Plato on Knowledge

The analysis of knowledge attempted in the *Theaetetus* ends inconclusively. The question of why it fails is made more intriguing by the fact that Plato’s analysis of knowledge given in the *Meno*—knowledge is true opinion with an account of the reason why—is not mentioned at all. In fact, the absence of Plato’s earlier view may be why the inquiry in the *Theaetetus* fails. It be may that the characters in the *Theaetetus* are so far from being moved by the same considerations present in the *Meno*—for instance, the theory of recollection—that their investigation was doomed from the outset. An inspection of why the characterizations of account given in the *Theaetetus* are deficient may shine some light on the project’s inevitable failure. Meanwhile, in the *Meno*, the characterization manages to survive the end of the dialogue; in addition, it is connected by Socrates with theory of recollection. Perhaps if the theory had been advanced in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates and his interlocutors would have been more successful.

I. The problem understood broadly: *Meno* 85c-e and 97a-98c.

The problem of the difference between knowledge and (mere) true belief is broached first in the *Meno*. Appropriately, the explication of this difference—exactly what is true of knowledge that is not true of mere true belief—does a good amount of work for Plato’s program of recollection. Firstly, though, it must be clarified that the goal is not to specify in what way the properties of knowledge—what knowledge is like—and the properties of true belief diverge: the question is in what way the formula that some doxastic agent S knows that Socrates is a man if and only if S has a true belief that Socrates is a man fails, such that S can have a true belief that Socrates is a man without knowing that same proposition.\(^1\) After watching the slave boy make a series of inferences without any prior instruction in geometry, Socrates believes his previous thesis that “as the soul is immortal, has been born before, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned” has been vindicated (81c-d). The soul had experienced, in some capacity, mathematical objects—and, certainly, a lot more besides—before embodiment. Meno takes this claim to be one according to which “what we call learning is recollection” (81e). In the *Phaedo*, it is reported that recollection is achieved when one is “interrogated in the right manner” (73a). The relevant sort of interrogation is illustrated in the *Meno*. What is interesting for my purposes here, though, is Socrates’ insistence that what is being

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\(^1\) Specifically why this analysis is defective will be articulated later. What matters now is that, in the *Meno*, Socrates proceeds as if true opinion is not identical to or sufficient for knowledge. All translations are taken from Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).
recollected—or, equivalently, learned—is not knowledge, but simply true opinion.

The upshot is that the distinction between knowledge and true opinion helps motivate the theory of recollection. In the dialogue with the slave, Socrates observes that the true opinions, already present in him, “have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways, you know that his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone’s” (85c-d). The question-and-answer process characteristic of Socrates stirs up true opinions. These “opinions were in [the slave]” even before the stirring-up (85c). The salient point is made clear when Socrates affirms that “the man who does not know has within himself true opinions about the things that he does not know” (85c). This passage is a clear statement of the status of true opinion as an insufficient condition for knowledge. Taken in conjunction with the previous two passages, it can be inferred that the true opinions, present even before birth, in the slave can be stirred up by the right sorts of questions, and then, when this interrogation is maintained and carried out from various angles, the true opinions can become knowledge.

In the Meno, Socrates sketches a picture of what accompanies true opinion, generating knowledge; however, his meditations on this issue do not approach the sustained inquiry seen later in the Theaetetus. True opinion is neither reliable nor consistent in the same way knowledge is. The fact that some true beliefs can be acquired accidentally or through luck illustrates this unreliability.\(^2\) Socrates captures this idea with an image: just as the statues of Daedalus run away if not tied down, so do true opinions (97d-98a). The analogy continues: one can tie down the statues of Daedalus, and one can tie down true opinions, ensuring that they do not “escape from a man’s mind” (98a). The general notion appears to be that true opinions can cease to be true when some salient feature of the world changes, and one who formed the true belief only accidentally is unable to track these relevant differences. Accordingly, true opinion, according to Socrates in the Meno, can be tied down by giving “an account of the reason why” (98a). The accompaniment of the reason why some opinion is true allows one to track changes in the world, since the possession of why some opinion is true—its truth conditions—entails that one can see now whether the opinion is true or untrue. The presence of this arrangement—truth, opinion, and an account of the reason why—are apparently jointly sufficient for knowledge, in light of Socrates’ remark that when true opinions are “tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place” (98a). Such is Plato’s account of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge in the Meno. This distinction is so crucial that Plato has Meno declare that, among the few things he takes himself to know, he would count the fact that “right opinion is a different thing from knowledge” (98b). Indeed, this distinction

