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‘We Are What We Eat’. The *Theaetetus* as a Philosophy of Education

1 A Tasting Menu

Upon Theaetetus’ proposal that knowledge is perception, Socrates examines what this statement might mean with him. As the subsequent characterization of perception is puzzling, Socrates asks the boy:

Do these doctrines seem pleasant to you, Theaetetus, and do you find their taste agreeable (καὶ γεύοιο ἂν αὐτῶν ὡς ἀρεσκόντων)? (157c1–2)

And since Theaetetus doubts whether Socrates defends the doctrine that he has just expounded sincerely or wants to put him to the test, Socrates adds:

You forget, my friend, that I myself know nothing about such things, and claim none of them as mine, but am incapable of bearing them and am merely acting as a midwife to you, and for that reason am uttering incantations and giving you a taste of each of the wisdoms:¹ καὶ παρατίθῃμι ἐκάστων τῶν σοφῶν ἀπογεύσασθαι (157c5–d1).

Twice, Socrates compares the doctrines considered throughout the conversation to delicacies that he gives his young interlocutor to try. The chefs, whose dishes he serves to the hard-working boy one after another, are undoubtedly the most renowned, with Protagoras as a true ‘Ferran Adrià’ at the peak of his wisdom.

Needless to say, in his usual diet Theaetetus often consumes nutrients provided by Theodorus’ teaching, although he also seems to have tried creations by the eristic cooks every now and again, among the many other *delicacies of the soul* that the *Theaetetus* as a whole, serves up to us in a sophisticated tasting menu.

The alternatives that Socrates presents to provoke Theaetetus’ reflection are part of the method that Socrates uses to refute them, in order to place the young on the right track. The fact that he appeals to his interlocutor’s ‘taste’ rather than to his intellectual powers to judge properly, together with his calling them

1 I am aware of the fact that the expression is often translated as ‘the wise men’.

‘encantations’ clearly indicates, at least to the reader of the *Gorgias*,² that Socrates is in his ironic mood at considering first impressions and (irrational) inclinations.

2 A Varied Menu at Wisdom’s Table

From the passage just quoted, it is immediately understood that, at least in this context of the *Theaetetus*, there does not seem to be *wisdom*, in the singular, but *wisdoms*, (as I take it, instead of ‘wise men’) in the plural. It is no hard task to make a list of all the characters that receive the title of ‘wise’ in the dialogue. Let us quote the passages in which the description is explicit, where it is always Socrates speaking:

1. On midwives: ‘Well, have you noticed this also about them, that they are the most skilful of matchmakers, since they are very wise (ὡς πάσσοφοι οὔσαι) in knowing what union of man and woman will produce the best possible children?’ (149d5–6). Regarding his own skill as a midwife of souls: ‘I have handed over many of them to Prodicus, and many to other wise and inspired men (ὧν πολλοὺς μὲν δὴ ἐξέδωκα προδικῶ, πολλοὺς δὲ ἄλλοις σοφοῖς τε καὶ θεσπεσίοις ἀνδράσι).’ (151b3–4)
2. Regarding the conception of reality as an everlasting flow:

And on this subject all the wise men, except Parmenides, may be marshalled in one line (καὶ περὶ τούτου πάντες ἐξῆς οἱ σοφοὶ πλὴν Παρμενίδου συμφερέσθων) — Protagoras and Heraclitus and Empedocles — and the chief poets in the two kinds of poetry, Epicharmus, in comedy, and in tragedy, Homer.’ (152e1–4).

