Reading Plato's Theaetetus by Timothy Chappell

Reviewed by
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Chappell's recent commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus* follows the format of Cornford's classic *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* [1935] in that it offers a translation of individual sections of text followed by brief commentary. Its main differences from Cornford are an analytic approach, and a systematic survey and critique of alternative scholarly viewpoints. Chappell's commentary is, therefore, more rigorous and philosophically subtle than Cornford's. This is certainly the book's greatest merit. Occasionally, however, one gets the impression that the discussion has strayed far away from the *Theaetetus* and that this difficult dialogue has become even more complicated.[1] In addition to offering philosophical analysis of individual passages and an interpretation of the dialogue as a whole, Chappell ventures outside of the dialogue to address its place within the Platonic corpus and the issue of whether it supports a unified or revisionist model of Plato's thought. He defends a modified version of Cornford's 'Unitarianism' in arguing that the *Theaetetus*, although a late dialogue that does not mention Forms, implicitly defends the need for Forms in any correct account of knowledge.

The book consists of 40 brief sections that include for each passage a useful summary of the argument, Chappell's own translation of the relevant text, and a detailed commentary on various issues that the passage raises. The translations are colloquial, easy to read, and for the most part accurate; there are, however, several additions,

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[1] See, e.g., the discussion of 'Socrates and Wittgenstein on definition' [35–36]; and the author's interpretation of Socrates' dream theory in terms of Russell's and Wittgenstein's Logical Atomism [208–211].

omissions, and eccentricities throughout.[2] All Greek is transliterated. The book is in dire need of an index, but it does offer a glossary of technical terms and abbreviations (of which the author makes abundant use). There is a series of introductory essays that provide background on Athens, Socrates, Plato, the Platonic dialogues and their standard grouping, Plato's philosophy and approach, and the Stephanus numbering system. These essays suggest that the book is intended for an audience of newcomers to Plato; but the fact that the author presumes familiarity with modern philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Wittgenstein, and Russell suggests a more experienced reader. It is the opinion of the present reviewer that the discussions of modern philosophy tend to be cursory and unhelpful. Take, for example, the following:

> The Wax Tablet passage offers us a more explicit account of the nature of thought, and its relationship with perception. The picture now on offer says *explicitly* that perception relates to thought roughly as Humean 'impressions' relate to Humean 'ideas'. [178: emphasis added]

Two additional points of criticism: Chappell's remarks about other scholars' views can be dismissive, even condescending.[3] And

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[2] For example, the addition of 'X's and 'Y's as the indefinite objects of knowledge in 192a1ff. See also the following translation:

> It is the theory that. . . all predication of any [predicate] to anything is strictly inaccurate. . . . For nothing is ever one, either subject. . . or predicate.

for the Greek

> οὐδ᾽ ἄν τι προσείποις ὀρθῶς οὐδ᾽ ὁποιονοῦν τι. . . ὡς μηδενὸς ὄντος ἑνὸς μήτε τινὸς μήτε ὁποιουοῦν. [152d3–6]

which literally rendered is

> Nor could you correctly refer to anything nor to anything as of whatsoever quality. . . since nothing is one, either as a thing or as of whatsoever quality.

[3] A good example is the following:

> McDowell has two further suggestions about what is achieved by objection H. These suggestions are rather recherché, and anyone not interested in a close encounter with the intricacies of McDowell's thought might reasonably move on to section 22. [115]

finally, there are several typos and inaccuracies throughout the book (which have been listed at the end of this review).