\(^2\) Importantly, this feature of true beliefs will animate a large part of the discussion surrounding why one cannot identify knowledge with true beliefs, which I shall cover soon enough.
must be so: the problem of separating true belief and knowledge (such that the former is not sufficient for the latter) is central to the Platonic program of recollection, because it is on that basis that Socrates can hold that true opinions are stirred up by some kinds of interrogation, and only further questioning produces knowledge.

II. The problem understood narrowly: Theaetetus 144e-151e.

In contrast, the local problem is the one that prompts Socrates, in the Theaetetus, to define knowledge. As such, the immediate goal is not even to distinguish knowledge from, say, true opinion, since before this investigation has commenced, the question whether knowledge is true opinion is still open. Only later in the inquiry is that possibility eliminated. Moreover, the problem that moves Socrates in this dialogue to consider the definition of knowledge has no obvious relationship to the theory of recollection or, more indirectly still, to the immortality of the soul that the theory of recollection is meant to support in the Phaedo. It is for this reason that a distinction was established between the narrow or local problem and the wide problem. This local problem is about expertise. It is introduced in a peculiar way. Thadodorus, one of Socrates’ interlocutors, has judged that Theaetetus resembles Socrates himself (144a-c). While Socrates acknowledges Thadodorus’ judgment, he is more interested in Thadodorus’ position to make this claim; he is interested in whatever makes one qualified as an expert. To this end, Socrates supposes that if he and Theaetetus each had a lyre, and if Thadodorus “had told them that they were both similarly tuned,” then, before accepting his judgment, it would be responsible to “find out if he was speaking with any expert knowledge of music” (144e). Instead of inquiring into Thadodorus’ body of knowledge, the discussants are going to inquire into the nature of knowledge.

However, it may not be obvious at first how to move from a discussion about expertise to a properly epistemological activity. Whether Thadodorus’ recognition of the similarities between Socrates and Theaetetus was about a physical resemblance or about conditions in the soul, it is agreed that Thadodorus needs to be speaking from a place of expertise, otherwise “one ought not to pay much attention to him” (145a). In what sense this relates to knowledge is pointed out by Socrates rather quickly. He maintains that “to learn is to become wiser [or, to become an expert] about the thing one is learning” (145d). Subsequently, to set up clearly the problem to which he is driving, Socrates secures Theaetetus’ assent to the fact that wisdom makes people wise (or, that expertise makes people experts) and that, notably, these are the same things as knowledge (145e). So, if Socrates wants to inquire into Thadodorus’ grounds for making some claims—specifically, those which require some expertise—then he needs to look into the nature of knowledge. The focus of the Theaetetus is, then, innocently offered by Socrates: “what do you think knowledge is” (146c)? Consequently, the local problem—the problem that initiates the discussion of knowledge in the dialogue—is one about expertise. It is, in this way, divorced
from considerations of recollection and the immortality of the soul. As the dialogue continues, however, the parties to the discussion come to see that the distinction between true belief and knowledge that marked the exchange in the *Meno* needs to be made here, too.

III. The nature of judgment: *Theaetetus* 187a-190b.

One constitutive ingredient of knowledge is belief, opinion or judgment. The conversation recorded in the *Theaetetus* gets off the ground in earnest only when the titular character and Socrates evaluate the entailments of the proposition that knowledge is perception. After the explosion of that definition of knowledge, the dialogue proceeds along a different trajectory: knowledge as true judgment. The attendant complications are many. Regardless, the notion of *judgment* generally stands in need of elucidation. Perhaps calling the objects of sense perception deficient or not the proper objects of knowledge, Socrates supposes that he and Theaetetus need to look for knowledge “in whatever we call that activity of the soul when it is busy by itself about the things which are” (187a). Judgment, as such, is some kind of activity of the soul that is completed *by itself*, whose objects are the things which are—as opposed to the objects of “sense-perception” (187a). Judgment is initially explicated this way. Socrates feels that this treatment is preliminary, though.

