

# 11 PLATO'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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## Introduction

Knowledge is a central topic in Plato's dialogues. The reason for this is ethical. Plato thinks that the pursuit of a good life requires the pursuit of knowledge. The reasons for that are diverse. For example, in many dialogues, Plato has his main and favored character Socrates argue in various ways that knowledge constitutes human goodness. Elsewhere, for example, in *Philebus*, he has Socrates argue for the weaker thesis that knowledge is not the sole, but is nonetheless the most important, constituent of the good life for humans. It does not seem that knowledge of any and every kind is required for human goodness or the good life. Consider, for example, knowledge of pottery or of shoemaking, let alone knowledge of how many teeth Ctesippus has or of how many grains of sand there are on beaches at Sounion. Rather, as Socrates sometimes puts it, what is required is knowledge of goodness.

The concept of the knowledge of goodness itself raises various questions. Above all, what is it? Also, is there not a logical problem with the idea that knowledge of goodness constitutes human goodness? Plato is aware of these questions. But the examination of the claims that lead to these questions and the answers to the questions themselves largely fall within the domain of ethics, not epistemology.

Plato's dialogues engage various epistemological questions. For example, how is knowledge acquired? Does knowledge have particular objects? How are various forms of knowledge to be distinguished? Arguably, the most basic epistemological question and the one upon whose answer the answers to these and other epistemological questions depend is "What is knowledge?" This is the question on which the present discussion focuses. More specifically, my aim here will be to guide the reader into what I regard as *the core interpretive difficulty* to which pursuit of this question leads.

Various dialogues engage with the question "What is knowledge?" in different ways. Some do so directly, some obliquely. Some present sustained examinations; some discuss the question briefly. Some offer positive results; some end in aporia: puzzlement or a recognition that the discussants simply do not know the right answer. The following sections 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. 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* Book 5, but also *Republic* Books 6 and 7, appear to stand in sharp contrast to the *Meno* and *Thea-*

*etetus* 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. The core interpretive difficulty is whether the treatments of knowledge in these passages of *Republic* can be squared with those in *Meno* and *Theaetetus*.

In addressing the core interpretive difficulty, it must be considered whether there is a single conception of knowledge on offer. 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 discussion 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.

### *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 *aitia*" (98a3–4). It is questionable, however, whether justification and a reasoning of the *aitia* are equivalent. "*Aitia*" is often translated as "cause," although this is unsatisfactory. Strictly speaking, a cause is but one kind of *aitia*. An *aitia* 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 *aitia*, 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 any explanation. For example, that some proposition  $p$  been expressed by a divine oracle provides justification for believing that  $p$ , but it doesn't explain  $p$  itself.

Further reason to think that Plato understood the request for an *aitia* 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 *aitiai* (plural of *aitia*) of each thing: why it comes to be, why it perishes, and why it exists" (96a7–9). Socrates focuses on the *aitiai* 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. Note that, as in the present case, the *aitiai* Socrates tends to cite in his discussions are objects rather than propositions, states of affairs, or events. But insofar as *aitiai* are explanatory, they must figure in propositions. Thus, when Socrates makes claims of the form "x is the *aitia* 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.

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 Socrates with justification for believing that he is the 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 (*anamnēsis*) (98a4).

In identifying aetiological reasoning with recollection, Socrates is referring to an earlier discussion in the dialogue, which was prompted by Socrates' thesis that all learning is recollection (82b9–86b5). 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.

Through 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 explicit knowledge not from himself, but from Socrates. But Socrates insists that throughout the exchange all the slave's answers have been "his own (*heautou*)" (85c1). 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 thinks for himself and does 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 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. At least in this case, however, 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." "Internalist justification" means 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.

### *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 (*logos*)" (201c8–d1). 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 account of the name "Theaetetus" requires an enumeration of the letters constituting the name. In other words, a decompositional account is a reductionist 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 of some inscription, and "that is the sun," said 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 its constituents, but in contrast to everything else. Thus, whereas decompositional accounts reach a dead-end in the face of elements, 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

(*doxa* in Greek)? 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*. One needn't, however—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 what 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.

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

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 ontologically 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 the 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.”

(476c2–d6)

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 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 (*epi*) what is (*to on*), 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 (*to on*)” 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 (*dunamis*), Socrates claims that distinct capacities are set over (*epi*) 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 Greek phrase “*epi' <einai>*” corresponding to the English “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” (*phanōteron*) than ignorance, but more “obscure” (*skotōdesteron*) 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.”

(478e1–5)

Given this, let us 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 therefore taken to be consistent with the view that knowledge is a kind of belief, namely, a kind of true belief.

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 are not simultaneously true and false, however. 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. While Socrates uses the phrase “what both is and is not” in the course of the argument, however, 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 appeal to the distinction between Forms and participants in his argument with the perception-lover since, as we have said, the perception-lover does not recognize this metaphysical distinction. 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?”

(478e7–479a8)

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 non-philosophers in many of the definitional dialogues which are 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 that she is 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 *fs* 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.” 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 *aitiai* 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 core interpretive difficulty 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. If we do reach that conclusion, however, then we need to provide justification or explanation for why Plato does that.

### 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 sub-segments and associates each of the four resulting sub-segments with a distinct cognitive capacity and correlative kind of *relatum*. The perceptual sub-segments of belief are called “conjecture (*eikasia*)” and “confidence (*pistis*)”; the intellectual sub-segments of knowledge are called “thought (*dianoia*)” and “intelligence (*noēsis*).” The cognitive *relata* of conjecture 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 “conjecture,” “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—there is no reason to think that Plato believes that, say, “conjecture” or “*eikasia*” 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 (*dialektikē*). Dialectic is an intellectual practice whose objective is the acquisition of knowledge of Forms. Thus, dialectic relates to intelligence (*noēsis*) 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 (*dianoia*), a sub-segment of knowledge on the Divided Line, are mathematical objects:

“[These mathematical fields] 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.”

(533d4–e1)

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 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 facile. 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” 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 such as medicine or geometry.

Consider now the idea that a field of knowledge may be a capacity for propositional 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 arithmetic knowledge does not include the propositional knowledge that  $7652 + 1833 = 9455$ . Rather, the field of arithmetic knowledge includes other knowledge that enables one to calculate the sum and so to come to have propositional knowledge that  $7652 + 1833 = 9455$ . Likewise, the field of medicine does not include the propositional knowledge that, for example, Socrates is presently suffering from leukemia. It does, however, include other knowledge that enables a doctor to come to have that propositional 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 (*epistasthai*), while belief is the capacity for believing (*doxazein*). 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 to make 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; however, I want 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.

I briefly mentioned above that Forms are *aitiai*, and specifically *aitiai* 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 returning borrowed items on such-and-such an occasion is just or unjust.

Let us grant, then, that Socrates does use “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 forma-

tion of a doxastic judgment. 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 aetiologically adequate. So belief can only produce doxastic judgment. Moreover, doxastic judgment may be true or false; but knowledge will, as Socrates says, be “unerring” 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 core interpretive difficulty I am proposing, epistemic and doxastic judgments in *Republic* 5 are equivalent to knowledge and belief in *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. 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.

### Concluding consideration

The preceding discussion and proposed solution to the core interpretive difficulty leave many questions unanswered. The most important question, or rather cluster of questions, is what knowledge of a field consists in. In particular, how is knowledge of a Form like a field of knowledge? Moreover, how are the various fields of knowledge that constitute various Forms related? In particular, Plato maintains that all knowledge of Forms depends upon knowledge of the Form of the Good. How is this so?

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