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Bitter Knowledge: Socrates and Teaching by Disillusionment Appendix C - the Theaetetus

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PREFATORY NOTE [ADDED IN 2015]

It was been suggested (and here I am thinking in particular of comments made by Professor William Prior) that my book, *Bitter Knowledge*, would benefit from a more comprehensive attention to the argumentative details of the dialogues studied there. Professor Prior specifically suggests that, if we were to be given more of their argumentation, we might better appreciate the motivation or the disposition of the speakers in the dialogues under study.

The book as designed, as submitted in typescript, and as accepted for publication, included three appendices. These appendices comprised detailed outlines of the speakers and events portrayed in, respectively, the *Protagoras*, the *Meno*, and the *Theaetetus*. They were intended to add depth and context to the analyses and discussions in the book’s three chapters devoted to those dialogues. Unfortunately, during the production process, the editorial decision was made to cut the appendices, despite my objection.

My book does not explore these three dialogues along the traditional lines of eliciting and analyzing the doctrinal features embedded within the discussions portrayed, which doctrines (about virtue, or justice, or the Forms, etc.) may be ascribed to Plato. I knew that my approach was untraditional in this regard, and that I risked losing some readers due to my lack of attention to those doctrinal features. I did not run this risk lightly, nor did I think the resultant loss inconsequential. I did believe, however, that certain other features in the Platonic corpus had been under-attended and under-appreciated, and it was toward those features — largely pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning — that I mostly gave my attention in the core of the book.

The appendices, in their collection of the complex weave of speakers and themes and events and arguments within each individual dialogue, were meant to illustrate how educative lessons were interwoven with doctrinal concerns by the master-craftsman, Plato, in his depictions of Socrates talking and interacting with others. It seemed to me that, as much as Socrates denied or refused the mantle of teacher, most famously in the *Apology*, his actions belied his denials. In this respect, I was following the lead of Seth Benardete, whose book entitled, *The Argument of the Action*, nicely teaches us the lesson that the action of a text has an argument of its own, if we can but elucidate it. Putting my own particular spin on Benardete’s insight, one might say that *Bitter Knowledge* focuses our attention throughout on the action (or activity) of the argument, rather than on the doctrinal aspects of the argument.

I regret that these appendices, as further illustrations of my characterization of the various participants in these conversational inquiries, were dropped from the book as published. So, I make them available, for whatever assistance they may be to readers of *Bitter Knowledge* at this late date.

T.D.E.

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Appendix C – the *Theaetetus*

**Conversational Groupings:**

A. Eucleides and Terpsion [142a-143c].  
B. Socrates and Theodorus [143d-144d].  
C. Socrates and Theaetetus [144e-161a].  
   i. Theodorus' interjection: he declines to participate [146b].  
   ii. Socrates' first speech: his art as mid-wifery [148e-151d].  
D. Socrates and Theodorus: an interruption [161a-162b].  
E. Socrates and Theaetetus: back again [162c-164c].  
F. Socrates and Theodorus (and Theaetetus) [165a-165b].  
G. Socrates and Theaetetus [165b-165e].  
H. Socrates' second speech (as Protagoras' advocate or defender) [166a-168c].  
I. Socrates and Theodorus: Theodorus is challenged to participate fully [168c-183c].  
J. Socrates and Theodorus and Theaetetus [183d-184b].  
K. Socrates and Theaetetus [184b-210d].

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**An Outline of the Speakers, Events, and Topics in the Theaetetus**

1. **Theaetetus' bravery and nobility: Eulogy for a hero [142a-143c].**  
   a. Terpsion meets Eucleides, and they converse about Theaetetus and about Socrates [142a-143c].  
   b. Theaetetus' character and nobility: "A fine man" [142b].
c. About Socrates: "what a remarkably good prophet he was--as usual--about Theaetetus" [142c].

d. Socrates met Theaetetus, who was a boy at the time, and they had a talk [142c-d].

e. Socrates recounted, for the benefit of Eucleides, his discussion with Theaetetus; Eucleides wrote it down and frequently revised it, checking various points later with Socrates. "The result is that I have got pretty well the whole discussion in writing" [143a].

f. Terpsion and Eucleides sit and listen to the written record of this long-ago discussion, as read to them by Eucleides' slave [143a-c].

