

## PLATO'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Plato was the first person in the history of the world to produce a great all-embracing system of philosophy. Plato gathered the entire harvest of Greek philosophy. All that was best in the Pythagoreans, the Eleatics, Heracleitus, and Socrates, reappears, transfigured in the system of Plato. Like all great systems of thought, Plato's philosophy grew out of the thoughts of previous thinkers but it is not to be understood that Plato merely took the best thoughts of others and worked them into some sort of philosophy of his own. On the contrary, he was in the highest degree, an original thinker. Plato appropriates the ideas of Heracleitus, Parmenides and Socrates. But he does not leave them as he finds them. He takes them as the germs of a new development. They are the foundations, below ground, upon which he builds the palace of philosophy.

Like Socrates Plato started his investigation with opposition to the Sophists. The first part of Greek Philosophy is negative. In answering the question - what is knowledge, Plato follows implicitly the teaching of Socrates. After, demolishing the stand of the Sophists, Plato advances his own theory of Ideas.

The theory of Ideas is itself based upon the theory of knowledge. The question is what is knowledge? The question is what is truth? Plato opens the discussion by telling us first what knowledge and truth are not. His object here is the refutation of false theories. These theories must be disposed of to clear the ground, preparatory to positive exposition. The first such false theory which Plato attacks is that knowledge is perception. The main object of Theaetetus is to refute this theory that knowledge is perception. His arguments against this theory may be summarized as follows:-

1. That knowledge is perception is the theory of Protagoras and the Sophists. We may observe to what results it leads. What it amounts to is that what appears to each individual true is true for that individual. But this is false in its application to our judgement of future

events. The frequent mistakes which men make about the future show this. In general, what appears to each individual to be the truth about the future frequently does not turn out so in the event.

2. Perception yields contradictory impressions. The same object appears large when near, small when removed to a distance. Compared with some things it is light, with others heavy. The question is which of these impressions are true? To know which is true, we must be able to exercise a choice among the different impressions, to prefer one to another, to discriminate, to accept this and reject that. But if knowledge is perception, then we have no right to give one perception preference over another. For all perceptions are knowledge and all are true.
3. Perception is a joint product of the perceived object and percipient. Nobody knows what the perceived object is in itself. In perception there is no object in itself to be known at all. Each perception is relative to the percipient.
4. This doctrine renders all teaching, all discussion, proof or disproof, impossible. Since all perceptions are equally true, the student's perception must be just as much the truth as those of his teachers. Therefore, his teachers can teach him nothing. Thus all proof and refutation are rendered futile by the theory of Protagoras.
5. If perception is truth, man is the measure of all things because man is a percipient being. But other animals are also percipient beings. So the lowest brute will be measure of all things equally with men.
6. The theory of Protagoras contradicts itself. Protagoras admits that what appears to 'me' true is true. Therefore, if it appears to 'me' true that the doctrine of Protagoras is false, Protagoras himself must admit that it is false.
7. This theory destroys the objectivity of truth. There will be no distinction between truth and falsehood. The same thing is true and false at the same time. Hence it makes no difference at all whether we say that a proposition is true or whether we say that it is false.
8. Again if perception is knowledge and memory is not knowledge, then this doctrine will be absurd. A man knows and at the same moment does not know. If a man shuts his eyes after perceiving something, but remembers it, then he has no knowledge of what he remembers according to this theory.

9. In all perception there are elements which are not contributed by the senses. Our thought involves some other processes like comparison and classification. The sense themselves cannot perform these acts of comparison and contrast. Each sensation is an isolated dot. It cannot go beyond itself. Therefore mind acts as a co-ordinating central authority, which receives the isolated sensations, combining, comparing and contrasting them. The idea of identity and difference are not yielded by senses. The intellect itself introduces them into things. Yet they are involved even in the simplest acts of knowledge. Therefore, knowledge cannot consist simply of sense-impressions as even the simplest knowledge contains more than sensation. Thus with these arguments Plato refutes that knowledge is perception.

Now Plato wants to refute another theory that knowledge is opinion. If knowledge is not the same as perception, neither it is, on the other hand, the same as opinion. Wrong opinion is clearly not knowledge. But even right opinion cannot be called knowledge. Right opinion may also be grounded on something which is not true understanding. We often fill intuitively or instinctively, that something is true. But we cannot give any definite grounds for our belief. The belief may be correct, but according to Plato it is not knowledge. It is only right opinion. To possess knowledge, one must not only know that a thing is so, but one must know the reasons. Knowledge must be full and complete understanding, rational comprehension. It is not mere instinctive belief. It must be grounded on reason. Knowledge can only be produced by reason. Right opinion is unstable and uncertain whereas knowledge cannot be shaken. He who truly knows and understands cannot be robbed of his knowledge by anything. Opinion may be true or false. Knowledge can only be true.

Now we can pass to the positive side of the theory of knowledge. The question is if knowledge is neither perception nor opinion, what is knowledge? In this respect Plato adopts the Socratic doctrine that all knowledge is knowledge through concepts. A concept is something fixed and permanent. It is not liable to mutation according to the subjective impression of the individual. It gives objective truth. Knowledge is not opinion. It is founded on reason. This is the same as saying that it is founded upon concepts.

However, though Plato in answering the question "What is knowledge?", follows implicitly the teaching of Socrates, yet he builds upon this teaching a new and wholly un-Socratic metaphysic of his own. Plato converts the Socratic theory of knowledge into a theory of the nature of reality.

Plato's theory of knowledge is summarized in the famous figure of the divided line at the end of the book VI of the Republic. A vertical line is divided into four segments. Each of this represents a level of knowledge. Each of the four types of knowledge has its peculiar object and appropriate method of enquiry.

1. The lowest segment represent conjecture. It is a kind of sense knowledge conversant with images shadows, dreams etc ( E.g :- A mirage seen in the desert is a type of conjecture).
2. The second segment represent belief. It is the knowledge of sensible object like material objects such as trees, mountains, river etc. or human artifact such as house, tables etc. The source of belief is sense perception. It is also probable knowledge. Plato critically examines the identification of knowledge with perception conjecture and belief. This two are grouped together by Plato under the heading opinion which embraces all sense derived knowledge.
3. The third segment of the line represents discursive intellect or understanding. It occupies itself not with sensuous particulars but with mathematical entities such as numbers, line, planes, triangles and other arithmetical and geometrical objects. This form of knowledge is hypothetical. It proceeds deductively from definitions and unproved assumptions.
4. The highest segment of the line represents rational insight. Each objects are the form or ideas. The method by which such knowledge is achieved is dialectic. Dialectical knowledge rests on categorical first principles. □