

SPECIAL SECTION ON ANCIENT EDUCATION*



PLATO'S CONCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE

ABSTRACT: *Plato's epistemology is closely related to his metaphysics and ethics. The basic reason for this is that Plato thinks that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)—in at least one of the senses in which he uses this word—requires explanation. Fully adequate explanation must refer to what is metaphysically primary. The Form of the Good is metaphysically primary. Hence, fully adequate explanation must be teleological. This paper endeavors to clarify these fundamental points through an examination of Plato's treatment of knowledge in three dialogues: Meno, Theaetetus, and Republic.*

I. Introduction

Plato's epistemology is closely related to his metaphysics and ethics. The basic reason for this is that Plato thinks that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)—in at least one of the senses in which he uses this word—requires explanation. Fully adequate explanation must refer to what is metaphysically primary. The Form of the Good is metaphysically primary. Hence, fully adequate explanation must be teleological. This paper endeavors to clarify these fundamental points.¹

* *EDITOR'S NOTE:* The four papers collected in this issue were originally delivered at the New York Classical Club's (NYCC) winter conference on "Education in Antiquity" held on February 6, 2010, at Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus. I am very grateful to Professor Matthew M. McGowan (Fordham University), President of the NYCC, who organized the meeting, collected the papers, and worked with the authors and editor to ready them for publication in *CW*. —*M.S.S.*

¹ A note on the composition and intention of this piece. As a specialist in ancient philosophy and particularly in Plato, invited to present at a conference on education in antiquity, I thought to speak on Plato's conception of education. Since the goal of Platonic education is knowledge—not an uncommon, although not a necessary goal of education—I then thought to speak on Plato's conception of knowledge; hence the title of this paper. Given that the conference audience was to consist of classicists, I thought, furthermore, that any sort of specialized and narrow treatment of the subject would be inappropriate. Consequently, what follows is a "big picture" or synthetic account of Plato's conception of knowledge. Such an approach to an ancient philosophical subject does not lend itself well to the sort of evidence-buttressing and debate-orienting that narrower treatments do. I am well aware that every section and even paragraph could be expanded into its own article-length treatment with numerous footnotes. Although I do little here to situate the large claims I advance within the context of the persistent debates among the secondary literature, I would like to register a particular debt to Gail Fine, whose work in Plato's epistemology and metaphysics has been a significant source of insight, provocation, and inspiration—even while I do not always and perhaps do not usually agree with her conclusions. What I call the "basic interpretive problem," around which I orient this discussion, is central to her chapter "Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII," in S. Everson, ed., *Epistemology* (Cambridge 1990) 85–115. That said, a synthetic treatment aimed at an audience of nonspecialists has significant advantages as well defects. A bird's-eye view is necessary if we are not to get lost in the forest of interpretation. Moreover, one notices relations and connections from on high that one cannot see from the ground. In the process of trying to write this piece, I have learned about Plato's epistemology myself. I hope, then, that the results will be enlightening to specialists as well as nonspecialists. Finally, I would like to thank Matthew McGowan for inviting me to participate in the conference and for accepting this more philosophical than philological contribution to the collection.

Various dialogues variously engage the question “What is knowledge?” Some do so directly, some obliquely. Some present sustained examinations; some discuss the question briefly. Some offer positive results; some end in aporia. The following sections principally focus on Plato’s treatments of knowledge in three dialogues: *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, and *Republic*. In each case, Plato has Socrates develop some distinction between knowledge and belief ($\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$). The treatments in *Meno* and *Theaetetus* are closely related. I discuss their relations and suggest how the discussion in *Theaetetus* supersedes the discussion in *Meno* in certain respects, even while the *Theaetetus* discussion ends in aporia. Discussions in *Republic*, in particular in *Republic* 5, but also *Republic* 6 and 7, appear to stand in sharp contrast to the *Meno* and *Theaetetus* treatments. In *Meno* and *Theaetetus*, knowledge is explained as a kind of belief, namely, true belief with some additional component. In *Republic* 5, 6, and 7 knowledge and belief appear to be treated as exclusive. I will refer to the disparity between the treatments of knowledge in *Meno* and *Theaetetus*, on the one hand, and in *Republic* 5, 6, and 7, on the other hand, as *the basic interpretive problem*. The question is whether the basic interpretive problem can be resolved by showing that the treatments of knowledge in *Meno* and *Theaetetus* can be squared with those in *Republic*.

In addressing the basic interpretive problem, it must be considered whether Plato operates with a single conception of knowledge. In particular, in some contexts Plato seems to have propositional knowledge in mind, that is, knowledge of a single proposition, for example, knowledge that the area of a square S whose side is equal to the hypotenuse of a square T is double the area of T . In other contexts, he seems to have in mind knowledge as a field or body of information. For example, in *Charmides*, when Socrates’ interlocutor Critias claims that sound-mindedness is knowledge, Socrates inquires into this knowledge as though it were analogous to geometry or medicine or architecture. More generally, throughout the dialogues widely regarded as early Socrates tends to pursue an understanding of the knowledge that constitutes human goodness by analogy with specialized bodies of knowledge such as medicine, architecture, and geometry. Finally, in some contexts, it is unclear whether Plato’s treatment of knowledge corresponds with any familiar sense of “knowledge” we have. Arguably, Plato then uses the word “knowledge” as a term of art or in an idiosyncratic way.

II. *Meno*

According to what is known as *The Standard Analysis* in contemporary epistemology, propositional knowledge is standardly analyzed as a kind of justified true belief. If one knows some proposition p , then: one believes that p ; p is true, and one has some sort of justification for p . For example, I know that the rumbling sound outside my office window is due to a construction worker using a jackhammer to break up the concrete walkway that leads to my building. I know this because I believe it; it is true; and I have justification for my belief. My justification is that I saw the construction worker

jackhammering the walkway when I arrived this morning and heard the loud rumbling coming from his work.