Prior to his discussion of the text of the *Theaetetus*, Chappell offers a concise but helpful introduction to the debate between 'Unitarians' and 'Revisionists'. He defines the former as those who 'argue or assume that Plato's works display a unity of doctrine and a continuity of purpose throughout' [16]. The latter, he explains, 'retort that Plato's works are full of revisions, retractations, and changes of direction' [17].[4] Chappell takes the central issue in this debate to be whether Plato ever abandoned the theory of Forms between the 'doctrinal' Middle dialogues (*Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*) and the 'critical' Late dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*). The typical Revisionist take on the *Theaetetus*, Chappell explains, is that the dialogue does not appeal to the theory of Forms at all and thus represents Plato's epistemological reflections once he had abandoned that theory. The usual Unitarian response, in turn, is that Plato has shown in the *Theaeteus* that a definition of knowledge is impossible without appealing to the Forms. The theory of Forms, therefore, is implicitly at the center of the dialogue.

Chappell himself admits that on many issues both Unitarianism and Revisionism in their extreme forms are implausible and that it is reasonable to compromise. He criticizes attempts to date to the Middle Period those dialogues that appeal to the Forms (as Owen did for the *Timaeus*), as well as attempts to show that late dialogues like the *Theaetetus* somehow invoke the theory of recollection [21: cf. nn145, 171]. Chappell does stand by the Unitarians, however, on the question of whether Plato is employing an indirect argumentative strategy in the *Theaetetus* in order to prepare the reader for the role of Forms in defining knowledge.

Chappell concludes his introductory comments with a brief survey of some of the main interpretations of Plato's overall purpose in the *Theaetetus* [22–24]. He dismisses the ancient view that it is a skeptical work that ultimately encourages suspension of judgment.

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[4] Chappell's list of Unitarians includes: Aristotle, Proclus, ancient and medieval commentators, Berkeley, Schleiermacher, Ast, Shorey, Diès, Ross, and Cherniss. His list of Revisionists includes Lutoslawski, Ryle, Robinson, Runciman, Owen, McDowell, Bostock, and 'many recent commentators' [16–17].

Chappell, however, does acknowledge the aporetic qualities (such as Socrates' Midwife illustration and his disavowal of knowledge at the end). But the relevant object of doubt, Chappell argues, is any attempt to define knowledge on empiricist terms (i.e., to claim that knowledge derives solely from sense-perception). Platonism and its theory of Forms were exempt from Socrates' critique in the first place; indeed, it is through the elimination of alternatives that they in turn are validated.

Chappell goes on to argue that Socrates' objection to Theaetetus' initial attempt to define knowledge by listing examples of knowledge [145e7–147c6] cannot be a criticism of the *Republic*'s distinction between knowledge and belief according to their objects (thus Revisionists such as Ryle, Robinson, and McDowell) because it lists types of knowledge rather than objects of knowledge [37–38]. Chappell rather reads Socrates' criticism as directed against the empiricist—that is,

> the philosopher who bases all knowledge on sensory experience... [and who] thinks that we acquire, for instance, the concept of a dog simply by exposure to examples of dogs. [38]

A weakness in Chappell's argument here is that the empiricist doctrine as he states it, along with the texts that he cites [Aristotle, *An. post.* 100a4–9; and Locke, *Essay* 2.1), address how we come to form concepts.[5] So, if Theaetetus were expressing such an empiricist viewpoint, then he should be assuming that he has formed a valid concept of knowledge through exposure to various types of knowledge. But this is not what Theaetetus assumes. His answer to Socrates' request for a definition is simply as follows:

> I think the things that one might learn from Theodorus are kinds of knowledge: geometry [etc.].... All of these are nothing other than knowledge; each of these is nothing other than a kind of knowledge. [146c7–d2: Chappell's translation, 33]

What Theaetetus has done is to identify several types of knowledge as knowledge. He does not appeal to those examples as sources of a concept of knowledge itself. It would have been helpful for Chappell

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[5] Locke's subject in *Essay* 2.1 is 'whence the Understanding may get all the Ideas it has, and by what ways and degrees they may come into the Mind'. Be that as it may, it has dubious significance for determining which particular philosophers or philosophy (if any) Socrates is criticizing here.

to explain why Theaetetus' belief that 'examples... are enough for a definition of knowledge' [38] entails empiricism.

