

SOCRATES: Is it also the best way to *discover* the things that are? If one discovers something's name has one also discovered the thing it names? Or are names only a way of getting people to learn things, and must investigation and discovery be undertaken in some different way?

CRATYLUS: They must certainly be undertaken in exactly the same way and by means of the same things.

b SOCRATES: But don't you see, Cratylus, that anyone who investigates things by taking names as his guides and looking into their meanings runs no small risk of being deceived?

CRATYLUS: In what way?

SOCRATES: It's clear that the first name-giver gave names to things based on his conception of what those things were like. Isn't that right?

CRATYLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if his conception was incorrect and he gave names based on it, what do you suppose will happen to us if we take him as our guide? Won't we be deceived?

c CRATYLUS: But it wasn't that way, Socrates. The name-giver had to know the things he was naming. Otherwise, as I've been saying all along, his names wouldn't be names at all. And here's a powerful proof for you that the name-giver didn't miss the truth: His names are entirely consistent with one another. Or haven't you noticed that all the names you utter are based on the same assumption and have the same purpose?

d SOCRATES: But surely that's no defense, Cratylus. The name-giver might have made a mistake at the beginning and then forced the other names to be consistent with it. There would be nothing strange in that. Geometrical constructions often have a small unnoticed error at the beginning with which all the rest is perfectly consistent. That's why every man must think a lot about the first principles of any thing and investigate them thoroughly to see whether or not it's correct to assume them. For if they have been adequately examined, the subsequent steps will plainly follow from them. e However, I'd be surprised if names *are* actually consistent with one another. So let's review our earlier discussion. We said that names signify the being or essence of things to us on the assumption that all things are moving and flowing and being swept along.<sup>59</sup> Isn't that what you think names express?

437 CRATYLUS: Absolutely. Moreover, I think they signify correctly.

SOCRATES: Of those we discussed, let's reconsider the name '*epistēmē*' ('knowledge') first and see how ambiguous it is. It seems to signify that it stops (*histēsi*) the movement of our soul towards (*epi*) things, rather than that it accompanies them in their movement, so that it's more correct to pronounce the beginning of it as we now do than to insert an '*e*' and get '*hepeistēmē*'<sup>60</sup>—or rather, to insert an '*i*' instead of an '*e*'.<sup>61</sup> Next, consider

59. See 411c.

60. As was suggested at 412a, yielding something to do with "following" things.

61. To get '*epihistēmē*', revealing more clearly the derivation from '*epi*' and '*histēsi*'.

*tebaion*' ('certain'), which is an imitation of being based (*basis*) or resting (*stasis*), not of motion. '*Historia*' ('inquiry'), which is somewhat the same, signifies the stopping (*histēsi*) of the flow (*rhous*). '*Piston*' ('confidence'), too, certainly signifies stopping (*histan*). Next, anyone can see that '*mnēmē*' ('memory') means a staying (*monē*) in the soul, not a motion. Or consider '*hamartia*' ('error') and '*sumphora*' ('mishap'), if you like. If we take names as our guides, they seem to signify the same as '*sunesis*' ('comprehension') and '*epistēmē*' ('knowledge') and other names of excellent things.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, '*amathia*' ('ignorance') and '*akolasia*' ('licentiousness') also seem to be closely akin to them. For '*amathia*' seems to mean the journey of someone who accompanies god (*hama theōi idn*), and '*akolasia*' seems precisely to mean movement guided by things (*akolouthia tois pragmasin*). Thus names of what we consider to be the very worst things seem to be exactly like those of the very best. And if one took the trouble, I think one could find many other names from which one could conclude that the name-giver intended to signify not that things were moving and being swept along, but the opposite, that they were at rest.

d CRATYLUS: But observe, Socrates, that most of them signify motion.

SOCRATES: What if they do, Cratylus? Are we to count names like votes and determine their correctness that way? If more names signify motion, does that make *them* the true ones?

CRATYLUS: No, that's not a reasonable view.

438 SOCRATES: It certainly isn't, Cratylus. So let's drop this topic, and return to the one that led us here. A little while ago, you said, if you remember, that the name-giver had to know the things he named.<sup>63</sup> Do you still believe that or not?

CRATYLUS: I still do.

SOCRATES: Do you think that the giver of the first names also knew the things he named?