Plato is often taken to have apprehended this idea or something akin to it, for in *Meno* Socrates distinguishes knowledge from true belief. He claims that knowledge is true belief with "a reasoning of the αἰτία."² It is questionable, however, whether justification and a reasoning of the αἰτία are equivalent. Αἰτία is often translated as "cause." This, however, is unsatisfactory. Strictly speaking, a cause is but one kind of αἰτία. An αἰτία is an entity that is responsible for another entity's being as it is; it may be responsible in any number of ways: materially, logically, causally, teleologically. Consider the following questions: Why does water at sea level boil at 100 degrees? Why does a triangle have 180 degrees? Why is the thermometer reading minus 50 degrees? And why is there cause for concern that my temperature is now 94 degrees? Accordingly, a reasoning of the αἰτία, or what I will call "aetiological reasoning," answers the vague question: "Why is such-and-such the case?" This appears to be a request for an explanation. An explanation of some proposition clarifies or illuminates that proposition in some way. In contrast, justification provides reason to believe a proposition. Justification needn't provide explanation. For example, the fact that some proposition *p* been expressed by a divine oracle provides justification for believing that *p*, but it doesn't explain *p*.

Further reason to think that Plato understood the request for an αἰτία to be a request for an explanation derives from Socrates' discussion of aetiology in *Phaedo* (96a5–107a1). There Socrates describes his early intellectual pursuits in natural philosophy: "I thought it was an extraordinary thing to know the αἰτία of each thing: why it comes to be, why it perishes, and why it exists."³ Socrates focuses on the αἰτία of nourishment and growth, cognition and perception. He wonders whether heat and cold are responsible for nourishment and growth and whether the brain is the bodily organ responsible for perception.⁴

Understanding entails explanation. That is, when one understands some proposition, one can explain that proposition. Merely knowing something does not entail explanation. Consider an example of a divine oracle drawn from Plato's *Apology*. The Delphic Oracle reported that Socrates was the wisest of the Greeks. Assuming the Oracle tells the truth, its pronouncement provides Socrates with knowledge, for the oracle provides him with justification for believing that he is the

² *Meno* 98a3–4.

³ *Phd.* 96a7–9.

⁴ Note that, as in the present case, the αἰτίαι Socrates tends to cite in his discussions are objects rather than propositions, states of affairs, or events. But insofar as αἰτίαι are explanatory, they must figure in propositions. Thus, when Socrates makes claims of the form "x is the αἰτία of y," this must be taken to be elliptical. For example, in the case of heat and cold, Socrates' question may be put less elliptically as follows: Are heat and cold decomposing and reconstituting foodstuffs responsible for the nourishment and growth that occur in animals? In that case, we might more precisely refer to heat and cold and the like as explanatory or aetiological factors.

wisest of the Greeks. On the other hand, Socrates can't understand the oracle. On the contrary, he is initially completely baffled by the claim, for he doesn't take himself to be wise at all.

Since aetiological reasoning is explanatory, arguably Plato's conception of knowledge should be construed as understanding rather than as propositional knowledge. On the other hand, the capacity to explain something may provide justification for believing the relevant content. Support for this suggestion derives from consideration of the way Socrates introduces the distinction between knowledge and true belief in *Meno*. Socrates claims that true belief is a fine possession so long as it abides, but that it tends to be unstable until it is bound with aetiological reasoning. He then claims that aetiological reasoning is recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*).⁵

In identifying aetiological reasoning with recollection, Socrates is referring to an earlier discussion in the dialogue, which was prompted by his thesis that all learning is recollection.⁶ According to this thesis, prior to incarnation the soul acquired knowledge of a range of contents (not clearly specified in this or any other dialogue in which the theory of recollection is discussed). After the acquisition of this knowledge and prior to, or precisely at, the moment of incarnation, these contents were lost to consciousness and became latent in the soul. Learning is a process of recovering and thus recollecting the latent contents. Recollection is an important epistemological theory in its own right. It is also a highly controversial theory. Indeed, I find it hard to avoid the verdict that the theory incurs much heavier epistemological burdens than those it is introduced to solve. I will not attempt here to justify or even to explain Plato's position. I have introduced the theory simply because Socrates' demonstration of learning as recollection provides us an example of aetiological reasoning.

Socrates offers Meno a demonstration of learning as recollection using Meno's slave. Socrates presents a geometrical problem to the slave, who begins the conversation ignorant of geometry. The problem is to construct a square *S* double the area of a square *T* with side 2. The slave first pursues two false avenues: the construction of a square with side 4 and the construction of a square with side 3. Finally, the slave arrives at the correct conclusion that the side of *S* must equal the hypotenuse of *T*. Socrates does not claim that the slave has now acquired knowledge; rather, he says that the slave is well on his way. In other words, the slave has true belief, but as yet an inadequate grasp of why his conclusion is true. So the example demonstrates recollection in progress rather than fully achieved.

Throughout the conversation, Socrates guides the slave by asking him what appear to be leading questions. Indeed, one might object that the slave could not have achieved the correct answer without Socrates' help; and since presumably Socrates begins with explicit knowledge of the correct solution, the slave is in fact acquiring

⁵ *Meno* 98a4.

⁶ *Meno* 82b9–86b5.

explicit knowledge not from himself, but from Socrates. But Socrates insists that throughout the exchange all the slave's answers have been "his own (ἐαυτοῦ)."⁷ By this Socrates means that the slave has not simply been obediently and blindly led by Socrates, but has been thinking through the implications of each question and responding on the basis of his considered judgment. In fact, Socrates allows the slave to pursue the two false avenues precisely to ensure that the slave think for himself and not assume that Socrates will lead him to the answer. Throughout the exchange, then, the slave increasingly gains insight into the logical relations between various geometrical objects relevant to the solution to the problem. In short, he increasingly comes to see for himself how the geometrical figures and their components are related and thus why the side of *S* must equal the hypotenuse of *T*.

In short, aetiological reasoning here consists of the reasons that both clarify and corroborate the slave's thesis that the side of *S* equals the hypotenuse of *T*. This suggests that knowledge requires comprehension of why the content that is truly believed is true. But, at least in this case, such comprehension also justifies one's belief in the truth of the content. As I said, the reasons both clarify and corroborate the slave's thesis. Thus, although explanation and justification need not overlap, they can. Here, the kind of justification that explanation affords is what contemporary epistemologists call "internalist." By "internalist justification" is meant that the justification is directly available to the subject. Thus, knowledge as true belief with aetiological reasoning may be a kind of propositional knowledge after all. We may call this kind of propositional knowledge "explanatory knowledge." In contrast to mere propositional knowledge, explanatory knowledge entails understanding and thus explanation.

