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Plato on Episteme and Propositional Knowledge

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Plato sometimes says that we come to know Forms by perception. At *Rep.* 402b, for example, Socrates says that “we must be able to perceive *aisthanômetha* (the Forms of the virtues) and their likenesses.” At *Rep.* 510e, he talks about “seeing those realities which can be seen only by the mind” [ekeina idein ha ouk an allôs idoi è têi dianoiai]. Passages such as these have led many interpreters to take epistêmê in Plato to involve a direct intuition of Forms.

In recent decades, this interpretation of Plato’s views on epistêmê has been called into question, most prominently by Gail Fine. In place of this interpretation, which Fine calls the “objects analysis”1 of Plato, she proposes a “contents analysis”, according to which “knowledge and belief are not set over different objects but only over different contents... knowledge is set over true propositions; belief is set over true and false propositions.”2

On Fine’s interpretation, A knows that p when A believes that p and A can produce an account, expressing some further set of propositions, which explains why p is true. However, stating an account of some p is not sufficient for knowing p—I must also know the account. The latter requirement threatens a regress.3 According to Fine, Plato endorses a coherentist solution to the problem of stopping the regress: “…the regress is finite but has no end. I explain p in terms of q, and q in terms of r, and so on until, eventually, I appeal again to p; but if the circle is sufficiently large and explanatory, then it is virtuous, not vicious.”4

Fine does not deny that the ultimate objects of knowledge are the Forms. Rather, she denies that we arrive at such knowledge by directly intuing the Forms. She believes, instead, that we arrive at knowledge about the Forms by coming to know propositions about the Forms, and we derive this propositional knowledge from other items of propositional knowledge. On Fine’s interpretation, Plato must be speaking metaphorically in the passages in which he says that we are capable of a “perception” [aisthêsis] or “seeing” [idein] of Forms.

Fine has come under criticism for her interpretation of the argument of Book V of the *Republic*, which is central to her interpretation of Plato’s theory of knowledge.5 However, it cannot be denied that Plato does say in a number of places that epistêmê consists of knowledge of an “account” [logos].6 We see this in the *Meno*, in the context of Socrates’ discussion of the difference between knowledge and correct opinion [orthê doxa]. Correct opinion is the state in which one believes what is true without having wisdom regarding this truth [oiomenos men alêthê, phronôn de me] (97b6-7). Knowledge, on the other hand, includes both correct opinion and “an account of the cause” [aittas logismôi] (98a3-4).

We have, therefore, evidence supporting two interpretations of epistêmê in Plato, both of which have some basis in Plato’s texts. On one interpretation, epistêmê is a direct and non-propositional intuition of the Forms. On the other interpretation, epistêmê is knowledge of an account. It is the aim of this paper to suggest a way of reconciling these two aspects of Plato’s theory.

We will not be examining two other controversial questions regarding Plato’s theory of knowledge. First of all, there is the question whether Plato has anything like the contemporary

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2 Fine 1999, p. 221.
3 Ibid, p. 238.
5 F.J. Gonzalez, ‘Propositions or objects?’
6 Of course, one might deny the claim that knowledge of an account is propositional knowledge. I shall argue shortly that there is a basic sense in which this claim is right.
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notion of a proposition. Some authors have argued that the answer to this question is "no."7 However, when Fine says that *epistêmê* in Plato is knowledge of propositions rather than an intuition of Forms, what she means is that the content of knowledge is exhaustively expressed by sentences. On the direct intuition interpretation, in contrast, one knows when one has a direct non-discursive intuition of the object of knowledge.8 Fine's interpretation, therefore, does not require anything like a robust contemporary account of the proposition. For, if Plato believes that a *logos* expresses exhaustively the content of what is known by someone who has *epistêmê*, then Fine's interpretation of Plato is correct.

