An Excerpt from

THEAETETUS

by Plato

(Written 360 B.C.E)

Translated by Benjamin Jowett

Summary of excerpt:

Knowledge is belief accompanied by an explanation (*logos*)

One way of making mere belief approach the status of knowledge would be to accompany one's judgment with an explanation (or reason) of why one holds this or that belief. Such a reason (logos) would then serve to ground the belief, it would provide a foundation for the judgment, This seems to be the further buttressing that mere belief needs, and the dialogue now begins to move in this direction.

Theaetetus and Socrates approach the problem by investigating various modes of explanation The first, strangely enough, is presented through the image of a dream which Socrates had once had. It seems that in Socrates' dream he had heard of a theory which held that all things are essentially complexes made up of many simple elements, For example, we can say that a broom is a complex thing made up of (the simpler elements of) a long wooden handle and straw bristles. This theory then goes on to say that the broom's handle would itself be made of simpler elements (it is, for instance, both wooden and long), and that, in fact, these elements get simpler and simpler until we reach the simplest possible elements. These primary elements would then be described as the ultimate (conceptual) building blocks of the complex entity called the broom.

Now, from within this dream image, it seems possible to give an account of knowledge. We may be said to know a thing when we are able to explain it in terms of its simple elements. Once we analyze a complex object down to its constituent parts, we may then be said to have arrived at a full explanation of the object-and we may then be said to have arrived at a knowledge of the object.

Theaetetus is at first favorably inclined to accept this view, but Socrates is uncertain. The problem is that, within the dream itself, there is the belief that these simple elements are so simple that they cannot even be described. In fact, these ultimate simples seem "unknowable." This is the theory’s fatal flaw. When we attempt to arrive at a knowledge of something (by analyzing it into its simplest elements) we eventually arrive at something unknowable. Yet how can that which is unknowable serve as a foundation for knowledge? What does it mean to make complexes knowable (for example, a word) while at the same time to make its elements (viz., the syllables) unknowable? It seems as if Socrates and Theaetetus really have been dreaming. If we are going to give an explanation of a thing in terms of its elements, then these elements must at least be capable of being known.
Awake now from the dream, both Socrates and Theaetetus return to the problem of explanation. Together, they will explore three possible meanings of the phrase "to give an account."

**To give an account means to list the parts.** This attempt is similar to the one in the dream-story, though this time the simplest elements ("parts") are assumed to be knowable. In this vein, the account of, for instance, a wagon, would simply consist of listing its various parts e.g., wheels, seat, horses, etc.

But what would a mere listing of the individual parts contribute to a knowledge of what the wagon really is? We might well know all the parts of a wagon and still not know what a wagon is (for instance, what a wagon is used for, how to ride it, etc.). To know the parts is different from knowing what the thing is; to know the parts of Theaetetus' name is not to know Theaetetus.

Plato is making us feel the need for something more in our description of things. In this case, what is missing is the "Form" or essence of the wagon, and this is something distinct from the mere enumeration of the parts (elements). So even if one claims that the elements are knowable, one still cannot arrive at a "knowledge of X" from an "analysis (of the parts) of X." This second account fails, and Theaetetus and Socrates go on to their final attempt to arrive at an understanding of knowledge.

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THEAETETUS: That is a distinction, Socrates, which I have heard made by some one else, but I had forgotten it. He said that true opinion, combined with reason, was knowledge, but that the opinion which had no reason was out of the sphere of knowledge; and that things of which there is no rational account are not knowable--such was the singular expression which he used--and that things which have a reason or explanation are knowable.

SOCRATES: Excellent; but then, how did he distinguish between things which are and are not 'knowable'? I wish that you would repeat to me what he said, and then I shall know whether you and I have heard the same tale.

THEAETETUS: I do not know whether I can recall it; but if another person would tell me, I think that I could follow him.

SOCRATES: Let me give you, then, a dream in return for a dream:--Methought that I too had a dream, and I heard in my dream that the primeval letters or elements out of which you and I and all other things are compounded, have no reason or explanation; you can only name them, but no predicate can be either affirmed or denied of them, for in the one case existence, in the other non-existence is already implied, neither of which must be added, if you mean to speak of this or that thing by itself alone. It should not be called itself, or that, or each, or alone, or this, or the like; for these go about everywhere and are applied to all things, but are distinct from them; whereas, if the first elements could be described, and had a definition of their own, they would be spoken of apart from all else. But none of these primeval elements can be defined; they can only be named, for they have nothing but a name, and the things which are compounded of them, as they are complex, are expressed by a combination of names, for the combination of names is the essence of a definition. Thus, then, the elements or letters are only objects of perception, and cannot be defined.
or known; but the syllables or combinations of them are known and expressed, and are apprehended by true opinion. When, therefore, any one forms the true opinion of anything without rational explanation, you may say that his mind is truly exercised, but has no knowledge; for he who cannot give and receive a reason for a thing, has no knowledge of that thing; but when he adds rational explanation, then, he is perfected in knowledge and may be all that I have been denying of him. Was that the form in which the dream appeared to you?

THEAETETUS: Precisely.

SOCRATES: And you allow and maintain that true opinion, combined with definition or rational explanation, is knowledge?

THEAETETUS: Exactly.

SOCRATES: Then may we assume, Theaetetus, that to-day, and in this casual manner, we have found a truth which in former times many wise men have grown old and have not found?

THEAETETUS: At any rate, Socrates, I am satisfied with the present statement.

SOCRATES: Which is probably correct—for how can there be knowledge apart from definition and true opinion? And yet there is one point in what has been said which does not quite satisfy me.

THEAETETUS: What was it?

SOCRATES: What might seem to be the most ingenious notion of all:—That the elements or letters are unknown, but the combination or syllables known.

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SOCRATES: ...When Hesiod says that a waggon is made up of a hundred planks. Now, neither you nor I could describe all of them individually; but if any one asked what is a waggon, we should be content to answer, that a waggon consists of wheels, axle, body, rims, yoke.

THEAETETUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And our opponent will probably laugh at us, just as he would if we professed to be grammarians and to give a grammatical account of the name of Theaetetus, and yet could only tell the syllables and not the letters of your name—that would be true opinion, and not knowledge; for knowledge, as has been already remarked, is not attained until, combined with true opinion, there is an enumeration of the elements out of which anything is composed.
THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: In the same general way, we might also have true opinion about a waggon; but he who can describe its essence by an enumeration of the hundred planks, adds rational explanation to true opinion, and instead of opinion has art and knowledge of the nature of a waggon, in that he attains to the whole through the elements.

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