Concordantly, a more developed approach is taken shortly thereafter. A judgment is an answer the soul gives to itself, in a kind of internal question-and-answer exchange. It is an internal dialectic. Socrates holds that it seems to him “that the soul when it thinks is simply carrying on a discussion in which it asks itself questions and answers them itself,” either making an affirmation or a denial (189e-190a). One may expect that Socrates would find it un-problematic to label *just any* affirmation a judgment; one’s expectations go unmet. Somewhat mysteriously, Socrates avers that only when a soul “affirms one thing consistently and without divided counsel” is this called its judgment (190a). The qualification regarding divided counsel and consistency is endorsed without question by Theaetetus (190a). Possibly thinking the qualification is inconsequential, Socrates overlooks it when he explains that “to judge is to make a statement, and a judgment is a statement which is not addressed to another person or spoken aloud, but silently addressed to oneself” (190a). While it is clear now that a judgment is a sort of statement by oneself to oneself internally, it is not sufficiently clear what Socrates has in mind with the divided counsel condition.

It may be that when there is discord in the soul, it does not make judgments. In the eighth book of the *Republic*, Socrates says about the oligarchic city that “of necessity
it isn’t one city but two—one of the poor and one of the rich—and living in the same place and always plotting against one another” (551d). Since Socrates thinks the oligarchic city is divided (such that, in fact, it is two cities), and since he thinks there is a kind of arrangement in the soul analogous to it, he may believe that these sorts of souls make affirmations with divided counsel, preventing their statements from counting as judgments. The difficulty with this view is twofold. First, it seems that the natural response is to insist that the oligarchic soul is making judgments, but they are just the wrong sorts of judgments. This response would prompt Socrates to cast some light on why the divided counsel condition is present at all. The second difficulty is that it seems even in the oligarchic person, there is a kind of unity—just one concerned with money-making. The oligarchic person “makes the rational and spirited parts sit on the ground beneath appetite, one on either side, reducing them to slaves,” not allowing reason to discover anything except money-making techniques and not permitting spirit to value anything but money or aspire to be anything but rich (553b-c). The three parts of the soul appear to be united in money-making. There is no divided counsel here; if there is, then it is not obvious where it is. In any case, where there is no divided counsel, the soul can make judgments.4

IV. Knowledge is not identical to true belief: *Theaetetus* 200e-201d and *Meno* 97a-97e.

After articulating the character of judgment, Socrates and Theaetetus hone in on false judgment. Predictably, this discussion ends inconclusively, but the two interlocutors agree to suspend that investigation and look into the definition of knowledge as true belief (200e). At stake in this definition is much of what was said in the *Meno*: if knowledge turns out to be true belief in the *Theaetetus*, then there is an inconsistency between this discovery and the fact that Socrates avouched to Meno and the slave that the latter had a true belief that was not yet knowledge. If now knowledge is defined as true belief, then the *Meno* requires some revision. Fortunately, the argument in the *Meno*—which I have not yet presented—concludes the same way as the argument against knowledge being true belief (K=TB) in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates employs one counter-example—jurymen in a law court—in the *Theaetetus*, and he exploits various angles of it. It is not clear which objectionable features would, by themselves, be sufficient for establishing the falsity of K=TB.

The jurymen counter-example is meant to convince the reader that true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. The example begins in the aftermath or a robbery or assault, with lawyers and orators being responsible for having to persuade a jury of some conclusion (201b). Socrates is clear that these people “use their art to produce conviction not by teaching people, but by making them judge whatever they themselves choose” (201a). They cannot be teaching the jurors because of the limited amount of time allotted
for these speeches. Instead, it must be an instance of persuasion, defined as “causing them to judge” (201b). So far, one argument against K=TB has been disclosed: true beliefs formed by accident cannot be knowledge. The fact that the jurymen are only hearing some proposition—even if it is a true one—because the lawyers or the orators have chosen to tell it confirms that this case is one of luck. The jurymen are just lucky to form this true belief. Knowledge is not formed accidentally.

