

7 Plato's Epistemology

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A convenient starting point for consideration of Plato's treatment of knowledge is Socrates' notorious disavowal of knowledge; we can hope to arrive at a conception of how knowledge is seen in the Socratic dialogues if we can see what it is that Socrates claimed not to have. In antiquity, Socrates was widely supposed to have claimed that he knew nothing or, in some versions, that he knew only this one thing, that he knew nothing.¹

¹ Cicero, *Academica* I, 16 and 45, II, 74.

But in Plato's dialogues, Socrates never makes either claim. The nearest he comes to the former is at *Apol.* 21d, where he describes himself as having shown that someone who claimed to have wisdom (which, in context, amounts to wisdom in organizing his life as a whole) did not, in fact, have the wisdom which he claimed. Socrates remarks that while it is likely that neither he nor the person whom he has just exposed knows anything fine and good, he (i.e., Socrates) is wiser in that he is aware of his ignorance (*ha mē oida oude oiomai eidenai*), while the other is not. Assuming that "is likely" is an intentional understatement, this is naturally taken as asserting that Socrates knows nothing fine and good. But in this same work Socrates twice claims to know that it would be wrong for him to abandon his divine mission to improve the souls of his fellow citizens by philosophical criticism (29b, 37b); that implies that he knows that carrying out his mission is fine and good, which I take it he would count as a case of knowing something fine and good. So either Plato depicts Socrates as inconsistent within a single work, or the assertion that he knows nothing fine and good is to be interpreted as to be consistent with the knowledge claim just mentioned.

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The context readily suggests such an interpretation. Socrates is explaining how he was prompted to his mission by the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle that no one was wiser than he. He was puzzled by this because he was conscious of not being wise about anything, great or small (21b)—that is to say, of not being an expert in any subject matter—and he tried to show that the oracle could not have meant what it seemed *prima facie* to mean by seeking genuine experts, whether experts in the conduct of life as a whole, as the sophists claimed to be (20a–c), or experts in particular areas, such as builders. The result was that neither kind of expert proved wiser than Socrates: the former because they had no expertise at all, the latter because they mistakenly believed that the technical expertise which they did possess extended to the conduct of life as a whole. I suggest, then, that the assertion at 21d that neither Socrates nor the supposed expert knew anything fine and good is to be interpreted as "neither knows anything fine and good in that way," that is in the way that the supposed expert had claimed: the possession of expertise in how to live. Lacking such expertise, Socrates may still be able to know some particular moral truths, such as that mentioned above, though how he knows them is as yet unexplained.

So far, the texts warrant a distinction between the highest level of epistemic achievement, wisdom or expertise, which Socrates claims not to possess, and a lower level, exemplified by knowledge of particular moral truths, which he does claim.²

² For a similar, though different, view, see G. Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Socratic Studies*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Cambridge, 1994), 39–66, reprinted in G. Fine, ed., *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology [Plato 1]* (Oxford, 1999), 64–92. He claims that what Socrates disavows is certainty, and that what he claims is a form of knowledge falling short of certainty, derived from successful application of elenctic argument. My claim is that what Socrates disavows is systematic knowledge, and that what he claims is unsystematic—that is to say, piecemeal knowledge. I see nothing in the texts to suggest that wisdom requires certainty or that Socrates gives any general account of what grounds his particular claims to knowledge, beyond the claim that he has arguments for them. I discuss the matter more fully in *Socrates* (Oxford, 1998), 42–48.

It has been suggested³

³ By T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford, 1977), 40–41, and Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), 28–29.

that this amounts to the distinction between knowledge and true belief. That distinction is certainly important in Plato's epistemological thought (see below), but it is not the distinction drawn in the *Apology*. In that work, Socrates is made to claim particular moral knowledge without qualification, or any other indication in the text that the verbs rendered "know" are not the most appropriate terms to use. The contrast between that knowledge and the wisdom which Socrates disavows is never explicitly spelled out, but it is evidently connected with the fact that the possessor of wisdom is thereby qualified to impart that wisdom to others, and regularly does so, whereas Socrates insists that he does not have any wisdom to impart: that is to say, that he does not teach anyone anything (19d–20c). What the expert is typically qualified to teach is a systematic body

of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, the relative importance of the two aspects depending on the nature of the expertise.

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It is that kind of expertise which Socrates disavows; he is not expert in any specific subject or in the kind of general expertise in running one's life which the sophists claimed to have. But he does not argue that expertise is impossible. He recognizes experts in specific areas, and, as far as general expertise goes, he does not argue that there can be no such expertise, merely that those who claim to possess it, including sophists and statesmen, fail to meet the ordinary standards for possessing expertise, notably the ability to impart it to others. In various dialogues, we see Socrates in conversation with self-styled experts in different areas (e.g., Euthyphro claims to be an expert on religious matters (4e–5a), and Meno on virtue in general (81b)), and as the conversation progresses, we find their claims to knowledge of the subject evaporating. A notable feature of these discussions is that they reveal that Plato is using a specific conception of expert knowledge. Central to any expertise is the knowledge of what that expertise is concerned with, and that knowledge consists in the ability to specify those things. The requirements for such a specification are exacting; it must apply to all and only the things in question, it must reveal the feature or features in virtue of which things count as of that kind, and that feature (or those features) must be the same in all cases. For example, the expert in holiness must be able to specify a feature or set of features such that (a) all and only holy things possess that feature and (b) it is in virtue of possessing it that those things count as holy (6d–e).

The ability to give that kind of specification is primary in a number of ways. In the *Euthyphro*, it serves as a template for the solution of disputed cases; anything which satisfies the specification of holiness is holy, and anything which does not satisfy it is not holy (6e). The specification is thus explicitly said to be sufficient for resolving disputes, and one may plausibly suppose that it is assumed to be necessary also. In the *Meno*, having the specification of what virtue is is necessary for knowing further things about virtue, specifically how it is to be acquired (71b). In at least one dialogue, the *Hippias Major*, Socrates maintains that it is impossible to know whether anything is an instance of a property (the example is that of beauty) unless one is able to specify what that property is (304d–e), and that seems also to be the implication of the conclusion of the *Lysis* (223b), where Socrates says that he and his young friends appear ridiculous in thinking that they are friends, though they have proved unable to say what a friend is. It is clearly implied that in that situation they do not *know* that they are friends and, perhaps, even suggested that they are not entitled to believe that they are.⁴

4. For a defense of the thesis that Socrates maintains a strong form of the principle of the priority of definition—"If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know anything about F-ness"—see H. H. Benson, "The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1990), 19–65, revised version in Benson, *Socratic Wisdom* (New York, 2000), ch. 6. This article contains copious references to other literature on the topic.

The evidence surveyed so far has not suggested any general account of knowledge or any concern with how knowledge is acquired or how it relates to other mental states such as belief or activities such as perception or thought. What has emerged is the view that a certain kind of knowledge is primary. This is, roughly,

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knowledge of what things are, where things are conceived as universals of one sort or another, chiefly properties (holiness, temperance) or states (virtue), but also kinds, not sharply differentiated from properties and states. (I take it that the question "What is a friend?" may be expressed without change of meaning as "What kind of thing is a friend?" or as "What is it to be a friend?"—that is to say, what is the property of being a friend?) Knowledge of "things" consists in the ability to specify them as set out in the preceding paragraph. Apart from the formal characteristics set out there, specifications take various forms, some approaching to conceptual definitions, as in "speed is the ability which achieves many things in a short time" (*Laches* 192a–b), others to scientific accounts, such as "Color is an efflux of shapes adapted to (the sense of) sight and (hence) perceptible" (*Meno* 76d). Plato never makes any explicit theoretical discrimination between these types of specification, and it is a moot point how far he was aware of the distinction.⁵

5. Of the extensive literature on Socratic definition, the following may be particularly mentioned (see bibliography for full citations):

- T. Penner, "The Unity of Virtue"
- G. Vlastos, "What Did Socrates Understand by His 'What Is F?' Question?"
- C. C. W. Taylor, "Socratic Ethics"
- H. H. Benson, "The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus"
- D. Charles, "Definitions in the Meno"

This kind of knowledge is primary in that it is presupposed by any other kinds of knowledge in the respective area (e.g., knowledge that friendship is good presupposes knowledge of what friendship is). As is clear from the citations so far, this paradigm is found in a number of dialogues generally regarded as written early in Plato's career, as well as in the *Meno*. There we find it brought into connection with a number of questions about knowledge not raised in any of the others cited, including a puzzle about how it is possible to acquire knowledge, and the question of how knowledge relates to true belief. These questions require closer examination.

