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Phil 161

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Summary of John M. Cooper’s “Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge”

**Situation Of Argument and Thesis**

Cooper rejects the thesis proposed by F.M. Cornford, to whom he positions his argument in opposition, that Plato claims that sensibles cannot be the object of knowledge and forms are alluded to in this dialogue. He instead advances the contrary position, that reflections on the information provided by the senses is the source of knowledge. Cornford’s argument divides the text into two stages sourced from 184b-186.a.1 and 186.a.1-e.12. In the first Plato makes a distinction between perception and judgment in order to show that when making judgements there is an intuitive acquaintance with formal concepts, i.e. being and similarity, independent of perception. From this Cornford’s second stage concludes that knowledge must originate from - and be limited to, independent, self reflective activity of the mind in relation to the forms; being cannot be asserted by sensing itself. However, the distinction between judgment and sensing is repressed -favoring an interpretation that locates the act of judgment as a source of knowledge, and relies on a shifty translation of “existence”. Most of all, the text makes no allusion to the forms. Including them appears unnatural as Plato recognizes concepts such as Existence, and Sameness, but makes no indication of them being forms or that awareness of them necessarily produces knowledge.

**Perception and Reflection**

Cooper’s own analysis begins with the clarification that in Plato’s process of perception the mind is always active, perceiving sensory objects through the sense organs. Contrasted with perception is the mind’s “higher use” of reflection. In reflections we predicate “common terms”[[1]](#footnote-0) to the information from various senses. Because these predicates are not limited to one sense, judgements must be made by the mind without relying on a sense organ. Cooper provides nuance to his argument by noting that in the text “sensing” exists as both the act of the mind which perceives, and the power of the bodies which facilitate perception. He proposes that Plato means to reject that both the senses themselves, and the perceptual process described here are candidates for knowledge.

**The problem of labeling**

Further complicating his argument, Cooper notes how Plato does not create a clear distinction as to whether perception implies only sensory awareness, or awareness with the application of labeling concepts[[2]](#footnote-1). However, Plato maintains that neither of these practices involve the application of the“common terms” which constitute knowledge. However, it still seems that in labeling, we reflect on the sameness and difference of attributes. Cooper alleviates this tension by noting how Plato characterizes thought, “as a discourse carried on by the mind with itself” (Cooper, 133). The application of labeling concepts does not necessitate this discourse, it occurs immediately. Other candidates for knowledge require discourse between them and other objects of the mind to be labeled. The immediacy of labeling also shows why Plato was unconcerned with the distinction Cooper notes earlier, as neither side constitutes knowledge.

**Knowledge as the result of reflective acts**

Cooper focuses on Socrates’ question at 185.c.7-8, “What sort of organs do you assign for all of these (common terms), through which our sense-perceptory part perceives them”? For Cooper, this question has nothing to do with the acquaintance with common terms, a problem stemming from an alternate mistranslation, but how we perceive or judge that a thing exists. Providing his own translation of Theaetetus’s reply, Cooper continues to maintain that the dialogue is concerned primarily with epistemology and psychology, not metaphysics. More specifically, as Theaetetus’ reply at 186.a.9-b.1 indicates, Plato wants to show how past, present, and future are weighed in order to make a judgment about a *particular* event, not a universal quality. This reading negates the possibility of Cornford’s first premise, and by consequence, his second.

**Refutation of Perception as Knowledge**

The refutation begins at the problem of what perception means to Plato. There are two plausible possibilities. First, that perception means sensory awareness without conceptualization. This reading implies that knowledge then means applying a “that” claim to an object. However, as perception is continually characterized as not “grasping” existence, this conclusion is burdened by the possibility that all judgements are existence claims. In place of this first premise, Cooper proposes that it only means sensory awareness. This interpretation is founded on the fact that in the Greek the function as a copula and implication of existence of the word “is” is undifferentiated. The application of this is left for the higher faculties, but in sense perception only the minimum labeling process is present. Only the application of the “is” of the higher faculties constitutes knowledge because it makes a claim of objective validity, while perception is relative to the moment of sensation. This argument appeals to expertise as appropriate instances of knowledge, uniting the refutation with Theaetetus’ earlier claims.

1. Existence, identity, difference, similarity etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. I.e. “red”, “blue”, “hard”, “soft”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)