There are a few other problems with K=TB exposed by this counter-example. Socrates appears to think that it is not possible to persuade someone of something only an eye-witness—or, one who has experienced something firsthand—can know (201b). For reasons unclear, Socrates thinks that jury has formed, on account of the lawyers and orators’ speeches, a true belief about “some matter which only an eye-witness can know, and which cannot otherwise be known” (201b-c). The jury’s true belief fails to be knowledge also because it is second-hand. The suggestion that knowledge is necessarily firsthand is a high standard, though it should not be inferred from that fact that Socrates does not propound it. He may, on the other hand, hold the following: it is impossible for a belief to rise to the level of knowledge, where the belief is generated by persuasion, and where the persuaders do not have enough time in delivering their speeches to “teach adequately to people who were not eye-witnesses” to the truth (201b). The reason why the jury’s true belief, accordingly, does not qualify as knowledge is because the persuaders—the lawyers and orators—did not have enough time to teach the jurymen adequately, given also that the jurymen had no firsthand experience. The takeaway of this exercise is that true belief is not identical to knowledge.

In the Meno, Socrates presents a counter-example to K=TB that seizes upon the character of knowledge as firsthand. The counter-example is a guide to Larissa. Someone who guides people to Larissa with a true opinion regarding how to get there will not, insofar as the judgment is true, be distinguished from someone who knows how to get there. For this reason, Socrates exclaims that “as long as he has a right opinion about that of which the other has knowledge, he will not be a worse guide than the one who knows, as he has a true opinion, though not knowledge” (97b). It is not obvious why one cannot infer from this observation that K=TB has been vindicated, and that he who Socrates takes to be a non-knower does, in truth, know. There are a few replies. First, Meno himself wonders why this move is not made when he asks why “knowledge is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why they are different” (97d). Those who would use the success of the guide to Larissa as an example in favor of K=TB are in the esteemed company of Meno, who thinks the guide’s ability to get to Larissa blurs the line between knowledge and true opinion. So, one response to the Larissa example is to say that it just is support for K=TB.

The second and third responses to the Larissa example are more critical and situate it within a criticism of K=TB. The second response is to insist that the guide to Larissa merely has true opinion because he has never been to Larissa before, since Socrates does
design the case as one in which the guide “had not gone there” (97b). This response does some important work for the opponent of K=TB. First, now there is a reply to Meno, who wonders why there is a distinction between true judgment and knowledge. Suppose the guide forms the right opinion because he guesses correctly; in this case, it is merely luck that is responsible for the true belief. This feature of the true opinion would, in conjunction with the analysis of the jury example in the *Theaetetus*, explain why the guide’s belief does not rise to the level of knowledge. However, suppose that, rather than guessing, the guide has been told the truth about how to get to Larissa by someone who has been there. Now, one can mobilize against the guide the same argument Socrates uses in *Theaetetus* against the law court example as well: the guide’s true opinion does not rise to the level of knowledge because it is not firsthand experience. Knowledge of the route to Larissa is not something one can get without even having been to Larissa. This restriction does not preclude one from acquiring true opinions of the path: accurate testimony is sufficient for that. So, the second reply to the defender of K=TB is to emphasize either the accidental nature of the guide’s belief, or its status as secondhand.

The third reply to the proponent of K=TB, in light of the Larissa example, was more or less covered earlier: mere true opinions never endure as true for long. Suppose that by chance, the path to Larissa changed one day—maybe a bad storm made taking the traditional road just not practical—the guide would not be able to adapt to these changes. The guide does not even know where Larissa is. Meanwhile, the person with knowledge is in a much stronger epistemic position. It was just these considerations that motivated the discussion of an “account of the reason why” that is meant to accompany true opinion, which would be sufficient for knowledge (98a). Without some account joined with the true opinion, one is unable to keep track of changes in the environment; this inability produces a sort of inconsistency in one’s judgments, where sometimes one is right and other times, about the same issues, one is wrong, and only the environment varies. Perhaps knowledge is true opinion with an account.