2. Socrates' meeting with Theaetetus as a promising youth: Eucleides' reconstructed dialogue [143d-145e].

a. Socrates to Theodorus: "I love Athens better than Cyrene, and so I'm more anxious to know which of our young men shows signs of turning out well" [143d].

b. Socrates to Theodorus: Who among the Athenian youth "is good for anything?" Who is worth talking about or talking to? Who is worth getting to know? [143d-144d].

c. Theodorus: "I think I ought to tell you ... about a remarkable boy I have met here" [143e].

d. Theodorus describes Theaetetus and his many virtues [143e-144b].

e. Theodorus: "His name, Socrates, is Theaetetus" [144d].
f. Socrates and Theodorus call over to Theaetetus, who is outside in the gymnasium, asking him to sit down and join them in discussion [144d].

g. Socrates begins his examination of Theaetetus [144d-145e].

i. "Theodorus says I am like you. But ... should we have taken his word for it straight away? Or should we have tried to find out if he was speaking with any expert knowledge ... ?" [144d-e].

ii. Theaetetus: “Oh, we should have enquired into that” [144e].

iii. "But supposing it were the soul of one of us that he [Theodorus] was praising? Suppose he said one of us was good and wise? Oughtn't the one who heard that be very anxious to examine the object of such praise? And oughtn't the other be very willing to show himself off?” [145b]

iv. “Then, my dear Theaetetus, now is the time for you to show yourself and for me to examine you” [145b].

v. “So have the pluck to stand by your agreement” [145c].

vi. “I have a small difficulty, which I think ought to be investigated, with your help and that of the rest of the company.--Now isn't it true that to learn is to become wiser about the thing one is learning?” [145d]

vii. “And what makes men wise, I take it, is wisdom?” [145d]

viii. “And is this in any way different from knowledge? ... Wisdom. Isn't it the things which they know that men are wise about?” [145e]

ix. “So knowledge and wisdom will be the same thing?” [145e]
3. **Socrates' difficulty:** "What on earth knowledge really is?" [145e-148e].

a. Socrates: "Well, why this silence? Theodorus, I hope my love of argument is not making me forget my manners—just because I'm so anxious to start a discussion and get us all friendly and talkative together?" [146a]

b. Theodorus: "But do make one of the young people answer you. I am not used to this kind of discussion, and I'm too old to get into the way of it. But it would be suitable enough for them and they would profit more by it" [146b].

c. Socrates to Theaetetus: "Now give me a good frank answer. What do you think knowledge is?" [146c]

d. Theaetetus' initial response to Socrates' request: He gives examples of knowledge [146c-146e].

e. Socrates' initial response to Theaetetus' examples of knowledge: "But that is not what you were asked, Theaetetus. You were not asked to say what one may have knowledge of, or how many branches of knowledge there are. ... We wanted to know what knowledge itself is.—Or am I talking nonsense?" [146e]

f. Socrates: "So when the question raised is 'What is knowledge?', to reply by naming one of the crafts is an absurd answer; because it points out something that knowledge is of when this is not what the question was about" [147b-c].

g. What is wanted by Socrates is "a short, simple, commonplace statement" of what knowledge really is (by way of a definition or general explanation) [147d-148e].

h. Theaetetus: "And yet, Socrates, I shouldn't be able to answer your question about knowledge in the same way that I answered the one about lengths and powers--
though you seem to me to be looking for something of the same sort" [148b].

i. Socrates to Theaetetus: "Then do have confidence in yourself and try to believe that Theodorus knew what he was talking about. You must put your whole heart into what we are doing—in particular into this matter of getting a statement of what knowledge really is" [148c-d].

