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Plato's early theory of knowledge

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In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates states or assumes a number of views about knowledge.[1] Although he never examines these views critically or develops them into a theory, they can be interpreted as mutually consistent, and as such constitute what I shall loosely call Plato's early theory of knowledge. This is mainly a theory of expert knowledge, and concerns what sort of thing an expert ought to know. The theory says little about what it is for an expert or anyone else to know what she knows, and for this reason is not very like epistemology as we know it, despite a number of misleading appearances. There is nothing here about the grounds of knowledge or the justification of belief, and Plato's early theory of knowledge stands outside the sort of sceptical debate that stimulates epistemology. Anyone who brings standard epistemological questions to a reading of early Plato is bound to misunderstand him. That would be too bad, for what he offers is attractive in many ways. It is the least academic of philosophical theories, for by itself it carries no reference to earlier philosophers. The basic distinction that it makes is familiar and practical – between the knowledge anyone can have, and the knowledge for which we must depend on specialised experts. Still, the theory is heavy with the seeds of later epistemology, and deserves to be examined in any history of the subject.

I shall follow the usual convention of assuming that Plato's early theory is the theory that he represents Socrates as holding. For convenience of reference, I shall use 'Socrates' to refer to the fictional character in Plato's early dialogues. By 'early' I mean the family of dialogues, largely aporetic, that cluster around themes of the *Apology*, and do not explicitly advance theories of epistemology or metaphysics: *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias* and *Ion*. Later dialogues that apparently reflect on the approach of the early dialogues may be admitted as evidence, but only with caution: *Theaetetus* 148e ff., *Sophist* 230c, and possibly *Phaedo* 100b ff. Elsewhere Plato develops theories to mitigate the paradoxes of the early dialogues. In the *Meno* he does this through his model of learning by recollection and his distinction of knowledge from true belief. Though the *Meno* theories do not belong to early Plato, they were adduced to explain certain difficulties in early Plato; and for that reason I shall cover the *Meno* briefly in an appendix.

1 This chapter owes much to Vlastos [86], and to his generous correspondence with me on the subject. The views presented here are my own, however.

I

Plato and the sceptical debate

Which came first, the sceptic or the epistemologist? The answer is, 'Neither: Plato came first.' Epistemology asks what knowledge is and how it can be acquired. Scepticism, aiming to detach the epistemologist from his enterprise, raises hard questions as to whether knowledge, as the epistemologist defines it, can be acquired at all. Early Plato does something quite different from either of these, though it smacks of both.

Much of modern epistemology has tried to answer scepticism, and this tempts us to think of epistemology as second in the order of thought and of history – as the sort of theory given by dogmatic philosophers in answer to what sceptics have already said. But classical scepticism cannot come first in any order of things. Unwilling to take a position on anything, true scepticism has nothing to say except in response to a philosopher who already has views about knowledge. In fact, scepticism did not properly emerge until after Aristotle, by which time it could develop against a rich background of dogmatic epistemology. After a form of scepticism made its professional début in the Academy, philosophers on both sides expanded the debate in mutual responses that grew in sophistication. But if this story is correct, how could Plato be a major part of it? If epistemology and scepticism can flourish only in the sort of dialogue that began long after Plato's death, what could Plato say about either one?

Of course the matter is not so simple. Elements of proto-scepticism occur in the remains of Xenophanes, Parmenides, Democritus and some of the sophists, but Plato did not reply to them in any of his earlier works. On the contrary, Plato's earlier works themselves seem to carry out a proto-sceptical programme: they include a series of fictions that show Socrates refuting men who directly or indirectly lay strong claims to knowledge. Socrates gives no general reasons for disputing human claims to knowledge, however, and so his programme is not in itself sceptical. Nor is his procedure strictly sceptical, for Socrates must introduce criteria of knowledge that are his own.

In short, Plato took no part in any of the historical dialogues that pitted scepticism against epistemology; instead, he wrote dialogues, a whole series of them, that set Socrates in unequal combat against naive dogmatists – unequal because in this discussion Socrates supplies *both* the dogmatic theory *and* the negative arguments, while his partner grows tongue-tied. Even the negative arguments are not sceptical on familiar modern or even ancient models.

When Socrates disclaims knowledge or undermines the claim of another, he does not do so by attacking the truth, the certainty, or even the source of the particular item of knowledge that is in question. Instead, he challenges the reliability of the person who claims knowledge, by asking him for a definition that would hold for all circumstances. The point is not to ascertain whether he is right in this case, but to see whether his claim could hold for every case. This is close to the sceptical issue, but deceptively so.

The Sceptical Academy of Arcesilaus and Carneades used Socrates as an icon; but so far as we know they showed no interest in the sort of argument Socrates actually used in the early dialogues. Surprisingly, it is the later sceptics of the Pyrrhonist revival who use arguments reminiscent of Plato, and who return to the issue of reliability as it arises in later Plato, in the context of the reliability of the senses.[2]

Socrates' disavowal of knowledge

Socrates' disavowal of knowledge has been a commonplace in the history of philosophy since Aristotle (*de Sophisticis Elenchis* 183b6–8), and indeed was the one point on which the Academic Arcesilaus declined to follow Socrates (Cicero, *Academica* I.45): a sceptic would hold back from disavowing knowledge because of the same attitude that balks at avowing it. The very formulation of the disavowal seems a paradox: 'I know of myself that I am wise in neither much nor little' (21b4–5); 'I know of myself that I am expert in hardly anything' (22d1).[3] Without wisdom, how does Socrates know that he is not wise?

Disavowals of knowledge occur in a number of contexts. Besides *Apology* 21b2–5 and 22d1, we have *Apology* 21d2–6, where Socrates comments on his examination of the claim of a politician to knowledge: 'perhaps I am wiser than this man. For it turns out that neither of us knows anything fine

2 Woodruff [112].

3 For the translation of *sunoida*, see *Phaedrus* 235c7 ('knowing my own ignorance'), which shows that *sunoida* is at least as strongly epistemic as *oida* ('I know'). There, Socrates uses *ennenoēka* and *eu oida* in the same context and to the same effect as *sunoida*. Some translators have wrongly chosen a weaker translation for 21b4: e.g. Tredennick: 'I am only too conscious.'

or good, but he thinks he knows something when he doesn't, while I, on the grounds that I do not know, do not think that I do.' General disavowals of knowledge are implied in the *Gorgias* at 506a3–5 ('I do not say what I say as one who knows') and 509a4–6 ('the same saying always applies to me: I do not know that these things are so'). The disavowal of the *Meno* ('I do not know anything about virtue' – 71b3) could be taken as an ironical attempt to draw on Socrates' partner; but the similar disavowals at *Euthyphro* 16d and *Hippias Major* 304b cannot be dismissed so easily, as these come after the discussions have reached their impasse.

On the other hand, Socrates does say that he *knows* of his ignorance at *Apology* 21b4 and 22d1 (cf. *Phaedrus* 235c7). At 37b7–8 he speaks of alternative penalties that he 'knows well' to be evil, and at *Gorgias* 486e5–6 he says, 'I know well that if you [Callicles] agree with me on what my soul believes, then these opinions are true.' Of Socrates' knowledge claims the most significant is at *Apology* 29b6–9, for it invokes knowledge of the sort of moral subject that Socrates takes up in his elenchus of others: 'to do injustice, i.e., to disobey my superior, god or man, this I *know* to be evil and base' (cf. *Crito* 51b). Had anyone else based a decision on this principle, we would expect Socrates to have asked how he knew this: 'Come, tell me, what is the evil and base?'