V. One attempt at specifying the nature of accounts: *Theaetetus* 206c-206e.

With Theaetetus and Socrates determined as ever to identify jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge, they press on. The explicit goal is to look more closely at “what

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3 I am not following the exact order of presentation in the *Theaetetus*. The march goes from the so-called dream theory of account to a criticism of this theory to meditations on three candidates for being definitions of account. The second of these candidates largely resembles the dream account. I will start by presenting the first of the three candidates. Then, I will treat the dream account and the second candidate together. I will conclude this section of the essay, fittingly, with the final candidate.
can be meant by the proposition that it is in the addition of an account to a true judgment that knowledge is perfected” (206c). The first candidate is an explication of account according to which to give an account is to make “one’s thought apparent vocally by means of words and verbal expressions—when a man impresses an image of his judgment upon the stream of speech, like reflections upon water or in a mirror” (206d). To give an account, on this view, is to relate one’s thought linguistically. Since judgment was an exclusively internal activity, making an account accompany a judgment is expressing this internal activity externally (or, it is at least being able to). Theaetetus is attracted to this explication because he has recognized that “at least, a man who does this is said to be giving an account” (201d). The datum supporting this definition, then, is that it squares with what (apparently) some speakers called giving an account. So, to give an account is to express with language the content of one’s judgment.

This understanding of account is exploded rather quickly. It is too easy to achieve. However, this ease is not a problem in itself. This property implies that simply true opinion does not exist, since true opinion is sufficient for true opinion with an account (which is, by hypothesis, knowledge). Socrates exploits this defect, in saying that “everyone is able to [give an account, in this sense,] more or less readily [...] if he is not deaf or dumb to begin with” (206d). An important disclaimer is that Socrates does not consider it a desideratum of a theory of account that it holds that accounts are hard to give. The problem is not that accounts are easy to give. The flaw is that “anyone at all who makes a correct judgment will turn out to have it ‘together with an account’; correct judgment without knowledge will no longer be found anywhere” (206d-e). This argument is interesting because there is a real sense in which it puts a new gloss on an old problem. True opinion is not identical to knowledge—so, K=TB is not undergoing a revival—but it is now sufficient for it, since true opinion is sufficient for having a true opinion with an account. On K=TB, knowledge was too easy to get because one could form true beliefs by accident or by testimony; on this understanding of account, knowledge is so easy to get that no one will have mere true opinion. If this explication of account really did obtain, it would naturally pose problems for the Platonic program in two ways: expertise would become too easy to get, and recollection could no longer be conceived in the same fashion. If having a true opinion is sufficient for having a true opinion with an account, and, since having a true opinion with an account is knowledge, then Socrates would have to concede that, say, the slave in the Meno, even just after answering a few questions, has knowledge. Furthermore, it would have to be conceded too that anyone can hold forth on any skill-related issue, so long as he or she is right. This theory of account is doomed.
VI. Another attempt at specifying the nature of accounts: *Theaetetus* 201e-206c and 207a-208c.

In addition, some other (similar) approaches are attempted. Both try to specify more exactly the contents of the account meant to, when accompanying true opinion, be sufficient for knowledge. The dream theory is first. The dream theory has it that there are basic constituents of a thing, and their “names may be woven together and become an account of something—an account being essentially a complex of names” (202b). Yet, these basic elements cannot have an account provided of them, so they are “not knowable” (201d). The nature of these basic elements is left unexplored, except for the following exposition: they are “primary elements [...] of which we and everything else are composed” and they “have no account” (201e). Socrates is adamant that these primary elements can have nothing predicated of them. A primary element can “only be named; it is not possible to say anything else of it, either that it is or that it is not. That would mean that we were adding being or not-being to it; whereas we must not attach anything, if we are to speak of that thing itself alone” (201e-202a). The complexes that are built out of the primary elements can be the objects of knowledge; the accounts that are added to the true opinions are the complexes of the names of the primary elements. In contrast, the primary elements cannot be known, because they are “unaccountable” (202b). They can only be perceived and named. The soul can, however, be “in a state of truth as regards that thing, but [the soul] does not know” the primary element (202c). The dream theorist’s insistence that the primary elements are unknowable will be the theory’s undoing.