Meno

The dialogue opens abruptly with the question how virtue or excellence (*aretē*) is to be acquired: that is to say, How is one to become an outstanding individual and thereby achieve overall success in life? Socrates immediately turns the question to that of what virtue or excellence is, in accordance with the primacy thesis elucidated above, and various attempts at specification are explored and rejected. When Socrates says (80d) that though he and Meno do not know what excellence is, they should continue to try to find out, Meno asks how it is possible to try to find out anything which you do not already know. He poses two specific problems:

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1. Of the many things which you do not know, which one will you set up as the object of your inquiry?
2. Even if you were to happen upon what you were looking for, how will you know that that is what you did not know? (80d6–8).

The first problem makes the point that, in order to undertake any inquiry, one must know what inquiry one is undertaking, and therefore understand the terms in which that inquiry is identified. To undertake an inquiry is to ask a question, and one must know what question it is that one is asking. (Knowing what question one is asking is of course distinct from knowing the answer to that question.)

The second problem asks how you will know whether you have found what you were looking for, with the implication that you will never know. If you did not know the answer to the question in advance of inquiry, how will you recognize any answer as the one you were looking for? In general, the answer to the second problem is that the understanding of what question one is asking provides a specification of what counts as a correct answer to it, and that one recognizes an answer as correct when one recognizes that it satisfies that specification. Thus understanding the question "What is the cube root of 27?" involves knowing that one has correctly answered it when one has found a number n such that $((n \times n) \times n) = 27$, and understanding the question "Who is the murderer of Smith?" involves knowing that one has correctly answered it when one has identified an individual of whom it is true that that individual murdered Smith. (The question of how one knows that one *has* found the right number, or the right individual, is not a question about how doing so is in principle possible, but about how one knows that one has employed the right method of inquiry and employed it correctly.)

The general answer to the second problem—that the phrasing of the question provides a specification of the correct answer—poses a particular problem in the special case where the question is itself a request for a specification. Prior understanding of what a cube root is specifies the correct answer to the question "What is the cube root of X?" but if one's question is "What is X?" (e.g., "What is virtue?"), it is problematic what prior understanding might be supposed to specify the correct answer. It is tempting to think that that prior understanding could be nothing other than understanding of what virtue is: that is to say, in the special case of the kind of knowledge which Plato regards as primary (see above), Meno's second problem is unanswerable. In fact it is not. The prior understanding in question is the pre-theoretical understanding of the concept which is presupposed by the ability to pose and to understand the request for a specification, and the specification itself consists either in sharpening that pre-theoretical understanding via a conceptual definition or in providing a substantive account satisfying the requirements indicated in that pre-theoretical understanding. (There is a residual problem—namely, which type of specification is (a) sought and (b) appropriate for the particular case.)⁶

⁶ For example, Charles, "Types of Definition," 118–19.

In response, Socrates represents Meno as arguing that it is impossible to try to find out anything; he poses the dilemma that either one already knows what one is

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trying to find out, in which case one cannot try to find it out, or one does not already know it, in which case one does not know what one is trying to find out (and hence cannot look for it) (80e). This "captious argument," as Socrates describes it, does

not do justice to the genuine problems which Meno has raised or to the insights about the presuppositions of inquiry which those problems reveal. The dilemma which Socrates ascribes to Meno is solved simply by the distinction between knowing what question you are asking and knowing the answer to that question. Contrary to his description, however, Socrates does not treat Meno's problem as a facile sophism but as a deep problem whose solution involves an ambitious theory not only of the acquisition of knowledge but also of the nature of the soul. The essence of the solution is that it is possible to find out what you (by ordinary standards) do not know, provided that in a deeper sense you do already know it. What we think of as discovery is in fact the recovery of knowledge which the soul has previously possessed but which it has forgotten. The detailed exposition in which that broad outline is spelled out raises a number of difficult questions about precisely what cognitive resources it is that the soul has previously possessed, how it has come to possess them, and how its mode of possession relates to the distinction between knowledge and belief.

Socrates begins by simply stating the theory on the authority of priests, priestesses, and poets; the human soul is immortal and undergoes many incarnations, in the course of which it has "seen everything here and in Hades" and has thereby learned everything. Hence it is not surprising that it should be able to recall what it previously knew about virtue and other things (81c). This suggests a simple model of the revival of experiential knowledge; knowledge is originally acquired by experience, whether of things in the world, experienced, presumably, via the senses, or of things in Hades. What those things might be, and what kind of experience apprehends them, we are not told. We are told, however, how this theory allows for the process of arriving at knowledge via some sequence of mental acts; since the whole of nature is akin, and one has learned everything, recalling one thing allows one to find out everything else, provided one perseveres in one's search (81d). This sounds like a description of the acquisition of knowledge by inference from things known by experience, but a key feature of inferential knowledge is that previous experience of what one knows by inference is no part of the explanation of one's knowledge. One is not reminded of what one knows by inference.⁷

⁷ One might have inferential knowledge of something one had already experienced, provided that the previous experience is not causally productive of one's inferential knowledge. For example, if one saw a dog running over a snow-covered lawn, but then forgot having done so, one might infer from the tracks that a dog had run over the lawn. But if one remembered seeing the dog run over the lawn, one's knowledge that a dog ran over the lawn is not inferential, even if one did, in addition, infer from the tracks that a dog ran over the lawn.

Socrates' explanatory account of this kind of knowledge, in contrast, includes the repetition of the claim that the soul has learned everything (d1), and he concludes (d4–5) with the assertion that seeking and learning is just recollection (or, in other words, being reminded (*anamnēsis*)). That is not, then, inferential knowledge.

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Rather, what is envisaged is something more like sequential revival of experiences via association of ideas. Suppose that I have been previously acquainted with every member of a given family. Since they all share a family resemblance, recalling what Robert Smith looks like serves to remind me of what his brother Richard looks like, and that, in turn, of what their cousin Winifred looks like, and so on. There is no inference here, merely serial reminding.

Challenged to show that this theory is true, Socrates conducts the famous experiment with the slave, which he claims to be an instance of the process he has just described. This, however, appears to be an instance of the acquisition of knowledge by inference. The slave certainly works out the answer to the problem of doubling the square by inference, specifically inference from the premises that the diagonal of a given square bisects it; that the square on the diagonal contains four triangles, each equal to half the area of the given square; and that $4 \times \frac{1}{2} = 2$. Insofar as his reaching the correct solution is to be explained by recollection, it is quite unnecessary to suppose that the slave is recollecting the solution of that particular problem, a solution which, ex hypothesi, he had arrived at in some previous existence. It suffices to suppose that he recollects the crucial properties of the square and the diagonal, from which he now (for the first time) infers the solution. But it is unclear whether that is how Plato sees the matter. It is possible that he does not distinguish the acquisition of knowledge by inference from what I have termed serial reminding and therefore intends what, in fact, is a description of the latter to apply to both indifferently.

This raises the important question of what it is that one recollects. On the model of serial reminding, one recollects literally everything that one finds out by any kind of investigation, and everything that one recollects one has previously experienced. Even if we restrict the application of the theory to a priori investigation (a restriction for which there is no explicit textual warrant), it is still a vastly uneconomical theory and one which depends on a quite obscure conception of experience. It is uneconomical in supposing that every particular arithmetical or geometrical truth which anyone discovers has previously been known by that person, and obscure in attributing that knowledge to experience. To stick to the example of doubling the

square, what would it be for the slave to have “seen” that the area of the square on the diagonal of a given square is double the area of the original square? Ex hypothesi, that would be to recognize that particular truth without inference; but that leaves us quite in the dark how the slave knows that truth (he “just knows,” it seems) and darker still how the process of thought which he undertakes together with Socrates revives that particular item of immediate knowledge. These difficulties are at least alleviated if we suppose that what is recollected is some restricted set of items (elements, principles, or basic entities), knowledge of which provides the basis for inferential knowledge of further truths. The idea that there might be such a thing as immediate apprehension of the properties of, say, the square or the even seems not an obviously hopeless suggestion. It remains problematic how closely that notion of immediate apprehension can be modeled on perception.

