

KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTION AND MEMORY: *THEAETETUS* 166B

At *Theaetetus* 163d–164b Socrates objects to the thesis that knowledge is perception by pointing out that a man who has seen something can still remember it, and so has knowledge of it; but this is impossible, if knowledge is perception, since he is no longer perceiving it. To this Protagoras is made to reply with two sentences at 166b1–4: αὐτίκα γὰρ δοκεῖς τινά σοι συγχωρήσεσθαι μνήμην παρῆναι τῷ ὧν ἔπαθε, τοιοῦτόν τι οὖσαν πάθος οἶον ὅτε (οἶον ὅτε T: οἶόν τε B: οἶόν τε ὅτ' W) ἔπασχε, μηκέτι πάσχοντι; πολλοὺ γέ δει. Cornford translates 'For instance, do you think you will find anyone to admit that one's present memory of a past impression is an impression of the same character as one had during the original experience, which is now over? It is nothing of the sort'. Cornford understands this as the suggestion that the memory and the original perception are of different things: 'All that the objection in fact established was that "perception" must be stretched to include awareness of memory images'.¹ So too Lee: 'Protagoras' "way out" ... appears to be to say that what we now know is not properly X but rather (say) our memory trace of X – some present πάθος (Y) quite distinct from X (or, more exactly, from our earlier perception of X: Protagoras must thoroughly subjectivize the matter) and very different from that (perhaps along Humean lines of vividness and the like)'.² (Relevant passages from Hume are given by Campbell in his note *ad loc.*)³ McDowell sees Protagoras as pointing to a difference between the two experiences of the thing, rather than between the things experienced; he translates: 'Because – to begin with – do you think anyone is going to concede to you that when one is no longer experiencing something, one can have present in one a memory of that thing which is itself an experience of the same sort as the original one? Far from it'.⁴ Runciman agrees: what Protagoras is saying is that 'memory is another and quite different perceptual experience'. He adds that 'this is not in fact a very good argument, since it makes no attempt to account for our conviction that the two are connected. But Plato does not specifically refute it'.⁵ Lee similarly complains that 'even if remembering X should be said to involve the viewing of some present memory-image Y, it will also be required that Y be "seen as" a memory-image of X': on this interpretation too, Protagoras fails to allow the necessary connection between memory and original perception.

Both interpretations, however, may be based on a mistranslation of the text. Both treat the concluding participial clause in the first sentence as descriptive: when a person remembers, he is no longer having the original perceptual experience. So also Kennedy 1881, Campbell, Dyde 1899, Levett 1928, Robin 1942, Diès 1950. Other translators (Cary 1896, Apelt 1923, Salin 1946, Schleiermacher 1948, Lewis [1963], Rufener [1974], Mazzara 1977) make the clause concessive, with the same effect: 'Do you think anyone will admit to you that anyone's memory is the same as his original experience, although he is no longer having that experience?' The expected negative, however,

¹ F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1935), p. 69.

² E. N. Lee, "'Hoist with his own petard": ironic and comic elements in Plato's critique of Protagoras (*Tht.* 161–171)," in *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. Lee and others (Assen, 1973), p. 235.

³ *The Theaetetus of Plato*, with a revised text and English notes, by L. Campbell (Oxford 1883).

⁴ *Plato, Theaetetus*, translated with notes by J. McDowell (Oxford, 1973).

⁵ W. G. Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 14.

in descriptive and concessive participial clauses is *οὐ* rather than *μή*;⁶ *μή* + participle will normally give a conditional sense (a Platonic example to hand is *Meno* 73a8–b1). Admittedly, it can sometimes possess a *causal* meaning,⁷ which would bring us back close to the accepted understanding of the sentence ('how can the memory be the same as the original experience, since/if he is no longer having it?'). By itself, therefore, the linguistic argument is not conclusive. But to take the clause in question as a true conditional – thereby actually reversing the meaning of the sentence – also seems to make Protagoras' 'way out' more convincing, and helps us to explain why Plato fails to refute it. The sense now becomes 'For in the first place do you think that anyone will agree that anyone has a memory of the things he was experiencing, it (the memory) being the same sort of experience as he had when he had (the original) experience, if he is no longer having an experience (unless he is still having an experience)?' Instead of failing to account for the connection between the memory and the original experience, Protagoras is represented as directly appealing to it, in order to suggest that the man remembering a thing perceived is not only still somehow perceiving it, but even still undergoing the same sort of perceptual experience as he did when he directly perceived the thing. If this is what Plato intends as Protagoras' reply, it might well be difficult to square with the particular account given earlier of one kind of perception, seeing; at the least, that account would require modification or extension. But we would hardly expect Plato to press the point, since – as the appearance of a similar theory in the *Timaeus* may tend to confirm – the detailed theory of vision is likely to be his rather than Protagoras'.

It should be stressed that the suggested interpretation only makes Protagoras (or Plato on Protagoras' behalf) say that remembering is having an experience *like* the original experience, not one numerically identical with the original. It thus takes full account of the phrase *τοιούτων τι πάθος οὔσαν*, and also explains the emphatic *πολλοὺ γὰρ δεῖ* which answers the question posed. The accepted interpretation does neither: anyone would (reasonably) deny that a memory is the same experience as the original one, but why should anyone want to deny *tout court* that it is the *same sort* of experience ('some such experience') as was originally experienced? In some cases of memory, e.g. having a piece of music running through one's head after a performance, it is precisely the similarity with the original experience which is likely to strike one. Indeed, it would not be implausible to treat memories of this type (i.e. vivid memories) as the truly representative cases of memory, since the less vivid and immediate a man's memory is, the more likely he is (or we are) to say that he is not properly remembering. On this basis, Protagoras might fairly contend that *all* (i.e. all true) memories were (perceptual) experiences like the original ones. Non-perceptual memories would have to be treated in a different way; but this particular context of the *Theaetetus* is restricted specifically to the relationship between memory and perception.

A final point about the accepted interpretation. If Protagoras is to save his position in the face of the objection relating to memory, he will need either to claim that remembering is not a case of knowing, or to claim that remembering is a kind of perceiving. The first move would hardly be a plausible one (as Socrates and Theaetetus emphatically agree, and Protagoras shows no sign of dissenting); he is therefore restricted to the second. On the accepted interpretation, he makes this move in a singularly unconvincing way, by insisting on the difference between memory and direct

⁶ R. Kühner – B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache II* (Hanover/Leipzig, 1904), pp. 198 ff.

⁷ Kühner-Gerth II, p. 201 n. 3; add to the examples given e.g. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1120b15, 1121a5.

perceptual experience, and merely leaving it to be understood that memory-experiences are themselves perceptual experiences, of an unspecified kind; either experiences of a different, but unspecified, type of object (Cornford, Lee), or simply different, but unspecified, perceptual experiences (McDowell, Runciman). On the proposed interpretation, he makes the required point directly, gives us some account of what sort of perceptual experiences memories are, and supports his case by means of a clear, and plausible, appeal to common experience. Remembering, he says, is a possible case of knowing because it is a matter of having an experience like the original one of seeing, hearing, etc., where its likeness includes its being a perceptual (indeed visual, aural) experience.

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