3. On Protagoras: ‘while we were honouring him like a god for his wisdom (ἐπὶ σοφίᾳ), he was after all no better in intellect (εἰς φρόνησιν) (...) than a tadpole’ (161c6–d1), since tadpoles are also endowed with senses and, according to Protagoras, these are infallible; an argument that also applies to the ‘pig,

² As it is well known, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates regards cooking not as an art but just as a certain ‘experience at bringing about gratification and pleasure’ (462e–463a). The problem is that cooking ‘has slipped into the guise of doctoring, and passes itself off as knowing the best foods for the body’. If there were a contest between a cook and a doctor the latter would die of starvation (464e). Socrates declares this is ‘shameful’ for it ‘makes guesses about what is pleasant in the absence of what is best’, and has no speech to give about the nature of the things it makes use of, and cannot state the cause of any of them (465a).

a dog-faced baboon or some still stranger creature of those that have sensations'. (161c4)

4. On Theaetetus: 'So I must attack the wise Theaetetus (ἐπὶ τὸν σοφὸν Θεαίτητον) again.' (162c1)
5. On the eristic: 'He would have charged down upon hearing and smelling and such senses, and would have argued persistently and unceasingly until you were filled with admiration of his greatly desired wisdom (τὴν πολυάρατον σοφίαν) and were taken in his toils.' (165d3–e2)
6. About 'those who have knocked about in courts and the like from their youth up': 'but they think they have become clever and wise (δεινοί τε καὶ σοφοί).' (173b2)
7. Finally, about the profession that refutes the identification of knowledge in itself with true opinion: 'The profession of those who are greatest in wisdom (ἡ τῶν μεγίστων εἰς σοφίαν), who are called orators and lawyers.' (201a6)

The list of characters that are *explicitly* qualified, thus, as 'wise' includes all the following names: midwives, Prodicus, Parmenides, Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Epicharmus, Homer, the gods, pigs, tadpoles, dog-faced baboons or some still stranger creatures of those that have sensations, Theaetetus, the eristic, those who have knocked about in courts and the like from their youth up, orators and lawyers.

It is obvious that the context in which some of these statements appear makes it clear that the label is ironic. And yet, it is still true that Theaetetus has, not a single example, but a plurality of different cases before his eyes, when, at the beginning of the dialogue, he sets out to investigate what true knowledge and genuine wisdom might be alongside Socrates.

Incidentally, we would gain nothing privileging a model of wise man over others *from the outset*, because in doing so we would give our answer in advance instead of leaving – as the art of the midwife demands – that it be the boy himself who, with hard work, should shed some understanding on the matter.

So, when at the beginning of the dialogue, we begin to investigate who we should grant the title of 'wise' to – whether it be the sophist or the mathematician, the poet or the speaker, etc. – the investigation is confronted at its starting point with certain confusion, because what is said with respect to knowledge and wisdom seems like a motley set of divergent stances to the inexperienced eye.

3 Two (or Maybe Three) ‘Philosophers’

It is therefore tempting to suppose that, in the face of such an entanglement of wisdoms, and given that Socrates recognizes himself precisely as being sterile in wisdom (ἄγονός εἰμι σοφίας, 150c3), only he should appear on the scene as a legitimate candidate to occupy the position of philosopher. However, and against such temptation, philosophy is not one singular figure in the *Theaetetus* either.

In fact, as with “wisdom”, the word “philosophy” also appears in the plural in the dialogue. In the passage in question, Socrates points out the following observation to Theodorus:

And that makes me think, my friend, as I have often done before, how natural it is that those who have spent a long time in philosophies³ (οἱ ἐν ταῖς φιλοσοφίαις πολὺν χρόνον διατρίψαντες) appear ridiculous when they enter the courts of law as speakers.’ (172c3–5)

This passage sounds even more significant when we realize that Theodorus is not referred to as wise once throughout the whole dialogue, while on the other hand, he is *explicitly* considered a philosopher.

It is Socrates himself who recognizes Theodorus as being one of those who forms such part of the band of genuine philosophers; a recognition with which Theodorus, incidentally, identifies himself with pleasure. The passage where this occurs is at the centre of the dialogue. After characterizing those who frequent the courts, Socrates asks Theodorus if he wishes they proceed to ‘describe those who belong to our band’ (173b3), to which Theodorus answers affirmatively, and adds: ‘I like your saying that we who belong to this band (ἡμεῖς οἱ ἐν τῷ τοιῷδε χορεύοντες) are not servants of our arguments.’ (173c1) To which Socrates replies: ‘Very well, that is quite appropriate, since it is your wish; and let us speak of the leaders (περὶ τῶν κορυφαίων); for why should anyone talk about the inferior philosophers (φαύλως διατρίβοντας ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ)?’ (173c5–6).