Though Socrates and Theaetetus are initially confident about the dream theory and its potential, it meets its end after a relentless assault from the former. The difficulty Socrates perceives with this theory is that “the elements are unknowable and the complexes knowable” (202d-e). The consequence is that one knows some whole, but fails to know its parts. This problem will be illustrated by taking the primary elements to be letters—“the elements of language” (202e). Take the word ‘Socrates’ and its first syllable ‘SO’; it is a complex composed of the letters ‘S’ and ‘O’ (203a). Since Theaetetus is acquainted with the relevant letters, and has a true judgment regarding the first syllable, it is correct to endow his belief with the status of knowledge. However, Theaetetus—as predicted by the dream theory—cannot give an account of ‘S’; it is one of those unaccountable primary elements. So, he fails to know ‘S’. This fact, totally consistent with the dream theory, invites the theory’s first problem. The syllable ‘SO’ is *nothing other than* its parts: ‘S’ and ‘O’. If there is knowledge of the whole, there must be knowledge of the parts. Socrates affirms that it cannot be that, with regard to the one syllable and the two letters, someone “is ignorant of each one, and knows the two of them without knowing either” (203d). Socrates and Theaetetus both revoke their endorsement of the dream theory, upon discovering the upshot of its central tenet: one can know a complex, without knowing its parts.
Even still, the dream theory is quickly revived, perhaps for the sake of charity on the part of Socrates. The way to salvage it, says Socrates, is to argue that any complex is “a single form resulting from the combination of the several elements when they fit together” (204a). From this amendment it follows that the syllable ‘SO’ is something above and beyond its constitutive elements. Socrates rightly points out that, if this amendment is correct, it means that ‘SO’ “must have no parts” (204a). This necessity is due to the fact that “when a thing has parts, the whole is necessary all the parts” (204a). Theaetetus attempts to resist the direction of Socrates’ argument. He maintains that a sum is the same thing as all its parts, but that a whole is not (204a-204c). ‘Sum’ and ‘whole’ express different content.

Socrates manages to deal with Theaetetus, and the revived dream theory, together: to do so, he switches to talk about numbers. To talk about ‘two and three and one’ and ‘four and two’ is to talk about the same thing: six. He gets Theaetetus to agree that in number-related matters, “by ‘the sum’ and ‘all of them’ we mean the same thing” (204d). The ambitious Socrates aspires to extrapolate and move into non-mathematical matters: for instance, “the number of an army is the same as the army” (204d). The amount of soldiers in the army—the number of an army—is nothing other than its parts, too. The next step in the argument is that since things which have parts consist of parts, and since all parts are the sum (because the total number is the sum), then the whole does not consist of parts, because then it would be the sum (204e-205a). After all, it has been claimed by Theaetetus that wholes and sums are different. Socrates concludes that Theaetetus was wrong on this front (205a). The discussants have arrived at the claim “that both the whole and its sum will be all the parts” (205a). Socrates moves in for the killing blow, with everything in place.

Now, Socrates can properly return to where the discussion stood right after the dream theory was revived. If the syllable ‘SO’ is not the letters that make it up, then it cannot have the letters as its part—since wholes are all the parts. Note that Socrates and Theaetetus agree there are not any other parts that could compose a syllable, besides letters (205a). Then, the syllable ‘SO’ is “an absolutely single form, indivisible into parts”— and, so, by the lights of the dream theory, it is unknowable (205c). What was once a complex—‘SO’—now enjoys the same status (both ontologically and epistemically) as the primary elements, since “it has no parts and is a single form” (205d). Socrates gestures towards the end of his treatment of the dream theory, saying that “if anyone tries to tell us that the complex can be known and expressed, while the contrary is true of the element; we had better not listen to him” (205e). Socrates concludes with a disjunction: if the syllable ‘SO’ is a complex, then it and its parts are knowable; on other hand, if the syllable ‘SO’ is a primary element, then there are no complexes, from which it follows that nothing is knowable (since nothing is accountable) (205d-e). One final observation reported by Socrates is that, in education, a student often begins by learning the primary elements, and that the “elements are much more clearly known, and the knowledge of them is more decisive for the mastery of any branch of study than the knowledge of the complex” (206b). In this light, Socrates thinks
it is “tomfoolery” to endorse the dream theory, which holds that complexes are known and primary elements, are not (206b). The dream theory is finished.

Something resembling the dream theory is revisited not long after the original theory’s demise. It is an understanding of an account on which possessing an account means “being able, when questioned about what a thing is, to give an answer by reference to its elements” (206e-207a). This analysis does not make any claims about unaccountable elements. It is, however, a substantive view about the content of an account: an account of φ is an enumeration of all of φ’s parts. In particular, no doxastic agent has knowledge of a thing “till, in addition to his true judgment, he goes right through the thing element by element” (207b). Consider the high standards put in place for knowledge in this view. Even for such commonplace objects as a wagon, someone may be able to identify some key elements of a wagon—for instance, rails, axles, and wheels—but “it is the man who can explore its being by going through those hundred items who has made the addition which adds an account to his true judgment” (207b-c). With relevance to the appraisal of the dream theory, merely being able to go through the name ‘Socrates’ by enumerating each syllable is insufficient, because “going through it by ‘syllables’ or larger divisions falls short of being an account” (207c). There are higher standards for being an account, on this view. Such is this characterization of account.