A second question is that of what Plato means by a "*logos*" in the context of his discussion of *epistêmê*. The controversy regarding the *Theaetetus* is typical here.5 At 201Dff., Socrates considers the definition of knowledge as "true belief accompanied by an account [*logos*]." There is disagreement as to what the knowledge here is knowledge of. Burnyeat takes the definition of knowledge here to be the following: "Knowing *o* is having true judgment concerning *o* with an account of *o*, where *o* is any object, concrete or abstract."10 Others have taken knowledge here to be knowledge of a proposition. But, here too, there is disagreement as to what the nature of the *logos* is. On one interpretation, it is any *logos* explaining why it is the case that *p*.11 On another interpretation, the *logos* must be an adequate justification for the judgment that *p*.12

Neither of these controversies is directly relevant to the discussion here, because our concern is the question of whether knowledge consists in knowledge of an "account" in a very general sense of the latter word. In this general sense, an "account" is something the content of which can be expressed by sentences. In this general sense, the claim that *epistêmê* is knowledge of an "account" means that what is known by the person with *epistêmê* is the content that can be expressed by some set of sentences.13

We shall henceforth call the latter interpretation of Plato's views on *epistêmê* the "L-interpretation" or "L-account" (the "L" in both cases stands for "*logos*") of Plato's theory of *epistêmê*. On the alternative interpretation, that which is known is not the content of some set of sentences. Rather, knowledge requires direct non-discursive intuition of a Form. One can produce sentences about the Form that are based on this direct intuition, but the direct intuition is something apart from the content of the sentences produced. We shall call this second interpretation the "IF-interpretation" or "IF account" (where "IF" stands for "intuition of Forms") of Plato's theory of *epistêmê*. The question, then, is whether Plato endorses the L-account or the IF-account, or some third account.

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7 Hintikka denies that we can find a robust conception of a proposition in any Greek philosopher ('Time, truth').
8 Lloyd discusses non-discursive thought in Greek philosophy and some problems associated with the claim that such thought is possible ('Non-discursive').
9 Burnyeat gives an overview of the controversy ('Introduction,' pp. 130-2).
10 'Introduction,' p. 130. Burnyeat agrees with White ('Plato on knowledge,' pp. 176-88) here. It is important to note that, on this interpretation, knowledge is not necessarily a non-discursive intuition of an object. Thus, as Burnyeat notes, on this interpretation "we may still hope to find place in the discussion for explanation, justification, and the knowledge of propositions. We may want to say, for example, that knowing an object involves knowing propositions about it or having a certain kind of explanation of it ('Introduction,' p132)."
11 This interpretation is favored by Annas ('Knowledge') and Nehamas ('Epistêmê').
12 This interpretation is favored by Fine ('Knowledge and *logos*, pp. 366-67).
13 It for this reason that the contemporary notion of a proposition is appropriate in discussing knowledge of an "account." For, a proposition is something that is expressed by a sentence in a language. The sentences "Felix is a soldier" and "Felix est un soldat," for example, express the same proposition in different languages, and they express fully the content of the corresponding proposition.
We examined above passages which support each of the IF and L-interpretations of Plato. Plato is quite consistent in appearing to be of two minds on the subject. The *Theaetetus* is typical in this respect. In this dialogue, the definition of knowledge as “true judgment with an account” is considered and then criticized. But in this same dialogue he also defines thought as a kind of logos (*Theaet. 189e-190a*). Thinking (ίονοια/) is “the logos which the soul has with itself about any object which it examines.” The soul, when it thinks, “is merely conversing with itself, asking itself questions and answering, affirming and denying.” The latter claim is troubling if one advocates an IF-interpretation of Plato. For, if all thought is a kind of logos, no non-propositional intuition is a mode of thought. What, then, is ἐπιστήμη if it is not a mode of thought? How is non-discursive thought possible if all thought is discursive? Before we attempt an answer to this question we shall examine more closely some passages in which Plato discusses the role of knowledge of logoi in ἐπιστήμη.

