

Plato, from *Sophist*, 242c-243c; 261c-264b

In *Sophist*, Plato is attempting to refute the sophistical claim that stating a falsehood is impossible. Parmenides had argued that ‘what is not’ has no sort of being, and so can not be stated. The sophist may try to take advantage of this claim in order to deny that he is distorting the truth. The participants in this dialogue are the bright young Theaetetus and an Eleatic (i.e. Parmenidean) Stranger.

Stranger: I think that Parmenides, and all who ever undertook to determine how many real things there are, talked to us in rather a light and easy strain.

Theaetetus: How?

Stranger: As if we had been children, to whom they each told a story. One said that there were three principles, and that at one time there was war between certain of them; and then again there was peace, and they were married and begat children, and brought them up. Another spoke of two principles, a moist and a dry, or a hot and a cold, and made them marry and cohabit. The Eleatics, however, in our part of the world, say that things are many in name, but in nature one; this is their myth, which goes back to Xenophanes, and is even older. Then there are Ionian, and in more recent times Sicilian, muses, who have arrived at the conclusion that to unite the two principles is safer, and to say that being is one and many, and that these are held together by enmity and friendship, ever parting, ever meeting, as the more severe Muses assert, while the gentler ones do not insist on the perpetual strife and peace, but admit a relaxation and alternation of them; peace and unity sometimes prevailing under the sway of Aphrodite, and then again plurality and war, by reason of a principle of strife. Whether any of them spoke the truth in all this is hard to determine. Besides, antiquity and famous men should have reverence, and not be liable to accusations so serious. Yet one thing may be said of them without offence.

Theaetetus: What thing?

Stranger: That they went on their several ways disdainingly to notice people like ourselves; they did not care whether they took us with them, or left us behind them.

Theaetetus: How do you mean?

Stranger: I mean to say, that when they talk of one, two, or more elements, which are or have become or are becoming, or again of heat mingling with cold, assuming in some other part of their works separations and mixtures, do you, Theaetetus, understand a single word they say? When I was a younger man, I used to fancy that I understood quite well what was meant by the term “not-being,” which is our present subject of dispute; and now you see how completely perplexed we are about it.

Theaetetus: I see.

Stranger: And very likely we have been getting into the same perplexity about “being.” We may fancy that when anybody utters the word, we understand him quite easily, although we do not know about not-being. But we may be equally ignorant of both....

Stranger: Let us first of all obtain a conception of language and opinion, in order that we may have

clearer grounds for determining, whether not-being has any concern with them, or whether they are both always true, and neither of them ever false.

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: Then, now, let us speak of names, for that is the direction in which the answer may be expected.

Theaetetus: And what is the question at issue about names?

Stranger: The question at issue is whether all names may be connected with one another, or none, or only some of them.

Theaetetus: Clearly the last is true.

Stranger: I understand you to say that words which have a meaning when in sequence may be connected, but that words which have no meaning when in sequence cannot be connected?

Theaetetus: What are you saying?

Stranger: What I thought that you intended when you gave your assent; for there are two sorts of intimation of being which are given by the voice.

Theaetetus: What are they?

Stranger: One of them is called nouns, and the other verbs.

Theaetetus: Describe them.

Stranger: That which denotes action we call a verb.

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: And the other, which is an articulate mark set on those who do the actions, we call a noun.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: A succession of nouns only is not a sentence any more than of verbs without nouns.

Theaetetus: I do not understand you.

Stranger: I see that when you gave your assent you had something else in your mind. But what I intended to say was, that a mere succession of nouns or of verbs is not discourse.

Theaetetus: What do you mean?

Stranger: I mean that words like "walks," "runs," "sleeps," or any other words which denote action, however many of them you string together, do not make discourse.

Theaetetus: How can they?

Stranger: Or, again, when you say "lion," "stag," "horse," or any other words which denote agents. Neither in this way of stringing words together do you attain to discourse, for there is no expression of action or inaction, or of the existence of existence or non-existence indicated by the sounds, until verbs are mingled with nouns. Then the words fit, and the smallest combination of them forms language, and is the simplest and least form of discourse.

Theaetetus: Again I ask, What do you mean?

Stranger: When any one says "A man learns," should you not call this the simplest and least of sentences?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: Yes, for he now arrives at the point of giving an intimation about something which is, or is becoming, or has become, or will be. And he not only names, but he does something, by connecting verbs with nouns; and therefore we say that he discourses, and to this connection of words we give the name of discourse.

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: And as there are some things which fit one another, and other things which do not fit, so there are some vocal signs which do, and others which do not, combine and form discourse.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: There is another small matter.

Theaetetus: What is it?

Stranger: A sentence must and cannot help having a subject.

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: And must be of a certain quality.

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Stranger: And now let us mind what we are about.

Theaetetus: We must do so.

Stranger: I will repeat a sentence to you in which a thing and an action are combined, by the help of a noun and a verb; and you shall tell me of whom the sentence speaks.

Theaetetus: I will, to the best my power.

Stranger: "Theaetetus sits" - not a very long sentence.

Theaetetus: Not very.

Stranger: Of whom does the sentence speak, and who is the subject that is what you have to tell.

Theaetetus: Of me; I am the subject.

Stranger: Or this sentence, again-

Theaetetus: What sentence?

Stranger: "Theaetetus, with whom I am now speaking, is flying."

Theaetetus: That also is a sentence which will be admitted by every one to speak of me, and to apply to me.

Stranger: We agreed that every sentence must necessarily have a certain quality.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And what is the quality of each of these two sentences?

Theaetetus: The one, as I imagine, is false, and the other true.

Stranger: The true says what is true about you?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And the false says what is other than true?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And therefore speaks of things which are not as if they were?

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: And say that things are real of you which are not; for, as we were saying, in regard to each thing or person, there is much that is and much that is not.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: The second of the two sentences which related to you was first of all an example of the shortest form consistent with our definition.

Theaetetus: Yes, this was implied in recent admission.

Stranger: And, in the second place, it related to a subject?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: Who must be you, and can be nobody else?

Theaetetus: Unquestionably.

Stranger: And it would be no sentence at all if there were no subject, for, as we proved, a sentence which has no subject is impossible.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: When other, then, is asserted of you as the same, and not-being as being, such a combination of nouns and verbs is really and truly false discourse.

Theaetetus: Most true.

Stranger: And therefore thought, opinion, and imagination are now proved to exist in our minds both as true and false.

Theaetetus: How so?

Stranger: You will know better if you first gain a knowledge of what they are, and in what they severally differ from one another.

Theaetetus: Give me the knowledge which you would wish me to gain.

Stranger: Are not thought and speech the same, with this exception, that what is called thought is the unuttered conversation of the soul with herself?

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: But the stream of thought which flows through the lips and is audible is called speech?

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: And we know that there exists in speech....

Theaetetus: What exists?

Stranger: Affirmation.

Theaetetus: Yes, we know it.

Stranger: When the affirmation or denial takes place in silence and in the mind only, have you any other name by which to call it but opinion?

Theaetetus: There can be no other name.

Stranger: And when opinion is presented, not simply, but in some form of sense, would you not call it imagination?

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Stranger: And seeing that language is true and false, and that thought is the conversation of the soul with herself, and opinion is the end of thinking, and imagination or fantasy is the union of sense and opinion, the inference is that some of them, since they are akin to language, should have an element of falsehood as well as of truth?

Theaetetus: Certainly.

Stranger: Do you perceive, then, that false opinion and speech have been discovered sooner than we expected? For just now we seemed to be undertaking a task which would never be accomplished.

Theaetetus: I perceive.