What follows in the text is the so-called ‘digression of the philosopher’, which tells of a philosopher who, just like Thales as he appears in the eyes of a young Thracian servant girl (174a4–b1), deals with Heaven and Earth but knows nothing about men’s struggles for social reputation, status and pleasures.

In this context, it is therefore obvious, that we have not one but two models of philosophers in play:

³ I take the phrase literally, though it could be understood as referring to those who spend a long time on ‘philosophical studies’ (Cornford 1935, *ad locum*) or ‘pursuits’ (McDowell 1973, *ad locum*).

1. Thales and Theodorus deal with Heaven and Earth but know nothing of men's ordinary worries;
2. Socrates deals with men but, according to the *Apology*, knows nothing of Heaven and Earth.

Theodorus, who is Protagoras' friend, seems to be quite afraid of offending him and not really ready to seek the truth, while Socrates, who regards himself as one of those simple (φᾰῦλοι) philosophers,⁴ seems to satisfy his own description of the philosopher at disdaining ordinary human affairs,⁵ and at focusing on the universal, as he inquires and exerts himself to find out what a human being is and what his proper nature is (174b).

Can one of the two models alone suffice itself to educate boys like Theaetetus properly?

In fact, since the two appear in a text written by Plato, there may be a third possibility, a *third philosophy* that dialectically subsumes the other two. For, are not Theodorus and Socrates two ways of thought that must be simultaneously overcome and integrated into a superior vision of knowledge and wisdom? Is not Plato himself, then, the philosopher who gives us a third model, one that integrates Thales' manner of philosophising and Socrates' manner of philosophising into one higher entity? Dialectics is supposed to be universal in its content and in

⁴ The term φᾰῦλος is used twelve times in all the dialogue and almost always indicates that the others (Protagoras' theory implicit in Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as perception, the theory of Heracliteans and the battle between the Heracliteans and the Parmenidians) are not simple (φᾰῦλοι) while Socrates is so. Indeed: (1) at 151e1. Socrates observes that the definition of knowledge as perception is 'not a base (φᾰῦλον) doctrine' because it is the same that Protagoras said; (2) at 152d2, Socrates prepares to outline another important doctrine (οὐ φᾰῦλον λόγον) — namely the Heraclitean doctrine; (3) at 179d5, and confirmed by Theodorus at 179d6, Socrates observes that the battle between Heracliteans and the Parmenidians is not insignificant (οὐ φᾰῦλη); (4) at 181b1–4 and referring to this battle, Socrates proposes that if neither side is eventually able to speak with measure (μέτριον) then both he and Theodorus — comparatively simpler ones (φᾰῦλους ὄντας) — would make fools of themselves if they purported to have said something better; and (5) at 197a3, Socrates says that if he were a naysayer (ἀντιλογικός), he would give up the inquiry but that as they are simple (ἔσμεν φᾰῦλοι) he will persist in his attempt to define knowledge. (1), (2) and (3) demonstrate that the important doctrines are those of the others, while (4) and (5) show that Socrates always philosophises 'in a simple manner (φᾰῦλως)' (173c6).

⁵ See 174b4–6: 'For really such a man pays no attention to his next door neighbour; he is not only ignorant of what he is doing, but he hardly knows whether he is a human being or some other kind of creature.'

its method. The philosopher's mind flies in all directions (πανταχῆ πέτεται) below the earth and above the sky; he investigates every nature thoroughly of everything that is, each in its entirety, never lowering itself to anything close at hand καὶ πᾶσαν πάντη φύσιν ἐρευνωμένη τῶν ὄντων ἐκάστου ὅλου, εἰς τῶν ἐγγύς οὐδὲν αὐτὴν συγκαθειῖσα (173e–174a).