The basic problem has been brought into focus by Gregory Vlastos in a masterful article: though Socrates is sincere in disavowing knowledge, he says or implies that he knows a good many things.[4]

The difficulty shows up in several ways. Socrates applies outrageously difficult epistemic criteria in some areas, but in others he uses the word 'knowledge' as in ordinary language. He sets out to purge other people of their dogmatic conceits of knowledge, yet he does so by demonstrating their ignorance on the basis of a thesis he holds dogmatically about knowledge – that one who knows knows definitions. Again, in view of his success in proving the ignorance of anyone he meets, it would seem foolish for anyone to aspire to knowledge; yet Socrates at least aspires to virtue, and this, in his analysis, is knowledge.

Readers of Plato have not agreed on a solution. Perhaps, when Socrates says that he does not know, he means to deceive his hearers.[5] Perhaps, when

4 Vlastos [86].

5 The interpretation of the disavowal as an act of deception (first bruited by Thrasymachus – *Republic* I337a) has been represented in recent years by Gulley [78], 69, and roundly refuted by Vlastos [86], 3–5, followed on this point by Lesher [85].

On the crucial distinctions between deception, simple irony and complex irony, see Vlastos [87]: 'In "simple" irony, what is said is simply not what is meant. In "complex" irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant' (p. 86).

Socrates says that he does know, he means merely that he has true belief.[6] More likely, Socrates means most of what he says on this score, but means the verb 'to know' differently on different occasions.

We need a distinction between the sort of knowledge Socrates claims, and the sort he disavows. Nothing like this is explicit in Plato. We shall have to supply a distinction that Socrates recognises merely in use. Some have attempted to solve the difficulty by distinguishing among the subjects of knowledge: there is a kind of thing Socrates knows, and a kind of thing he does not. For example, he might consistently and unambiguously say (1) that he *does* know the moral character of specific actions but (2) that he *does not* know basic theses about virtue and related terms.[7] But this line will not work. Nothing can disguise the fact that Socrates does not apply the same stringent standards for knowledge in all cases; and different standards mean different working conceptions. When Euthyphro says he knows it is pious to prosecute the guilty, Socrates thinks this confidence should be backed up by a definition of piety (4e–5d); but Socrates does not consider such a test for certain assertions he makes with equal certainty – for example that he knows it is wrong to disobey the gods, though he emphasises his confidence in this claim by contrasting it with his uncertain beliefs about life after death (*Apology* 29b). In each case what is said to be known is the same kind of thing exactly – a moral judgement about a certain sort of action – and the two believers show equal confidence. Even if different kinds of thing were presumed known in the two cases, the fact would remain that Socrates applies different epistemic standards in them, and thereby uses different working conceptions of knowledge. Either Plato (1) has failed to represent him consistently, or (2) has succeeded in representing him as an inconsistent thinker, or (3) has shown Socrates making a distinction in use between two conceptions of knowledge with different epistemic standards. This last is the most likely hypothesis if the texts will accommodate an adequate account of the distinction.

What we need, then, is a distinction between two kinds of knowledge. Vlastos has argued that Socrates makes a dual use of the various words for 'know' and 'knowledge': what he disavows is knowledge in a strong technical sense, certain knowledge ('knowledge$_C$'), while what he claims is knowledge in a weak sense ('knowledge$_E$'). Knowledge$_E$ is knowledge that is justifiable by the elenchus, that is, by Socrates' method of cross-examination. But some have complained that Socrates, who sought always for unity of definition, would not want to multiply senses of 'know', and therefore would not respond to the failure of elenchus to achieve knowledge$_C$ by falling

6 So Irwin [101], 39–40, on which see Vlastos' persuasive reply in [86], 5–11.
7 Lesher [85], esp. p. 282.

back on a second conception of knowledge. This complaint is right as far as it goes, but it does not answer Vlastos' point, which was that elenchus is totally inappropriate for knowledge$_C$. If knowledge$_C$ had been Socrates' goal, he would have been mad to propose the elenchus as a route to it.[8]

Vlastos' distinction between knowledge$_C$ and knowledge$_E$ is promising, but raises several difficulties. To do its job, the distinction should at least assign all of the moral knowledge Socrates claims or assumes to knowledge$_E$. But not all of such knowledge claims could be based on the elenchus. When Socrates claims certainty, as he does by implication at *Apology* 29b, he cannot mean to appeal merely to the elenchus, since that, as Vlastos concedes, leaves a 'security gap'.

Moreover, premises of the elenchus (for example that courage is fine – *Laches* 192c) must be known when this is demonstrative, but these could not be justified without circularity by the elenchus that uses them. In fact, it is odd to think of the elenchus as *justifying* a knowledge claim at all; at most it *fails to disconfirm*. But to call the latter an *epistemic justification* is misleading. If elenchus were enough for knowledge, then justification, as it is usually understood, is not required. Better to say, on this view, that knowledge is *examined* true belief.

In any case, degree of certainty does not appear to be the important difference between the knowledge Socrates claims and the knowledge he denies. The difference is that the knowledge he denies is supposed to be backed up by an ability to give a certain sort of account, a Socratic definition. But what does that have to do with certainty? You can be quite certain in the ordinary way of any number of things, without being able to give a Socratic definition; again, you can give any number of Socratic definitions, and still be subject to doubt. If Socrates wants extraordinary philosophical certainty, he would be wrong to pursue it through definitions, which do nothing by themselves to banish doubt. Charity demands that we attribute to Socrates a better reason for asking after definitions.

Expert and non-expert knowledge

Let us begin with two loosely defined categories which we can fill out from the texts. What Socrates disavows is a certain sort of *expert knowledge*,[9] while the sort of knowledge Socrates claims, or allows for others, need not meet expert standards; indeed, Socrates claims knowledge

8 Vlastos [86]; the objection is stated by Lesher [85], 277–8.
9 By 'expert knowledge' I mean what Socrates most often refers to by *technē*. On the use of this word in Plato, see Roochnik [88]. Interest in *technē* in moral and political contexts grew out of the increasing complexity of public affairs in Athens in the later fifth century. On this theme see W. R. Connor, *The New Politicians of Fifth-Century Athens* (Princeton, 1971), 125 and 126, n. 68.

in non-expert contexts as if it need not meet any standards at all (as at *Apology* 29b). Socrates' conception of expert knowledge is based on, but broader than, the view his contemporaries held. Expert knowledge is mainly the specialised knowledge of professionals, but it extends to a less specialised sort of knowledge that Socrates thinks should meet similar standards.

The *Apology* makes it plain that expert knowledge is what Socrates means to disavow. Our initial paradox was that Socrates said he knew that he lacked wisdom and knowledge (21b, 22d). The words for what Socrates says he lacks (*sofia* and *epistēmē*) can be used interchangeably with *technē*, his word for professional knowledge. In the immediate context of 22d, expertise is plainly what Socrates has in mind; and his procedure for testing the oracle by questioning well-known experts suggests that he has the same idea at 21b. It is professional knowledge, expertise, that he knows he lacks, and that he looks for elsewhere, asking, in effect: if there is no subject in which I can claim expertise, what did the oracle mean by saying no one was wiser? The people he questions turn out either not to be experts at all, or to suppose mistakenly that they are experts on a grand scale, a mistake serious enough to eclipse their small expertise.

