

PLATO

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PARMENIDES
and other
Dialogues
Protagoras,
The Sophist
and
The Statesman



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sort of man you describe his son to be. He was highly respected—left a lot of money too. But I don't know the youngster's name.

THEAET. Theaetetos is his name, Socrates; but I believe the property has been squandered by trustees. All the same, open-handedness is another of his admirable qualities.

SOCR. You give him a splendid character. Do ask him to come and sit down with us.

THEAET. Certainly, Theaetetos! come here and sit by Socrates.

SOCR. Yes, do, Theaetetos; I want to have a look at myself and see what my face is like. Theodoros tells me it resembles yours. If each of us had a lyre, and he said they were both tuned to the same pitch, would we just take his word for it or would we first try to find out whether he spoke as a musician?

THEAET. We should want to know that.

SOCR. And believe him if he turned out to be a musician, but not otherwise?

THEAET. Exactly.

SOCR. And now, if we are at all interested in the so-called [145] resemblance of our faces, we must presumably ask whether or not the allegation is made by a skilled draughtsman.

THEAET. I agree.

SOCR. Well, is Theodoros a portrait painter?

THEAET. Not so far as I am aware.

SOCR. Nor a geometer?

THEAET. Oh yes, he is, Socrates, very much so.

SOCR. And an astronomer, an arithmetician, a musician and in general an educated man?

THEAET. I think so.

SOCR. Then if, whether by way of a compliment or of disapproval, he says we have some physical likeness to one another there is no particular reason why we should take any notice.

THEAET. Perhaps not.

SOCR. But suppose he praises the mind of one of us for virtue and intelligence: surely there would be good reason why the one who heard the other so commended should be anxious to examine him, and why the latter should be keen to show his gifts.

THEAET. Certainly, Socrates.

SOCR. Now is the time then, my dear Theaetetos, for you to show *your* gifts, and for me to examine them. For I assure you that, often as Theodoros has spoken to me in praise of citizen or stranger, he has never praised anyone so highly as he was praising you a few minutes ago.

THEAET. I am pleased to hear it, Socrates; but perhaps he was only joking.

SOCR. That would be quite unlike Theodoros. Come now, do not try to escape from your bargain on the pretext that his words were insincere. We don't want him to have to testify on oath. In any case, no one is going to accuse him of perjury; so don't be afraid to stand by your undertaking.

THEAET. I suppose I must, if you say so.

SOCR. Tell me, then: you are studying geometry under Theodoros, I believe?

THEAET. I am.

SOCR. Together with astronomy, harmonics and arithmetic?

THEAET. I try hard to do so.

SOCR. So do I, my boy, from him and from anyone else who appears to understand these things. Although, generally speaking, I make fairly good progress, there is one small matter which puzzles me and which I should like to discuss with you and your friends. Tell me: isn't it true that learning about something means becoming wiser in that subject?

THEAET. Of course.

SOCR. And what makes people wise is wisdom, I suppose.

THEAET. Yes.

SOCR. And does this differ in any way from knowledge?

THEAET. Does what differ?

SOCR. Wisdom. I take it that men are wise in those things whereof they have knowledge?

THEAET. Of course.

SOCR. So knowledge and wisdom are identical?

THEAET. Yes.

SOCR. Well, that is just what puzzles me: I cannot satisfy myself as to what exactly knowledge is. [146] Can we answer that question? What do you all say? Which of us is going to speak first? Everyone who misses shall sit down and be donkey; as children say when they play ball; anyone who gets through without missing shall be our king and shall be entitled to make

us answer any question he likes to ask. Why the silence? I hope, Theodoros, that my love of argument is not making me rude; I only want to start a conversation so that we shall all feel at home with one another like friends.

THEOD. Nothing rude in that, Socrates. However, tell one of the lads to answer your questions; I'm not used to abstract discussion of this kind, nor am I ever likely to become so at my age. But it is quite in their line, and they stand a far better chance of improvement; youth, in fact, is capable of improvement in any and every direction. Stick to Theaetetos on whom you began: let him do the answering.

SOCR. Come, Theaetetos, you hear what Theodoros says. I don't imagine you will want to disobey him; it would in fact be quite wrong for you to turn down such a request from an older and wiser man. So do not begrudge me an answer: what do you think knowledge is?

THEAT. Well, Socrates, I cannot refuse, since you and Theodoros ask me. Anyway, if I go wrong, the two of you are sure to put me right.

SOCR. Certainly, if we can.

THEAT. In that case I think the things one can learn from Theodoros are knowledge—geometry and the other sciences you mentioned just now. Then there are cobblery and the crafts of other skilled workmen. Each and all of these are nothing else than knowledge.

SOCR. My word, you are generous, Theaetetos; so open-handed that, when asked for a single thing, you produce instead a whole variety.

THEAT. What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCR. Maybe I'm talking nonsense, but I will tell you what I have in mind. When you speak of cobblery I take it that you mean precisely the knowledge of how to make shoes.

THEAT. Exactly.

SOCR. And what about joinery? Are you not referring simply to the knowledge of how to make wooden furniture?

THEAT. Quite so.

SOCR. In both cases therefore you are defining what the craft is knowledge of?

THEAT. Yes.

SOCR. But my question, Theaetetos, was not 'What are the

objects of knowledge?' nor 'How many kinds of knowledge are there?' We were not trying to count them, but to find out what knowledge (the thing itself) really is. Is there nothing in that?

THEAT. No, you are perfectly right.

SOCR. [147] Take another example. Suppose we were asked about some common or garden thing; for instance, what clay is. It would surely be ridiculous to answer 'potter's clay, oven-maker's clay and brick-maker's clay'.

THEAT. Perhaps.

SOCR. To begin with, it is absurd to imagine that the questioner gathers any meaning from our answer when we use the word 'clay'; no matter whose clay we call it—the doll-maker's or any other craftsman's. Surely you are not going to suggest that a man can understand a thing's name when he does not know what the thing is.

THEAT. Of course not.

SOCR. Then 'knowledge of shoes' conveys absolutely nothing to him if he doesn't know what knowledge is.

THEAT. No.

SOCR. A man, therefore, who has no conception of knowledge can derive no meaning from 'cobblery' or from the name of any other art.

THEAT. That is true.

SOCR. So it is ridiculous to answer the question 'What is knowledge?' by naming one of the arts, and thereby saying 'knowledge of so-and-so'—which was not what the question called for.

THEAT. I see your point.

SOCR. In the second place we are going an interminable way round when we might give a short and simple answer. For example, to the question about clay, the straightforward and obvious reply is 'earth mixed with moisture', regardless of whose clay it may be.

THEAT. It appears easy now, Socrates; when put like that. Your question seems to involve a problem like one that came up not long ago when your namesake here, Socrates, and I were talking.

SOCR. What was that, Theaetetos?

THEAT. Our friend Theodoros was proving to us something