Let's leave this question for the moment and go back to Socrates. Too simple (φαῦλος) to profess any wisdom, he himself has comically suggested that his role is that of the dietician who gives Theaetetus dishes that the different cooks of wisdom have elaborated to be tasted. Plato gives us a clue to determine the nutritional value of each of these dishes for the soul of the young, by suggesting (1) that the wise resemble their doctrines and (2) that the disciples resemble their teachers. The result being that everyone becomes what his soul consumes or — if you'll allow me the naturist joke — that we are what we eat.

4 The Wise Resemble their Doctrines

To begin observing this phenomenon, let's consider the materialists, the Heracliteans and the Parmenideans.

4.1 The Hard Resistant Rude Materialists

Let's start with the materialists. When he sets out to clarify some of the consequences that follow on from Protagoras' thought, Socrates begins by warning Theaetetus against the materialist interpretation of perception with these words:

Look round and see that none of the uninitiated is listening. The uninitiated are those who think nothing is except what they can grasp firmly with their hands, and so deny the existence of actions and processes and all that is invisible. (155 e3–5)

To which Theaetetus replies: 'Truly, Socrates, those you speak of are very hard (σκληρούς) and resistant (ἀντιτύπους).' (155e6–156a1)

And Socrates agrees, adding that, 'they are very rude (ἄμουσοι).' (156a2)

So that,

1. The materialist doctrine maintains that only that which we can grasp with our hands exists, i.e. the corporeal, the hard and resistant; and
2. Materialistic thinkers turn out to be like the reality as they conceive it; namely: rude, hard and resistant.

4.2 The Hyperactive Heracliteans

Later on, Socrates alludes to the battle of great proportions that has taken place on the question of mobility or immobility of the real. Theodorus grants Socrates the benefit of examining it, with this portrait of the Heracliteans:

Certainly we must [examine Heraclitus' doctrines]. For it is no more possible, Socrates, to discuss these doctrines of Heraclitus (or, as you say, of Homer or even earlier sages) with the Ephesians themselves — those, at least, who profess to be familiar with them — than with madmen. For they are, literally, in perpetual motion; but as for keeping to an argument or a question and quietly answering and asking in turn, their power of doing that is less than nothing; or rather the words 'nothing at all' fail to express the absence from these fellows of even the slightest particle of rest. But if you ask one of them a question, he pulls out puzzling little phrases, like arrows from a quiver, and shoots them off; and if you try to get hold of an explanation of what he has said, you will be struck with another phrase of novel and distorted wording, and you never make any progress whatsoever with any of them, nor do they themselves with one another, for that matter, but they take very good care to allow nothing to be settled either in an argument or in their own souls, thinking, I suppose, that this is being stationary; but they wage bitter war against the stationary, and, so far as they can, they banish it altogether. (179e2–180b3)

According to this,

1. Heraclitus' doctrine maintains that everything moves in all the senses of the word 'movement'.
2. And the Heracliteans fight determinedly (πάνυ πολεμοῦσιν) to be pure movement themselves. They constantly break the conversation's development (ἐπὶ λόγῳ) with enigmatic aphorisms; they completely reject a fixed meaning of words; their speech does not follow any fixed course nor does it lead us anywhere, but it is lost in an aimless, restless, pure flow of reason; and, in short, they and their discourses are similar to reality as they conceive it, because they fight incessantly so that there is nothing stable in either their speeches or in their souls.

4.3 Noble Parmenides

Finally, the reference to the Parmenideans is very brief: upon concluding the examination of the flow's supporters, Socrates, despite Theodorus' encouragement to examine Parmenides and his doctrine as well, refuses to carry out this examination with the following arguments:

Because I have a reverential fear of examining in a flippant manner Melissus and the others who teach that the universe is one and motionless, and because I reverence still more one

man, Parmenides. Parmenides seems to me to be, in Homer's words, 'one to be venerated' and also 'awful' ('αἰδοῖός τέ μοι εἶναι ἄμα δεινός τε). For I met him when I was very young and he was very old, and he appeared to me to possess an absolutely noble depth of mind (παντάπασι γενναῖον) (183e3–184a1).