CRATYLUS: Yes, he did know them.

b SOCRATES: What names did he learn or discover those things from? After all, the first names had not yet been given. Yet it's impossible, on our view, to learn or discover things except by learning their names from others or discovering them for ourselves?

CRATYLUS: You have a point there, Socrates.

SOCRATES: So, if things cannot be learned except from their names, how can we possibly claim that the name-givers or rule-setters had knowledge before any names had been given for them to know?

c CRATYLUS: I think the truest account of the matter, Socrates, is that a more than human power gave the first names to things, so that they are necessarily correct.

62. '*Hamartia*' is like '*homartein*' ('to accompany'), and '*sumphora*' is like '*sumpheresthai*' ('to move together with').

63. At 435d.

SOCRATES: In your view then this name-giver contradicted himself, even though he's either a daemon or a god? Or do you think we were talking nonsense just now?

CRATYLUS: But one of the two apparently contradictory groups of names that we distinguished aren't names at all.

SOCRATES: Which one, Cratylus? Those which point to rest or those which point to motion? As we said just now, this cannot be settled by majority vote.

d CRATYLUS: No, that wouldn't be right, Socrates.

SOCRATES: But since there's a civil war among names, with some claiming that they are like the truth and others claiming that *they* are, how then are we to judge between them, and what are we to start from? We can't start from other different names because there are none. No, it's clear we'll have to look for something other than names, something that will make plain to us without using names which of these two kinds of names are the true ones—that is to say, the ones that express the truth about the things that are.

e CRATYLUS: I think so, too.

SOCRATES: But if that's right, Cratylus, then it seems it must be possible to learn about the things that are, independently of names.

CRATYLUS: Evidently.

SOCRATES: How else would you expect to learn about them? How else than in the most legitimate and natural way, namely, learning them through one another, if they are somehow akin, and through themselves? For something different, something that was other than they, wouldn't signify them, but something different, something other.

CRATYLUS: That seems true to me.

439 SOCRATES: But wait a minute! Haven't we often agreed that if names are well given, they are like the things they name and so are likenesses of them?

CRATYLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So if it's really the case that one can learn about things through names and that one can also learn about them through themselves, which would be the better and clearer way to learn about them? Is it better to learn from the likeness both whether it itself is a good likeness and also the truth it is a likeness of? Or is it better to learn from the truth both the truth itself and also whether the likeness of it is properly made?

b CRATYLUS: I think it is certainly better to learn from the truth.

SOCRATES: How to learn and make discoveries about the things that are is probably too large a topic for you or me. But we should be content to have agreed that it is far better to investigate them and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names.

CRATYLUS: Evidently so, Socrates.

c SOCRATES: Still, let's investigate one further issue so as to avoid being deceived by the fact that so many of these names seem to lean in the same direction—as we will be if, as seems to me to be the case, the name-givers really did give them in the belief that everything is always moving and

flowing, and as it happens things aren't really that way at all, but the name-givers themselves have fallen into a kind of vortex and are whirled around in it, dragging us with them. Consider, Cratylus, a question that I for my part often dream about: Are we or aren't we to say that there is a beautiful itself, and a good itself, and the same for each one of the things that are?

CRATYLUS: I think we are, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Let's not investigate whether a particular face or something of that sort is beautiful then, or whether all such things seem to be flowing, but let's ask this instead: Are we to say that the beautiful itself is always such as it is?

CRATYLUS: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: But if it is always passing away, can we correctly say of it first that it is *this*, and then that it is *such and such*? Or, at the very instant we are speaking, isn't it inevitably and immediately becoming a different thing and altering and no longer being as it was?

CRATYLUS: It is.

SOCRATES: Then if it never stays the same, how can it *be* something? After all, if it ever stays the same, it clearly isn't changing—at least, not during that time; and if it always stays the same and is always the same thing, so that it never departs from its own form, how can it ever change or move?

CRATYLUS: There's no way.

SOCRATES: Then again it can't even be known by anyone. For at the very instant the knower-to-be approaches, what he is approaching is becoming a different thing, of a different character, so that he can't yet come to know either what sort of thing it is or what it is like—surely, no kind of knowledge is knowledge of what isn't in any way.

CRATYLUS: That's right.