Because Socrates employs two conceptions of knowledge, we shall have to reconstruct two types of epistemology: (1) the theory of *expert knowledge* Socrates tacitly uses in discrediting people's claims to expertise; (2) the theory of *non-expert knowledge* we must supply to make sense of the knowledge that Socrates himself confidently displays, and which he sometimes recognises in others. Under each heading, we will need to make further distinctions. Expert knowledge will include quite ordinary skills; and non-expert knowledge will include the quite extraordinary human knowledge that Socrates connects with virtue – an understanding of one's own epistemic limitations. It will also be the foundation for Socrates' practice of questioning people and exhorting them to virtue.[10]

I must emphasise before going on that these are technical terms; they do not have their ordinary English meanings, and the meanings they have here are special to the early dialogues. Expert knowledge is the sort of knowledge that a specialised professional ought to have, such that we would be right to trust him or her to make decisions on our behalf. Doctors, generals, sea-pilots and teachers should have expert knowledge. Non-expert knowledge is

10 Socrates calls this practice a *political technē*, without meaning to claim for it any special epistemic status: at *Gorgias* 521d he claims to practise the true political *technē*, on the grounds that his sights are set not on what is most pleasant but on what is best (cf. *Apology* 30a, 36de). This is not expert knowledge, because it does not satisfy the conditions of teachability and specialisation, and so the knowledge on which it is based must be non-expert. But Socrates' *practice* of the elenchus remains a *technē* in this special Socratic sense.

the sort of knowledge you can have without being an expert. Socrates uses his concept of expert knowledge often in his contests with alleged experts, so that we can confidently sketch a detailed account of a Socratic view on this matter. But the concept of non-expert knowledge is obscure. We know that he uses such a concept, since he says he knows certain things, without implying that he is an expert; but because he does not depend on the concept in argument, we have little basis for assigning him a definite view about it.

Still, it helps to see that the two concepts of knowledge play different roles in Socratic argument. Expert knowledge is something for which there are criteria that an expert must satisfy. Socrates uses arguments – a form of elenchus – that test people's claims to expert knowledge against these criteria. Non-expert knowledge is never at issue in the same way; the elenchus uses it, reveals it, and may in some manner support it. But we must see at the outset that ordinary knowledge does not need the kind of support that is required for expertise.

The concept of expert knowledge is based on criteria that experts must satisfy; but there are no criteria for being a non-expert. This way of making the distinction is not arbitrary. It makes sense to ask the credentials of a presumed expert, but it would be absurd in other cases. An expert has specialised knowledge; she makes decisions on our behalf. Before we trust her to do this we naturally want to know if she is qualified. Hence the need for criteria in this area. Before you trust your life to a doctor – before you accept her as an expert in medicine – it is reasonable to ask where she studied and how many patients she has cured or killed. But if someone tells you he knows what time of day it is, you do not ask to see his diploma (though you may want to know who made his watch).

Socrates never investigates a claim to non-expert knowledge; for him it is never an issue whether a person knows in the ordinary way the things that he believes.[11] Indeed, this has led to confusion among Plato's modern readers, who have been unsure whether Plato in a given context had in mind *knowledge* or *true belief* for assertions he saw no reason to test. (On the distinction, see p. 84.)

Evidence for early Platonic epistemology

Most of Plato's speakers show that they have views about knowledge which they do not state, though none of them directly presents an epistemological theory. These views show themselves in two ways. On the positive side, each time a character says that he knows something, or even

11 A possible exception is *Charmides* 166c7–d4; but that must refer to Socrates' concern not to mistake his ordinary views for *expert* knowledge, if definitions are required only to support a claim to expert knowledge.

acts as though he did, we can ask what sort of view he would have to take about knowledge in order to defend his claim. On the negative side, whenever Socrates disclaims knowledge on his own account, or fails to find grounds for another man's claim to knowledge, then we can ask by what criteria of knowledge the characters are supposed to fall short of their ambitions.

We must be cautious about our results. The dialogues, after all, are works of fiction about a Socrates who assumes different tones with different antagonists, and who may sometimes, but not always, be Plato's spokesman, but who does not always speak even for himself.

Socrates does not have the same attitude towards every theoretical view he uses in the elenchus. Of these, some appear to be his own views, and others are the expressed views of his partners in debate, while still others are supplied by Socrates dialectically as being necessary to support the expressed views of his partners. Socrates' theory of expert knowledge is certainly not the expressed view of any of his interlocutors; none of them proposes it, and scarcely any shows that he understands it. Moreover, Socrates does not adjust his view of expert knowledge to meet the need of each argument; his view is much the same, no matter whose case it is used against. Nevertheless, we would be naive to conclude that this simply is Socrates' analysis of what it is to be an expert. He uses it dialectically, especially when he applies it to moral expertise.[12] It is safer to say Socrates supplies this view of expert knowledge as necessary in his view to support the claims made by his partners.

II

Expert knowledge

To be an expert is to be someone on whom others may reasonably rely in difficult, perilous or highly technical matters. Plato indicates expert knowledge by *technē* and its cognates, and in many contexts also by *sofia* and *epistēmē*.

Socrates has a way of knowing whether or not one is an expert. In the *Apology* he says that he knows he is not an expert (22d1), and that he has demonstrated that poets are not experts (22c9). Socrates' test for expertise is evidently cross-examination, what modern scholars have called the elenchus. Poets and politicians (*Meno* 99d), orators and rhapsodes (*Gorgias* 462b ff. and *Ion*, *passim*), even a pair of experienced generals (*Laches*), all fail this examination in one way or another; and Socrates' confident disavowal of expert knowledge must rest on the same foundation. Socrates must think he has failed his own test, for he refers poignantly to his self-criticism at the

12 See Roochnik [88], 307.

end of the *Hippias Major* (304de: cf. 286cd with 298b11). A natural reading of *Apology* 38a takes it to imply the value of self-criticism, and this practice is shown indirectly in a number of early dialogues that test Socratic views after disposing of his first partner's amateur efforts. For example, in the *Hippias Major* Socrates takes both roles for the greater part of the debate, putting forward definitions with one hand while rejecting them with the other. In the *Laches* he finds his own teaching presented by Nicias, and proves that it does not represent expert knowledge. These passages are controversial, but their combined weight supports attributing a practice of self-criticism to Socrates.

The standards Socrates uses explicitly or implicitly to test for expertise give us a basis for constructing an early Platonic theory of expert knowledge. But a curious double standard runs through the early dialogues, making for a complex theory. There is the ordinary expertise of cobblers and shipwrights, which Socrates uses as a model, and the extraordinary expertise Socrates looks for in a teacher of virtue, a politician or a poet. In the *Apology* he finds no expertise at all in politicians (21c8) and poets (22bc), but allows a sort of expertise to handcraftsmen: they 'know many fine things' (22d2) and each practises his *technē* to good effect (22d6), though this results in a false conceit of *sofia* that obscures the *sofia* they actually have.