The transition from the plural ('Melissus and the others who teach that the universe is one and motionless') to the singular ('Parmenides, one') seems comically meaningful. In a sense it also may seem 'comic' that there should be 'many' 'moving' for the thesis about the 'immobile' 'One'.

Parmenides is 'one to be venerated and also awful'. It is at the beginning of *Odyssey* VIII that Homer tells us how the goddess Athena modifies Ulysses' aspect so that he appears as 'one to be venerated and also awful' in the eyes of the Phaeacians (verse 22). Since Ulysses is not really 'one to be venerated and also awful', but only seems so, perhaps the comparison that Socrates makes of him with Parmenides is somewhat ironic. In any case, how does Parmenides appear in Socrates' eyes?

Absolutely noble throughout, presented as an ecstatic and unique figure, worthy of admiration, Parmenides seems to be regarded as someone similar to the doctrine he defends:

1. According to Parmenides, only Being exists, and is therefore round, immobile, finished, perfect, and noble from beginning to end.
2. According to Socrates, Parmenides also seems to be noble, apparently to the point that he refuses to say anything about him (is it so because we would risk succumbing to the movement of words and betraying the truth of this unique sage who can only be welcomed in a silent vision full of respect and fear?). In any case, Socrates says that he is afraid that they may not understand his words and what they mean (184a).

4.4 The Wise Men and their Doctrines

The three examples that we have just considered allow us, therefore, to establish that the *Theaetetus* as a whole seems to suggest, not without a certain amount of humour, the following: *those who profess a doctrine tend to resemble, in a sense, the doctrine they profess or provoke reactions that are somehow connected to them. The Heracliteans become maniac and Parmenides is not to be discussed (wandering mortals with their resounding ears and tongues know nothing).*

5 The Disciples Are like their (Wise) Teachers

Now, perhaps it is generally true that everyone who professes a doctrine teaches it and, therefore, has disciples. Regarding this point, the *Theaetetus* also seems to suggest, again with a good dose of humour, that just as wise men resemble reality as they conceive it, *their disciples*, in turn, *resemble them*. Let’s consider the different cases the dialogue presents.

5.1 The Twisted Fraudulent Ones

There are young people who have had the courts as teachers. Of them Socrates says that to him they seem, ‘when compared with those who have been brought up in philosophy and similar pursuits, to be as slaves in breeding compared with freemen’ (172c7–d1). Socrates describes the effect that life in the courts has on the souls of those who have grown up frequenting them, in the following terms:

They have been deprived of growth and straightforwardness and independence by the slavery they have endured from their youth up, for this forces them to do crooked acts by putting a great burden of fears and dangers upon their souls while these are still tender; and since they cannot bear this burden with uprightness and truth, they turn forthwith to deceit and to requiting wrong with wrong, so that they become greatly bent and stunted. Consequently, they pass from youth to manhood with no soundness of mind in them, but they think they have become clever and wise. (172e5–173b2)

Such young people are educated, therefore, by the tortuous practices to which they devote themselves, and this also causes their souls to twist: their bent and stunted souls make them take for wise and upright what is truly distorted and petty.

5.2 The Docile Geometers

At the polar opposite of the Heracliteans, unable to follow an argument, Theaetetus appears docile and obedient to Socrates, despite his initial reluctance to converse with him. Theodorus himself laments the untamed Heracliteans’ manic excesses, and — whether out of contempt or cowardice — he seems reluctant to intervene in the conversation at all times. Thus, restraint and unwillingness to expose themselves in dialectical battles seem to be traits shared by the master and his disciple.