III. *Theaetetus*

In *Theaetetus* Socrates also distinguishes knowledge from true belief. But the dialogue contains no theory of recollection, and Socrates does not speak of aetiological reasoning. Instead, Socrates examines the thesis that knowledge is true belief with an "account (λόγος)."⁸ I assume that true belief with aetiological reasoning is equivalent to true belief with an account. As we will see, however, the kind of account Socrates actually examines in *Theaetetus* is but one kind of aetiological reasoning. More precisely, Socrates examines and criticizes two serious candidates for the form of account that knowledge requires: decompositional (201d8–206c6 and 206e6–208c3) and differential (208c4–210b3).

A decompositional account characterizes some entity *x* in terms of *x*'s elements. Socrates illustrates this form of an account with the letters constituting a word. The elementary constituents of the name "Theaetetus" are the letters "t", "h," "e," and so on. Thus, an ac-

⁷ *Meno* 85c1.

⁸ *Tht.* 201c8–d1.

count of the name "Theaetetus" requires an enumeration of the letters constituting the name. In other words, a decompositional account is a reductionistic account of some kind. In contrast, a differential account characterizes x as distinct from everything else. That is, a differential account is a sort of uniquely specifying description. Socrates illustrates this conception with an example that assumes a geocentric conception of the universe: the sun is the brightest celestial body moving around the earth.

Granted this, how are such accounts supposed to supplement true beliefs to yield knowledge? The most salient kind of belief featured in the course of the discussion in *Theaetetus* is recognitional or identificational. By a "recognitional or identificational belief" is meant a belief that identifies some object as such-and-such, for example, the belief that that man is Chrysippus or that that celestial body is the moon. Assume that the beliefs in question here are of this kind; for example, "this is Theaetetus' name," said or believed of some inscription, and "that is the sun," said or believed of some celestial object. Accordingly, in order to have knowledge that something is x , one must have an account of x . For convenience, let us call this an "identificational account." Assume that an identificational account is a form of aetiological reasoning. In that case, *Theaetetus'* examination of an identificational account can be seen to supersede *Meno's* treatment of aetiological reasoning. In *Meno* there is no discussion of the form that aetiological reasoning should take. But in *Theaetetus* Socrates examines the form that identificational accounts, and thus the form that one kind of aetiological reasoning, should take.

The treatment of identificational accounts in *Theaetetus* also seems to supersede the treatment of aetiological reasoning in *Meno* in the following way. In *Meno* Socrates does not consider the epistemological status of the aetiological account itself. That is, he does not consider whether the reasons that support and explain *Meno's* slave's conclusion regarding the doubling of the square are themselves adequately clear or adequately grounded. In contrast, in *Theaetetus* he criticizes decompositional and differential accounts on epistemological grounds.

Socrates rejects the decompositional conception of an account for two reasons. One is that it applies to compounds, but not to elements themselves. If elements cannot be accounted for, they cannot be objects of knowledge. This is taken to be especially paradoxical since according to the thesis under consideration some sort of cognition of elements is fundamental for all knowledge. Let us call this the "problem of elemental knowledge." The second reason is that it seems possible to have true belief that certain elements constitute a compound, but to lack knowledge of those elements as constitutive of the compound. Socrates offers the following example: a child could learn to spell his name, but lack understanding of why it was so spelled. In other words, an individual could have some sort of cognitive grasp that certain elements constitute an entity, but not have, in some intuitively compelling sense, the right sort or an adequate sort of cognitive grasp. For example, the child grasps by rote that

these letters spell his name, but he does not possess more general principles of spelling. So in this case, a decompositional account seems inadequate when conjoined with true belief to yield knowledge.

Socrates offers a differential conception of an account, at least partly, to overcome the problem of elemental knowledge. Again, a differential account explains x , not in terms of x 's constituents, but in contrast to everything else. Thus, whereas in the face of elements decompositional accounts reach an explanatory dead-end, elements may be explicable differentially. But Socrates criticizes a differential account as well. One criticism he makes concerns the epistemological status of the differential account itself. Is one's grasp of the differential account doxastic; that is, is its cognitive status that of belief? Or is it epistemic? If doxastic, then how can this yield knowledge? If epistemic, then the definition of knowledge as true belief with a differential account is circular. It is circular because it claims that knowledge is true belief with a differential account that is known.

The discussion in *Theaetetus* concludes without resolving the epistemological problems of an account, or of what form accounts should take. Indeed, the dialogue's central objective of defining what knowledge is ends in aporia. However, one need not—and my preceding comments indicate that I myself do not—interpret the aporetic conclusion as an indication that Plato relinquished the view that knowledge is true belief with an account, or that the account that knowledge requires is aetiological. Possibly, the aporetic conclusion indicates just that Plato thought himself unable to offer a satisfactory account of the sort of account knowledge itself requires. Alternatively, perhaps Plato thought he did have a satisfactory account to offer, but for pedagogical or other reasons he wished not to offer it. In other words, it is unclear whether the aporetic conclusion of *Theaetetus* is to be explained on epistemological or on some other grounds.

IV. *Republic* 5

At *Republic* 5, 474b4–480a13, Socrates develops a discussion whose objective is to define what a philosopher is. In the course of the discussion, Socrates distinguishes the philosopher from the sight-lover and sound-lover. I will refer to the latter two conjointly as “the perception-lover.” The perception-lover is a sort of aesthete; he runs from dramatic spectacle to dramatic spectacle, loving their sights and sounds. In contrast, the philosopher is, as Socrates says, a lover of truth. The ensuing discussion works to clarify what this means. In the process, Socrates' distinction of the philosopher from the perception-lover develops through a distinction between knowledge and belief. Socrates argues that the philosopher possesses knowledge, whereas the perception-lover merely possesses belief.