Socrates does not say what he is doing, but he appears to be using *technē* in two ways when he applies higher standards to poets and politicians than to men who work with their hands. The crafts to which Socrates readily grants expert status are humble; I shall call them *subordinate technai*, and suppose that Socrates is content to speak with the vulgar in these cases. Socrates applies his own strict theory of *Technē* to other cases, however, to professions that claim higher status. A *Technē* in strict Socratic usage would be adequate, and would not need the guidance of a superior body of knowledge (*Republic* I.342ab). Subordinate *technai* and *Technē* are the two categories of expert knowledge which I shall consider here.[13]

The subordinate technai

Though he normally reserves the word *technē* for the highest sort of expertise, Socrates needs to appeal to ordinary examples of *technai* to build his arguments. Generally, he allows the term for vulgar lines of work that are in no danger of being ennobled by it, as in the *Apology*; and he withholds the term from poets, politicians and the like, who would have considerable authority even without expert status. That is, he allows the term for crafts

13 There is a tradition that divides *technē* also into productive and theoretical *technai*, a division that cuts across the one I make here between subordinate *technai* and an adequate *Technē*. See Roochnik [88], 297.

that are plainly subordinate, and withholds it from those that might masquerade as a Ruling *Technē*.

Socrates is clear that there is a class of *technai* that ought to be subordinate to a ruling *Technē*. Subordinate *technai* are ones you can master without knowing exactly when it is good to apply them, or how their products are best used. A sensible sea-pilot holds his knowledge cheap, because although it tells him how to save lives at sea, it does not tell him which lives it is good to save (*Gorgias* 511c–513c). A sensible general turns his captured city over to statesmen, because he recognises that he does not know how to use what he knew how to capture (*Euthydemus* 290d; cf. 291c). The Ruling *Technē* turns out to be elusive (291b–292e), but this does not vitiate his earlier point that the subordinate *technai* are defective without it.

Standards for subordinate technai

Not surprisingly, the standards for *technai* at this level are as ordinary and as familiar as the doctor's diploma on the examining room wall: you can establish expert status by pointing to your education or your success; and, to be an expert, you must possess a body of knowledge that is teachable, deals with a specialised subject, and covers it completely. Fine as it may be, such a *technē* is specialised and so cannot be adequate in itself; that is why it deserves to be a subordinate *technē*.

Sufficient conditions

(a) Education. Apparently it suffices for an expert to show that he has had good teachers (*Laches* 185b, *Euthyphro* 16a1, *Meno* 90b, *Gorgias* 514a–c). The condition is not necessary (*Laches* 185e7); you might establish expertise by pointing to your pupils as well.

(b) Success. If all else fails, you might still establish expertise by pointing to a body of work well done (*Laches* 185e9 ff.).

Necessary conditions

(c) Teachability. If you are an expert, you can pass your expertise on to others; if you cannot, your success must be due to some other cause. But, presumably, the only way to prove that you can teach is to do it (*Protagoras* 319e ff.: cf. 348e ff., *Meno* 99b).

This is a corollary of the common Greek view that any *technē* is teachable. But Socrates may have held an unconventional view of what it is to teach, and this is part of the difference between Socrates and Protagoras in the dialogue *Protagoras*. Protagoras holds the conventional view that training

people in non-intellectual ways is still teaching them; while Socrates evidently does not.[14]

Intuitively this condition is sound: expert knowledge must be teachable. Nevertheless, the principle becomes awkward on a narrow view of what it is to teach. For this reason, Socrates will introduce a model of non-teachable knowledge in the *Meno*.

(d) Specialisation. If you are an expert, you are a specialist with a well-defined subject or ability. This is the condition that poets, orators and rhapsodes most signally fail, since they speak equally well on anything and to any effect. Such is the argument of the *Ion* (especially 541e) and the *Gorgias* (447c, 448e, 450b, 455b, 456a). *Republic* I treats justice as a *technē* when it asks after its specific function – in what sphere it yields benefits to friends (332c ff.).

This too is a corollary of a commonplace about *technē*: that a *technē* involves specialisation. That is why Plato represents gentlemen of leisure as having no interest in acquiring *technai*, and contrasts education (*paideia*) with technical training (*Protagoras* 312b). Protagoras holds a similar view (317c); and though he treats political virtue on the analogy with *technē* (because it is teachable) he stresses this difference: political virtue is not the province of specialists but of all normal civilised humans (322d, 327d).

This requirement is even more awkward than that of teachability. If *technai* are specialised, then each one has its specific goal, the good of its object, which it pursues to the exclusion of all others: doctoring cures patients, but money-making collects the bills (*Republic* 341d ff., 342c; cf. 346e, 347a). This leads to paradox if each *technē* operates without fault, as Socrates recognises at *Charmides* 174b ff. (cf. *Republic* I 342b3–5). To operate faultlessly, a *technē* would need to know what really promotes the advantage of its object. It would have to ask, for example, whether a mutilated patient is really better off alive or dead; but that would be beyond the scope of specialised doctoring. Socrates recognises that for this reason you will not be able to acquire rhetoric as a *technē* unless you also acquire, as a *technē*, the ability to avoid committing injustice (*Gorgias* 510a; cf. 509e). It follows that no ordinary specialised *technē* is adequate in itself, and that all such *technai* must be subordinate as rhetoric is subordinate: you could not be

14 The difference shows up in the contrast between Socrates' argument that virtue is not taught (319a ff.) and Protagoras' reply that it is taught, like language, by all to all (327e ff.). It is obvious again in the discussion of courage at 351a ff., where Protagorean teaching includes the nurture (*eutrofia*) of the soul, and Socrates takes the narrower view that teaching is imparting a *technē*, and leads to professional confidence.

technikos in rhetoric without being *technikos* in justice. But this undermines the principle of specialisation.

Again, within the confines of a given *technē* there is no way of marking off good uses of the relevant skill from bad ones (*Hippias Minor* 367e, 375bc and *passim*). If *technai* (or *epistēmai*, treated as *technai*) are specialised, then no *technē* can judge either its own work or the work of another, as Socrates infers at *Charmides* 165e–166a: cf. 171c, 172d. The principle will make it impossible to find in this category a *technē* that judges other *technai*. The same principle, which confines each *technē* to its specific subject-matter, will not allow one *technē* to be subordinate to another, and so undermines the concept with which we began. A *technē* of life-saving saves lives, but does not know whether it is good to do so; but an equally specialised Ruling *Technē*, if it knew this, would be interfering in a subject it is supposed to know nothing about – life-saving.

These paradoxes about subordinate *technai* are symptoms of deep confusions in the ordinary conception of *technē*; to Socrates they probably indicate that subordinate *technai* are not *technai* in the true sense. In his strict theory, the vulgar idea that there are *multiple* specialised *technai* must wither away. The only way Plato could save the notion of a *technē* that is adequate in itself, without violating the principle of specialisation, would be to suppose that there is but one true *Technē*. The principle of specialisation is not dispensable; Socrates' larger project depends upon it – the guarding of Athens against deception by the opinions of experts off their own ground (*Apology* 22e). If you are an expert on poetry, as Ion would be if he were expert on anything, then I would be a fool to rely on you for moral knowledge; if you are an expert on grammar, I should not be a slave to your view of international politics. The price of preserving the principle of specialisation is high, but it is worth paying.

(e) Completeness. A *technē* is complete in that it covers the entire range of its specific subject. Socrates' theory of *technai* rides on an implicit theory about the integrity of each body of knowledge. Just how this theory works in general is never clear, though the specific examples are intuitively satisfactory. The assumption of the integrity of each body of knowledge shows up in the *Laches* at a crucial point, where it will not allow Nicias and Socrates to claim that knowing future goods and knowing all goods are different things (198d1–199a8). The principle is used as a test for *technē* most notably in the *Ion*, where Ion claims to be an expert in Homer only, and not in poetry as a whole. There Socrates concludes that Ion's ability to talk about Homer is not due to expertise; if it were, Ion could talk equally well of other poets (532c). To claim expertise is to claim knowledge of a body of material.