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This question connects with the topic of the distinction between knowledge and true belief. When the slave has reached the correct answer to the problem, Socrates says that he has true beliefs about it (which are his own, not imposed on him by someone else) but that he does not yet know the answer. His true beliefs have been stirred up as if in a dream, and if he is subjected to repeated and varied questioning, he will eventually attain exact knowledge (85b–c). Yet, immediately, Socrates describes him as having recovered his *knowledge* (my italics) from within himself, without anyone's having taught it to him (d3–4) and proceeds to argue that the knowledge which he now has⁸

⁸. It may be, as G. Fine suggests (*Plato on Knowledge and Forms [Knowledge]*, [Oxford, 2003], 5 and 69), that “now” at d9 refers not to the actual time of Socrates' utterance but to the envisaged future time at which the slave has achieved complete knowledge. But even if that is so, the argument still requires that the slave has never acquired knowledge but has always possessed it.

he must always have had, since he could not have acquired it during his present life (d9–13). That is clearly incompatible with the suggestion that all that he now has is true belief and that he is yet to acquire knowledge, which he will do as a result of subsequent questioning. True belief, it appears, presupposes the permanent possession of knowledge (86a–b), and the transition from true belief to knowledge is in fact the transition from a state of partial recovery of the knowledge which we have always possessed to its full recovery.

The connection with the perceptual model of knowledge arises from Socrates' argument (86a6–9) that since the slave's true beliefs are always in his soul, both in its incarnate and in its discarnate state, his soul is always in a state of “having learned” (*ton aei chronon memathēkuia estai hē psuchē autou*.) If the soul is always in a state of having learned (i.e., *having acquired* knowledge), there was no time at which it *did acquire* that knowledge; “always having learned” is thus equivalent to “never having *learned*, but always knowing.” And since the knowledge we have was never acquired, but was always possessed, it follows that it was not acquired by experience.

The distinction between knowledge and true belief reappears at the end of the dialogue, when Socrates points out that true belief is as good a guide to action as knowledge (97a–b). The crucial difference is one of stability; true beliefs are as useful as knowledge as long as one retains them, but they are liable to be lost, “until one ties them down by reasoning about the cause” (*aitia*).⁹

⁹. Following on from G. Vlastos's influential discussion of the meaning of *aitia* in Plato and Aristotle, G. Fine suggests that *aitia* should be rendered “explanation” rather than “cause.” Fine explains that she reserves the term “cause” for an event that is sufficient for bringing about change and points out, correctly, that Plato's *aitiai*—for example, the *aitia* of the correct solution of the geometrical problem in the *Meno*—are not restricted to events. See Vlastos, “Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*,” *Philosophical Review* 78 (1969), 291–325, reprinted in Vlastos, ed., *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), 132–66, and in Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1981), 58–75; Fine, “Knowledge and True Belief in the *Meno*” [“Knowledge and True Belief”], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004), 56.

In common with some other writers on Plato and Aristotle, I use “cause” more widely, to apply to whatever answers the question “Why?” and hence as virtually interchangeable with “reason” and “explanation.” For this usage, see, for example, D. Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* [Phaedo] (Oxford, 1986), 135; for a defense of the translation of *aitia* as “cause,” see D. Furley, “What Kind of Cause Is Aristotle's Formal Cause?” in M. Frede and G. Striker, eds., *Rationality in Greek Thought [Rationality]* (Oxford, 1996), 60–62. Given that usage of “cause,” the issue of whether *aitia* should be rendered “cause” or “explanation” is stylistic rather than substantial.

That (i.e., tying down true beliefs by reasoning concerning the cause) is recollection, and when true beliefs are thus tied

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down, they become stable items of knowledge (98a). This brief passage contains a cluster of problems. The first is how we are to understand “reasoning about the cause”; the cause of what? Reasoning about the cause of one's having a belief does not

seem appropriate to turn true belief into knowledge. On the other hand, reasoning about the cause of the beliefs being true makes good sense of the point about stability, as well as giving a good account of the example of the slave. Someone who understands why a given belief is true—for example, because it follows from the basic principles of the discipline to which it belongs—is not liable to be persuaded by apparent counterarguments. And we can see why frequent and varied questioning would be needed to give the slave the systematic grasp of geometry which would enable him to see not just *that* this is the correct solution of this problem but *why* it is.

It is problematic, however, whether reasoning about the cause is required for every case of knowledge or only for some. In this passage, someone who has traveled the road to Larisa is said to know it, which presumably implies that his or her true beliefs about the road amount to knowledge about it. But acquaintance with the road is surely insufficient to give one understanding of why one's beliefs about it are true; one may know that the road passes a certain hill on the north side because one has been there but still not understand why the road passes the hill to the north rather than to the south. Again, the acquisition of this kind of knowledge seems to have nothing to do with reasoning; experience of the actual road (together with memory of what one has experienced) is sufficient for knowledge of it. It seems plausible, then, that perceptual knowledge is not supposed to be explained by recollection, which is what we should expect, especially in light of the assertion that knowledge which is recollected was not acquired at any time but was always possessed. No one can believe that knowledge of the road to Larisa, or knowledge that Socrates is now standing in front of me, has been in my soul as long as my soul has been in existence.

Recollection, then, provides an explanation of a special kind of knowledge, which contrasts with perceptual knowledge.¹⁰

¹⁰ Alternatively, only the kind of knowledge which is explained by recollection is knowledge, strictly speaking. On that supposition, perceptual knowledge counts as knowledge in a reduced sense, perhaps on the strength of some resemblance to knowledge properly so called (e.g., that it gives one's true beliefs the same degree of stability as "reasoning about the cause" does). On either view, knowledge grounded in recollection is primary in the evaluative sense.

It is characteristic of that kind of knowledge to be grounded in an understanding of what makes the beliefs constitutive of that knowledge true, an understanding which is reached via reasoned inquiry.¹¹

¹¹ Some commentators (e.g., Fine, *Knowledge*, 5–6, 50, and Fine, "Knowledge and True Belief," 61–67) interpret the requirement that knowledge involves tying down true beliefs by reasoning concerning the cause as amounting to the definition of knowledge as justified true belief (a view shared by E. L. Gettier in his epoch-making article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121–23). But the requirement that one should have a grasp of what makes one's beliefs true is a stronger requirement than that one's true belief should be justified. At the conclusion of his discussion with Socrates, the slave is justified in his true belief that the square is doubled by constructing the square on the diagonal, since he has constructed (or at least followed) a sound argument leading to that conclusion, but Socrates insists that he does not yet

Fine responds by tightening the requirements for justification to include the grasp of what makes one's belief true as a necessary condition for justification. As she points out ("Knowledge and True Belief," 64, 78), the question whether the *Meno* provides an account of knowledge as justified true belief then turns on the question (still disputed in contemporary discussions) of how demanding the standard for justification is.

The objects of that understanding are most plausibly to be thought of as whatever function as principles or elements of reasoning. At this point, we should

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recall Socrates' methodological principle that knowledge of what things are is primary in the investigation of the properties of those things. In the *Meno*, Plato seems to be moving toward a systematization of that principle in an ambitious combination of epistemology and metaphysics.

On this theory, the transformation of true belief into knowledge via intellectual inquiry is, in fact, the recovery of knowledge which the soul has always possessed. Souls are created with a grasp of the basic principles of reality, including an understanding of what are the primary things, and the task of systematic intellectual inquiry is to reactivate that knowledge, which includes both formulating those principles, including definitions of the basic things, and drawing consequences from them. This program is admittedly hinted at, rather than made explicit, in the *Meno* itself. It is displayed more explicitly in other dialogues, especially the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.¹²

¹² The most recent comprehensive discussion of the *Meno* is D. Scott, *Plato's Meno* (Cambridge, 2006), which contains a full bibliography.

