

Theaetetus 142–160

General remark on coursework. For CATS points, you can (a) answer a selection of questions from coursework sheets like this one amounting to about 1,500 words in total, (b) write an essay of about the same length on a topic arranged with me, or (c) continuously work on a reflective course dairy, writing on your thoughts about the reading, your questions about it, remarks on the discussion, or how your understanding of Plato grows as the course develops. I will write a summative feedback at the end of the course, but I hope to give you formative assessment as we go. Note too that the coursework sheets are also intended to guide preparatory reading for class, and hence are useful even if you do not want credit. (The questions with asterisks are a bit more difficult or demanding.)

1. Give an outline of the dialogue's context, or the 'frame' (142a–143c).
- 2.★ In your own view, is there any point or fact that stands out?
3. At 145d, Socrates mentions a 'small point' that puzzles him: what is this point (145c–146c)?
- 4.★ In the same passage (145d–e), Socrates makes three claims about learning, wisdom, and knowledge. Identify them.
5. What is Theaetetus first answer to Socrates's question (146d)?
- 6.★ And what is wrong with this initial suggestion (146d–147c)?
- 7.★ Socrates: unless one knows knowledge, one does not understand knowledge of shoes (147b). What is the point? Do you agree?
8. What strikes you most about the midwifery passage (148e–151d)?
9. Once Theaetetus provides D1 at 151e ('knowledge is nothing but perception'), Socrates relates this to Protagoras. Identify this new thesis.
10. At 151c, Socrates introduces a 'secret doctrine'. Briefly explain this second new thesis.
11. Between 153e and 157d, Socrates develops a theory of perception. Sketch the gist of this theory.
12. Socrates mentions dreams and hallucinations (157d–158e). Why?

Background Information. (a) An unusual feature of *Theaetetus* is that Euclides has written down the conversation, and even fact-checked his notes with Socrates himself. For a contrasting impression about the inferiority of the written text, see *Phaedrus* 274b–277a. (We will discuss that passage in class.) (b) Terpsion and Euclides were present when Socrates drank the hemlock; while Plato 'was ill' (see *Phaedo* 59b–c). (c) For a similar false start in defining virtue or excellence, see *Meno* 71d–79e. (d) The mathematical example at 147 is intriguing. As I understand it, Theaetetus provides a *general* solution to the problem of finding the square roots for 'oblong' (i.e. non-'square' numbers), such as 3, 5, 6, etc.: \sqrt{n} is irrational iff there is no 'square' integer m such that $n = m^2$. Ignoring the maths, the point is that Theaetetus demonstrates that *knows* something (the law in question), and he knows *how* to get to know it (not by drawing it like Theodorus). Yet, he still cannot apply this to the question about 'knowing knowledge'. Even though he

needs help from the midwife, Theaetetus is a model learner. There is a good chance that we—Plato’s audience—come to know too, even if this may be a life-long endeavour. (Recall: at the time of writing, Theaetetus is dying.)¹ (e) At 149a, Socrates mentions that he makes people feel difficulties (*ποιῶ ... ἀπορεῖν, ποιο ... aporein*). This ‘aporia’ (*ἀπορία, aporia*) means puzzlement or impasse; the associated verb means to be perplexed, at a loss, without further resources, or in doubt. In a passage in *Meno* (79e–80d) Socrates is compared to a torpedo. (f) At 150d, Socrates alludes to the theory of recollection (‘anamnesis’), according to which learning something is to remember it. Hence learning is akin to a process of re-discovering what we already know. For discussion, see *Meno* 81 and *Phaedo* 72e–77a. (g) Little is known about Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490–420 BCE), a early sophist who appears also in *Meno* and, of course, in *Protagoras*. In fact, the passage at 152a is one of the few citations that give us an insight in his work. The other famous passage is the opening of a book on the gods, in which Protagoras defends agnosticism (cf. *Tht.* 162d–e): “Concerning the gods, I cannot ascertain whether they exist or whether they do not, no what form they have; for there are many obstacles to knowing, including the obscurity of the question and the brevity of human life.”²

1 See Giannopoulou, Z. (2013). *Plato’s Theaetetus as a Second Apology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2 DK 80 B4, See Graham, D. W. (2010). *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, Part 2, p. 707. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