Beyond some preliminary moves, the discussion is divisible into two parts: 475e6–476e3 and 474e4–480a13. The first part is directed toward Socrates' interlocutor Glaucon, the second toward a hypothetical perception-lover. This split between audiences is significant because Glaucon himself is a philosopher and so is understood to have certain

conceptual resources on which Socrates can draw in making his case. The perception-lover lacks these resources, so Socrates must persuade the perception-lover in a different way.⁹

In particular, Glaucon grasps the metaphysical distinction between Forms and participants. By “participants” is meant the perceptual entities that participate in Forms. The perception-lover does not grasp this metaphysical distinction. Socrates explains to Glaucon that the perception-lover’s cognitive capacity is limited to the apprehension of perceptual participants. Since perceptual participants are metaphysically dependent on Forms, the perception-lover’s grasp of reality is limited. Socrates describes him as living in a dream state. In particular, Socrates conveys the point in speaking of the distinction between the Form Beauty and perceptual entities that participate in the Form. The perception-lover misidentifies beauty with the numerous and various perceptual participants rather than the single Form in virtue of which the participants are beautiful. So the perception-lover’s conception of beauty is disjoint, not unified:

“What about someone who recognizes beautiful things [that is, beautiful perceptual entities], but does not recognize beauty itself [that is, the Form Beauty] and is unable to follow someone who leads him to knowledge of it. Does it seem to you that he is living in a dream or in a waking state? Consider this. Isn’t the condition of dreaming when someone, whether in fact in a dream or awake, thinks that that which is similar [in this case, some perceptual entity that participates in the Form Beauty] is not similar to something, but is the same as that [the Form Beauty] which it resembles? . . . But someone [namely, the philosopher] who on the contrary thinks that the beautiful itself [the Form Beauty] is something and is able to behold both it and the things that participate in it and does not think that the participants are it or that it is the participants, does it seem to you that this person is dreaming or awake? . . . Then we would rightly say that his mind is the mind of one who knows, since he has knowledge, whereas the mind of the other is the mind of one who believes, since he has belief.”¹⁰

It is puzzling that Socrates identifies the state of mind of the philosopher with knowledge and that of the perception-lover with belief. It is not as if the perception-lover merely believes that beauty is identical to the various perceptual entities, whereas the philosopher knows it. Rather the perception-lover falsely believes that beauty is

⁹ I note that the question why Plato has Socrates pursue the discussion on both of these fronts is itself an important one, but I will not examine it here.

¹⁰ *Resp.* 476c2–d6. Translation is my own.

identical to the perceptual entities, whereas the philosopher knows that it is not. I will propose a solution to this problem below, once I have discussed Socrates' argument with the perception-lover.

Socrates begins his argument with the perception-lover not with a distinction between knowledge and belief, but with a distinction between knowledge and ignorance. We will have to clarify why Socrates begins this way. Presently, Socrates claims that knowledge is set over ($\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$) what is ($\tau\acute{o}$ $\acute{\omicron}\nu$), whereas ignorance is set over what is not. It is questionable what Socrates means by "set over," and it is controversial what he means by "what is" and "what is not."

Let's begin with the phrase "set over." A bit further into the argument, Socrates does introduce belief. He says that knowledge and belief are different powers or capacities. (I will use the terms "power" and "capacity" interchangeably.) In clarifying what he means by a capacity or power ($\delta\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$), Socrates claims that distinct capacities are set over ($\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota$) distinct kinds of thing and that they enable distinct functions with respect to those kinds. For convenience, I will refer to that over which a capacity is set as its *relatum* (plural, *relata*). Socrates illustrates his claims about capacities using examples appropriate to the perception-lover: sight and hearing. The functions of the capacities of sight and hearing are the acts of seeing and hearing. The phrase " $\acute{\epsilon}\phi$ < $\acute{\epsilon}\iota\upsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota$ >" corresponding to the phrase "set over" has the sense of "having power over." Socrates does not explicitly state what the *relata* of sight and hearing are, but it seems reasonable to infer that since the capacity to hear has power with respect to audible properties, but none with respect to visible ones, the *relata* of hearing are audible properties, whereas the *relata* of sight are visible properties.

Correspondingly, Socrates claims that knowledge and belief are distinct powers. Like sight and hearing, they are distinguished by what they are "set over" and by correlatively distinct functions. (Note that Socrates does not speak of ignorance as a power. This makes sense, for ignorance is precisely a lack of power.) Given that knowledge is set over what is, while ignorance is set over what is not, insofar as belief is a distinct capacity, it cannot be set over either what is or what is not. Moreover, insofar as belief is, as Socrates puts it, "clearer" ($\phi\alpha\nu\acute{o}\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\nu$) than ignorance, but more "obscure" ($\sigma\kappa\omicron\tau\omega\delta\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\nu$) than knowledge, belief must be set over what is between what is and what is not. In light of this, we can now clarify why Socrates begins his argument with the perception-lover by drawing a distinction between knowledge and ignorance rather than between knowledge and belief. Socrates intends to clarify the nature of belief and its *relatum* as situated between the extremes of knowledge and ignorance and their *relata*. Socrates conveys as much in the following passage:

"It only remains for us to find that which participates in both what is and what is not and which cannot correctly be called purely one or the other, in order that, if there is such a thing, we can rightly call it

the *relatum* of belief, thereby setting extremes over extremes and intermediates over intermediates.”¹¹

Given this, let’s now attempt to clarify the meaning of the phrases “what is” and “what is between what is and what is not.” Commentators typically distinguish three interpretations of the phrase “what is”: (predicative) what is *f*, where “*f*” stands for some predicate, for example, what is beautiful; (existential) what exists; and (veridical) what is true. The veridical interpretation best conforms to the distinction between knowledge and belief in *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. According to this interpretation, knowledge is set over what is true, while belief is set over what is both true and false. The latter claim is taken to mean that belief can be either true or false. This interpretation is then taken to be consistent with the view that knowledge is a kind of belief, namely a kind of true belief.