Phaedo

The thesis that the objects of recollection are basic principles, including basic entities, which was suggested for the *Meno* by considerations of economy and fit with the text, is explicitly confirmed by the text of the *Phaedo* (72e–77a). Forms (see ch. 8), which are not explicitly mentioned in the *Meno*, are central to the epistemology and metaphysics of the *Phaedo*, and they fill two gaps in the schematic theory sketched in the *Meno*, first as objects of recollection and second as the causes, reasoning about which transforms true belief into knowledge. Recollection of Forms is presupposed by the ability to give philosophical accounts of properties such as equality; we are prompted to give such accounts by experience of instances of them, and that experience prompts us to think of the properties as something over and above the instances themselves.¹³

¹³ I accept the interpretation of recollection in the *Phaedo* proposed by D. Scott, *Recollection and Experience* (Cambridge, 1995), part 1 (condensed version reprinted in Fine, *Plato I*, 93–124), according to which recollection explains the ability to give theoretical accounts of Forms. The more traditional view that what recollection explains is ordinary concept formation is maintained by, among others, J. L. Ackrill,

“Anamnesis in the *Phaedo*: Remarks on 73C–75C,” in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty, eds., *Exegesis and Argument: Studies in Greek Philosophy Presented to Gregory Vlastos* (Assen, 1973), 177–95, reprinted in Ackrill, *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1997), 13–32, and Bostock, *Phaedo*, 66–69. Scott gives a lucid account of the controversy.

The instances, then, remind us of

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something distinct from them, as a picture may remind us of its subject, and what we are reminded of in each case is the appropriate Form. That confirms the more economical interpretation proposed for the *Meno*. The explanation of the slave's solving the puzzle is his ultimate recollection not of that very solution but of the square and the diagonal to which he was prompted by Socrates' rough representation of them and from which he was able to work out the solution itself.

For a case where what is sought is itself the account of some Form, the doctrine that all nature is akin allows us to see how such an account may be worked out. Since Forms are systematically connected with one another, recollection of the properties of one may lead by inference to recollection of the properties of another. That Forms are the causes of things is central to the *Phaedo*'s account of explanation, where the first stage in the explanation of anything's being F is that it shares in the Form of F. Admittedly, that is only the first stage, which Socrates describes as a “safe and ignorant” answer (105c1); a more subtle answer explains the thing's being F via the presence of an entity or the instantiation of a property such that anything in which that entity is present, or anything instantiating the property, necessarily is F—for example, whatever contains fire is necessarily hot (105c2–6). The explanatory entities and properties are of various types, and while some may themselves be conceived as Forms, not all can be; fire and snow are perceptible stuffs which come to be and cease to be, not changeless and eternal Forms.¹⁴

¹⁴ For fuller discussion, see C. C. W. Taylor, “Forms as Causes in the *Phaedo*,” *Mind* 78 (1969), 45–59; Bostock, *Phaedo*, ch. 7; and Fine, *Knowledge*, ch. 14, “Forms as Causes: Plato and Aristotle.”

It is then obscure how the theory in which they play a central role is supposed to be radically superior to the empirically based theories of the physicists of the sixth and fifth centuries.

I have two suggestions on this point. First, Socrates' principal objection to his predecessors is their neglect of teleological explanation, and though the theory sketched in the *Phaedo* is not explicitly teleological, it is unlikely that Plato had simply abandoned that ideal. Second, the *Timaeus*, which is Plato's fullest sketch of a theory of the physical world,¹⁵

¹⁵ At *Timaeus* 27d–28a and 51d–52a, Plato asserts that there can be no knowledge, but only belief, about the physical world since knowledge requires stable objects, whereas the physical world is in a state of systematic instability. Hence the account which he proceeds to give of it is only a “likely story” (*eikota muthon*, 29d2). But that should not be taken as an expression of epistemic despair about the physical world. I take it that the teleologically grounded mathematical physics is intended to be, given the pervasive instability of matter, the closest approximation to knowledge of which that subject matter is capable. Mathematical and evaluative Forms are universal principles of intelligibility, which, instantiated in various subject matters, make that subject matter knowable or the nearest approach thereto. In “The Philosophical Economy of Plato's Psychology: Rationality and Common Concepts in the *Timaeus*,” in Frede and Striker, *Rationality*, 29–58, D. Frede gives a persuasive account of how those universal principles permeate the flux of sensible phenomena in the *Timaeus*, allowing the achievement, if not of knowledge of phenomena at least of true and reliable beliefs about them (37b4–8).

In different contexts, Plato expresses mutually inconsistent views about whether there is any knowledge of the sensible world. It is

certainly recognized in the *Meno* (see above, though note the reservation expressed in n. 10) and in the *Theaetetus* (see below). In the *Republic*, it is assumed that the philosopher-rulers know particular truths about good and bad (520c). The *Phaedo* seems more optimistic about the possibility of knowledge of the sensible world than the *Timaeus*; Socrates is dissatisfied with the theories of his predecessors, not because they were attempting something impossible in principle but because they failed to give the right kind of explanation of physical events, and he appears to envisage that the theory of Forms will ultimately make good that deficiency. And even in the *Timaeus*, though knowledge is apparently impossible, true and reliable belief is attainable (see above).

(a) depicts the world as teleologically designed,

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specifically as the best material approximation to the Form of the Living Being, and (b) gives a basic explanatory role to the geometrical properties of the fundamental particles of matter. Physical stuffs and their properties thus fit into an overarching theory which is both teleological and mathematical. Ultimately, matter behaves the way it does because it instantiates mathematical structure, and mathematical structure is as it is because that is the best way for it to be. Mathematical and evaluative Forms are thus the ultimate *aitiai*, and it is by reasoning about them that we achieve the systematic understanding of reality which constitutes knowledge.

Republic

That systematic understanding is further elucidated in the two principal treatments of knowledge in the *Republic*, in book V and in books VI–VII. In the former passage, Socrates, in defending his claim that the ideal state can come into existence only if it is ruled by philosophers (473c–e), argues that only the person with knowledge of the Forms is entitled to be called a *philosophos* (lover of wisdom). The first argument for this conclusion (475e–476d) presupposes the existence of the Forms, but the second (476d–480a), which is designed to convince someone who does not antecedently accept the existence of Forms, argues from the generally accepted premise that knowledge is a grasp of what is to the conclusion that only the person who knows the Forms grasps what is. The main rival, the person who lacks knowledge of the Forms, but is restricted to acquaintance with sensible instances of them, is thereby confined to what is intermediate between being and not-being, and hence to a grade of cognition lower than knowledge—namely, belief.

Both the premise and the argument itself are highly problematic.

The premise is that knowledge is a grasp of what is. Someone who knows (*gignōskei*) knows something (rather than nothing), and what he knows is (476e7–477a1). The range of uses of the Greek verb “to be” admits three interpretations of “what he knows is”:

1. What he knows is true.
2. What he knows is something (e.g., is beautiful).
3. What he knows exists.¹⁶

¹⁶ So G. Fine, “Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*,” *Achiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 60 (1978), 121–39, reprinted as Fine, *Knowledge*, ch. 3. (The passage cited occurs at 69 in the latter volume.) My discussion of *Rep. V* owes a great deal to hers, though she distinguishes senses (1) and (2) more sharply than I do.

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All three are appropriate marks of knowledge: if someone knows that p, it must be true that p, and if someone knows something (e.g., knows Socrates), then what he knows must be something (e.g., be a man) and must exist. This elucidation indicates that the three interpretations apply most readily to different types of knowledge: (1) is a characteristic of propositional knowledge, where what is known is a proposition, capable of truth and falsehood, and linguistically represented by a sentence, such as “Plato knows that Socrates is wise.” Interpretations (2) and (3), on the other hand, apply primarily to what is traditionally called “knowledge by acquaintance,” or familiarity with some object. But (a) neither here nor elsewhere does Plato show a firm grasp of that distinction, and (b) in this discussion, he is chiefly concerned with cases such as that of “knowing beauty” (i.e., knowing what beauty is), where the distinction becomes blurred. Someone who knows beauty may be conceived as being familiar with something which is such-and-such and which exists, and as being ipso facto aware of the true proposition that beauty is such-and-such. We should not expect this discussion to focus on truth as a mark of knowledge, then, if such a focus is assumed to presuppose a sharp distinction of truth from the other marks.