4. Socrates' art as mid-wifery [148e-151d].

a. Socrates: "Yes; those are the pains of labour, dear Theaetetus. It is because you are not barren but pregnant" [148e].

b. Socrates: "Then do you mean to say you've never heard about my being the son of a good hefty midwife ... ? ... And haven't you ever been told that I practise the same art myself?" [149a]

c. Socrates: "Only don't give me away to the rest of the world, will you? You see, my friend, it is a secret that I have this art. That is not one of the things you hear people saying about me, because they don't know; but they do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties" [149a].

d. Socrates describes the art of mid-wives [149b-150a].

e. Socrates: "So the work of the midwives is a highly important one; but it is not so important as my own performance. And for this reason, that there is not in midwifery the further complication, that the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms and sometimes of realities, and that the two are hard to distinguish. If there were, then the midwife's greatest and noblest function would be to
distinguish the true from the false offspring--don't you agree?" [150a-b]

f. Socrates: "Now my art of midwifery is just like theirs in most respects. The difference is that I attend men and not women, and that I watch over the labour of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or fertile truth" [150b-c].

g. Socrates: "For one thing which I have in common with the ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren of wisdom. The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough" [150c].

h. Socrates: "So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom. But with those who associate with me it is different" [150c-d].

i. Some people who have associated with Socrates have left him too soon, and "the result [was] that what remained within them has miscarried" [150e].

j. Socrates: "There is another point also in which those who associate with me are like women in child-birth. They suffer the pains of labour, and are filled day and night with distress; indeed they suffer far more than women. And this pain my art is able to bring on, and also to allay" [151a].

k. Socrates: "Well, my dear lad, this has been a long yarn; but the reason was that I have a suspicion that you (as you think yourself) are pregnant and in labour. So I want you to come to me as to one who is both the son of a midwife and himself
skilled in the art, and try to answer the questions I shall ask you as well as you can. And when I examine what you say, I may perhaps think it is a phantom and not truth, and proceed to take it quietly from you and abandon it. Now if this happens, you mustn't get savage with me, like a mother over her first-born child" [151b-c].

1. Socrates: "So begin again, Theaetetus, and try to say what knowledge is" [151d].

5. **Beginning again: Trying to say “what knowledge is” [151d-160e].**
   a. Theaetetus' initial attempt at an account: "knowledge is simply perception" [151e].
   b. Socrates attributes this account of knowledge to Protagoras ("Man is the measure of all things") [152a].
   c. Socrates also associates this account of knowledge with Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Homer [152e].
   d. Socrates gives his own initial interpretation of Protagoras' theory of knowledge ("my friend, you must understand our theory in this way") [153d].
   e. Socrates helps Theaetetus "to discover the veiled truth in the thought of a great man" [155c].
   f. Socrates concludes his initial account of Protagoras' theory ("Well, Theaetetus, does this look to you a tempting meal and could you take a bite of the delicious stuff?") [157c].
   g. Theaetetus: "I really don't know, Socrates. I can't even quite see what you're getting at--whether the things you are saying are what you think yourself, or
whether you are just trying me out" [157c].

h. An interjected plea of Socratic ignorance: "You are forgetting, my friend. I don't know anything about this kind of thing myself, and I don't claim any of it as my own. I am barren of theories; my business is to attend you in your labour. ... But you must have courage and patience; answer like a man whatever appears to you to be true about the things I ask you" [157c-d].

i. The problem of false perceptions for Protagoras' theory ("what argument is left for the person who maintains that knowledge is perception") [158a].

j. Everything is what it is, only in relation to something else ("That is the meaning of the theory we have been expounding") [160b-c].

k. Initial Summation: "Then that was a grand idea of yours when you told us that knowledge is nothing more or less than perception." (The theories of Heraclitus, Homer, and Protagoras coincide with Theaetetus' theory.) [160d-e]

l. This theory is Theaetetus' "first-born child," the result of Socrates' mid-wifery [160e].