SOCRATES: Indeed, it isn't even reasonable to say that there is such a thing as knowledge, Cratylus, if all things are passing on and none remain. For if that thing itself, knowledge, did not pass on from being knowledge, then knowledge would always remain, and there would *be* such a thing as knowledge. On the other hand, if the very form of knowledge passed on from being knowledge, the instant it passed on into a different form than that of knowledge, there would be no knowledge. And if it were always passing on, there would always be no knowledge. Hence, on this account, no one could know anything and nothing could be known either. But if there is always that which knows and that which is known, if there are such things as the beautiful, the good, and each one of the things that are, it doesn't appear to me that these things can be at all like flowings or motions, as we were saying just now they were. So whether I'm right about these things or whether the truth lies with Heraclitus and many others<sup>64</sup> isn't an easy matter to investigate. But surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names,

64. See 402a.

440d or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something—condemning both himself and the things that are to be totally unsound like leaky sinks—or believe that things are exactly like people with runny noses, or that all things are afflicted with colds and drip over everything. It's certainly possible that things are that way, Cratylus, but it is also possible that they are not. So you must investigate them courageously and thoroughly and not accept anything easily—you are still young and in your prime, after all. Then after you've investigated them, if you happen to discover the truth, you can share it with me.

CRATYLUS: I'll do that. But I assure you, Socrates, that I have already investigated them and have taken a lot of trouble over the matter, and things seem to me to be very much more as Heraclitus says they are.

SOCRATES: Instruct me about it another time, Cratylus, after you get back. But now go off into the country, as you were planning to do, and Hermogenes here will see you on your way.<sup>65</sup>

CRATYLUS: I'll do that, Socrates, but I hope that you will also continue to think about these matters yourself.

65. 'See on your way' (*propempsei*): as a good son of Hermes *pompaios* (who conducts souls of the dead to Hades) would do. Hermogenes is thus correctly named after all. See 384c, 408b.

## THEAETETUS

Plato has much to say in other dialogues about knowledge, but this is his only sustained inquiry into the question 'What is knowledge?' As such, it is the founding document of what has come to be known as 'epistemology', as one of the branches of philosophy; its influence on Greek epistemology—in Aristotle and the Stoics particularly—is strongly marked. Theaetetus was a famous mathematician, Plato's associate for many years in the Academy; the dialogue's prologue seems to announce the work as published in his memory, shortly after his early death on military service in 369 B.C. We can therefore date the publication of Theaetetus fairly precisely, to the few years immediately following Theaetetus' death. Plato was then about sixty years of age, and another famous longtime associate, Aristotle, was just joining the Academy as a student (367).

Though it is not counted as a 'Socratic' dialogue—one depicting Socrates inquiring into moral questions by examining and refuting the opinions of his fellow discussants—Theaetetus depicts a Socrates who makes much of his own ignorance and his subordinate position as questioner, and the dialogue concludes inconclusively. Socrates now describes his role, however, as he does not in the 'Socratic' dialogues, as that of a 'midwife': he brings to expression ideas of clever young men like Theaetetus, extensively develops their presuppositions and consequences so as to see clearly what the ideas amount to, and then establishes them as sound or defective by independent arguments of his own. The first of Theaetetus' three successive definitions of knowledge—that knowledge is 'perception'—is not finally 'brought to birth' until Socrates has linked it to Protagoras' famous 'man is the measure' doctrine of relativistic truth, and also to the theory that 'all is motion and change' that Socrates finds most Greek thinkers of the past had accepted, and until he has fitted it out with an elaborate and ingenious theory of perception and how it works. He then examines separately the truth of these linked doctrines—introduced into the discussion by him, not Theaetetus—and, in finally rejecting Theaetetus' idea as unsound, he advances his own positive analysis of perception and its role in knowledge. This emphasis on the systematic exploration of ideas before finally committing oneself to them or rejecting them as unsound is found in a different guise in Parmenides, with its systematic exploration of hypotheses about unity as a means of working hard toward an acceptable theory of Forms. Socrates establishes a clear link between the two dialogues when, at 183e, he drags in a reference back to the conversation reported in Parmenides.

Theaetetus has a unique format among Plato's dialogues. The prologue gives a brief conversation between Euclides and Terpsion, Socratics from