Moving on to the Midwife passage, Chappell takes a Revisionist stance (against Cornford and McDowell) on the question of whether Plato is alluding to the doctrine of recollection [46–47]. He emphasizes instead the very reasonable view that this passage is meant to propose the method of discussion in the *Theaetetus*:

> It is going to be an *experimental*, tentative, and probably unsuccessful dialogue, like the aporetic dialogues. It will try out a number of suggestions about the nature of knowledge.[6] [46]

Chappell continues:

> So read, the midwife passage can also tell us something important about the limitations of the *Theaetetus*' inquiry. The limitations of the inquiry are the limitations of the main inquirers, and neither (the historical) Socrates nor Theaetetus was a card-carrying adherent of Plato's theory of Forms. Perhaps the dialogue brings us only as far as the threshold of the theory of Forms precisely because, on Socratic principles, one can get no further. To get beyond where the *Theaetetus* leaves off, you have to be a Platonist. [47]

Plato devotes the majority of the *Theaetetus* to an examination of Theaetetus' initial definition of knowledge as perception, which Socrates' ends up restating and refuting in terms of Heraclitus' metaphysical doctrine of flux and Protagoras' epistemological doctrine of relativism [151d8–187a9]. Chappell presents as two possible interpretations of this discussion the Unitarian and the Revisionist readings. He understands the former reading as taking Plato to be concerned with validating Protagoras' and Heraclitus' theories as true for the sensible world, although not for the intelligible world of Forms. Conversely, Chappell's account of the Revisionist interpretation holds that Plato's point is to refute these theories as entirely false and invalid even for the sensible world [48–49]. Chappell himself defends a version of the Unitarian reading. He does so on the grounds that in his series of objections to the thesis that knowledge is perception

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[6] The emphasis in quotations from Chappell's book are in the original unless indicated otherwise.

Socrates appeals to two crucial distinctions: first, 'between the claim
that the objects of perception are in flux, and the claim that every-
thing is in flux'; and second, 'between bare sensory awareness, and
judgement on the basis of such awareness' [86: cf. 63, 140, 146–48].

Theaetetus' second definition of knowledge states that know-
ledge is true belief [187a9–201c7]. Chappell interprets this as saying
that knowledge is 'judgement about immediate sensory awareness'.
He takes the main point of Socrates' discussion of this definition to
be the question of how such judgments can arise [151]. This dis-
cussion, Chappell explains, is concerned exclusively with explaining
the possibility of false belief in order to refute the empiricist's view
that knowledge and belief are 'simply constructs from immediate sen-
sory awareness, with no magical extra ingredients (such as Plato's
Forms) thrown in' [152]. The 'corollary' of this refutation, accord-
ing to Chappell, is 'that we need something else besides sensation
to explain belief. In modern terms, we need irreducible *semantic
properties*. In Plato's terms, we need the Forms' [152]. The point of
Plato's objection to the second definition, Chappell argues, is that
the distinction between true and false belief does not even make sense
unless one can explain how sense impressions come to be 'concate-
nated so as to give them semantic structure' [232]. Again, Chappell's
argument is that Plato wants the reader to see Platonism as the solu-
tion to the problems involved in the empiricist's explanation of false
belief [cf. 152n122]. But the author is not clear about why the suc-
cess of Platonism should follow from the failure of empiricism, and in
particular how Forms can explain the 'semantic structure' of beliefs.

Theaetetus' third definition of knowledge is that knowledge is
true belief with an account [201c8–210d4]. Chappell argues that in
discussing this definition Plato is trying to find a sense of the word
'account' that will 'explain how sense-experience alone can provide
a basis for semantic structure, and in particular for the possibility of
reference' [199]. Chappell here is especially concerned with the fact
that Socrates discusses and refutes four interpretations of Theaetetus'
third definition of knowledge, but that 'none of these is Plato's own
earlier version of [that definition], which... says that knowledge =
true belief with an account *of the reason why the true belief is true*'
[201]. Chappell points to this fact in order to support his view that
the concluding *aporia* is a literary device and does not reflect genuine
uncertainty. Plato, he argues, is not trying to clarify his own view of

knowledge but rather wants to eliminate the views of his opponents [199–201]. He explains:

