186a2,[45] according to which being means something like the nature or essence of the subject

[43] As regards the distinction between dialectic and mathematics, in addition to the passages already mentioned above (on page ####), the reader may wish to consult Socrates' description of the mathematical disciplines in *Republic* 510c2-511d5 and 533a10-c6.
[44] On this point, see Howland 1998, 54. As I see it, the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* can be read as a continuous attempt to redirect Theaetetus from mathematics to dialectic, and to the question what being is and how and why knowledge depends on it, and the passage 186a2-e12 may be read as one crucial, but not final, step in this process. For more on this point in relation to the *Sophist*, see Larsen 2015, pp. 310-11.
[45] Sedley 2004, p. 110.

matters an expert is concerned with. At the very least, we may rule out the suggestion that he has a general concept of being, underlying all kinds of judgment, in mind here. For whatever he means precisely by "calculation," it is aimed at providing knowledge of the being of four specific terms, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad, and the fact that Theaetetus states that the soul, when trying to come to grips with their being, compares them with each other, clearly indicates that the being of one of these, say the good, is different from the being of the others.

To highlight the importance of Theaetetus' answer, Socrates then proceeds to point out, in T2, that it is through touch that we may perceive the hardness of what is hard and the softness of what is soft (186b2-4). However, as regards hardness and softness,[46] when it comes to

i) their being (*ousia*), and

ii) to the fact that they are (*eston*),[47]

iii) to their being opposite to each other (*ten enantiotēta pros allēlō*), and

iv) to the being of oppositeness (*tēn ousian au tēs enantiotētos*),

the soul itself tries (*peira[i]n*) to judge (*krinein*) them, going over (*epaneinai*) and comparing (*symballein*) them to each other (186b6-9). While the finer points of Socrates' distinction between perceiving hardness and softness and trying to judge their being may seem less clear than we might wish them to be, his emphasis on *ousia* in both i) and iv) seems to me to point in the same general direction as Theaetetus' earlier claim, bestowing upon being, to use the words of Sedley, a somewhat richer profile in comparison with the preceding parts of the argument.

To see this point more clearly, let us note that i), ii), iii), and iv) are all described as matters that the soul attempts to judge on its own, that is, without having recourse to perception. Neither the being of hardness and softness, the fact that they are, that they are opposite, or the being of oppositeness is something we may perceive. At the same time, the fact that Socrates mentions *being* (*ousia*) twice, first referring to the being of hardness and softness and then to the being of oppositeness, indicates the importance of being for intellectual inquiry. We may judge that two things, such as hardness and softness, are opposite, just as we may judge that they are two. But we may also ask ourselves what the being of hardness, softness, and oppositeness are.

[46] For this reading, see Campbell 1881, p. 143n11.
[47] See note 35 above.

What Socrates is pointing to in T2 is then, I suggest, that it is possible to note *that* two things are and also *that* they are opposite to each other, but that we may also, once we notice this, think that there is a further question, namely *what* hardness and softness are, and *what* the being of oppositeness is. To notice *that* they are does not necessarily require much effort, while answering the question *what* they are, I take it, will require real effort, effort that may be described as a kind of calculation. For, in deciding what they are, one would be attempting to answer *ti esti* questions, while in noticing that are, one would not, even if noticing that they are may be the natural starting point for attempting to answer the *ti esti* questions.

This emphasis on the soul's attempt to decide what the being of certain things are, and not just that they are, that they may be opposite to each other etc., is followed up, finally, in the suggestion Socrates makes in T3, as a conclusion to the argument set out in T1 and T2.

What is particularly striking about T3 is that Socrates there singles out calculations about *being* and *benefit*. This is striking because Theaetetus has already conceded that the soul examines, itself by itself, quite a number of things, such as being, likeness, unlikeness, identity, otherness, the beautiful, the ugly, the good, and the bad (186a2-b1). Had Socrates' point been to emphasize the difference between mere perception, deprived of conceptual content, and judgements that rely on general concepts, as many critics following Gilbert Ryle have suggested, the reference to benefit would make little sense, as would the claim that the calculations about being and benefit only come with difficulty, at length, and through hard work and education.[48] If the main point Socrates wishes to make concerns the difficulty of understanding the being of something in the sense of its *nature* or *essence*, however, and what is good or beneficial, it makes perfect sense to suggest that calculations about being and benefit require serious effort. For one of the hallmarks of the expert is, as I have argued became clear in the previous part of the *Theaetetus*, to be able to judge correctly what will prove beneficial, and this ability depends, it may be suggested, on knowing what the object the expert is concerned with is, essentially.

If this reading is along the right lines, we may conclude that the full significance of Theaetetus' concession about being at 185d6-e2, that there are certain "things" common to what we perceive, including being, that the soul examines itself by itself, does not become clear before T3. To put this point differently, while *ousia* is already introduced in the discussion at 185c8 and at first seems to signify the mere fact that something we perceive is

[48] The reader may compare Michael Frede's suggestion about the latter point (1987, pp. 7-8) with that of David Sedley (2004, p. 110).