Plato's thought is not well represented by interpretation (3), “what is known must exist.” He goes on immediately (477a2–7) to describe things as being more or less, and some things as “such as to be and not to be” and hence intermediate between

“being unqualifiedly” and “not being in any way.” The notion of degrees of existence is not only unintelligible in itself; nothing suggests that Plato accepted it. “Degrees of being” in 479a–d fit readily with interpretation (2), being such-and-such, and also with (1), being true, but not at all with (3), existence. It is best, then, to assume that Plato's argument is to be interpreted in terms of (1) and (2), to the exclusion of (3), while bearing in mind that (1) and (2) are unlikely to be sharply distinguished from one another.

On this undifferentiated interpretation, the argument proceeds fairly smoothly. At 477a–b, Plato correlates degrees of being with degrees of knowability; what totally or unqualifiedly is is totally or unqualifiedly knowable, what is not in any way is totally unknowable. Anything which both is and is not is in between the totally knowable and the totally unknowable and is the object of a mental state in between complete knowledge and total ignorance or error, if there is such a state.

This argument may be understood either in terms of truth (Elucidation A) or in terms of being something (Elucidation B). For the reasons given above, I incline to think that Plato does not distinguish between the two elucidations.

Elucidation A:

Any proposition which is totally or unqualifiedly true (e.g., “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”) is capable of being known without qualification; any which is totally or unqualifiedly false (e.g., “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ”) expresses nothing but ignorance or error. But any proposition which is sometimes (in some contexts) true and sometimes false, (such as “Englishmen are phlegmatic,”) is neither an expression of unqualified knowledge (since it is not true without qualification that

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Englishmen are phlegmatic, it cannot be known without qualification) nor of total ignorance or error.

Elucidation B:

Something which is totally or unqualifiedly such-and-such (e.g., “Cruelty is bad”) is capable of being known as such without qualification; something which is not such-and-such at all can be said to be such only in error (e.g., “Cruelty is good”). But suppose we have something which is such-and-such qualifiedly; e.g. “Swimming is good for you.” Someone who accepts that without qualification does not have knowledge but is not totally wrong, either.

Plato's strategy is to try to show that the *philotheamōn* (the person who is acquainted only with sensible instances of Forms) cannot escape from that situation. The only general beliefs available to him are characterized as much by falsehood as by truth. That claim is not distinguished by Plato from the claim that the objects of the *philotheamōn*'s general beliefs are characterized by not being F (e.g., beautiful) as much as by being F.

Plato has already assumed that distinct capacities are directed onto (*epi*) distinct objects; belief is a distinct capacity from knowledge (477b5), so belief is directed onto one thing and knowledge onto another (b7–8). This assumption is spelled out at 477b11–478a4. At 477c6–d5, Plato's Principle of Differentiation of Capacities is stated: capacities are differentiated by two factors, their object and their effect (i.e., what possession of the capacity enables its possessor to do). Capacity A and capacity B are one and the same capacity if they have the same object and the same effect, and they are distinct capacities if they have different objects and different effects. It is apparently assumed that objects and effects cannot vary independently of one another: it is impossible that the same object should be subject to distinct effects or the same effect applied to distinct objects. Plato, then, must assume that there is a necessary connection between objects and effects. That result would be achieved if the object were itself specified in terms of the effect, as what is susceptible of the effect—for example, the capacity to see has as its object the visible, and the capacity to touch has its object the tangible. But that would merely yield the trivial result that the concept of the knowable is distinct from the concept of the believable, which is compatible with its being the case that the application of the two concepts is identical. Plato is not aiming at the trivial connection between knowledge and the knowable but at the connection, necessary but nontrivial, between knowledge and the character of what is known—namely, that knowledge is of what is true and/or real, whereas belief lacks those necessary connections with truth and reality.

He is correct to distinguish the two concepts in that way but wrong to try to derive that distinction from his general Principle of Differentiation of Capacities. That general principle is either trivial or false. Heating is a distinct effect from cooling, but there is no nontrivial sense in which the object of the one effect, the heatable, is distinct from the object of the other, the coolable.

By 478d, belief has been established as a capacity intermediate between knowledge and error or ignorance. Objects intermediate between being and nonbeing will be objects appropriate to that intermediate capacity (478d5–9).

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Arguments familiar from, for example, *Rep.* I, 331c and *Hippias Major* 289a–c show that the instances of Forms, which are all that the *philotheamōn* is familiar with, are so characterized. These instances include both kinds (e.g., paying back what you borrowed) and particulars (e.g., a beautiful woman). Beliefs about these things, such as “Justice is paying your debts” and “Helen is beautiful” will be neither unqualifiedly false nor unqualifiedly true but sometimes true and sometimes false; in Plato's words, “the many beliefs (*nomima*) held by the many about beauty and the rest roll about, as it were, between not being and being without qualification” (479d3–5). So those who are familiar with nothing beyond the instances of Forms, lacking any grasp of the Forms themselves, must recognize that they have nothing more than belief, and therefore accept the title “lovers of belief” (*philodoxoi*) instead of that of *philosophoi* which they had attempted to usurp (479e–480a).

But the *philotheamōn* can have unqualifiedly true particular beliefs—for example, “In these particular circumstances, paying back this particular debt was just.” As such beliefs will simply be true, they will be *epi tōi onti* (literally, “onto what is”; i.e., they will latch onto what is so). So why will they not amount to knowledge?

To defend Plato against that objection, we must return to the *Meno*'s distinction of knowledge from true belief, by the criterion that, in order to count as knowledge, true beliefs have to be grounded in “reasoning about the cause”—that is to say, in a grasp of the grounds of their truth. In order to have knowledge, the *philotheamōn* must understand what makes his beliefs true, e.g., why this particular repayment was unqualifiedly just. And in order to do that, he must have a systematic grasp of the standards which govern the characterization of types and particular instances: he must be familiar with the Forms, as well as the instances. Knowledge, even of particular cases, must be grounded in understanding of why things are as they are, and that understanding requires knowledge of Forms. Hence the *philotheamōn*, who has no knowledge of the Forms, lacks the understanding which is necessary for knowledge.

This suggestion does not claim to represent Plato's actual argument but to reply to an objection on the part of the *philotheamōn*. It has the advantage of assimilating *Rep.* V to the *Meno* and thereby removing an apparent difficulty: that whereas in the *Meno* (and *Th.* 201b) knowledge and belief can have the same objects, in *Rep.* V they have, by the Principle of the Differentiation of Capacities, different objects. In fact, the two positions are compatible; the thesis in the *Meno* and *Theaetetus* concerns particular items of knowledge, while that of *Rep.* V concerns the objects of the capacities as such. Plato does not claim in *Rep.* V that there can be no knowledge which is not knowledge of Forms (which would deprive philosopher-rulers of knowledge of events in the sensible world). He does (implicitly) claim that there can be no knowledge of anything which is not grounded in knowledge of Forms.¹⁷

¹⁷ However, this does imply that perceptual knowledge such as knowledge of the road to Larisa either is not knowledge (or, at least, not knowledge strictly speaking) or is somehow grounded in knowledge of the Forms. Does Plato perhaps think that you cannot know the road unless you know what a road is, and that knowing the latter is (or involves) knowing the Form of the Road?

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Teleology and mathematics are central to the discussion in books VI–VII, whose context is the description of the advanced education of the philosopher-rulers. The “greatest subject” of their education is the Form of the Good, since their grasp of what is beneficial in the political sphere depends on their understanding of goodness as such (505a). Since Socrates does not know what goodness (506c) is, he cannot give a scientific account of it, but he states his beliefs in the form of the famous images of the Sun (506e–509d), the Divided Line (509d–511e), and the Cave (514a–517a). The central point of the first of these is that just as the sun is both the ultimate generative force and the primary source of illumination in the visible world, so the Form of the Good is primary, both epistemologically and ontologically, in the intelligible world of the Forms (509a–b). That is to say, the other Forms exist, and are what they are, because it is best that they should be, and understanding what any Form is involves understanding why it is what it is—that is to say, understanding how that is the best way for it to be.