But there are problems with the veridical interpretation. One problem is that the phrase “what both is <true> and is not <true>” more naturally suggests something that simultaneously has both truth and falsity. Beliefs, however, are not simultaneously true and false. The phrase “what either is <true> or is not <true>” would be more appropriate. We might try to shrug off this difficulty by claiming that Socrates has merely expressed the point he intends in a somewhat obscure or misleading way. However, while Socrates uses the phrase “what both is and is not” in the course of the argument, he actually prefers the phrase “what is between what is and is not.” Consequently, when he says “what both is and is not,” we ought to understand him to mean “what is between what is and is not.” This way of taking the phrase is, moreover, consistent with Socrates’ claim that belief is clearer than ignorance, but more obscure than knowledge. But granted this, there is no property, specifically no truth-value, that is between truth and falsity such that belief has that truth-value.

One further and decisive reason against the veridical interpretation is that in his argument Socrates explicitly says that what is between what is and what is not is what is no more *f* than the contrary of *f*, for example, what is no more beautiful than ugly. This suggests that the predicative interpretation is correct. More precisely, it supports the view that by “what is” Socrates means “what is wholly or purely *f*.” Recall, in this light, Socrates’ claim above that what is between what is and what is not “cannot correctly be called purely one or the other.”

Now, according to Platonic metaphysics, the Form *F*, where “*F*” stands for a general term, for example, beauty, is purely *f*. In contrast, participants are not purely *f* or the contrary of *f*. For example, the Form Beauty is purely beautiful, whereas some perceptual entity that is beautiful is not purely beautiful. Granted this, however, Socrates cannot in his argument with the perception-lover appeal to the distinction between Forms and participants since, as we have said, the perception-lover does not recognize this metaphysical distinction.

¹¹ *Resp.* 478e1–5.

Instead, Socrates has to persuade the perception-lover that the many perceptual entities the perception-lover regards as beautiful are in fact not purely beautiful:

“Now that these points have been established, I want to address a question to our friend who doesn't acknowledge the beautiful itself or any Form of the beautiful itself that remains always the same in all respects, but who does recognize the many beautiful things. . . . Will the many beautiful things also appear ugly? Will the many just things also appear unjust? Will the many impious things also appear impious?”¹²

The perception-lover immediately admits that the many beautiful perceptual entities also appear ugly; the many just things unjust; and the many pious things impious. It is surprising, to say the least, that the perception-lover admits these claims so readily, for Socrates does not give him any explicit reasons to admit them. This is especially remarkable in view of how crucial this point in the argument is. How are we to explain the fact that Plato composes the argument so that it moves so swiftly here to the perception-lover's admission?

I suspect that Plato does not make Socrates dwell on this move in the argument precisely because it is such a central feature of Socrates' discussions with nonphilosophers in many of the definitional dialogues widely regarded as early, including book 1 of *Republic*, where Socrates pursues the question “What is justice?” For example, Cephalus initially defines justice as returning borrowed items. But Socrates refutes this definition on the grounds that if the lender had lent weapons and subsequently gone insane, it would be unjust to return the borrowed items. Thus, returning borrowed items is not purely just. Again, consider the way in *Hippias Major* Socrates engages Hippias in the question “What is beauty?” When Socrates asks Hippias what beauty is, Hippias initially refers to a specific perceptual entity, a maiden. Socrates responds that a maiden may be beautiful in comparison to a monkey, but ugly in comparison to a goddess. In his second attempt to answer Socrates' question, Hippias cites another kind of perceptual entity. He says that gold is beautiful. Again, Socrates responds that in some contexts gold is not beautiful. For example—my example, not Plato's—in some contexts gold is garish. Apparently then Plato's reason for compressing Socrates' argument with the perception-lover at this crucial point in the *Republic* 5 argument is that Socrates has familiar resources for gaining the perception-lover's admission to the claims that perceptual *f*s are not purely *f*, or no more *f* than the contrary of *f*, or both *f* and the contrary of *f*, as Socrates variously puts the point.

Such discussions from *Hippias Major* and elsewhere suggest that in *Republic* 5 by “being purely *f*” Socrates understands “being *f* in every respect and not being the contrary of *f* in any respect.”

¹² *Resp.* 478e7–479a8.

Indeed, recall once again Socrates' statement from the passage above: "The Form of the beautiful itself . . . remains always the same in all respects." Socrates thinks that no perceptual entity can satisfy this description. Granted this, note that in the context of his argument with the perception-lover, Socrates needn't gain the perception-lover's admission that Forms exist or that it is they, of all entities, that satisfy the description of being purely *f*. All Socrates needs is the perception-lover's admission that the perceptual entities that he thought were *f* are not in fact purely *f*. Given that, Socrates can conclude that belief is set over these perceptual entities; and from this it follows that the perception-lover possesses belief, not knowledge.

Turning away now from the perception-lover—since knowledge is set over what is, since "what is" is what is purely *f*, and since Forms satisfy the condition of being purely *f*, knowledge is set over Forms. Since the philosopher possesses knowledge, the philosopher possesses knowledge of Forms. When at the beginning of the *Republic* 5 discussion Socrates says that the philosopher is a lover of truth, he is using "truth" in an ontological sense. That is, he is using "truth" as synonymous with "reality." The Forms are the truth in the sense that they are the fundamental constituents of reality. They are the immutable grounds and the metaphysical αἰτίαι responsible for everything else being what it is, for everything else is what it is because it participates in the Forms.

The preceding account of the discussion in *Republic* 5 raises many questions. A number of these pertain to the metaphysics of Forms and participants. For example, how is it possible and what does it mean for a Form *F* to be purely *f*? Likewise, the idea that participants are not purely *f* needs clarification and defense. Such questions, however, belong to the sphere of Platonic metaphysics, not epistemology. The basic epistemological question that the *Republic* 5 discussion raises and what I regard as the basic interpretive problem for the examination of the question "What is Plato's conception of knowledge?" is how to understand the distinction between knowledge and belief relative to the distinctions in *Meno* and *Theaetetus* as well as relative to anything that we can reasonably understand to be knowledge and belief. If there is no way of understanding the *Republic* 5 distinction between knowledge and belief in terms of familiar intuitions we have about knowledge and belief, then we must take Plato to be introducing terms of art or simply to be employing the terms in an idiosyncratic way. But if we do reach that conclusion, then we need to provide justification or explanation for why Plato does that.