Plato thinks that knowing a logos is necessary for ἐπιστήμη. But, we shall see next that Plato talks about knowledge of a logos in a way that suggests that he thinks that such knowledge is not sufficient for ἐπιστήμη.

In the *Republic* Socrates tells his interlocutors that a correct belief [orthē doxa] can be “stolen by argument (413b).” We see what it means for correct belief to be “stolen” by argument when Socrates discusses the education of philosophers later in the *Republic*. An important component of this education is dialectical inquiry into basic moral and political questions such as “What is justice?”, “What is the good?” etc. This is a particularly dangerous stage of education because of the refutability of the doxai to which the student is committed. This is why no one but potential philosophers ought to be allowed to undertake dialectical inquiry into moral and political issues. It is also why dialectical inquiry should be introduced even to such individuals at a very mature age. Those permitted to take part in such discussions must have orderly and stable natures, in contrast with the current practice of admitting to it any chance and unsuitable applicant (539d).

The reason why this sort of discussion must be controlled has to do with the ease with which one can refute the teachings [dogmata] from childhood about the just and the honourable in which citizens raised as children under the guidance of their parents (538c). Socrates tells us that, when a young person is met by the question “what is honourable?” and gives the answer which he learned from “the lawgiver,” the “account is refuted [ἐξελενχθείη] the logos]” and “after many such refutations he is led to believe that this thing [i.e. that which is said by the lawgiver to be honourable] is no more honourable than it is base.” When, furthermore, he has had the same experience with teachings about “the just and the good” he will cease to honour and obey these (538d-e).

It is important to note that “correct opinion” here means something that is already an explanatory account. Socrates includes explanatory logoi among the correct opinions that he wants the best state to impart to its citizens through the stories they hear as children. This

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14 As Burnyeat notes, “despite the *Meno* it is not clear that Plato himself ever proposed to define knowledge as true judgment with an account. Nowhere outside the *Thetetus* does he even formulate an explicit definition of knowledge (“Introduction,” 236-37).” It is only at *Meno* 97c-98a and *Symposium* 202a that Plato appears to define knowledge as true judgment with an account. But neither passage makes it clear that a definition is intended, and neither need be read as presenting one (ibid., 237n.23).”

15 That is, Plato says that no one but such people ought to be allowed to pursue the highest course of study which involves a dialectical inquiry into questions such as ‘What is justice?’ and other basic moral and political issues.

16 For example, he mentions the following explanation, which ought to be imparted to citizens: “One ought not to be overcome by loss of property or a son or a brother because the good man is most self-sufficient with respect to what is needed for the good life (387d-e).” It is because such explanatory accounts are needed that Socrates says that the stories that will impart correct opinion to citizens about the nature of
caution about discussing correct opinions because of their refutability is also expressed by Plato in the *Laws*. In the *Laws* the lawcode of the state will include explanations of the laws that citizens must learn.\(^\text{17}\) Yet, in the *Laws* the Athenian Stranger recommends the same sorts of restrictions on the discussion of the *nomina* that Socrates does in the *Republic*. For example, the Stranger thinks that it is important to control discussion of the law, especially among the young (634d-e).

We find additional evidence of Plato’s diffidence concerning *logoi* in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates distinguishes philosophers and “writers of *logoi*”.\(^\text{18}\) Someone who has nothing to show of more value than the *logoi* on whose phrases he spends hours is merely a “writer of *logoi*” (278d-e). Someone who produces a *logos* is not a mere writer of *logoi* but a “philosopher” if such a person: (a) has written the text “knowing the truth” [*eidôs to alêthes*]; and (b) can defend his *logos* against attempts at refutation [*echôn boêthein, eis elenchon tôn*]. In defending his *logos* against refutation, such an author demonstrates the inferiority of his writings out of his own mouth (278c-d). The elaborateness and detail of a *logos*, therefore, are not evidence that the *logos* is the product of *epistêmê*. Rather, someone displays the knowledge characteristic of a philosopher if she can defend her elaborate *logoi* against attempts at refutation.