In truth, this impression is confirmed by Socrates himself when, at the beginning of the *Sophist*, he says that all the disciples of Theodorus are, without exception, similar in their docile and kind character. In effect, when the Eleatic Stranger demands an interlocutor that is tractable and gives no trouble, Socrates declares: ‘Well, you may choose whomever you please of those present; they will respond pleasantly (πράως) to you.’ (217d3–4)

Those who are present, leaving aside Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger, are Theodorus and his disciples. Socrates invites the Stranger to converse with Theaetetus; perhaps to see if the educational action he exercised on the boy the day before (in the conversation developed in the *Theaetetus*) has yielded any fruit. Be that as it may, the opening scene of the *Theaetetus*, in which, thirty years later, Euclides and Terpsion recall the present conversation, reveals to us that Theaetetus, now an adult, is not at all docile in the sense of a coward, for witnesses claim that his behaviour in battle was brave (142b6–7). In addition, we learn (at 185e) that he is also ‘beautiful’ in the sense of ‘smart’, and ‘good’, for, Socrates argues, if he speaks beautifully, he must be beautiful and good. The boy relieves his interlocutor from a long discussion as he thinks that the soul views some things by itself directly, and others through the bodily faculties.

Could these conversations with Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger have had anything to do with the formation of his character? It seems like a good question to consider the trilogy formed by the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist* and *The Statesman*. In the end, Socrates’ refuting work on him is supposed to contribute to make him more agreeable and careful.

5.3 The Materialists

The materialists’ case presents a difficulty that we will see repeated in the Heracliteans and the Parmenideans. The thing seems simple: as they are all hard and resistant, it may seem obvious that those who are their disciples will resemble their teachers. But it is not necessarily so. In the *Symposium* and in the *Alcibiades*, Plato strives to show that Socrates is not responsible for Alcibiades’ character and behaviour. On the other hand, Plato’s best disciple (Aristotle) did not accept his most relevant doctrine. Perhaps the truth is that mediocre teachers, in general terms, make mediocre disciples, while good teachers do not necessarily produce good students.

In any case, here lies an irresolvable paradox: since the materialist sages ‘deny the existence of actions and processes and all that is invisible’ (155e4–5), it

is evident that their doctrine cannot explain the existence of teachers and disciples, because it is unable to give any explanation whatsoever for the invisible *action* of teaching and the invisible *process* of learning.

5.4 The Heracliteans

With regard to the Heracliteans, Socrates comments on the portrait Theodorus paints of them, in these words:

Perhaps, Theodorus, you have seen the men when they are fighting, but have not been with them when they are at peace; for they are no friends of yours; but I fancy they utter such peaceful doctrines at leisure to those pupils whom they wish to make like themselves (βούλωνται ὁμοίους αὐτοῖς ποιῆσαι). (180b4–6)

Theodorus' answer is meaningful:

What pupils, my good man? Such people do not become pupils of one another, but they grow up of themselves (αὐτόματοι), each one getting his inspiration from any chance source, and each thinks the other knows nothing. (180b7–c2)

Here is the same paradox that we found in the materialists: according to Socrates, teachers strive to make their disciples resemble them; but according to their own doctrine, the Heracliteans cannot have disciples, because a disciple in some way preserves the teachings of the master, and yet the Heraclitean doctrine denies that anything could be preserved. Perhaps for this reason Socrates has said that they present two faces, one, when they fight, another, when they 'are at peace' and converse with their own kind.

So, what is interesting about their case is the following: (1) although apparently the Heracliteans would like to make their disciples resemble their teachers, (2) the truth is that according to the Heraclitian doctrine there can be no teachers and disciples.

5.5 The Parmenideans (and the Megarics)

Should the Parmenideans, then, have a better understanding of themselves as teachers? As we have already observed, the brief passage where they appear (183e3–184a1) is solemn and full of a reverential respect for their wisdom. And, nevertheless, the aforementioned transition of the plural (the most recent Parmenideans) to the singular (the old father Parmenides) makes us suspicious of such solemnity, which sounds more like a Socratic joke and Platonic irony.