The adequacy of technē

Technai on the strict theory must satisfy all the conditions for the subordinate *technai* plus the necessary condition that it should be adequate in itself. The defect of the subordinate *technai* is that they were too specialised to know how to put their skills to good use, and so would have to be subordinate to a *technē* that did specialize in the relevant good. But any true *technē*, it now appears, must aim at the good, and must therefore know what this is. In some cases Socrates expects the expert to give a Socratic definition in order to demonstrate his ability to say precisely what good it is that he brings about (at *Laches* 190b, but not at *Gorgias* 449d ff., *Protagoras* 318a ff.).

Technē aims at the good as an end, and is consciously part of a teleological ordering. This principle, which no doubt came to Aristotle from Plato (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.1), puts Plato's epistemology firmly in the service of his values; a value-free *technē* would not be worthy of the name.

Of course, the principle is not true of the *subordinate technai*, from which most of his examples are drawn; nor is it true of *technē* as it is usually understood. Hence at *Protagoras* 356d, where Socrates is using *technē* as he supposes Protagoras would use it, he does not subordinate the measuring *technē* to independent knowledge of the good. Where Socrates does mention the principle, it often leads to paradox (*Charmides* 174b ff., *Republic* I.342b, *Gorgias* 510a), and this may be a further reason for Plato's not giving it full play until he is ready to give the vulgar examples subordinate status in the *Gorgias*.

Texts implying that *Technē* aims at the good occur before the *Gorgias*, however. Some of these concern the corollary that an expert knows what are the goals of his profession, not merely the means of achieving those goals. At *Laches* 185cd Socrates makes a related point for medicine of the eyes: the expert takes thought not about the medicine but about the eye; he is an expert in the care of eyes. At *Euthyphro* 14e, on similar grounds, Socrates claims it is not *technikos* to give the gods what they do not need. An expert in piety, on this view, would know what the gods need, but this would require him to know also what is good for them. In the *Gorgias* the principle becomes explicit (502d–504a: cf. 506de, 464c; cf. 501b, 500a). It is clearest at 521d, where Socrates claims alone to practise true political *Technē*, because he alone aims not at pleasure but at what is best. It is an implicit consequence of this principle that the same basic knowledge is essential to every *Technē* – knowledge of the good. If this is so, then either the principle of specialisation must be scrapped, or, as I have suggested, any adequate *Technē* in the final analysis will turn out to be essentially the same as expert knowledge of the good.

This is the feature of *Technē* that will be carried most significantly into Plato's middle epistemology (e.g., *Republic* VI.508e).

Definition

If you are an expert, and know the relevant good, then you should be able to say what it is without contradicting yourself – to give a Socratic sort of definition of the good that you produce. This is the rule that will disqualify the most confident self-styled experts. Since this rule guides the disqualifying elenchus of the early dialogues, we must suppose (though we cannot prove) that this is the rule Socrates used in refuting the experts mentioned in the *Apology*, and this the principle that left him in the condition he describes there – 'not expert with their expertise, or wrongheaded with their mistakes' (22e), but recognising that he is truly worthless so far as expertise goes (23b).

The requirement is explicit at *Gorgias* 465a (cf. 500b–501a): if you are an expert, you are able to give a certain sort of *logos* or account. What sort of account Socrates has in mind emerges at *Laches* 190a ff., and generally in the practice of the elenchus: you must be able to give a Socratic definition of whatever it is that your *technē* produces. Socratic definition tells the *ousia* or essence of something like courage, and in doing so explains why anything that partakes of that essence will in fact be courageous; furthermore, any adequate definition of a virtue like courage will explain why the thing that is courage is good and noble in every instance. For our purposes, this is the most important feature of Socratic definition. An expert doctor must know that what he imparts to you under the name 'health' is in fact always healthy and good; similarly, an expert moral teacher must know that what he imparts to you under the name 'courage' is always brave and noble. There is no point in paying a teacher to train you in a quality that is good only in certain circumstances. A quality that looks brave only in conventional hoplite battle is not true courage, for it would fail you in the cavalry or whenever lateral or retrograde troop movements are required (*Laches* 190e ff.). To be an expert is to know that what you produce has the qualities you say it has *in virtue of its essential nature*, and so will continue to have those qualities so long as it survives, whatever the circumstances.

This is the point that marks the difference between Socrates and the epistemologist. A modern epistemologist, in the spirit of Descartes, would ask whether Euthyphro can entertain doubt as to whether it is pious to prosecute his father, and would proceed to look for an unshakeable foundation for this view. But that is not Socrates' question. He asks whether Euthyphro's expertise is so exact that he does not fear lest prosecuting his father turn out to be impious (4e). 'Exact', and not 'certain', is the correct

word for the knowledge Socrates wants: exact knowledge is evidently *unqualified* knowledge. The danger, as we learn fom 8ab, is not that Euthyphro's original judgement would turn out to be incorrect, but that, if correct, it would turn out to be compatible with an opposed judgement. This would happen if his action were pious to one god and impious to another; and then his answer would be true only under a qualification. Euthyphro might fend off even that consequence, and issue a judgement that all the gods would approve; but even then he would still not be an expert, unless his account of piety stated the essence of piety (11ab). Only in that case would there be, not just the fact that the gods agreed, but a guarantee that what Euthyphro called piety would be piety, and never impiety, in any circumstance.

This requirement, which goes beyond anything an epistemologist would require for certainty, is appropriate for expertise. Euthyphro is being tested for knowledge on which others may rely, and this must therefore be not merely true, and not merely certain, but transferable without loss to any number of situations. Socrates is looking for a teacher whose expertise would support the defence of Socrates, whose circumstances are gravely different from Euthyphro's. To look for such an expert in Euthyphro is a joke, of course; but it is not a joke to insist that such an expert should know the essential nature of his subject – what it is in all circumstances.

Here is the main bridge from early Plato's theory of *Technē* to later Plato's theory of Forms: if you have a *Technē*, you know the essential nature of your product; essential natures will turn out in the middle dialogues to be Forms, entities so special that you must be oriented in a special direction in order to know them.

Expert knowledge and the sceptic

A classical sceptic has no theory about knowledge; he borrows his enemy's theory and uses it against him. In effect, he helps the dogmatist see that he does not satisfy his own epistemological standards. An argument that does this is rhetorical and not demonstrative; its aim is not truth but an attitude of detachment from the truth, and its method commits the sceptic to no views whatever.

Socrates cannot play the sceptic's role. The dogmatic characters he confronts have nothing like a theory of knowledge. Socrates supplies the necessary theory, brings them to agree to it, and then shows on that basis that they are not experts.[15] His use of this theory bars us from claiming a consistently sceptical attitude for Socrates.

15 For a detailed discussion of such an elenchus, and an argument that it is indeed intended as demonstrative, see Woodruff [89].

But Socrates is not on the other side either, for his theory has little to do with the central issues of epistemology. It is a theory about what it is to be an expert, not a theory about what it is to know. The theory assumes that we understand what is meant by 'know', and insists that an expert must know a certain kind of thing: if you are an expert you will know the essential nature of your product. Socrates also makes the obvious assumptions that you should be able to say what you know without contradicting yourself. But he gives nothing approaching a definition of knowledge, or a sufficient condition, or even an account of how knowledge is to be acquired.