(or perhaps is *something*), the later discussion makes clear that recognizing that something is (or is something) is not the termination point of that activity of the soul that we may call thinking, but is rather the starting point. Once we recognize *that* something is, we may in some cases also need to proceed to ask *what* it is and try to settle that question, at least if we are inclined to seek knowledge and believe that the question what that particular something is stands in need of further inquiry in order to be settled properly.

Section IV: Knowledge, *ti esti* questions, and dialectic

Having consolidated the conclusion that there are a number of "properties" or "things," including being and the beneficial, that we cannot perceive but can only reach toward through thinking, Socrates finally asks Theaetetus (at 186c7) whether it is possible to reach, or "hit upon" (*tygchanein*), truth (*alētheia*) if one does not reach being. Theaetetus agrees that it is not, and Socrates asks how someone who has not hit upon the truth about something could have knowledge of it (*pote toutou epistēmōn estai;* 186c9-10). Again, Theaetetus concedes that this is not possible. The conclusion of the entire inquiry that started when Theaetetus first suggested that knowledge might be perception is, therefore, that knowledge is to be found, not in our experiences (*en tois pathēmasin*), but only in our reasoning about these (*en tō[i] peri ekeinōn syllogismō[i]*), since it is possible to grasp (*hapsasthai*) being and truth only in reasoning, not in our experiences (186d2-6). In addition to rapping up the whole discussion of Theaetetus first suggested thesis, these final steps of the refutation also add two important points: i) truth depends upon hitting being, and ii) knowledge depends on truth.

Now, this connection between knowledge and being was already hinted at at the beginning of the inquiry, at 152c5-6, where Socrates suggested that perception, on the interpretation he was suggesting at that point, would be unerring (*apseudes*) and always about being, just as we are inclined to think that knowledge will be. As I have argued in the previous two sections, however, the passage 184b3-186e12 provides a gradual clarification of being, by picking up certain elements from the previous discussion of Protagoras' measure doctrine, that imbues being with a richer or ontologically more loaded sense than it had at the beginning of the inquiry. If this argument is along the right lines, we are entitled to infer that the idea that knowledge depends on being mentioned already at the beginning of the inquiry, is also given a more precise meaning in the passage. Further, the passage 184b3-186e12 also gives the connection between being and truth a more precise meaning. At 152c5-6 Socrates suggested that knowledge is unerring and about being, but did not offer any explanation for these claims, while the final steps in the 184b3-186e12 does offer an argument for the claim

that knowledge depends on being, namely that we cannot be said to know something unless we reach or hit upon truth about this something, and that we cannot obtain such truth if we do not hit upon, or grasp, the being of that something we wish to know.

Without pressing the point too much, I would like to suggest that truth, in the final passages of 184b3-186e12, means, more or less, what at least the earlier Heidegger claimed truth originally meant to the Greeks, namely un-concealment.[49] Put differently, Socrates' argument, as I understand it, is that knowledge is the result of a specific activity, called thinking or calculation, when that activity succeeds in grasping the being of something in the sense of revealing it to us as it is. Truth is not so much a function of our judgements as it is a function of being in the sense that we only obtain truth if our thinking is of such a quality that it manages to uncover or reveal the being of what we inquire into or think about. If this is correct, the point Socrates is making is not that we only have knowledge if our judgements correspond to matters-of-fact, but that we only have knowledge if we grasp the being, that is, if we are able to answer the *ti esti* question, of the subject matter we claim to know.

But, the reader may wonder, even granted that Plato is making these points about truth, being, and knowledge that I argue he is, what has all of this to say about dialectic. For, it may be objected, what I have established is at best a general point about knowledge, not a specific point about the power of *dialegesthai* mentioned in the *Parmenides* that I set out from in this chapter. To address this worry, and to conclude the chapter, some observations about Parmenides' claim about the power of *dialegesthai* at 135b5-c3 in the *Parmenides* and its connection with the *Theaetetus* are called for.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, it is not fully clear from the *Parmenides* itself what is meant by the expression *tēn tou dialegesthai dynamin*. What is clear is that *dialegesthai* is used in a quasi-technical sense and must mean something like "conversation engaged in for the purpose of achieving knowledge," for Parmenides claims, first, that the power of *dialegesthai* depends on our *dianoia* having forms toward which it may be directed (135b8-c2), and suggests, second, that if this power is destroyed, philosophy will become impossible as well (135c5). While the passage does not tell us explicitly how the power of *dialegesthai* is connected with dianoia and *philosophia*, the fact that Parmenides brings it into close proximity to both rules out that *dialegesthai* means something like mere casual conversation. Should we, then, follow those critics who translate the expression *tēn tou*

[49] See Heidegger 1992, pp. 15-17; 1988, pp. 10-19. On this point, see also Rowett 2018, pp. 43-5.

dialegesthai dynamin as "dialectic" [50] and conclude that the point of the passage form the *Parmnides* is to indicate what is required, ontologically speaking, if philosophy and dialectic is to be possible? I wish to resist this suggestion.