Sometimes Socrates objects to the *kind* of *logos* given by an interlocutor. He usually does so because he thinks that only those who are able to produce a certain kind of *logos* (an explanatory *logos*, say) can be said to have *epistêmê*. In the *Phaedrus* passage we have just examined, on the other hand, the requirement is not that one be able to produce a certain *kind* of *logos*, but that one be able to defend a certain kind of *logos* against refutation. Only someone able to do this can claim to have produced the *logos* “knowing of the truth” [*eidôs to alêthes*].

In the *Republic* the practice of dialectic is an important aspect of the acquisition of philosophical knowledge. A “dialectician” is a person who is able to produce an account of the essence of each thing [*ton logon hekastou... tês oustias*] (534b9-10). Someone who wants to be a philosopher must be able to define the Form of the Good by means of a *logos*, distinguishing it from all other Forms [*diorisasthai toî logôi apo tôn allôn pantôn aphelôn tên tou agathou idean*]. But in the *Republic* too producing a certain kind of *logos* is not enough. One must be able to defend the *logos* “as if in battle, testing out by all refutations” [*hôsper en machêi diapantôn elenchoi*], and striving to refute this *logos* “by reality and not by opinion” [*mê kata doxan alla kat'ousian prothoumenos elenchein*]. One must pass through all of this with one’s account intact [*en pasi toutois aptôti töi logôi diaporeuētai*] (534b13-c17).\(^\text{19}\) The person who lacks this power does not really know the good itself or any particular good. And if he apprehends any shadow [*eidôlou*] of it, his contact with it is by opinion and not by knowledge (534c).

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\(^\text{17}\) For example, he says that “The laws themselves will explain the duties we owe to children, relatives, friends, and fellow citizens (718a).” He says that explaining the laws will “help to make people more amenable and better disposed to listen to what the lawgiver recommends (718d).” He recommends explanatory “preambles” to the laws, of which the preamble to the marriage law at 721bff. is an example.

\(^\text{18}\) At 278e he says that such a person is a “writer of *logoi*” [*logon sungraphea*]. “Logographos”—meaning “writer of *logoi*”—is used at 257c and 258b.

\(^\text{19}\) Adam warns, in his commentary on the *Republic*, concerning “*dia pantôn elenchoi diexiôn*” [“as it were in battle”], that, “though the ordinary interpretation supposes that the *elenchoi* are applied by others, this would require that we take *elenchein* as = *elenchein tous tôn allôn elenchous*, which is difficult (Republic v.2, p.142).” According to Adam Plato means here that “we apply the *elenchoi* ourselves.” At “*mê kata doxan alla kat'ousian prothoumenos elenchein*” Plato means, according to Adam, that “the dialectician tests his view of the good not by... what 'seems' (good, bad, etc.) to the many, but by the Truth i.e. by that which 'is' in the Platonic sense of *ousia*, viz. the Ideas, such as (let us say) the Ideas of *kallos*, *dikaion*, and so forth. The Idea of the Good has connections and relations with all the other Ideas... and our knowledge of these may therefore be used to test the accuracy of our conception of the Good (v.2, pp. 142-3).”
It seems, therefore, that epistêmê cannot just be a matter of knowing a logos. Knowledge, it appears, is demonstrated not in the knowledge of any particular logos, but in the ability to defend a logos against refutation. It is precisely the latter ability that is characteristic of epistêmê. This ability, furthermore, cannot be imparted by means of a logos. For, no logos suffices to endow its possessor with the ability to defend it (i.e., the logos) against refutation.

Given that Plato appears to have believed that no knowledge of a logos—no matter how elaborate the logos—is sufficient for epistêmê, one can see why he was drawn to describing epistêmê as requiring a direct intuition of Forms. One can also see why he was inclined, in describing such direct intuition, to use the language of visual perception. When I see an object, I can describe the object—or answer questions about it posed to me by someone who does not see the object—but no logos that I can give exhausts the content of what I see. It is true that some contemporary philosophers would take issue with the claim that the content of visual perception is non-propositional. However, it is not implausible to suppose that Plato thought of the content of visual perception in this way.