Infallibility

Two kinds of infallibility must be distinguished: the infallibility of what is known, and the infallibility of the expert who knows it. An infallible expert is one who cannot fail to know; an infallible truth is one that cannot fail to be true in any circumstance. Socrates shows no interest in the infallibility of experts, but enormous interest in the infallibility of what is to be known. Socrates tests would-be experts not to see if they can make mistakes, but to see if there is a circumstance in which what they claim to know fails to be true. When Socrates claims to know that it is wrong to disobey one's superior, he does not mean to arrogate to himself the infallibility of a god; what makes this a matter of knowledge is that, if true, it cannot fail to be true for gods or men, above, below or on the earth, while no claim about Hades can have this feature (*Apology* 29b: cf. *Crito* 51b).

Later Plato will distinguish knowledge from other cognitive attitudes as being (1) *infallible* (*Republic* 447e: cf. *Theaetetus* 152c5 and 166d), and (2) *resistant to persuasion* (*Timaeus* 51e). These may be characterisations Socrates has in mind for the knowledge he disavows.[16] For (1), infallibility, the *Republic* and the early dialogues agree that knowledge knows only the sort of thing that stays true no matter what. A fallible belief could be true or false depending on the circumstances (compare *Hippias Major* 289c5 and *Euthyphro* 8ab with *Republic* 479a ff.). The danger is that your view may be true for the cases you have in mind but for no other cases: Euthyphro could be right about prosecuting his father, and be quite certain that he is right, and still fail condition (1) if doing that sort of thing is not always pious.

As for (2), resistance to persuasion, the early dialogues give the only helpful examples: people who are easily persuaded to drop their views cannot have known those views; while Socrates cites his success at resisting persuasion as evidence that his views were right (*Gorgias* 509a). The example makes it clear that he has in mind the resistance of the belief, not the believer: clinging stubbornly to your views is a bad sign. The beliefs that satisfy condition (2) are the ones that you are left with after a lifetime of the sort of strenuous discussion that threatens to refute your most cherished ideas.

16 Vlastos [86], 18.

Notice that you can satisfy either condition without being an expert. Socrates' knowledge that it is bad to disobey one's superior is infallible in Plato's sense (*Apology* 29b); but this cannot be expert knowledge. Again, Socrates more than anyone satisfies condition (2): after a lifetime of self-scrutiny, and of submission to the scrutiny of others, he could still say, 'It is always the same story with me; I don't know how these things are . . .' (*Gorgias* 509a). This is born out by the *Crito*, where he is shown at the end of his life still open, for a while, to persuasion. There he does not claim the status of the expert he mentioned at 47d, whose judgement would simply carry the day; instead, he asks Crito to try to speak against him (48e1). If, in the end, he is beyond listening to counter-arguments, it is not because he is certain, but because the guiding beliefs of his whole long life are singing to him so loudly at this point that he can listen to nothing else (54d).

Notice also that neither of these conditions is necessary for *certainty*. Certainty, in epistemological discussions, is immunity from doubt and a shield against scepticism. You can satisfy condition (1), in that your attitude is towards an unchanging object, and still be uncertain that you have it right. Again, as we have seen, Socrates could resist persuasion in the elenchus for a lifetime, satisfying condition (2), and still not be certain. But satisfying these conditions makes you *reliable* nonetheless.

Reliability and certainty serve different sorts of interests. Descartes seeks to know in a manner that will satisfy himself as being certain; he himself recognises that the immediate result of his meditation is of no interest to anyone but himself. But Socrates seeks an expert on whom others should rely. Reliability has nothing to do with certainty – with your ability to answer an internal sceptic; but it has everything to do with your knowing something that will be as useful for others as it is for you. I may know how to be truly brave in trench warfare, but that would not qualify me to train soldiers who might fight anywhere. I may know enough to build a particular house, and may even be able to defend my beliefs about my nails and my beams to the fiercest sceptic; but unless I know principles that would apply to any structure in any circumstance I am not fit to give general advice.

III

Non-expert knowledge

In practice, Socrates allows that one can know many things without being an expert. I shall discuss these under one heading, although no

general concept of this sort is treated in the early dialogues. There will be much less to say than there was on expert knowledge. We have no practical interest in testing other people for non-expert knowledge, and neither did Socrates.

There are five overlapping categories of non-expert knowledge to which Socrates is committed, either for himself or for others:

a. *Cases Socrates explicitly distinguishes from expert knowledge.* This category includes whatever Socrates says he knows, when he claims knowledge in a context governed by his disavowal of knowledge (especially *Apology* 21b4–5).
b. *Things Socrates says he knows.* These include (i) the knowledge that he, Socrates, is not an expert (*Apology* 21b2–5, 22d1), (ii) the moral truth that it is bad to disobey one's superior (*Apology* 29b6–7), (iii) certain methodological principles (*Gorgias* 485e5–6). (Some of Socrates' moral and methodological views belong also in category d, as presuppositions of elenchus.)
c. *Things Socrates says other people know.* These fall into two groups, expert and non-expert: (i) ascriptions of expert knowledge to ordinary experts (e.g. *Apology* 22d, *Crito* 47a ff.), (ii) claims as to what other people know (non-expertly). Most of this relates to the paradox that vice is ignorance (*Protagoras* 357d7–e1, *Republic* I.351a5–6 with 350c10–11, *Gorgias* 512b1–2).

   Curiously, the things Socrates says other people know are often views which he holds, but which the others do not consciously share. He must think that the elenchus finds this knowledge in them, when it brings forward surprising consequences of beliefs that they do hold consciously.
d. *Presuppositions of the elenchus, where this is demonstrative.* Socrates uses the elenchus at times to demonstrate certain conclusions. Where this is so, he must think that he knows that his methodological principles and premises are correct. These comprise (i) his theory of expert knowledge (which he uses to demonstrate that others are not experts), (ii) certain views about the subjects under discussion (most prominently Socrates' view that each virtue is good and noble, as at *Laches* 192c and *Charmides* 159c1), and (iii) certain examples and counter-examples, which Socrates treats as known (e.g. *Laches* 191c, the courage of the Spartans at the battle of Plataia).
e. *Results of the elenchus, where this is demonstrative.* These fall into two groups: (i) negative results, when Socrates concludes that none of a series of answers indicates expert knowledge. Socrates treats these conclusions as established in their contexts, and in the *Apology* refers to his negative results as demonstrated (e.g. 22b7), (ii) positive results, which are explicitly claimed only in the *Gorgias* (479e8, 508e6–509a5).

Pragmatic differences between expert and non-expert knowledge

Imagine a sceptic challenging Socrates to explain why he tests claims to expert, but not to non-expert, knowledge. What could Socrates say in reply? An expert is a well-qualified specialist on whom others may safely rely. Socrates can say that it is reasonable for us non-specialists to ask a presumed expert to prove his credentials before we give him our trust. In such a case we need to choose whom to believe, and it makes sense to seek grounds for reasonable choices because there plainly are grounds in ordinary cases: a true expert can point to his accomplishments, or to his pupils, or at least to an established teacher. On the other hand, since we are not invited to trust non-experts, we do not have the same reason to test their credentials; we would be foolish to ask them to have expert credentials anyway. Socrates' reply would be that he is right to treat the two cases differently because the cases are different: experts have credentials and non-experts do not. Moreover, practically, we need to ask experts for credentials, but not non-experts.