> [Unitarians] can say that Plato's strategy is to refute what he takes to be false versions of [the third definition] so as to increase the logical pressure on anyone who rejects Plato's version of [the third definition]. In particular, he wants to put pressure on the empiricist theorists of knowledge.... What Plato wants to show is, not only that no definition of knowledge except his own... is acceptable, but also that no version of [the third definition] except his own is acceptable. [201]

Once again, the author does not say how exactly this 'logical pressure' works and what exactly it entails.

The main shortcoming of Chappell's study is that it neglects to elaborate the didactic point of this indirect argumentative structure. After pointing to Theaetetus' three failed attempts to define knowledge, Socrates concludes on a positive note:

> Well then, Theaetetus, if you ever try to conceive again after this... the effect of this inquiry will be that better ideas than these will fill you. Whereas if you stay empty, you will come down less heavily on your friends, and be gentler with them. For you will have the modesty not to imagine that you know what you do not know. This is all my skill can do for you, and nothing more. [210b11–d1: Chappell's translation, 236]

How does Chappell explain this passage? It is one thing for Socrates to say that the aporetic outcome to Theaetetus' inquiries into knowledge clears the way for better ideas and allows him not to think that he knows what he does not know. But it is another thing entirely to suggest that the elimination of empiricism implies some specific doctrine as the better alternative. In addition, Socrates says that the only result of the conversation has been that Theaetetus will not believe that he has knowledge when he does not, 'and nothing more'. How does Chappell square this conclusion with his view that the conversation leaves us with a definition of knowledge 'as true belief with an explanation *why* that belief is true' [233], which is certainly more than Theaetetus' freshly learned modesty? Chappell does not elaborate, but he does offer the following brief (and unfortunately vague) conjectures:

...there may be much more to the ending than that. It may
even be that...we have seen hints of Plato's own answer to
the puzzle. Perhaps *understanding* has emerged from the last
discussion...as the key ingredient without which no true be-
liefs alone can even begin to look like they might count as
knowledge. Perhaps it is only when we, the readers, under-
stand this point...that we begin not only to have true be-
liefs about what knowledge is, but to understand knowledge.[7]
[236–237]

   In sum, *Reading Plato's* Theaetetus is a helpful analytic guide
for interpreting individual passages and issues in the *Theaetetus*, even
when the author's treatment of the dialogue's relation to Plato's other
writings is somewhat superficial and speculative.

Corrigenda

20	in 'Cornford's and Ross's **Revisionist**', read 'Unitarian'
23	in 'cp. section **34c(i)**', read '34c(ii)'
49	'issues of Plato interpretation interlock' makes no sense
49	in 'G.E.L. **Own**', read 'Owen'
53	in 'is introduced **is**', read 'as'
54	missing macron on *aesthesis*
67	'coming to be becoming' is redundant
71	in 'any **direction** solution', read 'direct'
89n66	'bout' = 'about'?
120	'sesctions' should be 'sections'

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[7] Nor are Chappell's earlier remarks very helpful:

   Plato means us to conclude that the attempt to know knowledge, if
   successful, will produce an account of knowledge which 'circles back
   on itself'. The moral is that, because all knowledge depends on the
   possession of an understanding of an 'explanation why' which itself
   has to be known, knowledge is irreducible to true belief. What
   needs to be added to true belief to get us to a correct definition
   of knowledge is always going to be circularity-generating, because
   what will need to be added is, roughly, *understanding*; and un-
   derstanding implies not only knowledge but even something like
   wisdom. [233–234]

172   in 'when **that** we made', omit 'that'
194   there is no 'section 10c, above'

In addition, the glossary has incorrectly alphabetized the following entries: 'Forms' and 'Flux', 'Recollection' and 'Reading B', and 'Ubiquity of Opposites' and 'Sense data'. An entry on Nominalism would have been useful.