Indeed, one could wonder how whoever maintains that only the One-Motionless exists, could explain the transmission of knowledge from teachers to disciples in any way at all. Is not the very presentation of Parmenides' disciples *in the plural* an ironic way of pointing out that transmitting something to *many* is not compatible with a doctrine according to which *there are not many* but only one?

The fact is that, in the *Poem*, the goddess 'teaches' the *kouros* both ways; the way of *doxa* necessarily admits plurality, and speaking and writing a poem imply movement and plurality. The fact is that Socrates says he does not understand Parmenides' words and their meaning here, while Plato makes Parmenides himself test his own thesis in the homonymous dialogue, to come to paradoxical conclusions.

While the materialists' views make it impossible for knowledge to flow, and Heraclitean logorrhea makes it impossible for anything to be preserved from teachers to disciples, (indeed, not even language as such is possible for words are universals that refer to steady meanings), the rejection of understanding on behalf of Socrates seems to block the way out in the case of Parmenides, despite of his having disciples, such as Zeno and Melissus. In fact, in all three cases there are undoubtedly teachers and disciples. But the point is that according to a certain extreme (humorous) reading of their respective doctrines, they should not be able to account for this fact.

The Parmenidean case is especially revealing in order to understand the *Theaetetus* thoroughly, as the Megaric disciples of Socrates, whose text we are reading (see 142d4–143c6), are precisely Parmenideans. Do we not find, then, throughout the whole dialogue, a strong no longer Socratic, but Platonic irony, an irony that Plato uses to take distance from his Megarian classmates?

Theaetetus is not, however, a disciple of the Megarics, but of Theodorus. Let us conclude our consideration of the *Theaetetus* by suggesting a key to its interpretation to progress towards a vision of the dialogue as a whole.

6 Conclusion: The *Theaetetus* as a Philosophy of Education

6.1 Becoming Good Men

The Socratic joke that presents the maieutic master as a dietician feeding different wisdoms to his disciples inspires a further, no less humorous, comparison, to epigenetics.⁶

Beyond its innate qualities, there is no doubt — at least according to the evidence we have presented extracted from the *Theaetetus* itself — that the environment in which they develop and the wisdom they feed from has a great influence on the man each one of them is to become. If the twisted atmosphere of the courts produces men of twisted souls, Theodorus' teaching nourishes docile men and that of Heraclitus, individuals with whom it is not possible to hold a conversation.

Theaetetus is a disciple of Theodorus. Is he in good hands? At the beginning of the conversation, Socrates shows his keen desire to know which young Athenians might become good men (ἐπίδοξοι γενέσθαι), and in fact this interest is what gives rise to the whole conversation (143d3–e2). Now, the collection of evidence that we have presented seems to suggest that what a young person becomes does not solely depend on his/her innate qualities and that even the best of the young Athenians educated by the courts will hardly become good men but rather twisted ones.

As for Theodorus, his teaching produces an initial beneficial effect on his disciples' souls: he makes them docile and able to follow a conversation. We might ask ourselves, however, if this is enough.

6.2 The *Theaetetus* as a Philosophy of Education

The situation in the *Theaetetus* is, then, as follows. As we have seen, young people do not become of a certain character — upright or twisted, combative or meek, etc. — in a self-sufficient way, but, at least in part, it depends on the environments they frequent and the teachings they receive. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates attempts to examine the teaching of Theodorus in the presence of his disciples. To what

⁶ It is known that two individuals of the same species subjected to a completely different diet or environment can develop very diverse potentialities. The case that is usually cited is that of queen bees, individuals genetically identical to the workers whose only difference is their diet based exclusively on royal jelly.

end? Perhaps so that Theodorus' disciples will notice that, in spite of their virtues, their master's teachings are not enough to train them as real philosophers and good men. It is obvious that Plato introduces Theodorus on several occasions as somebody afraid of examining Protagoras' doctrine openly, which means he is not brave enough to proceed as a free philosopher should.