m. Theaetetus: "Oh, there's no denying it, Socrates" [160e].

n. Socrates: "And now that it has been born, we must perform the rite of running round the hearth with it; we must make it in good earnest go the round of discussion" [160e].
Socrates is ready to test the truth of Theaetetus' theory, but Theodorus interrupts [160e-162c].

a. Theodorus: "Theaetetus will put up with it, Socrates. He is not at all one to lose his temper. But tell me, in Heaven's name, in what way is it not as it should be?" [161a]

b. Socrates: "You are the complete lover of discussion, Theodorus, and it is too good of you to think that I am a sort of bag of arguments, and can easily pick one out which will show you that this theory is wrong. But you don't realise what is happening. The arguments never come from me; they always come from the person I am talking to. All that I know, such as it is, is how to take an argument from someone else--someone who is wise--and give it a fair reception. So, now, I propose to try to get our answer out of Theaetetus, not to make any contribution of my own" [161a-b].

c. Socrates: "Well then, Theodorus, do you know what astonishes me about your friend Protagoras? ... It would have made clear to us at once that, while we were standing astounded at his wisdom as though he were a God, he was in reality no better authority than a tadpole--let alone any other man" [161b, c-d].

d. Socrates: Protagoras refutes himself; he punctures his own authority. "[H]ow could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise as to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men and worth large fees; while we, in comparison with him the ignorant ones, needed to go and sit at his feet--we who are ourselves each the measure of his own wisdom?" [161d-e]
e. Socrates: "I say nothing about my own case and my art of midwifery and how silly we look. So too, I think, does the whole business of philosophical discussion. To examine and try to refute each other's appearances and judgements, when each person's are correct--this is surely an extremely tiresome piece of nonsense, if the Truth of Protagoras is true, and not merely an oracle speaking in jest from the impenetrable sanctuary of the book" [161e-162a].

f. Theodorus continues to beg off answering Socrates' questions: "Protagoras was my friend, Socrates, as you have just remarked. I could not consent to have him refuted through my admissions; and yet I should not be prepared to resist you against my own judgement. So take on Theaetetus again. He seemed to be following you very sympathetically just now" [162a].

g. Socrates reluctantly accedes to Theodorus' request: "Well, Theodorus, what you like I'll not dislike, as the saying goes. So we must again resort to our wise Theaetetus" [162b-c].


a. "Protagoras, or anyone speaking on his behalf, will answer us like this" [162d].

b. "Here ... is another way in which we might consider whether knowledge and perception are the same or different things" [163a].

c. Learning and memory: "Can a man who has learnt something not know it when he is remembering?" [163d] (being a further attempt to show that knowledge and perception are not identical) [163d-164d].
d. Initial assessment: “And so the tale of Protagoras comes to an untimely end; yours [Theaetetus'] too, your tale about the identity of knowledge and perception" [164d].

8. **Coming to the rescue of Protagoras' theory [164e-168c].**

a. A new puzzle: “Is it possible for a man who knows something not to know this thing which he knows?” [165b]

b. A million questions from “mercenary skirmishers of debate” [165b-e].

c. Protagoras' own argument on behalf of his theory: Socrates' second speech (this time, as Protagoras's advocate or defender) [166a-168c].

9. **Socrates begins the inquiry anew by examining Theodorus as to the truth of Protagoras' theory [168c-172c].**

a. Back to the argument: “Now let us see whether we were right or wrong in holding it to be a defect in this theory that it made every man self-sufficient in wisdom” [169d].

b. We all recognize (and even Protagoras would have to concede) that we believe that, in some things, some people are wiser than others [170a-171c].

c. Different types of questions or topics have different measures (tests) of correctness [171c-172c].

d. Socrates: “And even those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom. But I see, Theodorus, that we are becoming
involved in a greater discussion emerging from the lesser one” [172b-c].