As we saw above, Plato says, in the Theaetetus, that all thought [dianoia] is a logos. He expresses the same view in the Sophist, at 263ff. There we are told that “thought and speech are the same” [dianoia...kai logos auton]. Thought is the soul’s conversation with itself, its distinguishing feature being that it is “conversation without sound” [dialogos aneu phonês].

Why does Plato think that dianoia is a kind of logos? He gives one reason at Sophist 263e. According to the Eleatic Stranger, “we know that in speech there is just affirmation and denial” [en logos...isomen...enon phasin kai apophasin], which is also what occurs in thought. The difference is that, when these acts occur in thought, they occur silently.20

At Theaetetus 189c-190a we are given another reason for thinking that dianoia is a kind of logos. When the soul thinks, it converses [dialegesthai] with itself, “asking itself questions and answering, affirming and denying [erôtôsa kai apokrinomenê, kai phaskousa kai ou phaskousa].” This process ends when it has arrived at a decision [hotan horisasa], whether “slowly or with a sudden leap,” and finally “agrees with itself and is no longer in doubt” [to auto êdê phêi kai mê distazê]. This final determination of thought is called “opinion” [doxa]. Here the reason for describing thought as a kind of speech is that the process of arriving at a new item of opinion—an affirmation or denial which one had not previously made with confidence—is discursive.

Dianoia is not the only way in which we arrive at affirmation and negation, according to Plato. Affirmation and negation, when it occurs in the soul silently “by way of thought” [kata dianoian] is opinion [doxa]. But affirmation and negation can also arise in the soul “through sensation” [di aisthêseôs] (Soph. 264a). In such cases affirmation and denial are called “fancy” [phantasia] rather than opinion.21

Plato’s discussion of dianoia is often cited in contemporary discussions of the relationship between thought and language.22 Burnyeat notes, regarding the discussion of dianoia in these passages that “this is very much an intellectual’s picture of thinking. That is to say, it is a picture of intellectual thinking rather than, for example, of the thought and concentration with which an athlete runs, an artist paints, or a child reads” (‘Introduction,’ p. 84). It may be, however, that Plato is discussing one kind of thought in this passage—the kind that involves

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20 What we call “opinion” [doxa] is affirmation and denial arising in the soul “silently” and “by way of thought” (264a).
21 We are also told that, when affirmation or denial are caused by sensation, they do not originate in the soul “with respect to itself” [kath’auto] (264a). Presumably, this is because they originate in something external to the soul, namely the objects of sensation.
22 One recent author, for example, tells us that, in these passages, Plato establishes that “there is a logical or ‘internal’ connection between thought and language: thought just is the discourse of the mind with itself” (Preston, Thought, p. 1).
affirmation and denial, and results in new items opinion and knowledge [doxa, epistêmê]—and that he would recognize other kinds of thought.\(^\text{23}\)

We can now address again the question of the role of logoi in epistêmê. Given his belief that thought is a kind of speech, it seems plausible to suppose that, for Plato, whenever I arrive at a true judgment, I do so by seeing that it follows from other affirmations and denials that I have made. In the \textit{Meno}, for example, the slave-boy is led by Socrates to a true judgment about how one can, for any square, construct another square twice the size. Socrates gets the slave-boy to see that, given other affirmations and denials that he has made, he should also affirm the solution proposed by Socrates. In the \textit{Meno}, the slave-boy example is held up as a model for Socrates’ theory of the way in which we arrive at new items of knowledge. In the \textit{Theaetetus} and \textit{Sophist} Plato is telling us that all thought proceeds in this way. The difference, presumably, between, on the one hand, thought that leads us to items of knowledge, and, on the other thought that leads us to items of incorrect opinion, is that one arrives at the former by good reasoning and at the latter by bad reasoning. The sequence of thought from which a correct opinion follows is—assuming that the sequence of thought is of the right sort—a logos explaining that correct opinion.\(^\text{24}\)