Socrates is going to exploit one necessary condition for knowledge to which he gets Theaetetus’ agreement. Theaetetus believes, with Socrates, that to have knowledge rules out believing “the same thing now to be a part of one thing and now a part of something else” and that one who knows cannot judge that “now one thing and now something different belongs to one and the same object” (207d). Socrates now enters into a discussion with Theaetetus regarding, familiarly, names and syllables. Theaetetus affirms that one, when learning one’s letters, used to believe that one letter would appear in some syllable, and, at other times, that a different letter appeared in the same syllable. Theaetetus is willing to deny knowledge to these students (207d-e). Socrates is intrigued and relates an example: someone who takes the syllable ‘THE’ in ‘Theaetetus’, and writes down this syllable. He or she gets it right. When the same person is confronted with the first syllable in ‘Theodorus’, he or she writes down ‘TE’ mistakenly. Theaetetus is clear that this person does not know the first syllable of his name (208a). For consistency’s sake, Theaetetus grants that someone could be in the same position for all the syllables in his name. He or she could write every syllable in ‘Theaetetus’ correctly, but fail to know (given the high standards for knowledge) each syllable. However, this example subtly yet powerfully defeats the understanding of account under consideration. Here, the letter-writer possesses “an account of [‘Theaetetus’] along with his correct judgment. He was writing it, you see, with command of the way through its letters and we agreed that that is an account” (208a-b). There is an account but not knowledge. Consequently, this proposal falls short of the
The last attempt at identifying what exactly accompanies true judgment such that it becomes knowledge does not persist for long under Socrates’ careful scrutinizing. On this view, an account of φ is “being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things” (208c). So, to know φ is to have a correct judgment about φ, and also to have an account of what makes φ different from, say, ψ. To have an account of the sun, for instance, is to be able to answer “that it is the brightest of the bodies that move round the earth in the heavens” (208d). To have an account of some dog in particular, one would answer what makes this dog different from others. If one’s answer captured what all dogs have in common, it would be an account of dogs generally (208d). This third candidate for an understanding of account is ready for evaluation.

Socrates wastes no time hurrying to the end. Let me pick up again the illustration with the dog. If, say, Theodorus does not know what makes one dog—Penny—different from other dogs, then Theodorus is merely judging Penny; if he does have in mind this mark of difference, then he knows Penny. In merely judging Penny, Theodorus fails to latch onto anything that distinguishes Penny from other dogs; if he did, then he would not be merely judging her. Socrates recognizes the flaw in this theory: appropriately, he asks “in Heaven’s name how, if that was so, did it come about that [Penny] was the object of [Theodorus’] judgment and nobody else” (209b)? One possibility is that the impression left by Penny on Theodorus’ soul may be different from the impression left by some other similar-looking dog. The idea may be to ensure that “correct judgment also must be concerned with the differentness of what it is about” (209d). One way this requirement can be parsed out is to say one is required to know the difference between Penny and other dogs, in which case knowledge is being defined by knowledge (209e-210a). In any case, it seems that this definition of account just cannot stand. In the Theaetetus, the idea that knowledge is identical to true judgment with an account is still tenable, but no sustainable theory of account is proffered.

Interestingly, Theaetetus could have just revoked his denial of knowledge. It is apparent that he and Socrates both want to preserve the belief that knowing something entails not believing it is a part of some whole at one moment and then, at a later time, believing it to be a part of another whole instead. This understanding coheres well with the sort of consistency I mentioned earlier: that the knower is able to track relevant changes in the environment in ways that one with true judgment is not.
I contend that the *Theaetetus* ends inconclusively because it is divorced from the concerns in *Meno*. The one theory of account that is left unscathed is the one from the *Meno* that knowledge is true judgment accompanied by an account of the reason why. It is possible that Plato has rejected this view—especially given the status of the *Theaetetus* as a late Platonic dialogue—but it seems odd that Plato’s former view is not explicitly repudiated, while a wide swath of other theses are treated. The *Theaetetus* is meant, I maintain, as a way of eliminating portraits of accounts that omit talk about recollection. In the *Meno*, the close relationship that obtains between an account and recollection is made clear, when Socrates says that one ties down “true opinions by (giving) an account of the reason why. And that, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed” (98a). Presumably, Socrates is thinking of the conversation with the slave, and how Meno agreed that though Socrates’ questions at first stirred up true opinions (in a moment of recollection), that more questions from various angles would have produced knowledge. So, an account of the reason why involves recollection.