V. Knowledge as a Capacity and a Field

There is some reason to think that in *Republic* 5 Plato uses the terms "knowledge" and "belief" idiosyncratically or as terms of art. In considering these reasons, I draw on some passages from *Republic* 6 and 7. In *Republic* 6 Socrates introduces his celebrated

image of the Divided Line (509d1–511e5) to illustrate a hierarchy of cognitive states. Socrates divides a line into two segments; each segment represents a distinct kind of object of cognition, perceptual and intellectual respectively. Socrates then labels the segments according to correlative forms of cognition. The perceptual segment is called “belief”; the intellectual segment “knowledge.” Socrates thus appears to use “belief” and “knowledge,” as he did in *Republic 5*, to refer to cognitive capacities with distinct *relata*.

Socrates subsequently divides each segment of the line into two subsegments and associates each of the four resulting subsegments with a distinct cognitive capacity and correlative kind of *relatum*. The perceptual subsegments of belief are called “imagination” (εἰκασία) and “confidence” (πίστις); the intellectual subsegments of knowledge are called “thought” (διάνοια) and “intelligence” (νόησις). The cognitive *relata* of imagination are natural and artificial copies, imitations, or reflections of perceptual originals; those of confidence are the perceptual originals; those of thought are mathematical objects; and those of intelligence are Forms. While the terms “imagination,” “confidence,” “thought,” and “intelligence” are appropriately chosen to the extent that they are applied to forms of cognition of lesser and greater power—as indeed “knowledge” and “belief” were—we needn't think that Plato believes that, say, “imagination” or εἰκασία means “a cognitive capacity whose *relata* are limited to perceptual copies or imitations.” As such, Plato's choice of terms is at least to some extent a convenient referential device. This supports the suggestion that Plato has Socrates use “belief” and “knowledge” in *Republic 5* in a similar way.

In *Republic 7*, Socrates discusses mathematics and distinguishes it from dialectic (διαλεκτική). Dialectic is an intellectual practice whose objective is the acquisition of knowledge of Forms. Thus, dialectic relates to intelligence (νόησις) as distinguished in the Divided Line. In book 7, however, Socrates suggests that it was misleading of him, in the discussion of the Divided Line in book 6, to have identified mathematics with knowledge. Recall that the *relata* of thought (διάνοια), a subsegment of knowledge on the Divided Line, are mathematical objects:

“[These mathematical fields (τέχναι)] we have often, through force of habit, spoken of as kinds of knowledge, but we need another term, brighter than belief, but darker than knowledge. Previously, we defined it as thought. Yet I don't think we should dispute over a word.”¹³

Compare this with Socrates' claim in *Republic 5* that belief is clearer than ignorance, but more obscure than knowledge. Note also Socrates' nonchalant attitude toward terminology. This further supports

¹³ *Resp.* 533d4–e1.

the suggestion that Plato's choice of cognitive terms in the account of the Divided Line is a convenient referential device.

But this is not the whole story—and that is a good thing for Plato. If in *Republic* 5 Socrates were merely using “belief” and “knowledge” in an idiosyncratic way or as terms of art, his success in persuading the perception-lover and Glaucon that the perception-lover merely possessed belief would be a cheat. There is, I suggest, more substance to the use of “knowledge” and “belief” in the argument. To see why and how, recall that in the introduction I mentioned that there are at least two ways the word “knowledge” or ἐπιστήμη can be used. One is propositional. This use corresponds to the accounts of knowledge in *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. More precisely, in these dialogues it corresponds to what I called “explanatory knowledge.” Explanatory knowledge, I said, is a species of propositional knowledge. The other use of “knowledge” is in reference to a field or body of information, for example, medicine or geometry.

Consider now the idea that a field of knowledge may be a capacity for propositional or more specifically explanatory knowledge. Take the example of arithmetic as a field of mathematical knowledge. Arithmetic does not include propositional knowledge of the sums of each and every pair of numbers. For example, the field of arithmetical knowledge does not include the propositional knowledge that $7652 + 1833 = 9485$. Rather, the field of arithmetical knowledge includes other knowledge that enables one to calculate the sum and so to come to have propositional or explanatory knowledge that $7652 + 1833 = 9485$. Likewise, the field of medicine does not include the propositional or explanatory knowledge that, for example, Socrates is presently suffering from leukemia. It includes, however, other knowledge that enables a doctor to come to have that propositional or explanatory knowledge. In short, fields of knowledge are applied to produce certain related, but other, knowledge.

In the passage from *Republic* 7 above, Socrates uses “knowledge” to refer to fields of mathematics. Could Socrates be using “knowledge” in the *Republic* 5 argument to refer to a field of knowledge? And would this yield a more intelligible view of the distinction between knowledge and belief in *Republic* 5? We have already seen that knowledge and belief in *Republic* 5 are treated as powers or capacities. I have said nothing about two correlative uses of “belief,” and so nothing about a use of “belief” analogous to “knowledge” as a field. Let us assume that there is such a use. I will return to this assumption below. Granted then that knowledge and belief are treated as powers or capacities—what are they capacities for? In other words, what are their functions?

In the *Republic* 5 discussion, Socrates explicitly says that knowledge is the capacity for knowing (ἐπίστασθαι), while belief is the capacity for believing (δοξάζειν). This is unfortunately barely illuminating. Consequently, we must venture a hypothesis. I venture that knowledge is a capacity for making epistemic judgments, where an epistemic judgment is a true belief informed by aetiological reasoning,

more precisely by adequate aetiological reasoning. In other words, an epistemic judgment is an instance of explanatory knowledge. In contrast, belief is a capacity for judgments, but judgments that are not epistemic. In other words, belief is a capacity for doxastic judgments, where doxastic judgment, whether true or false, is uninformed by aetiological reasoning or rather uninformed by adequate aetiological reasoning. (Note that I use the phrase "adequate aetiological reasoning" here just because anyone may provide *some sort* of reasoning to explain and justify a claim; I want however to emphasize that only someone with knowledge of the appropriate field can provide adequate aetiological reasoning.) Granted this, for example a doctor, that is, a person with medical knowledge, can make an epistemic judgment that a patient has or does not have leukemia, whereas someone without medical knowledge can merely make a doxastic judgment that a patient has or does not have leukemia.