Though this may explain why Socrates treats the two cases differently, it would not answer a sceptical challenge: no sceptic would agree that the differences between experts and non-experts are relevant to his question: the credentials that mark experts do not establish knowledge; even the Pyrrhonists followed the dictates of *technai*. Again, although there is no practical need to test non-experts, the sceptical challenge remains: does the non-expert know what he thinks he knows?

Common knowledge

Suppose a sceptic asks Socrates to explain why he may say that he knows certain things when even the best-trained people he questions cannot meet his standards for expert knowledge. If they fail, and if Socrates is no better, on what grounds can he claim to know? Socrates can answer that, unlike the presumed experts, he does not arrogate to himself a special position; he claims no more for himself than he does for everyone else. His knowledge is the common property of ordinary people; anyone knows enough to join in the elenchus. Though it makes sense to ask an expert to establish his credentials, it is absurd to ask an ordinary person to prove that he has ordinary accomplishments.

But this common-knowledge defence is particularly vulnerable to sceptical objections. A sceptic could turn against Socrates an argument like the one Socrates will use against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*: Ordinary

people do not always agree with each other, and they especially disagree with the sort of thing Socrates often says he knows to be the case. But then if Socrates' views are knowledge, the opposed views of the 'ordinary people' are not.

But Socrates would not concede the point that disagreement occurs. In the last analysis, he would say, no one disagrees with him on the matters he thinks he knows. The elenchus derives what people *really* believe from what they initially say they believe, and this method, Socrates believes, resolves apparent disagreement at a deep level.[17] So the sceptical argument from disagreement would fail to get a grip on Socrates, as long as he denied that disagreement occurred. Still the sceptic would be unsatisfied: how does Socrates know which way the deep-level agreement will fall? How can he be sure that he will not find himself agreeing that his opponents are in the right? And even if the right sort of agreement were secured, on what grounds could that be called knowledge?

Knowledge and the elenchus

Socrates has a method, the elenchus, to which he sometimes appeals for proof of his beliefs. Could the elenchus be the ground for Socrates' knowledge? Socrates says that some of what he believes was proved in the elenchus (*Gorgias* 479e, 509a). Vlastos infers that Socrates held all his human knowledge to be elenctically justifiable.

What this means is not clear; 'justifiable' cannot carry its usual sense in epistemology, as Vlastos makes plain. The justification is not epistemic, since it warrants no claims to knowledge. Socrates appeals to these elenctic arguments not as a reason for claiming that his beliefs have the status of knowledge, but simply as a reason for believing them.

Elenctic justification would not explain Socrates' fierce confidence in some of his views (*Apology* 29b, for example). That confidence must have another source. Also, the weak role that elenchus could play in justifying belief does not fit the enormous place that the method has in Socrates' life. Weak or strong, justification holds little charm for Socrates. His cherished elenchus must have other purposes.

Among other things, elenchus guards against the error of taking someone else as an authority on a matter in which no one is more expert than another. On moral questions, it appears, Socrates' audience are all in the

17 As at *Gorgias* 471d, 473a, 475e and 482b. The same principle underlies the ascriptions of knowledge to other people, category c(ii) above. Cf. *Symposium* 202c and Socrates' general practice of imputing to historical figures the views he thinks they ought to have held (e.g. *Theaetetus* 152d, which gives Protagoras a view he would have held if, like Socrates, he thought that no consistent relativist could continue to use the verb 'to be').

same boat. The pretensions of the poets and politicians, the rhapsodes and the sophists – none of them bears Socratic examination. The elenchus leaves its audience near dangerous moral shoals, without a specialist to guide them to shore. Every search for an expert leads to an impasse, leaving the ordinary person to fall back on his own resources.

But the elenchus finds that these resources are not so meagre as they had perhaps seemed. The same argument that unmasked the pretenders disclosed an impressive consensus on its moral premises. We have seen that elenchus discovers beliefs the believer never knew he had, and evidently does the same for knowledge (see above, n. 17). Socrates holds that, in the last analysis, you believe the consequences of whatever views you are left with after the elenchus has done its work. The elenchus thus exposes what you believe in the last analysis, and simply treats this sort of belief, without apology, as non-expert knowledge. The early elenchus is a direct ancestor to the method Socrates will introduce in the *Meno* for recovering knowledge from oblivion. Discovery, not justification, is the positive legacy of the elenchus. In Plato's early theory, special pretensions are to be challenged, but ordinary knowledge is to be found.

Appendix

The transitional theory of knowledge in the Meno

The *Meno* shows Socrates sketching out views of knowledge that go beyond anything presupposed in Plato's earlier works.[18] New in the *Meno* are the theory that what we call learning is really recollection, and a distinction between knowledge and true belief. A consequence of these developments is that the *technē*-model for knowledge is abandoned, for here Socrates considers a sort of knowledge that is always present in the knower, and so never taught.

The first stage of the dialogue follows a familiar pattern. Socrates demonstrates that Meno, for all his studies with Gorgias, cannot adequately say what virtue is, and the discussion ends in a stalemate. Meno is stymied and Socrates is no better off: he disclaims knowledge of virtue (80d1: cf. 71b3). The discussion does not end here, however, for Socrates offers to continue the enquiry, and Meno counters with a methodological question (80d5–8), the same question, in fact, that has perplexed our study of the earlier dialogues: how, in view of Socrates' disclaimer of knowledge, can he proceed in his enquiry? Now, for the first time, Socrates considers questions as to how knowledge is to be acquired.

18 The interpretation of these matters is controversial. For a fine recent study, see Nehamas [131].

The eristic paradox

After disclaiming knowledge of virtue, Socrates proposes to enquire, along with Meno, what virtue is. Now Meno worries how enquiry can proceed without knowledge: 'In what way will you seek to know something that you do not know at all? What sort of thing, among those things you do not know, will you propose to seek? Or if you really find it, how will you know that this is the thing you did not know before?' (80d). Socrates thinks Meno has in mind the eristic paradox: 'that it is not possible for a human being to seek to know either what he knows or what he does not know; for he would not seek what he knows – for he knows it already, and has no need to seek it – nor would he seek what he does not know – for he does not know what he will seek' (80e).

Recollection

Socrates answers by proposing that what we call learning is actually the recollection of lessons learned before birth (81de). He plainly thinks this solves the paradox (81d5: cf. 86bc), though he does not say how he thinks it does so. Evidently he supposes that when he seeks to know what virtue is, he is seeking something that falls neither into the class of the simply known nor into the class of the simply unknown, but into a third class, that of lessons once learned but now forgotten. Apparently, memory can guide a search for items in this third class. The theory of recollection reappears at *Phaedo* 72e ff. and *Phaedrus* 249c, in connection with metaphysical and psychological ideas of Plato's middle period; but it is never more than a sketch of a theory.

Socrates' attitude towards the theory in the *Meno* is puzzling. On the one hand, he says that he believes it to be true (81e1); on the other, he declines to affirm the theory with any strength (86b7). The most he will fight for is his view that we are better off not submitting to the eristic paradox (86c: cf. 81de). His attitude towards the theory of recollection illustrates a general view on which much of the argument of the *Meno* depends: Socrates evidently holds that we have beliefs on which we may rely for the guidance of our enquiries, but which cannot be securely affirmed (cf. 85c6–7).