But if this is how all thought proceeds, what of the direct intuition of Forms? And did we not also see evidence that Plato believes that no logos is a sufficient basis for knowledge? In attempting to answer these questions, it is important to note Plato’s description of the way in which the intuition of Forms and the production of logoi work together. An example is \textit{Laws} 965b. Using the typical visual language, the Athenian Stranger tells us that the master craftsman in any discipline must be able not only to look at the many but also to direct his gaze to the one [mé monon dein pros ta polla blepein dunaton einai, pros de to hen epeigesthai gnômai te] (965b). Indeed, the Stranger tells us, in any subject, one must be able to look from the many and dissimilar objects to the one Form [pros mian idean ek tôn pollôn kai anomoiôn dunaton einai blepein] (965c).

Having resolved, with Clinias, to apply this same method to their inquiry into virtue, the Stranger says something quite revealing about the way in which this method will be implemented. He and Clinias want to know what virtue is. In order to do this they must discover that which is one in courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom. They must proceed, the Athenian Stranger tells Clinias, until they are able to “say what the essential nature is of the object at which [they] are looking” [prin an hikanôs eipômen ti pot’ esting eis ho blepteoin] (965d). They cannot suppose that they know the nature of virtue if they are unable to “say whether it is many or four or one” [ei polla est’ out’ ei tettara euth hês hen dunatoi phrazein] (965e). We see here that coming to have knowledge of some Form consists of a process of producing a logos by inspecting a Form—the inspection of the Form being described here in typically visual terms.

The intuition of Forms and the production of logoi seem to contribute together to the acquisition of epistêmê: the production of a logos contributes to the acquisition of epistêmê only if it is accompanied by an intuition of a Form; and a Form is intuited in a way that contributes to the acquisition of epistêmê only if it results in the production of logoi that are about the Form.

But what of the idea that all dianoia is discursive? I suggest that Plato means by “dianoia” thought that is conscious, and that the intuition of Form is a non-conscious mode of

\(^{23}\) Burnyeat says further that, even as a description of philosophical thinking “it omits much that is important. Most conspicuously, it omits all mention of reasoning (p. 84).” Again, this seems not to be on target given that thought is described here in a way that fits quite well with the discussion, in the \textit{Republic}, of dialectical inquiry as the basis of philosophical knowledge.

\(^{24}\) Here we can offer an explanation here of what Socrates means in the \textit{Meno} when he says that the slave-boy example has established that epistêmê is correct opinion together with “an account of the cause” [aitias logismôi] (98a3–4). The sequence of affirmations and denials from which the correct solution to the problem follows is the “account of the cause” of the true opinion in the sense that it is an account of the reason why the true opinion is true.
thought. John Haldane’s discussion of non-conscious thought is relevant here. According to Haldane, “…some thoughts occur in the absence of any phenomenal accompaniment or correlate…these can only be reported propositionally… (‘thinking,’ p. 130).” Plato, I am suggesting, would have described the intuition of Forms in the same way.

Perhaps the process of intuiting Forms enters into conscious thought as a feeling of certitude that some argument establishes the truth of a proposition. One might, in intuiting a Form, experience a sense of certainty about a propositional item of knowledge. One might sense the connections between propositions. But, beyond this, there is no conscious thought that has the Forms as its objects.

The intuition of Forms would not, then, be the sort of experience that one can describe in ways that go further than the logoi that are the accompaniment of such an experience. One cannot, for example, say “Ah, o.k., now I see the Form of the number two, let me tell you what is it like,” and proceed to check what one is saying against the image of the Form. For, there is nothing to our conscious experience of the Forms beyond the discursive thought in which we typically engage.

Works cited

J. Haldane, ‘(I am) thinking,’ *Ratio* XVI 2 June 2003, pp. 124-139.