Now, above I briefly mentioned that Forms are αἰτίαι and specifically αἰτίαι of perceptual entities. What this means, at least in part, is that for some perceptual entity that is *f*—in the limited and qualified sense that perceptual entities can be *f*—that entity is *f* because it participates in the Form *F*. In short, a perceptual entity is *f* because of the Form *F*. This metaphysical claim is epistemologically significant in the following way. Insofar as explanatory knowledge entails aetiological reasoning, judgment that some perceptual entity is *f* may be aetiologicaly informed and thus epistemologically buttressed by a grasp of the Form *F*. In other words, a grasp of the Form *F* can serve to explain why a perceptual entity is *f*.

This metaphysical-cum-epistemological point is significant for our understanding of the distinction between knowledge and belief in *Republic 5* in the following way. In the context of the *Republic 5* argument, knowledge and belief are explicitly distinguished by their *relata*, and the *relata* of knowledge are Forms. So the philosopher will have knowledge of the Forms. For example, the philosopher will have knowledge of the Form Piety or Justice. This knowledge will enable the philosopher to make epistemic judgments about perceptual participants. For example, it will enable the philosopher to epistemically judge that, say, Euthyphro's prosecution of his father is pious or impious or that Cephalus' returning borrowed items on such-and-such an occasion is just or unjust.

Let us grant then that Socrates uses "knowledge" in the *Republic 5* argument in the sense of "a field of knowledge." Evidently, Socrates uses "belief" in an analogous way. That is, Socrates uses "belief" to refer to a body of information that enables the formation of doxastic judgments. Since the *relata* of belief are limited to perceptual participants, the body of information that constitutes belief will in some sense be accordingly cognitively limited. For instance, the way in which belief informs judgment cannot be aetiologicaly adequate. So belief can only produce doxastic judgment. Moreover, doxastic judgment may be true or false; but knowledge will, as Socrates says, be "unerring" (ἀναμάσθητον) and so always produce true judgments.

As far as I am aware, there is no common use of “belief” in English or in ancient Greek that is analogous to the use of “knowledge” as a field of information. Consequently, Plato does appear to be using “belief” in an idiosyncratic way or as a term of art. On the other hand, the fact that there is a common use of “knowledge” as “field of knowledge” provides philosophical justification for Plato’s analogous use of “belief.” In other words, Plato sees that one may possess a body of information, like a field of knowledge, but cognitively weaker, that enables the production of judgments, but not epistemic judgments; and insofar as belief is a weaker cognitive state than knowledge, although a stronger one than ignorance, it is fitting to characterize that field of information as belief.

Finally, according to the solution to the basic interpretive problem I am proposing, epistemic and doxastic judgment in *Republic* 5 are equivalent to knowledge and belief in *Meno* and *Theaetetus*, that is, to explanatory knowledge and to non-epistemic judgment respectively. As such, Socrates is indeed using “knowledge” and “belief” in a distinct way in *Republic* 5. Again, he is using them to refer to capacities for distinct kinds of judgment, rather distinct kinds of judgment themselves. In other words, Plato operates with two conceptions of knowledge, explanatory knowledge and knowledge as a capacity and a field.

VI. Τέχνη, Ethical Knowledge, and Definitions in the Early Dialogues

In *Apology*, Socrates distinguishes the trivial human wisdom (σοφία) he possesses from the divine wisdom he lacks. Socrates understands divine wisdom to be ethical wisdom, that is, knowledge of good and bad. In the early dialogues Socrates also refers to ethical wisdom as a τέχνη or ἐπιστήμη. Τέχνη refers to a field of knowledge, and thus ἐπιστήμη is also used here to refer to a field rather than to explanatory knowledge or, equivalently, epistemic judgment. For convenience, I will render the term τέχνη as “field-knowledge.”

Socrates emphasizes that he and his fellow citizens lack divine wisdom, that is, the field-knowledge of good and bad. Socrates’ trivial human wisdom and superiority to his fellow citizens lie precisely in this recognition.¹⁴ In contrast, Socrates admits that some of his fellow citizens, specifically the craftsmen, possess various other forms of field-knowledge, for example, the knowledge of the fields of medicine and architecture. But Socrates says that when he conversed with these men about ethical matters, it became evident that they falsely believed their nonethical fields of knowledge endowed them with ethical field-knowledge as well. This self-deception suggested to Socrates that his fellow citizens were in worse cognitive shape than he. Thus, Socrates ultimately interpreted the Delphic Oracle’s pronouncement that he had more wisdom than any other man. Consequently, Socrates came to view his philosophical mission as an endeavor to encourage his fellow citizens to recognize

¹⁴ Note that this is one place where “σοφία” is not interchangeable with “τέχνη.”

their lack of divine wisdom and thus to pursue it, in other words to practice φιλοσοφία.

Epistemological concerns in *Apology* and other early dialogues arise, then, specifically with respect to ethical matters. Socrates is not a global skeptic; he does not doubt the existence of, nor does he have an interest in, ordinary nonethical knowledge or cognition. Why epistemological concerns arise in relation to ethics is not much explored within the early dialogues. But this much is clear: Plato regards ethical field-knowledge as supremely valuable. It is understood that living well (εὐδαιμονία) is the goal of human life and that everyone in fact has this goal. Ethical field-knowledge or divine wisdom enables one to live well.

The prominence of nonethical fields of knowledge in the early dialogues is due to the fact that Plato is attempting to introduce and conceptualize ethical field-knowledge and doing so partly by analogy with nonethical fields of knowledge. The reason for this is that the nonethical fields of knowledge are recognized, in their various spheres within the polis, as forms of epistemic authority. But it is questionable to what extent the analogy between ethical and nonethical fields of knowledge holds. One way the analogy does not hold is that ethical field-knowledge is supposed to govern all other forms of field-knowledge. In other words, ethical field-knowledge is supposed to provide the teleological framework for the operation of the nonethical fields of knowledge. For instance, the function of farming is to produce food, but it does not lie in the farmer's ken per se to determine just distribution.