e. Theodorus: “Well, we have plenty of time, haven’t we, Socrates?” [172c]

10. A digression: The differences between (impractical) philosophers and (practical) lawyers [172e-177b].

a. Socrates: “That remark of yours, my friend, reminds me of an idea that has occurred to me before--how natural it is that men who have spent a great part of their lives in philosophical studies make such fools of themselves when they appear as speakers in the law-courts” [172c].

b. The conditions under which the philosopher and the lawyer (the practical man) live [172c-175e].

i. “[T]he man who has been knocking about in law-courts and such places ever since he was a boy ... [has] the upbringing of a slave ... .” He is always in a hurry and he has to speak with one eye on the clock. And the lawyer has to speak always in favor of his client and to oppose his adversary, all the while addressing and seeking to impress the judge (the lawyer's master) [172c-e].

ii. The philosopher (or the student) has the upbringing of a free man. He can devote his time and attention when and as he pleases. “When he talks, he talks in peace and quiet, and his time is his own” [172d].
c. Two character types: the philosopher and the lawyer (practical man) [173a-175e].

i. The conditions for the lawyer “make him keen and high-strung, skilled in flattering the master and working his way into favour; but [these same conditions] cause his soul to be small and warped” [173a].

ii. Theodorus enters his own observation about philosophers and other thinkers and students: “[W]e who move in such circles are not the servants but the masters of our discussions. Our arguments are our own, like slaves; each one must wait about for us, to be finished whenever we think fit. We have no jury, and no audience (as the dramatic poets have), sitting in control over us, ready to criticise and give orders” [173c].

iii. Socrates: The philosopher does not know practical matters, such as the way to the market-place or the location of the law-courts or of the council chambers. “His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way ... through the universe ...; tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, and never condescending to what lies near at hand” [173e-174a].

iv. Socrates: “Whenever he [the philosopher] is obliged, in a law-court or elsewhere, to discuss the things that lie at his feet and before his eyes, he causes entertainment not only to Thracian servant-girls but to all the common herd, by tumbling into wells and every sort of difficulty through his lack of experience. His clumsiness is awful and gets him a reputation
for fatuousness" [174c].

v. Socrates: "But consider what happens, my friend, when he [the philosopher] in his turn draws someone to a higher level, and induces him to abandon questions of 'My injustice towards you, or yours toward me' for an examination of justice and injustice themselves--what they are, and how they differ from everything else and from each other; ..." [175b-c].

vi. Socrates: "These are the two types, Theodorus" [175d].

d. Socrates accounts for the existence of evil in the world ("My friend, there are two patterns set up in the world. One is divine and supremely happy; the other has nothing of God in it, and is the pattern of the deepest unhappiness" [176e]) [176a-177a].

11. Returning once again to the main topic: Regarding Protagoras' (and Theaetetus') theory of knowledge, what is the measure for correctness in judgment or perception? [177c-183c]

a. Pursuing further the implications of the claims that "All is flux" [see 156a], and that "Man is the measure of all things" [see 152a] [177c].

i. Judging what is "just" and "right"; or what is "useful" [177c-178a].

ii. Judging what the future holds [178a-179b].

iii. Judging "immediate present experiences" [179c].

b. "We shall have to come to closer grips with the theory" [179d].

c. "[G]oing back to its [the theory's] first principle" ("All is flux") [179d].
d. Theodorus tells Socrates what is wrong with the Heracliteans [179e-180c].

e. Against Heraclitus, stands Parmenides [180d-e].

f. Socrates and Theodorus are in the middle between these two warring parties [180e-181a].

g. Examining the Heracliteans [181a-183b].

h. Conclusion: "If all things are in motion, then every answer, on whatever subject, is equally correct" [183a].

i. Assessment: "The exponents of this theory [viz., Protagoras and Heraclitus] need to establish some other language; as it is, they have no words that are consistent with their hypothesis" [that "All is flux," or that "Man is the measure of all things"] [183b].

j. Result: "Then we are set free from your friend [Protagoras]"--and Theodorus is absolved from his agreement to participate [183b-c].