This immediately raises the difficulty that teleological explanation requires that what is actual is the best of a range of alternative possibilities, whereas the Forms exist, and are what they are, necessarily. I suggest that we can best approach Plato's meaning if we take it that his starting point is the ordinary conception of goodness as consisting in order and proportion, as illustrated in *Gorgias* 504a–b, where goodness in a range of things, from a house to the soul, consists in order and arrangement of parts, whereas badness consists in disorder. To be good, then, is to manifest rationally satisfactory order; so to say that the intelligible Forms are as they are because that is best is to say that they are what they are because that system is maximally intelligible.

It seems fairly clear that Plato believed that order and proportion were ultimately to be understood mathematically. Hence the curriculum which is to lead the philosophers to the systematic study of the Forms is mathematical, not merely because mathematics leads the mind from reliance on the senses to abstract thought (524b) but because the grasp of the basic

principles common to the various mathematical sciences is useful in leading to the search for the beautiful and the good (531c–d). To understand goodness is to understand order, and fundamental to the understanding of order is the understanding of its mathematical basis; hence the understanding of goodness is to be sought via the basic principles of mathematics.¹⁸

¹⁸ For a fuller exposition and defense of this view, see M. Burnyeat, "Plato on Why Mathematics Is Good for the Soul," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 103 (2000), 1–81.

Some confirmation of this suggestion is provided by Aristotle's evidence of Plato's lecture on the Good, which was all to do with mathematics and which culminated (on the most likely interpretation of the text) in identifying the Good with Unity.¹⁹

¹⁹ The evidence comes from the *Elements of Harmony* of Aristoxenus (a pupil of Aristotle), II.30–31:

This, as Aristotle was always saying, was the experience of most of those who heard Plato's lecture *On the Good*. Each of them attended on the assumption that he would hear about one of the recognised human goods—such as wealth, health, strength, and in general some marvellous happiness. When Plato's lectures turned out to be about mathematics—numbers, geometry, astronomy—and to crown all about the thesis that the good is one, it seemed to them, I fancy, something quite paradoxical, and so some people despised the whole thing, while others criticised it. (Translation from J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols. [Princeton, N.J., 1984], 2:2397.)

The crucial phrase, translated above "the good is one," is *agathon estin hen*, which would most naturally be rendered "there is one good" (presumably as opposed to many). The translation given above assumes the emendation *tagathon estin hen*, "the good is one" (presumably, again, as opposed to many different things). But it is hard to see why the thesis that there is a single supreme good should have seemed so paradoxical as to provoke the reactions mentioned; it is clear from the context that the disappointed audience was expecting to hear that one of the recognized goods was *the* (i.e., the supreme) good. What was so outrageous must have been not the claim that the good was one as opposed to many but the account of *what* it was, and that must have been such as to require the mathematical build-up described. I propose that we should adopt the reading *tagathon estin hen*, understanding that as "the Good is the One," the article before *hen* being omitted (as is standard in Greek) when an expression with the definite article is the complement of the verb *einai* (to be).

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This suggestion is open to some obvious objections. According to the simile of the Sun, the Form of the Good is epistemologically primary; according to the image of the Divided Line, the principles of the mathematical sciences are themselves fully intelligible only when they are derived from the "unhypothetical principle of everything" (510c–511d), which, in context, must be the Form of the Good. Yet, on this suggestion, the Form of the Good is itself elucidated as a fundamental principle of mathematics, specifically the Form of Unity. The difficulty arising from the Divided Line is comparatively superficial; the principles of the individual mathematical sciences, when taken in isolation from one another, have the status of mere hypotheses. Only when they are derived from a single hypothetical principle (i.e., when they are tied down by reasoning concerning their cause) are they themselves known, and are hence the grounds of the knowledge of what is derived from them.

The other difficulty is deeper. Ex hypothesi goodness was the basic explanatory concept, but if understanding what goodness is requires that one explain what it is in terms of other concepts, those concepts are now more basic than goodness. We have here an instance of the classic problem of the hierarchical structure of knowledge. If knowledge of X is founded on knowledge of Y, and that, in turn, on knowledge of Z, then either we have an infinite regress of knowledge or we have some foundations of knowledge, knowledge of which is grounded on nothing but themselves. Plato's insistence that we must be able to give an account of what we know seems to rule out self-evident foundations of knowledge; he asserts the necessity of a *logos* in many passages,²⁰

²⁰ *Rep.* 510c, 531e, 533b–c; *Phaedo* 76b; *Symp.* 202a; *Tht.* 202c; *Tim.* 51e; *Laws* 966b, 967e.

notably in *Rep.* 534b–c, where the philosopher's task is that of giving the *logos* of each of the Forms and his ultimate aim that of differentiating the Form of the Good (*tōi logōi*)²¹

²¹ The phrase *tōi logōi* may be translated either "by (its) definition" or "by reasoning." The translation does not affect the doctrine; Forms have to be distinguished from one another by reasoning (since reason alone grasps them), but what reasoning does is to reach accounts of them which differentiate one from another.

) from the other Forms. In

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contrast, the account at the end of book VI of the priority of the Good—and the simile of the Sun, in particular—strongly suggest traditional foundationalism. Just as the sun makes everything else visible by its own light, and is itself visible by that same light, so the Good makes the other Forms intelligible and, we should expect from the analogy, is itself intelligible in and of itself.

Holistic (alternatively, coherentist) pictures of knowledge offer an escape from this dilemma.²²

²² As suggested by G. Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V–VII*," in S. Everson, ed., *Companions to Ancient Thought 1: Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1990), 85–115, reprinted as ch. 4 of Fine, *Knowledge*, and in Fine, *Plato 1*, 215–46.

To give an account of a concept is not to explain it in terms of anything more basic but to locate it in a coherent structure of concepts, and specifically to show the explanatory role which each concept plays within that structure. The suggestion that Plato identifies goodness with unity can be seen as instantiating that model. The basic explanatory role of goodness in a teleological scheme of explanation is adapted to unity, in that goodness is order, harmony, symmetry, and so on, those features are understood mathematically, the mathematical understanding of them is grounded in basic mathematical principles, and, given the holistic model, the account of those principles consists in showing their contribution to the system as a whole.

This discussion of *Rep.* VI–VII is doubly speculative, first in suggesting that Plato intends the nature of goodness to be understood mathematically, and then in raising the possibility that the type of account of it which he intends is a holistic one. Both suggestions are recommended by the extent to which they achieve plausibility; neither can claim direct textual confirmation. The problem which the second suggestion attempts to meet is also prominent in the *Theaetetus*, the only dialogue of Plato's to be devoted to the topic of knowledge. We shall therefore return to it in the context of that dialogue.

Theaetetus

The topic of the dialogue is the question "What is knowledge?" Three answers are proposed, and examined in turn:

1. Knowledge is perception (*aisthēsis*).
2. Knowledge is true belief.
3. Knowledge is true belief with an account (*logos*).

Each answer is rejected, and the dialogue ends aporetically. The discussion of the first suggestion, which is considerably longer than the other two combined, is largely devoted to a complex and sophisticated treatment of two theses, which Socrates argues to be logically connected with the proposed account of knowledge

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as perception—namely, Protagoras' thesis that things are as they appear to each individual, and a thesis derived from Heraclitus that everything is in a state of total flux. I shall not discuss the treatment of these theses (for which see ch. 17) but shall confine myself to the direct discussion of the proposed account of knowledge as perception. This is undertaken in a brief section (184b–186a) whose central point is a distinction between, on the one hand, properties apprehended by the individual bodily senses (colors by sight, acoustic properties by hearing, flavors by taste, etc.) and on the other formal properties (being, sameness and difference, likeness and unlikeness, number, etc.), which are not specific to any individual sense.²³

²³ On this section, see, in addition to the works cited below, M. Burnyeat, "Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving," *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 26 (1976), 29–51, and J. M. Cooper, "Plato on Sense Perception and Knowledge: *Theaetetus* 184 to 186," *Phronesis* 15 (1970), 123–46, reprinted in Fine, *Plato 1*, 355–76, and in Cooper, *Knowledge, Nature and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton, 2004), 43–64.