First, when Socrates introduces forms at the beginning of the *Parmenides*, he does not do so solely for the purpose of philosophy. He does so primarily in order to avoid certain consequences that follow from Zeno's paradoxes that would prove fatal for our ability to speak in a reasonable manner about the world we perceive. Positing forms, the young Socrates seems to suggest, is necessary if any knowledge of this world is to be possible.

Second, the fact that Parmenides states that it is the power of *dialegesthai*, not the science of dialectic, i.e. *dialektikē*, that will be destroyed if one does not allow that there are forms, suggests that he is making a much more sweeping claim than he would by claiming that philosophy and dialectic will become impossible. I would like to suggest that Parmenides is indicating that our ability to engage in conversation has a specific power inherent in it, namely a power to obtain knowledge, that may be unfolded more or less successfully, and may be used to obtain knowledge of different things, and that this power, however it is unfolded, depends on our *dianoia* having forms toward which it may be directed. It is not just philosophy, but knowledge quite generally, that stands in need of forms—even if it is philosophy, it may be argued, that will help make this clear to us, when we inquire into knowledge and being, and even if philosophy, more than any kind of positive expertise, requires that we recognize that there are forms for matters such as the good and the beautiful, if it is to count as true philosophy and a genuine attempt at obtaining knowledge.

Is such a conception of *dialegesthai* and the power inherent in it reflected also in the *Theaetetus*? The answer, I think, is yes. At 161d7-162a2, after having developed Theaetetus' thesis that knowledge is perception by connecting it to the Protagorean measure doctrine and the Heraclitean flux-ontology, Socrates makes the following statement about Protagoras' doctrine, on the supposition that it is true: "How can anyone be justified in supposing him qualified to teach others, for large fees, and the rest of us more ignorant than him, so that we need to go to him to be taught? … I say nothing about my side of things, and how ridiculous it makes *me*, if this theory is correct – me and my art of midwifery, presumably along with the whole business of conversation (*sympasa hē tou dialegesthai pragmateia*). Examining the things that appear to and are believed by one another, and trying to refute them, when each

[50] See for instance Gill 2012, p. xx.

person's appearances and beliefs are correct – isn't this just an inordinately drawn-out piece of tomfoolery, if Protagoras' 'truth' is true…?"

The point Socrates makes here is, then, that, if Protagoras' teaching is true, a teaching Socrates claims is grounded in the Heraclitean doctrine that denies that anything is what it is, itself by itself, the whole business of *dialegesthai* is made pointless. There can be little doubt that Socrates means to include dialectic as part of that business—the point of dialectical inquiry being, among other things, to test what each of us believes while aiming for knowledge about the subject matter that is inquired into. But it seems clear to me that he also means to include types of expert knowledge more generally under this heading. For the development of any kind of expert knowledge, it may be argued, depends also on this kind of truth-seeking conversation where false opinions are substituted with correct ones, and it is this fact, and the fact that this is only possible if one does not accept Protagoras' doctrine and the ontology supporting it, that Socrates seeks to make Theodorus and Theaetetus realize in the *Theaetetus*. Thinking (*to dianoeisthai*) is, as Socrates later suggests to Theaetetus, nothing else than conversing (*dialegesthai*) with oneself, asking oneself questions and answering them, confirming one thing and denying another (189e4-190a2). Such thinking is not the privilege of philosophers, I submit, but common to everyone who aims to achieve knowledge about anything. It is the kind of thinking that may be carried out in conjunction with other people, in dialogue, that Socrates is a profound defender of and our scientific community depends on.

The reader may still worry whether I end up suggesting that the *Theaetetus* has nothing to say about philosophy and dialectic as a specifically philosophical kind of expertise, but only about the activity of thinking or conversing that philosophy, as well as other kinds of expertise, depend on. I mean to suggest no such thing. During his conversation with Theodorus, Socrates at one point (at 175b7-175d2) explains that what characterizes philosophers, in contrast to politically inclined people, is their relentless inquiry into matters such as justice and injustice, kingship, and human happiness, for the purpose of deciding what they are. These are the matters that Socrates elsewhere describes as the greatest matters (see *Apo* xx; see also *Soph.* yy and *Gorg.* 451d7-8), of which knowledge is required if we are to live flourishing lives, and that Plato depicts Socrates as interested in already as a young man in the *Parmenides* where he insists that we need to posit forms for them (see 130a7-9). When Theaeteus in the passage I have analyzed in this chapter comes to see that benefit or the good is on a par with being, and that both being and benefit are stable objects of inquiry that it requires real effort to acquire knowledge about, he is, I submit, on his way to becoming

a real dialectician. For the inquiry into such matters, and the attempt to reach clarity about them, is what dialectic is truly about according to Plato. In this regard, at least, I doubt that Plato ever changed his conception of dialectic.

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