Clearly, Theodorus senses the danger to which he is exposed, since he stubbornly resists entering into conversation with Socrates. Nevertheless, at the centre of the dialogue he ends up recognizing, with his praise for the portrait that Socrates has drawn of the leading philosopher, that his knowledge and, therefore, his teaching, knows nothing of men. The formation that he offers his disciples must, therefore, be completed with another teaching that helps them to move among men. However, what Theodorus conceives as a complement to his knowledge is not another form of knowledge, because, in his understanding, there is no possible knowledge about man. The only thing he expects from his friend Protagoras (162a3) — whom Socrates regards as his teacher (179d) — is an effective defence that allows him to live in peace among his fellow citizens.

Though the leading philosopher makes a fool of himself when he appears before a court, because he cannot persuade anyone as to the nobility of his own knowledge, for a moment, Socrates seems to give Theodorus what he needs, as he exclaims: 'If, Socrates, you could persuade all men of the truth of what you say as you do me, there would be more peace and fewer evils among mankind' (176a2–3).

Note that what he appreciates is the power of persuasion. If Theodorus is Protagoras' friend and trusts in his wisdom, it is precisely because Protagoras promises, not knowledge, but mediation with the city that guarantees the success of any enterprise one proposes. That Protagoras has no real disciples is well known from the opening scene of the dialogue that bears his name, where Hippocrates blushes with embarrassment when Socrates asks him if he wants to hire the services of Protagoras to become a sophist (312a). Protagoras has a choir of 'blind followers'; he is not a teacher like Theodorus, but someone who compares himself to a physician, and who promises to produce a beneficial effect on the cities: 'The wise and good orators — Protagoras says — make (ἐποίησεν) the useful (χρηστὰ), instead of the evil, seem to be right to their states.' (167c4–5).

Theodorus professes a theoretical knowledge that knows nothing of political life, while Protagoras claims to possess a power capable of *producing* well-being in the lives of individuals and cities. For a moment, Theodorus sympathized with Socrates when it seemed that he could produce an opinion in the city favourable to his (Theodorus') knowledge. However, the Socratic examination of Protagoras'

wisdom reveals to us the dangers to which any young person devoted to it will be exposed.

The whole of the *Theaetetus* seems then directed to save the young Theaetetus from the clutches of sophistry into which he could unconsciously be thrown by Theodorus' teaching. To this end, Socrates will guide the boy to reflect on the limits of the knowledge professed by his maths teacher, but also on the nature of wisdom in general.

Seen through today's eyes, Protagoras would be something like a guru of high finances or a top-paid coach, an expert in all kinds of strategies to ensure practical success in all types of companies, including political parties.

Those of us who work in high schools today know fine well that this rhetoric of success or competition has been creeping into our schools progressively. Everything that refers to the human being now tends to be measured with criteria of effectiveness. Of our young people we only hope that they are competent, that they succeed, and we do not care if they have solid elements to become thoughtful in the strong sense of the expression anymore. The so-called "humanities" have gradually dissolved due to the corrosive effect of our Protagoreanism. It is true that we still, sometimes, value art and literature, but we do it as a personal taste or as a sophisticated hobby, as a mere aristocratic option that does not need to be wanted by all our students.

At the centre of the *Theaetetus*, the very central question itself is what it is to be a good man (176a4–177b6). The role that the different knowledges and the different wisdoms can or should perform in the formation of young people so that they become good men and women is what has moved the whole of the investigation about what knowledge and wisdom are. The *Theaetetus* appears therefore, in short, as a Platonic contribution to a philosophy of education for our time. For, do we do well to entrust our young people in an exclusive manner to the modern-day Theodorus and Protagoras? Or should we still defend a mediating — maieutical — role for philosophy in the formation of good men and women? Whatever our answer may be, such is, in my view, what Plato set out to defend throughout the whole of his *Theaetetus*.