Socrates says (185a6–7) that the soul discerns or apprehends (*episkopein*) the sensible properties "by means of the powers of the body," and the formal properties "itself by means of itself" (i.e., solely by its own power). The application of those concepts is not the work of any individual sense, or of the senses collectively, but of the integrating capacity of the mind, which unifies the data of the several senses into a single coherent diachronic picture (186a10–b1), and which also applies evaluations, such as beautiful and ugly, good and bad (a8). Perception, identified as the apprehension of the sensible properties, is thus distinguished from judgment, which is the work of the mind, and since being is one of the properties which belong to judgment, it is judgment, not perception, which grasps truth, since truth belongs to being (186b–c).²⁴

²⁴ The crucial sentence is 186c7, "Is it possible for what cannot even attain to being to attain to truth?" to which *Theaetetus*

answers, "It is impossible." The connection between being and truth is presumably made via the idiomatic use of *to on* and *ta onta* in the sense of "what is true"; the ordinary Greek for "speak the truth" is *to on* (or *ta onta*) *legein*.

And since knowledge implies truth (c9–10), the conclusion is reached that "Knowledge is not in our experiences, but in our reasoning about them; for it is here (i.e., in reasoning) that it is possible, it seems, to attain being and truth, but it is impossible there (i.e., in experiences)" (d2–5).

At first, this seems very straightforward: knowledge is propositional, knowledge that *p*. And propositions are the objects of judgment: judgment is always judgment that *p*. Perception, by contrast, lacks propositional content. Hence, knowledge cannot be perception. If that is the argument, it is a bad one, since the premise that perception lacks propositional content is just false. Some perception at least has propositional content: for example, I can see *that* the table has already been laid. Even if we restrict ourselves to perception of the proper objects of the senses, one sees *that* the color sample is green. Moreover, Socrates himself says just that, when he points out that, asked to examine (*skepsasthai*) whether something is salty or not, one does so by taste (185b7–c2). A great deal of perception, then, is perception that something is the case, and it is plausible that that was part of what Theaetetus had in mind in his original suggestion (151e1–3) that "someone who knows something perceives what he knows, and as it now seems to me, knowledge

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is nothing other than perception." And certainly, when Socrates immediately equates Theaetetus' suggestion with Protagoras' doctrine that things are as they seem to each individual, that seeming has propositional content; the wind's seeming (feeling) cold to me is its seeming (feeling) to me that the wind is cold. So if Socrates' final argument is the straightforward one set out above, it assumes a conception of perception which is not the one intended by the original proposal. In that argument, propositional content is assigned exclusively to judgment, leaving perception to be construed as contentless, i.e. as the reception of raw data whose interpretation is the work of a distinct faculty. But no one could conceivably maintain that knowledge is perception thus conceived.

That may, however, be the argument. Socrates' claim would then be that, *strictly speaking*, perception is nothing more than the contentless reception of stimuli²⁵

²⁵ Which is presumably all that animals and infants experience (186b11–c1).

and talk of perceiving *that p* is an illegitimate conflation of perception itself with judgment consequent on perception. The proponents of the thesis that knowledge is perception would then have misdescribed their own position. There are, however, some indications in the text that Socrates' argument may be different. First, in the statement of his conclusion quoted above (186d2–5), he says not that knowledge is in judgment about our experiences (which would presumably be *doxa*) but that it is in reasoning (*sullogismos*) about them. That suggests that knowledge is to be found not in the class of conceptualized judgments about perception but in some more restricted class of judgments arrived at by reasoning.²⁶

²⁶ The reminiscence of the *Meno*'s "by reasoning concerning the cause" (*aitias logismōi*) is highly suggestive.

That is supported by what immediately precedes (186b–c). The soul perceives by touch the hardness of what is hard and the softness of what is soft, but certain other properties it attempts itself to judge by examination and comparison; these properties are "their being and what they are (or that they are)"²⁷

²⁷ The Greek is *hoti eston*, which may be translated either as "what they (both) are" or "that they (both) are," "both" referring to the experienced instances of hardness and softness. For the reasons given in what immediately follows, I think that "what they are" is more likely. For the opposite view, see D. Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* [Theaetetus] (Oxford, 1988), 139–40. Given that translation "being" (*ousian*) is best understood in the same way: as equivalent to "nature," the *kai* connecting the two expressions being exegetical, "their nature, i.e. what they are."

and their opposition to one another and again the being of their opposition."

By contrast with perception, which is innate in humans and animals, "reasonings (or "calculations," *analogismata*) about them with reference to their being and their utility" are arrived at through a long and arduous process of education. It is hard to see that it takes such a process to arrive at the judgment, concerning something hard, that it is hard, but easier to see that it might take such a process to be able to understand what hardness is, that hardness is not just different from but opposite to softness, and again what oppositeness is. For these tasks, one needs not just experience of hardness and softness but a theory of the nature of those properties and of the properties of those properties (such as oppositeness). The references to evaluation may make the point that evaluation, like understanding

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what things are, requires not just experience but theory; one cannot determine whether something is good or bad, or beautiful or ugly, just by experiencing it but needs to understand the appropriate standards of evaluation.²⁸

²⁸ Experience is necessary, but not sufficient, for correct evaluation; to the untutored ear, a piece by Stockhausen may sound ugly, but it takes understanding of the genre and its conventions to determine whether it is really beautiful or ugly.

It is, then, at least possible that the conclusion of the first main section of the dialogue is that knowledge is not perception, not because knowledge is always propositional, whereas perception lacks propositional content, but because knowledge is primarily knowledge of what things are, whereas perception is never sufficient to reveal what things are.²⁹

²⁹ This suggestion was originally made by J. McDowell, *Plato, Theaetetus* (Oxford, 1973), 188–93.

That suggestion is not without its difficulties,³⁰

³⁰ See, for example, Bostock, *Theaetetus*, 140–42.

but it is worth keeping in mind when we turn to the remaining sections.

The second proposed definition is that knowledge is true belief. Since perception cannot be knowledge, the latter must be found in the activity of the soul “by itself” (see the distinction above), which is said to be belief or judgment (187a), and since there can be false belief, knowledge cannot be belief as such but must be true belief (187b). This proposal is threatened by the claim that false belief is impossible (in which case, knowledge would collapse into belief), and the bulk of this section (to 201a) is devoted to discussion of how false belief is possible (for details, see ch. 17). The substantive suggestion is dealt with only briefly, being refuted (201a–c) by the distinction between an eyewitness’s knowledge of some event, say an assault, and the true beliefs that a member of the jury has about that event. The latter cannot have knowledge of what “only the person who saw” can know (b7–8). Socrates describes the jury as having only a short time to decide the matter and as being persuaded, but not “taught” or “instructed” by the litigants (201a–b), which conveys the suggestion that they are unfairly manipulated rather than being presented with evidence sufficient to reach a proper verdict, but the insistence that only the eyewitness can know what occurred clearly implies that testimony, however compelling, and however fairly presented, can never produce that knowledge. We have returned to the distinction between the person who knows the road to Larisa from experience and the person who has true secondhand beliefs about it. Knowledge by experience is admitted without qualification as knowledge, and there is no suggestion that the eyewitness is better placed epistemically than the jury member because the former has some “reasoning about the cause” of the event which the latter lacks.³¹

³¹ On the jury passage, see M. Burnyeat and J. Barnes, “Socrates and the Jury,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 54* (1980), 173–91 (Burnyeat) and 193–206 (Barnes).

It is clear that the eyewitness’s knowledge is knowledge *that* such and such occurred. But it is less clear how sharply Plato distinguishes that from knowledge *of* the event. Just as the person who knows the road knows various things about it—for example, that it passes to the north of such and such a hill—whereas the person who merely “has the road in mind” merely believes those things, so the person who

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knows the event knows various things about it, whereas the person who relies on testimony merely believes those things. The suggestion that knowledge *that* and knowledge *of* things are not seen by Plato as two distinct kinds of knowledge is supported by the fact that the dialogue passes immediately to the final suggestion, that knowledge is true belief with an account (*logos*), which is primarily a discussion of knowledge of things, in the sense of knowledge of what things are. The basic idea is that knowing what something is is having a true belief about that thing together with an account of it. The kinds of account discussed are the enumeration of the elements of a thing, illustrated by the example of the analysis of a syllable into its component letters; the statement of one’s true belief; and a description of the thing sufficient to distinguish it from everything else.