Another way ethical field-knowledge differs from nonethical fields of knowledge concerns the role of definitions in ethical field-knowledge. In *Apology* Socrates says that in order to determine the meaning of Delphi's pronouncement that he has more wisdom than any other man, he engaged his fellow citizens in ethical discussions; however, he does not clarify the nature of these discussions. In most other early dialogues Socrates is portrayed as pursuing ethical knowledge with his fellow citizens or with sophists who have come to Athens to educate his fellow-citizens. Many of these discussions are largely governed by a question of the form "What is *F*?" where "*F*" is some ethical general term and designates some aspect of human excellence (ἀρετή) such as justice, sound-mindedness, or courage. For example, in *Euthyphro* Socrates and Euthyphro pursue the question "What is piety?"

The prominence of the "What is *F*?" question in the early dialogues reflects Plato's commitment to an epistemological principle: the epistemological priority of definitions. According to this principle, knowledge of the definition of *F* is epistemologically prior to content-relevant non-definitional knowledge. For example, in order for Euthyphro to have knowledge that his prosecution of his father is pious, he must have knowledge of the definition of piety. Put in more general terms, in order to have knowledge that some entity *x* is *f*, one must have knowledge of the definition of *F*.

Conceived in light of the results of the preceding sections, non-definitional ethical knowledge here appears to be explanatory knowledge, that is, propositional knowledge with aetiological reasoning, where the aetiological reasoning, in turn, depends upon definitional knowledge. Definitional knowledge either is or at least is fundamentally constitutive of field-knowledge. In light of the results of the preceding sections, I think that this is the view we would expect. But it is also rather explicit in the early dialogues. On the other hand, precisely how definitional knowledge is or fundamentally constitutes field-knowledge is hardly addressed in these texts—or in the middle dialogues, for that matter. Note that in *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, and *Hippias Major*, *F* is explicitly said to be a Form. Accordingly, definitional knowledge of *F* is equivalent to knowledge of the Form *F*. The question then is how knowledge of the Form *F* constitutes field-knowledge. This is a key question for the interpretation of Plato's epistemology and specifically for the question of Plato's conception of knowledge. It is a question that I can only barely address here.

VII. Knowledge and the Form of the Good

Forms are the ultimate aetiological factors, but all Forms are not logically and so not aetiological on par. In a number of late dialogues Plato examines relations of priority, posteriority, and coordination among Forms.¹⁵ In particular, such investigations proceed through the application of a method of division and collection. Understanding some such relations among Forms seems to be what field-knowledge and thus definitional knowledge of a Form requires. In the middle dialogues, Plato is relatively quiet about the logical relations among Forms. His primary interest lies in distinguishing Forms from perceptual participants. Even so, in *Republic* Socrates emphasizes the superordinance of one Form to all others. This is the Form of the Good (hereafter "the Good"). In *Republic* 6 Socrates proposes that all knowledge depends upon and culminates in the Good. When Glaucon presses him for an account of the Good, Socrates balks, claiming to be incapable. Instead, Socrates offers his view of what the Good is like. He does so using two celebrated illustrations, one of which we have already discussed.

The Divided Line serves to explain what the Good is like insofar as the Good is the highest *relatum* or cognitive object of the νόησις subsegment. In his second illustration, the Allegory of the Cave (514a–517c), Socrates proposes that the cognitive states of ordinary citizens are akin to those who pass their lives in a cave seated and facing a wall. Behind and unbeknownst to them a fire burns, before which puppets are variously manipulated. The fire casts the shadows of the puppets on the cave wall, and the shadows are the objects of the cave dwellers' cognition. One cave dweller eventually stands and looks

¹⁵ Note that it is controversial to what extent the treatment of Forms in the late dialogues is consistent with that in the middle dialogues. One might prefer to speak here of logical kinds rather than Forms. I will continue to speak of Forms.

around to discover that the objects he and his fellows have taken to be real are mere shadows. Gradually he ascends from the cave, acclimating to the increasing light of the sun. As he proceeds, perceiving the greater scope of perceptual entities, his comprehension of reality grows. The ultimate perceptual object is identified as the sun, on the ground that as the source of light it makes all visual perception possible. The Good is said to be analogous to the sun, itself the ultimate object of cognition, which makes all intellectual entities intelligible.

It is unclear how the Good is superordinate to other Forms and serves to make all intellectual entities intelligible, above all because Socrates says only what the Good is like, not what it is. But where Plato is silent, the Peripatetics speak. Aristotle and his student Aristoxenus report that Plato conceives of the Good as the One, that is, as the Form of Unity.¹⁶ I believe that their testimony is accurate. Generally speaking, the Good plays metaphysical or ontological, ethical, and epistemological roles in Plato's thought. Unity is, in ways that are difficult to make out, the logical and metaphysical basis of being or entification. For example, compare the unity of the Forms with the plurality of perceptual participants. Also, contrast the essential purity and thus uniformity of Forms with the impurity and complexity of participants. Participants are bundles of properties, none of which is stable, and each of which is both partially *f* and the contrary of *f*. In the case of mathematical entities, units are points, which the Greeks identify both as numbers and as the principles of geometrical objects. Forms, numbers, and geometrical objects serve to delineate, structure, and thus give definition, both logically and materially. Ethically and ontologically, unity is responsible for wholeness. Wholeness is that from which nothing is lacking. Thus, unity is responsible for perfection and self-sufficiency. But unity also logically entails and materially brings order and cohesion to complexes. For example, in *Republic* justice in the individual is identified with the order of the tripartite soul and analogously in the polis with the order of the three political classes.

Epistemologically, unity can be understood as necessary for knowledge at least in the following way. Coherence is a kind of unity. The contents of a field of knowledge must be coherent, as must the aetiological accounts that buttress explanatory knowledge.

With respect to explanatory knowledge in particular, since the Good is the ultimate cognitive object, explanatory knowledge in its most complete form is true belief with an account whose explanatory reach extends to the Good. In other words, explanatory knowledge in its purest form is true belief with a teleological explanation.

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¹⁶ Arist. *Metaph.* 1091b13–15, *Eth. Eud.* 1218a15–24; Aristox. *Harm.* 2.1.