

Setting the Stage

1. Initial Assumptions (145–147)

- (a) Learning x is becoming or getting wiser (σοφώτερον γίνεσθαι, *sophōteron gignesthai*) about x .
- (b) A wise person is wise in virtue of, or due to, wisdom. Wisdom makes people wise. (Generally: F things are F because of F -ness; cf. *Phaedo* 100d, *Sophist* 274a.)
- (c) Wisdom is knowledge.

An anonymous commentator (probably between 50 BCE and 150 CE) interprets this passage (145d–e) akin to an argument:¹

- (1) To learn is to get wiser. (see above, a)
- (2) To get wiser is to *recover* wisdom. This assumes Plato's theory of recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*, *anamnēsis*): learning amounts to uncovering in oneself what is already there.
- (3) So, to learn is to recover wisdom. (from 1 and 2)
- (4) To be wise with regard to x is to be knowledgeable with regard to x .
- (5) So, wisdom is knowledge. (from 4)
- (6) So, to learn is to recover knowledge. (from 3 and 5)

2. Kinds of Knowledge

<i>Propositional</i> or factual knowledge, or know that: knowing that Theaetetus and Socrates are snub-nosed.	<i>Procedural</i> knowledge, or know how: knowing how to make shoes'. Plato's term is art, skill, or expertise (τέχνη, <i>technē</i>): technique.	Knowledge by <i>acquaintance</i> : knowing Theodorus (see, e.g., <i>Tht.</i> 192d).
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3. Midwifery

1. Maieutics suggests that Socrates first enables and then criticises other people's ideas; *aporia* or perplexity is hence analogous to the labour of childbirth.² The verb *ἀπορέω* (*aporeō*) means to be perplexed, at a loss, without further resources, or in (perhaps embarrassing) doubt. Hence, *ἀπορία* (*aporia*) is probably best translated as puzzlement or impasse. Since many of Plato's early works end in *aporia*, they are called 'aporetic'. In *Meno*, 80a Socrates is compared to a torpedo, who numbs anyone who comes in contact with it.

1 Sedley, D. (1993). A Platonist Reading of *Theaetetus* 145–147. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 67, 125–49.

2 Matthews, G. B. (1999). *Socratic Perplexity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2. People cannot be forced to be virtuous or happy; the maieutic process starts where they are, so to speak, and goes where they lead (cf. *Euthyphro* 14c)—perhaps to *aporia*, perhaps to insight and clarity. In this sense, Socratic midwifery takes people seriously.

3. In an intriguing passage in the *Sophist* (231b), the Eleatic Visitor suggests that the ‘noble’ sophist cleanses the soul insofar as he examines pseudo-wisdom and the mere appearance of knowing. In this sense, Socrates is a sophist. Yet in the background is Plato’s scepticism about deception and illusion that is also characteristic of the Sophists.

4. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades compares Socrates with a *silenos*: a bald, opulent, and snub-nosed demon with the tail and ears of a horse (215b ff.; 221d). But this appearance is deceptive: Socrates’s words only seem comical or ironical; yet, if properly grasped, they reveal their true significance.

5. Plato suggests that learning is re-collecting or re-cognising. He develops this theory of recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*, *anamnēsis*) in the famous slave boy passage in *Meno* (81d ff.³), and also in *Phaedo* (72e–77a). The core idea is that the soul is already in-formed (sic!), or possesses knowledge, when it becomes embodied. But this information needs to be recovered. Hence the midwife analogy, according to which people ‘deliver’ what they find in themselves. The theory of recollection hence connects knowledge and learning with the theory of Forms and the immortality of the soul.

6. A related puzzle: if the philosopher has knowledge of these Forms and is a philosopher in virtue of their ‘recovery’, then Socrates is, strictly speaking, not a philosopher: for he claims never to have produced any wisdom (e.g. *Tht.* 150c).

4. Elenchus

1. In spite of its unusual opening, *Theaetetus* resembles an early dialogue because of the typical ‘what-is-x?’ project. It thus appears to have the hallmark typical of the Socratic ‘elenchus’ (ἔλεγχος, *elenchos*): a refutation or cross-examination.

2. The technique: invite someone to claim *P*, explore what *P* entails, e.g., *Q*, and then show that *Q* and *P* are incompatible. Hence *P* needs correction or replacement. It is a refutation insofar as the one who claims to know something does in fact not know, or perhaps reveals inconsistent (incoherent) beliefs.

3. Hence, the elenchus is *destructive*: prove ignorance, expose false beliefs, mere opinions, incoherent contradictions, or just bullshit (cf. *Apology* 21d ff.); the price seems to be indecision and scepticism. Yet, it is also *constructive*, leading to further inquiry and conceptual clarification or refinement. There is a meta-philosophical point too: the result is less important than the enquiry itself. Philosophy is an active open-ended search with an uncertain outcome.

3 *Meno* 85d: “Without anyone having taught him, and only through questions put to him, he will understand, recovering the knowledge out of himself?”: οὐκοῦν οὐδενὸς διδάξαντος ἀλλ’ ἐρωτήσαντος ἐπιστήσεται, ἀναλαβὼν αὐτὸς ἐξ αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπιστήμην; (*oukoun oudenos didaxantos all’ erōtēsantos epistēsetai, analabōn autos ex hautou tēn epistēmēn?*).