The first suggestion is rejected on the strength of the regress difficulty discussed earlier; if knowledge requires an enumeration of the elements of the things known, then the elements themselves must be unknown. But it is impossible that unknown elements can be the basis of knowledge of what they compose. On the contrary, the elements must be better known than the things composed of them (206b), but that is impossible on this compositional model. Stating one’s true belief is immediately rejected on the ground that since everyone with a true belief is able to state it, this proposal merely restates the previously rejected suggestion that knowledge is true belief (206d–e). Finally, the suggestion that knowledge of something is true belief of or about that thing together with a distinguishing mark of that thing is rejected on two grounds. First, true

belief about anything requires that one already possesses a distinguishing mark of it (otherwise one's belief would not be about it specifically); hence, once again, knowledge adds nothing to true belief. Second, if one responds to the first objection by requiring knowledge of the distinguishing mark, the proposed account of knowledge is circular (208c–210a). The dialogue thus ends inconclusively.³²

³² On the final section of the dialogue, see G. Fine, "Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), 336–97, reprinted as Fine, *Knowledge*, ch. 10, and Bostock, *Theaetetus*, ch. 6.

This outcome raises the question whether the *aporia* reflects genuine uncertainty on Plato's part, or whether his intention is to suggest some positive answer to the original question. Specifically, is the reader to infer that, given some other sense of "account," knowledge will indeed prove to be true belief with an account? An obvious suggestion is that we should revive the *Meno's* proposal, defining knowledge as true belief with reasoning concerning the cause. But that proposal fits derivative, rather than basic, knowledge. One has the kind of knowledge defined in the *Meno's* terms when one has some true belief together with understanding of what makes that belief true. But that understanding is itself a sort of knowledge, and application of the *Meno's* formula to it raises the dilemma which we have already encountered: either it, too, has to be accompanied by understanding of something else which makes it true, which leads to a regress, or there are some beliefs which are true in virtue of nothing other than their own truth—in other words are self-evident. If there is a distinction between basic and derivative

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knowledge, and if we assume that Plato is looking for an account of the former, then that would need to be an account of self-evidence; but "true belief with reasoning concerning the cause" cannot be an account of self-evidence. An alternative is the suggestion which we have already encountered: that the understanding of what makes any belief true is provided by the whole conceptual structure into which that belief fits. The regress is halted by the abandonment of the distinction between basic and derivative knowledge; "reasoning concerning the cause" would then have to be construed as "elucidation of the conceptual scheme to which the belief belongs."

This certainly has some affinities with some things said about knowledge in the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*, all plausibly regarded as later than the *Theaetetus*. Of these, the *Phaedrus* and *Philebus* describe,³³

³³ *Phaedr.* 265d–266c; *Phil.* 16b–18d.

and the *Sophist* and *Statesman* exemplify,³⁴

³⁴ *Soph.* 219a–232a, 264b–268d; *Statesm.* 258b–268d, 279a–311c.

a method of specifying what things are by a process of constructing definitions *per genus et differentiam*. A genus is collected together from many different things, and then successively divided into species and subspecies until indivisible species are reached. But while that method provides systematic knowledge of the various species and of their connections with their higher genera and therefore with each other, it does not avoid the problem of basic knowledge. For knowledge of being an X as being an F which is G presupposes that we know what being an F and being G is. It will not do to say that being an F is being a member of that genus which is constituted by the species, F which is G, F which is H, and so on. For that assumes that we know which species constitute a unity, and it seems that, for that, we have to have some way of identifying the genus independently of the species. We cannot identify the genus as the genus which is collected from the different things we started from, for that requires that we know what different things to collect. If we begin by collecting indivisible species, then how can we know which species to collect? And if we begin from individuals, then how shall we know which individuals to collect?

A system of classification cannot by itself be adequate to provide knowledge of reality but has to be supplemented by means of fixing the application of the classificatory terms, whether by observation, or by taking as primitive some pre-theoretical categories, or in some other way. The *Sophist* gives some intriguing hints in this direction in the suggestion that one of the principal tasks of philosophy is working out the conceptual interrelations of what it calls the "Greatest Kinds"—that is to say, some of the most general and abstract concepts: namely, Being, Sameness, Difference, Change, and Stability (251c–261b). It may have been Plato's view that a full specification of these interrelations will amount to an account of what each of these kinds is and thus to identifications of these highest genera, which will then be divisible via the method of division. But that is speculation; there is nothing in the text to connect the discussion of the Greatest Kinds with the method of collection and division.

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Conclusion

The overall picture of Plato's views on knowledge is not particularly tidy. While some themes remain constant from his earliest dialogues throughout, there are a number of important points on which he does not appear to have reached a fixed position. The following are constant themes.

- I. Knowledge is systematic. Over specific areas, such as mathematics and morality, and even conceivably for reality as a whole, items of knowledge are systematically interconnected, and it is the task of inquiry in those areas to reveal those connections.
- II. For any department of knowledge (and, conceivably, for reality as a whole), the primary knowledge is knowledge of what things are. Given the metaphysical theory of Forms as the basic things that there are, Forms are the primary objects of inquiry. Changes in (or uncertainties about) that theory are reflected in corresponding changes in Plato's views (or uncertainties) about knowledge.
- III. Knowledge of what things are is achieved a priori, by critical reflection. Empirical investigation has at best a secondary role in the achievement of knowledge (see below).

Those themes may be summed up as the doctrine that the aim of inquiry is to achieve systematic understanding of the intelligible principles of reality. While that remained Plato's constant ideal for philosophy, his conception of how, and how completely, it might be achieved seems to have fluctuated, in various ways.

- a. The Theory of Recollection expresses the view that the soul has been in permanent possession of a total grasp of the principles of reality and that the task of critical inquiry is to recover that grasp. But that theory is found only in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, and even in those dialogues it appears in different versions.
- b. The *Republic* presents the ambitious ideal of a single all-embracing system, on the model of a mathematical axiomatic system, founded on a single fundamental principle, the nature of goodness. It is plausible that goodness was itself conceived mathematically. No other dialogue gives that universal role to any single principle.
- c. There is no single view of the status—or, indeed, the existence—of empirical knowledge. In the *Timaeus*, Plato denies that knowledge of the sensible world is possible but allows that there can be reliable belief about it. Knowledge of the sensible world is recognized in numerous dialogues, but there is no uniform view how it is achieved. In *Rep. V*, knowledge of the sensible world appears to be admitted, provided that it is grounded in knowledge of Forms, and the same view is indicated by the thesis in the *Meno* that knowledge requires reasoning concerning the cause of one's true

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beliefs. But in the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*, we find instances of knowledge acquired by direct perception, where it is not clear how, or whether, knowledge of Forms is presupposed. Equally, it is not clear how, or whether, such items of knowledge are systematically connected to others. It may be that such knowledge is thought of as knowledge of a secondary kind or as not, strictly speaking, knowledge, but no distinction of that kind is explicitly drawn.

- d. Plato asserts repeatedly that in order to know what something is one must be able to give an account or definition of that thing. He is clearly aware of the difficulty that that requirement leads to an infinite regress of accounts, but his response to that difficulty is disputed. On some views, he modified the requirement to the extent of recognizing some things, perhaps including the Form of the Good, which were self-intelligible. On others, he extended the notion of an account to include the system in which such alleged primitives have their place, so that knowledge of the primitive elements and knowledge of what is derived from them is mutually self-supporting. There are traces of such views in some of the later dialogues, but they are not explicitly related to the regress problem.
- e. Some of the later dialogues exhibit definitions in genus-species hierarchies. The method raises a number of questions, including how these hierarchies are supposed to apply to the sensible world, and how the method is supposed to account for knowledge of the *summa genera* and the *infimae species*. It is possible that the former kind of knowledge is somehow grounded in the kind of investigation of the interrelation of basic formal concepts conducted in the *Sophist*, but there is no explicit connection in the texts between these two kinds of investigation.

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