There is more textual support of this thesis in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates advances around a dozen arguments against an identity relation between knowledge and perception, but it is perhaps the final argument that is the most interesting. Knowledge is not perception, because there are things that the soul grasps not “through the bodily powers [...] but which it considers alone and through itself” (185e). Some unclear examples include “being [...] beautiful and ugly, good and bad” (186a). The establishment of strict identity between knowledge and perception is made impossible by the existence of objects of knowledge that are not picked up by the senses. Yet, the Socratic claim here is stronger than that: it is the claim that “perception and knowledge could never be the same thing,” not just that the general concepts are not identical (186e). The quality of some object—the brownness of a brown table, say—is reported by the sense of touch, but the question of its being is not (186b). While working with the senses is something anyone can do even at birth, calculating and determining something’s being comes “only as the result of a long and arduous development, involving a good deal of trouble and education” (186c). The last relevant statement here is that “knowledge is to be found not in the experiences but in the process of reasoning about them” (186d). All these claims together can be understood in a manner consonant with the *Meno*. An investigation into the nature of knowledge and accounts that does not feature the soul and how it works by itself will necessarily be

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5 Note that the scope is not limited to the failure of defining account. Socrates and Theaetetus also fail at defining false judgment, and the discussion of true judgment only happens at all because they bracket the question of false judgment, in light of how consistently they failed. Perhaps, without a discussion of recollection, false judgment cannot be analyzed either, but I do want to limit this discussion.
deficient.

One question may be why the content of the reason why cannot be something uncovered by the senses. There are a few responses. The first is that Socrates, in the *Meno*, is clear that the account is given in recollection (prompted by a long and varied question-and-answer session), and recollection is meant to be a stirring-up of beliefs formed before embodiment. So, they cannot be about the objects of sense perception. Another reply is to emphasize that a reason why is a sort of explanation. An explanation that features the objects of sense perception—not something else—will be the sort of explanation given by Anaxagoras and his ilk. These sorts of material explanations are made problematic by Socrates in the *Phaedo* (96e-97b). Accordingly, it does not seem likely that Plato has in mind material explanations. A final reply is to consider the reason why to be about truth-makers: the reason why some true opinion is true is its truth-maker. Socrates says, in the *Theaetetus*, that someone who “does not even get at being” cannot get at truth (186c). A little earlier, he agreed with Theaetetus that being is “among the things which the soul itself reaches out after by itself,” as opposed to through sense perception (186a). One cannot get at truth without getting at being, and one cannot get at being with sense perception. So, one cannot get at the *reason why* through sense perception. The investigation in the *Theaetetus* ends inconclusively because the discussants do not take into consideration the theory of recollection, which is at the heart of the program of distinguishing true opinion from knowledge, as I brought to light at the beginning of this essay. Plato may have made Socrates and company fail in order to illustrate this fact. If he had meant to demonstrate something else—for instance, that knowledge or account cannot be analyzed—then he should have also eliminated his own claims proposed in the *Meno*. These theses remain plausible alternatives to the ones introduced in the *Theaetetus*.

**IX. Conclusion.**

The *Theaetetus*, though ostensibly about an attempt to define knowledge, is more subtly seen as an attempt to refute accounts of knowledge that do not adequately attend to matters of recollection and objects not disclosed by the senses. Socrates rejects the identity between knowledge and perception on just these grounds, after all. Although many possible understandings of an account—that which, when added to true opinion, makes it knowledge—are entertained, all are dismissed. One curious exception is the characterization of account made in the *Meno*, which is related by Socrates in that dialogue to the theory of recollection. The failure of the discussants in the *Theaetetus* to adequately address matters of recollection and the objects disclosed by the soul working by itself produces the failure to analyze knowledge and account.

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