This must fill out his unstated solution to the eristic paradox. The paradox (like Meno's worry) presupposed that any enquiry must be guided by knowledge of what the enquiry is about; but Socrates implicitly denies this. Enquiry, he must think, can be guided by beliefs that are not yet known to be true.[19]

It is a consequence of the theory of recollection that what we call learning

19 True beliefs are awakened in the course of enquiry only one step ahead of knowledge. It is therefore hard to see how *these* beliefs could guide the first stage of the enquiry (Nehamas [131], 23). But even the negative elenchus is, as

does not come by teaching; on this point Socrates is emphatic (82a1, 82e4, 84d1). Instead of teaching Meno that his theory is true, he illustrates the theory through an exercise with a slave boy, and presumably leaves it to Meno to recollect what truth there is in the theory. Instead of teaching the slave boy, Socrates questions him, and so brings the boy to learn a truth of geometry. Socrates points out that all of the boy's answers expressed beliefs that were his own (85bc). Socrates then infers first that those beliefs were always in the boy, and then that they were not implanted by teaching.

I will not stay here to evaluate this chain of inferences. The outline of Socrates' theory is clear enough. It entails (a) that a person may have true beliefs of which he is not aware (85c9: cf. the passages cited in n. 17 above), and (b) that, after becoming aware of such beliefs and being questioned about them, a person may come to know in the full sense the subject of those beliefs (85d1). From this follows the important but unstated conclusion that one may learn and know things that one was never taught.

Readers may think that Socrates has indeed taught the slave boy, and done it so well that he never had to ask the boy to accept a belief that the boy had not already reached by himself. But this would be to miss the point that this theory in the *Meno* marks Socrates' abandonment of the *technē* model for knowledge. For on that model, a person can learn and know only what he has been taught. Socrates may have been one kind of teacher to the slave boy, but he was not the kind of teacher who passes a *technē* by precept and example to a pupil. The concept of knowledge that Socrates treats in the *Meno* is something new: its standards are as high as the standards for a *technē* in the earlier dialogues; but it is not a *technē*, and it is not teachable as a *technē* is teachable.

In the *Protagoras* Socrates argued that virtue is not teachable by any method he accepts as teaching (319b ff.), and the same point is made later here (*Meno* 94e2, 96c10). But in the theory of recollection, the *Meno* has implicitly developed a concept of knowledge such that virtue could be knowledge and still not teachable. This new concept has developed out of Socrates' earlier theory of unteachable non-expert knowledge. It is a break from his theory of teachable expert knowledge.

To be sure, the *Meno* is not consistent on this point. The thesis that there can be knowledge without teaching, virtually explicit in 85c, is resisted in the balance of the dialogue. Socrates infers that what is not teachable is not knowledge (99ab) on the basis of a hypothesis repeated at 87c and 89d. These passages represent the pre-*Meno* theory of knowledge as *technē*. Why

we have seen, guided by Socratic beliefs about the criteria of knowledge. So the early stage of the enquiry must be guided either unconsciously by beliefs not yet awakened or (more likely) consciously by beliefs awakened in the course of a different enquiry.

Socrates retreats to his earlier view after 86c is a serious puzzle about the construction of the *Meno*. We shall encounter a parallel difficulty about true belief.

True and right belief

The distinction between knowledge and true belief in the *Meno* is emphatic at 85c7; Socrates distinguishes with equal force between knowledge and right belief (*orthē doxa*) at 98b, where Socrates says that he knows this distinction if he knows anything. But Socrates does not clearly specify the standards for knowledge as opposed to true belief, nor does he say clearly how far true belief is reliable without knowledge.

The following considerations bear on *criteria* for knowledge as opposed to true or right belief:

(1) Origins. The *Meno* is not consistent as to whether true belief and knowledge have different origins. In the recollection-passage, true belief is considered on a par with knowledge: it is present from birth and brought to light through questioning (85c). But in the last part of the dialogue, right belief is said to be acquired (98d); it is differentiated from knowledge as something not acquired by teaching (99bc); and it is therefore equivalent to a sort of inspiration, given to individuals by the gods (99cd: cf. *Ion* 533d ff., *Apology* 22c). Again, as for the teachability of knowledge, the recollection-passage takes Socrates beyond the theory of the earlier dialogues, while the later passages do not. True belief and right belief may represent two different theories awkwardly married in the *Meno* at 97e–98a.

(2) Definition. It is necessary to know what virtue is in order to know whether it can be taught (71a, 86d), though enquiry on this topic can proceed by hypothesis (86e).

(3) Refutability. True beliefs are said to become knowledge when they have been awakened by questioning (86a7) or tethered by an explanatory account (98a3), but these metaphors are not clearly explained. A likely hypothesis is that a tethered belief is one that cannot be refuted. Socrates likens beliefs to the wandering statues of Daedalus (97de, 98a1); he had used a similar image at *Euthyphro* 11cd, where a wandering belief is evidently one that can be refuted. We may infer that knowledge, unlike true belief, cannot be refuted.

(4) Reliability. Insofar as it is right or true, Socrates insists that a right or true belief is no less useful than knowledge (97c, 98c; but see *Republic* VI.506c7). This does not entail that true belief is reliable; indeed, Socrates implies that it is not (98a1). The tone of the last pages of the *Meno* is ironical and derogatory of inspired true belief, which, as in the *Ion*, has little in common with knowledge. In the recollection passage, on the other hand, true belief plays an entirely positive role in the recovery of knowledge.

5

Knowledge and belief in *Republic* V–VII

GAIL FINE

The *Meno* tells us that knowledge is true belief bound by an *aitias logismos*, an explanatory account (98a); the *Phaedo* tells us that all *aitiai* refer to Forms (96 ff.). It follows that knowledge of Forms is necessary for any knowledge at all. But although the *Meno* explains what knowledge is, it does not connect this account to Forms; and although the *Phaedo* tells us quite a lot about the metaphysics of Forms, it does not tell us much about their epistemological role. We must wait until the middle books of the *Republic* (V–VII) for the details of how Forms figure in knowledge. Here there are two crucial stretches of text: first, a difficult argument at the end of *Republic* V; and, second, the famous images of the Sun, Line and Cave in Books VI and VII. Both passages are often thought to show that Plato subscribes to the Two Worlds Theory (TW), according to which there is no knowledge of sensibles, but only of Forms,[1] and no belief about Forms but only about sensibles.[2]

If Plato is committed to TW, there are, arguably, some consequences of note. First, the objects of knowledge and belief are then disjoint; one cannot move from belief to knowledge about some single thing. I cannot first believe that the sun is shining, and then come to know that it is. Second, Plato then radically rejects the *Meno*'s account of knowledge, according to which true beliefs become knowledge when they are adequately bound to an explana-

1 A detailed account of what Forms are is not possible here. But, briefly, I take Forms to be non-sensible properties, properties not definable in observational or perceptual terms – the property, e.g., of beauty, as opposed both to particular beautiful objects (such as the Parthenon) and to observable properties of beauty (such as circular shape or bright colour). For some discussion, see my [115] and [116].

2 It is sometimes thought to follow from TW that Plato restricts knowledge to necessary truths; for, it is thought, all truths about Forms are necessary truths. See, e.g., Vlastos [86], 16. If, as I shall argue, Plato allows knowledge of sensibles, then (on the reasonable assumption that some of the knowable truths about them are contingent) he does not restrict knowledge to necessary truths.