12. **Returning to the main question ("What is the nature of knowledge?"): It is Theaetetus' turn to expound again [183d-210d].**

   a. First model: Knowledge is perception [184b-186e].

      i. "The knowledge is to be found not in the experiences but in the process of reasoning about them" [186d].

      ii. "Then, Theaetetus, perception and knowledge could never be the same thing" [186e].

   b. Second model: Knowledge is true judgment [187a-201c].
i. What is false judgment? How is it possible? [187d-200d]

(a) Three failed attempts to say how false judgment is possible [187e-190e].

(b) A fourth (successful) attempt to account for false judgment [190c-195a].

(c) Analogy of the wax block ("Now I want you to suppose, for the sake of the argument, that we have in our souls a block of wax, larger in one person, smaller in another, and of purer wax in one case, dirtier in another; in some men rather hard, in others rather soft, while in some it is of the proper consistency. ... We may look upon it, then, as a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses. We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, ... . Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know so long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget and do not know" [191c-d, d-e]) [191c-195a].

(d) Socrates: "We must begin this discussion by making certain distinctions" (listing four) [192a].

(e) Socrates: "Well, this, then, they say, is why the two things occur [i.e., true judgments and false judgments]. In some men, the wax
in the soul is deep and abundant, smooth and worked to the proper consistency; and when things that come through the senses are imprinted upon this 'heart' of the soul ... the signs that are made in it are lasting, because they are clear and have sufficient depth. men with such souls learn easily and remember what they learn; they do not get the signs out of line with the perceptions, but judge truly.

... But it is a different matter when a man's 'heart' is 'shaggy' ... or when it is dirty and of impure wax; or when it is very soft or hard. Persons in whom the wax is soft are quick to learn but quick to forget; when the wax is hard, the opposite happens" [194c-d, e].

ii. A further concern about false judgment, and what knowing is like [195b-199e].

(a) An impossible choice [196c].

(b) Analogy of the aviary ("Suppose a man were to hunt wild birds, pigeons or something, and make an aviary for them at his house and look after them there; then in a sense, I suppose, we might say he 'has' them all the time, because of course he possesses them. ...

But in another sense he 'has' none of them; it is only that he has acquired a certain power in respect of them, because he has got them under his control in an enclosure of his own" [197c]) [197c-199e].
(c) Socrates: "Well a little while ago we were equipping souls with I
don't know what sort of a waxen device. Now let us make in each
soul a sort of aviary of all kinds of birds; ..." [197d].

iii. "So, after going a long way round, we are back at our original
difficulty."

... "Then, to go back to the beginning, what are we going to say
knowledge is?" [200a-200d]

iv. True judgment is not sufficient for possessing knowledge [200d-201c].

c. Third model: Knowledge is true judgment coupled with an account [201d-210a].

i. Knowing elements and compounds [201d-206b].

(a) Socrates' dream ("In my dream, too, I thought I was listening to
people saying that the primary elements, as it were, of which we
and everything else are composed, have no account. Each of them,
in itself, can only be named; it is not possible to say anything else
of it, either that it is or that it is not" [201e]) [201d-202c].

(b) Examining the theory that elements are unknowable, but only
compounds are knowable [202d-206b].

ii. What is an account? Possible definitions (all of which are rejected):
[206c-210a].

(a) Making one's thought apparent vocally [206d-e].

(b) Being able, when asked, to give an answer (by going through the
elements of the whole) [206e-208c].
(c) Being able to tell some way of distinguishing an object of knowledge from all other things [208c-210a].

13. Somber conclusions [210b-d].
   a. "And so, Theaetetus, knowledge is neither perception nor true judgement, nor an account added to true judgement" [210a-b].
   b. "And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this enquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don't know. This is all my art can achieve—nothing more" [210b-c].