Perception, True Opinion and Knowledge in Plato’s Theaetetus

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Several years ago Mr. J. Xenakis proposed an interpretation of some aspects of the passage in the Theaetetus in which the thesis that ἐπιστήμη is ἀισθήσις receives its final refutation (184B4-186E12). ¹ Although I agree in the main with his interpretation, I believe that it can be supported more strongly. Thus an analysis of this passage is the first task of this paper. But on the basis of that analysis, I want to show also how this passage is related to what follows in the dialogue, the long discussion beginning with the thesis that knowledge is true opinion but turning almost immediately to a discussion of the nature and possibility of false opinion and ending with the wax block and aviary models (187A1-200D4). ²

The criticism of the thesis that ἐπιστήμη is ἀισθήσις begins with the distinction between what the soul apprehends through the sense-organs and what it apprehends “by itself”. Whatever Plato’s views about the soul might be at his writing of the Theaetetus, he wants to distinguish between those characteristics which the soul apprehends through the sense-organs and those characteristics which are called “common to everything” (ἐπὶ τὰ σαι κοινὰν -184C4-5). In spite of his expressed desire to be precise (184C1-7), Plato has some difficulties and ambiguities in his terminology. His general point is to show that knowledge cannot be equated with ἀισθήσις. But he does speak, on the one hand, of what the soul “perceives” (ἀισθάνομαι – 184E8-185A2) when he talks about the particular objects of the various senses, e.g. colors, tastes, sounds, etc. On the other hand he also speaks of what the soul “perceives” (again ἀισθάνομαι – 185C8) when he talks about the κοινά, characteristics which are somehow different from those apprehended via the individual sense-organs. The ambiguity in ἀισθάνομαι leaves two questions to be answered.

¹ J. Xenakis, “Essence, Being and Fact in Plato: An Analysis of One of Theaetetus’ ‘Koina,’” Kant-Studien vol. 44 (1957-58), pp. 167-181. The main thrust of Mr. Xenakis’ interpretation is in section IV.

² The argument against the thesis that knowledge is true opinion is contained in the brief passage in 200D5-210C7.
First, what sort of object is “perceived” through the sense-organs? Plato could mean either a particular object with a particular color or taste, etc., or he could mean the relevant sense-data. Plato’s introduction of the κοινά and his saying that the soul “perceives” these along with what it “perceives” through the sense-organs might be thought to favor the former interpretation, but it would also be consistent with saying that the soul apprehends the κοινά in relation to its sense-data. Although I should have to admit that a more detailed study of the earlier portions of the Theaetetus where Plato discusses the interaction of object and sense-organ would help to decide the issue, it seems that Plato did not clearly decide whether the soul perceives sense-data or physical objects.

Second, what is the sense of “perceive” in each of these cases? Does the soul “perceive” one set of characteristics via the sense-organs, e.g. colors, sounds, etc., and does it “perceive” a different set of characteristics when it operates “by itself”, e.g. being, sameness, otherness, etc.? To use “perceive” in both of these senses causes difficulties. Plato apparently wants to distinguish between two sets of characteristics, but he also might want to distinguish between these characteristics in terms of two different operations of the soul. Using “perceive” in both these ways leads to some very basic ambiguities.

Plato’s general point, I believe, is this. Perception (αἰσθησις) cannot be knowledge because in perception simply are none of the κοινά. These become a factor only when we make comparisons between the things which are perceived, and, more importantly, they enter the picture when the “truth” about them becomes an issue. To paraphrase the argument in 185E ff., the soul, when it operates “by itself” (αὐτῇ ἀπὸ αὐτῆς or αὐτῇ καθ’ αὐτήν), deals with certain characteristics which are not “viewed” (ἐπισκοποῦν) through the sense-organs. The chief of these is “being” (οὐσία – 186A2), and this characteristic “most of all pertains to everything” (186A2-3). In addition to this, there are similarity and dissimilarity, sameness and otherness, beauty and ugliness, and goodness and badness. But the point is that these are not involved until the soul starts to make comparisons between its sensations or perceptions, “reflecting within itself upon the past and present in relation to the future” (186A9-B1). The same point is made again in the following lines: all sensations (παθήματα) reach the soul via the body, but reflecting upon them (making judgments about them) is something which the soul does on its own. The